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* * *
If you love something ... leave it alone!

Only disaster can come of the bonds that bind us to the world at large, be they the love of mother and son, husband and wife, dog and master, or a man and his work.

Walk the dark paths of attraction with Henry, a serial killer who just wants to bring home a girl his mama approves of. Plunge to the depths of nightmare as a man refuses to give up on his dream of making a new discovery. Settle into loneliness and fear as the sun goes down on an ever-faithful companion. Sift through the images of dreams and nightmares in search of the wording that spells release from a hellish contract.

Lusty pirates, evil dust bunnies, ancient bloodlines, and babies that rain from the sky bring terror and confusion in these fourteen tales of darkness, fatal beauty, and wicked humor from Bram Stoker Award-nominated author Fran Friel. Within this book are fourteen reasons to check the dark and dusty corners before you go to bed and fourteen lessons to teach you everything you never wanted to know about how terribly life can go wrong.
Her stories are well written, compelling, all with a muscular hard edge, with often surprising but very appropriate endings ... and always absolutely brutally chilling.

—Gene O'Neill, author of *Collected Tales of the Baja Express* and *The Confessions of St. Zach*

Friel's in-your-face storytelling must command respect!"

—Weston Ochse, Stoker-winning author of *Scarecrow Gods*

Fran Friel has a genuine gift for storytelling. Her highly adaptable prose boils over with emotion: love, guilt, fear, and the myriad shades between. *Mama's Boy and Other Dark Tales* marks the arrival of a stunning new talent.

—Michael McBride, author of the *God's End* trilogy and *Bloodletting*

Fran Friel's fiction is frighteningly fantastic. *Mama's Boy* is clever, dark, and infinitely satisfying ... in the best worst way!

—Elizabeth Massie, author of *Homeplace, Sineater*, and *Wire Mesh Mothers*
Fran Friel writes and blogs by the sea on the coast of southern New England where she lives with her wonderful husband and daughter, and a dog named Sandy. Fran is a 2006 Bram Stoker Award finalist and is currently working on a novel about scary things. Please stop by and visit her at www.FranFriel.com and at her blog, Fran Friel's Yada Feast at blog.myspace.com/franfriel.
Billy Tackett is a multi-talented artist living in Northern Kentucky. His skills as an artist drift into all things dark and ominous. Billy is also a talented musician, photographer, graphic/web designer, writer, and make-up artist. The self-proclaimed “Creepiest Artist in America,” he is all that and more.

His current projects include being the “Official Artist” of Shane Moore’s Abyss Walker book series, creator and writer of the soon to be released graphic novel based on his series of paintings “Dead, White & Blue,” and designing a line of T-shirts featuring his work.
This collection is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in these stories are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

MAMA'S BOY AND OTHER DARK TALES

These stories first appeared in the following publications:


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Cover Art “Mama's Boy” by Billy Tackett

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Published by Apex Publications, LLC

PO Box 24323

Lexington, KY 40524


First Edition: June 2008

ISBN HC: 978-0-9816390-7-9

ISBN TPB: 978-0-9816390-8-6
What Are We Witnessing?
An Introduction
by
Gary A. Braunbeck

"We enter, we find our way through. Maybe something we experience changes the way we look at the world."

—Robert Freeman Wexler, In Springdale Town

I blame Peter Straub.

(I was going to blame Hemingway, but since he's been dead for as long as I've been alive, it hardly seems fair since he's not here to defend himself. The last thing I want is for Hemingway's ghost to come back from the Otherwhere and kick my ass, so the blame goes to Straub—who can also easily kick my ass, but I digress.)

Why blame Straub?

For the same reason that a lot of comics in the 50s and 60s blamed Lenny Bruce.

To whit: in the 50s and 60s, the club stages in Vegas and New York and Los Angeles were filled with comedians who'd cut their teeth in burlesque and on the radio, many of whom—like the late, great Myron Cohen (Google him)—came out onto the stage, said “Good evening,” to the audience, and then for the next 45—60 minutes, proceeded to simply tell jokes. The same kind of jokes we tell one another, those of the classic two-line setup, followed by the punchline: “A man walks into a doctor's office with a duck on his head. The doctor looks at the man and says, “Can I help you?” And the duck says, “Yeah—is there any way you can get this guy off my ass?” (Insert rimshot.)

Audiences loved it; a comic tells jokes for an hour, everybody laughs and tips their waitresses, a win/win situation all around.

And then came some Jewish punk named Lenny Bruce ... and nothing was ever the same again. Bruce was not only one of the first comedians to use profanity in his act, but he did so much more than just tell jokes. His routines would go on for ten, fifteen, even twenty minutes; he used different voices for characters in these routines; his routines often had actual storylines; he wasn't afraid to address the hot-button issues of the day, or satirize the political and Hollywood icons of the time in these one-man, multi-voiced mini-plays. Once audiences got over their initial shock, Bruce became, for a little while, the hottest comedian around.

And the old-school comics hated him for it. In what seemed less time than it took for a joke to bomb, the traditional two-line setup/punchline gags were antiquated. If they wanted to stay in the business, the old-schoolers had to adapt or step aside. Some hoped that Bruce's style of comedy was just a flash in the pan. But by the time of Bruce's tragic death in 1966 at the age of 40, his influence had spread; young comedians like Bill Cosby, Richard Prior, and George Carlin had picked up on Bruce's complex, multi-voiced story routines and were running with it. Some worked “blue,” some didn't, but all were moving forward on the basis of Bruce's legacy.

What does any of this have to do with Mama's Boy and Other Dark Tales, and for what, precisely, am I blaming Peter Straub?

Easy: until the 1990 release of Straub's remarkable collection, Houses Without Doors, the genre writer was content to release his or her short-story collection with either A) Just a dozen or so stories between the covers, or, B) With newly-written Introductions before each story, discussing some aspect of the piece that was to follow (something Harlan Ellison has turned into an art form). On the surface, Houses Without Doors comprises three novellas, three short stories, and seven briefer pieces of short-shorts and what is now called “flash” fiction. But—like Hemingway's In Our Time (hence my almost blaming him) or Russell Banks' Trailerpark—it was much more tightly focused and unified in theme than readers were accustomed to seeing in a genre collection. The “Interlude” pieces between the stories did not really stand on their own, but seemed more like smaller pieces of a bigger puzzle (which they were). And the stories themselves read as if they all sprang from a single core obsession, one that initially seemed to have little in common with the briefer pieces surrounding them. But as the reader delved further into the heart of the
collection, the connections began to reveal themselves like fog-shrouded figures walking slowly into the glow of streetlight. The effect was (and still is) stunning. For all intents and purposes, Straub had reinvented the wheel of how a writer of dark fiction could go about presenting his or her stories in a collection. The template set down in *Houses Without Doors* remains unequalled. (And I say this as one who attempted to adapt that template for my first collection, *Things Left Behind.* Looking at that collection now, I think I was about 75-80% successful, though lacking Straub's profound subtlety.)

Which brings us to Fran Friel and her debut collection that you now hold in your hands.

Whether it was her intention or not (and part of me suspects it was), Fran, instead of endeavoring to echo exactly Straub's template (as I tried to do), has used it as a jumping-off point, and as a result made it her own, including not only stories and novellas, but short-shorts, flash pieces, and some truly exquisite poetry along the way. The end result is dazzling—and a little mystifying. Dazzling because she writes with the confidence of a seasoned author; mystifying because you can't help but wonder how such a vibrant, funny, compassionate, and lovely human being could create some of the nastiness that's between these covers. (If you doubt that this book gets nasty, read "Close Shave" and see if you don't wince. In 55 words she manages to hit harder than some writers can in five thousand.)

That's the thing, if you ever have the chance to meet Fran—she is one of the most radiant people I've ever encountered. Seriously. Her face actually glows with her love of life, her love of reading, of writing, her love for her friends, a good meal, a good film, a certain passage from a piece of music. She's got a laugh that rings like fine crystal ... there ought to be a law against a person being this happy.

But it is, I think, this happiness, this total, passionate, almost evangelical joy for existence that fuels her fire; it is this very thing that makes her strong enough to access its dark and unsettling counterparts. Fran is a big believer that speculative fiction, in all of its forms, is the supreme mythic literature of our time, and that belief is on full display in *Mama's Boy and Other Dark Tales.*

But seeing—or in this case, reading—is believing, so I offer you what is to my mind the core image of this collection, taken from "Beach of Dreams," a brilliant, hallucinatory, mesmerizing dark fantasy that could, methinks, hold its own in the company of an Ellison tale. The central character of "Beach," Simon Rodan, an anthropologist who is living among the natives of an unidentified island, is taking pictures of mysterious, giant figures whose bodies have washed up on the beach:

"Fumbling inside his vest, Simon tried to protect his camera from the rain with a baggie. He ran up and down the spaces between the lifeless giants, snapping pictures, desperate to document the incredible images. He felt a strange split in his mind—focusing on the task at hand and an eerie concern for what he was witnessing. What was he witnessing?"

Indeed that last line—*What was he witnessing?*—could very well be the reader's mantra as he or she moves through the singular, unified experience of this collection. Like the flashes revealed to Simon in the brief burst of camera-light—each small glimpse hints at the majesty of the unseen whole, and (as if to echo the quote from R.F. Wexler at the beginning of this introduction), they have no choice but to find their way through. Along the way, perhaps, something in or of their world-view will be changed.

Pieces of a larger whole.

Now, I called the above-quoted passage the central image of the collection, not the central obsession that in the end unifies everything. *That* would be the pain (physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual) that is part and parcel of familial obligation, be it the family one is born into, or the family that one assembles for oneself throughout life.

And in the middle of all of this is "Mama's Boy," the tour-de-force novella that earned Fran a Bram Stoker Award nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Long Fiction. It is the thematic centerpiece of this collection, in which virtually all of the themes grappled with in the other fictions and poems are touched upon. I'm not going to spoil it for you by talking about any of its plot—aside from saying, "Frank's back!"—but I will say this much: upon second reading, it remains a work of terrible insight (and I mean that as a compliment) and unnerving power. A shattering study of unearned guilt and what happens when one takes familial obligation to an unspeakable extreme, it is...
simultaneously horrifying and heartbreaking ... and surprisingly funny in a few places. (Lest you start to think that all contained herein is Doom and Gloom, Doom and Gloom, check out “Under the Dryer” for a beautiful example of Fran's humor; you'll laugh, but you're going to feel so dirty about it.)

Then there are pieces like “Special Prayers,” wherein Fran displays her deft touch at the surreal, opening with yet another image that is arguably iconic to this collection:

"Babies fell from the skies over Eastville. They bounced, they bled, but none cried. Their silence was eerie—their tiny bodies splatted and split open as they hit the rooftops, the road, and the sidewalks of our little street. For miles and miles, the sky was full of falling babies, dark blots against the blue."

And there is heartbreak, also; “Orange and Golden,” is a brief story, but its lingering effect still haunts me, weeks after having first read it.

With this collection, Fran Friel accomplishes what all serious writers of dark fiction strive for: she entertains, she instills honest emotion by filtering her own sensibilities through those of her characters, and she leaves the reader with more than a little food for thought afterward. We may not be able to put into words an exact explanation of what we have witnessed, but we emerge richer for the experience, perhaps even with our world-view slightly altered.

What are we witnessing?

The beginning of a long and grand writing career.

I have kept you long enough, so it's time to do what I was asked to do.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my very great pleasure to introduce you to Fran Friel.

Gary A. Braunbeck

Lost in Ohio

May, 2008

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For my dad, Casper

Thank you for teaching me to wonder, wander and work hard.

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BEACH OF DREAMS

With dawn still hours away, the storm howled in the cavernous spaces between the carcasses on the beach. Simon Rodan's lantern swayed in the wind, casting a dance of wan light and shadows on the giant forms, impossible to see them in their entirety from his vantage. *Beached giants* was all he could think when he saw the dark, lifeless shapes crowding the shore. Koma, the villager who had alerted him to the disaster, huddled with the other fisherman around the fire in the cooking shelter between the palm trees. They stayed well away from the bodies on the beach.

Simon overcame the initial shock of the scene, his training as a researcher kicking in. Stomping through the sand, he pulled tools and specimen bags from the pockets of his tattered khaki vest. He took samples of blue and green skin, and some brown, the texture of lizard skin, and he clipped small pieces from golden fish scales the size of dinner plates. Winded from climbing around dozens of bodies in the heavy storm, Simon pushed on, cutting pieces of billowing wet fabric: white linen; colored polka dots; black silk. And finally, with heavy wire cutters, he snipped bits of bright red hair and brown fur, the strands as thick as cables.

Fumbling inside his vest, Simon tried to protect his camera from the rain with a baggie. He ran up and down the spaces between the lifeless giants, snapping pictures, desperate to document the incredible images. He felt a strange split in his mind—focusing on the task at hand and an eerie concern for what he was witnessing. *What was he witnessing?*

One thing he knew for certain: to see and document the full extent of what lay on the beach, he needed to get up above the scene somehow. He finished collecting his samples and photos and trudged through the rain to the gathering of fishermen in the shelter. The men spoke with hushed voices and animated hands, the smoke from their fire swirling around them like demons.

"Koma," he said, breathless, "can you get me up to the cliffs by sun-up?"

Koma searched Simon's face as if looking for a way to answer. Without replying, he turned to the gathering of men and whispered something that Simon did not quite hear. A biting exchange ran through the circle, with Koma shaking his head adamantly. Still struggling with the native tongue, the speed of the exchange left Simon with only a few words—sacrifice, twenty years, and something about hungry nightmares. None of it made sense.

Against loud dissent from the other men, Koma finally replied.

"No, Mr. Simon, too much danger in the night. Spirits come here to feast. You no leave beach. Wait until spirits go."

Simon was momentarily unnerved by the anger of the men. The normally genial villagers rarely raised their voices. Shaking off the knowledge that he was somehow the cause of the unrest, he turned his attention to Koma.

"Look, I need to get up high so I can see exactly what's on that beach. Whatever they are, they're not spirits, Koma. They're dead, cold bodies."

He continued to argue with the man, trying to convince him of the importance of this find to his career—to his life—but Koma shook his head, adamantly in his decision.

Simon was furious with the fisherman. Not long after his arrival on the island, he'd saved Koma's wife from a raging infection in a wound on her foot. With a few doses of antibiotics from his medicine kit, Peka recovered in a matter of days. Since then, Koma, Peka, and their son, Paulo, treated Simon like family. They insisted he move into their meager home, and though he'd hardly noticed over the months in their company, the gentle manner and the kindness of the family had begun to soften his long-held numbness to the world. But at the moment, this history seemed unimportant—Koma would not help him. Undeterred, Simon stomped off to find someone, anyone, who would guide him to *Pahulu Pali*, the Nightmare Cliffs.

With news from the beach spreading fast, villagers arrived carrying ceremonial drums, torches, and food for a feast. Large and small shelters made of palm leaves were erected to protect them from the storm as they prepared their vigil. A group of elder women built a crude altar of stones, heaping it with fruits, flowers and dried fish. Then their
low sing-song chanting began as they filed toward the giant forms at the sea's edge, wind and rain whipping at their hair and clothing, their arms loaded with more offerings to the spirits. The sound of their chanting was soon lost in the wind as they moved farther from the protection of the palms.

The elder men gathered around the fire with their drums and a slow, hypnotic beat began. Still in search of a guide to the cliffs, Simon watched the scene with great interest. He was torn. Although this unrecorded tribal behavior could be key to substantiating his beleaguered theories on tribal mind, documenting the extraordinary scene on the beach would be a career maker—he really had no choice. Disregarding Koma's warnings, he turned back to his task of securing a guide.

In concentric circles around the fire, the villagers gathered, swaying, humming, clicking abalone shells in counterpoint to the sound of the drums. Others held vigil with low droning chants at the altar erected by the elder women. Soaked to the skin, Simon slogged through the sand from villager to villager, without success. Curiously, he noticed the mild trance state the natives were experiencing and suspected the cause was a narcotic effect from the leathery slivers of bark being distributed for chewing. Each time a piece was passed to him, he tucked it away into one of his vest pockets—an excellent addition to his research samples. Some of the villagers appeared more lucid, always the elders it seemed, and when he approached them they kissed his cheeks in the custom of gratitude, which perplexed Simon. Still, none stopped to offer assistance for his journey or explain what the ceremony was about. Most simply smiled, pointed in the direction of the path leading into the jungle, and returned their attention to the ceremony. Everyone, it seemed, had their part.

With no guide, Simon knew that precious time was ticking away. He feared the storm that brought the bodies to shore might wash them back into the surf with the changing tide. With the wind-blown rain stinging his face, he slumped down on a fallen palm trunk. The sound of the pounding drums wrapped around him, intensifying his weariness from his long months on the island. He had sacrificed much of his life for his career. So much time lost with his late wife, Karen. She'd believed in him and his work. An uncommon pang of regret rang in his heart, and he pushed it away as he always did. But the estrangement from his son, Ethan, was a shadow that kept his guilt fresh, sapping his energy, his hope, and what vigor was left for his work. But this trip to the island was a gift. A few of his old supporters at the Foundation still believed him. This was his last chance to salvage his career before he was doomed to a dull academic life in the classroom of a third-rate university.

The morose attitude wasn't helping, so Simon shoved away his old concerns and buried the feelings—a skill he had honed since childhood. This was the break he'd been waiting for, and he needed to stay focused. The emergence of this undocumented ceremony alone was a huge breakthrough—but the forms on the beach? Such an event would put the anthropology community, not to mention the world, in a frenzy. He had to get this right. He had to get to those cliffs.

From his place on the log, Simon spotted Koma's son working on a shelter. Paulo, like most of the villagers, spoke English; a legacy of deceased missionaries and an odd number of reported shipwreck survivors evidenced by the graves of the haole, the white men, outside the village. Forcing his weary mind and body back into action, Simon approached the slender young man. He appeared more clear-eyed than the other villagers. With renewed hope, Simon reached up to hold a palm frond in place against the wind as the young man fastened it down.

"Paulo, I need your help." He raised his voice over the noise of the storm and the escalating sound of the drums. “I need a guide to the cliffs. Can you take me?"

"Pahulu Pali?" He shook his head. “Oh no, Father would be angry, Mr. Simon."

"Come on, Paulo, I'm sure your father wouldn't mind if you helped me out," he lied.

The boy hesitated. He'd followed Simon around like a puppy for months, fascinated by his work, his tools, and his foreign mannerisms. Simon knew he would do almost anything he asked.

"I sorry. No can help you." He looked away, lowering his eyes.

Simon's temper flared—What the hell is wrong with these people? I just want to get up to the damn cliffs! He took a deep breath and struggled to calm himself.
"I'm sorry. I wouldn't want to ask you to do something that scared you. After all, you're just a boy." He didn't like manipulating the boy, but he was desperate.

Paulo stood tall, raising his chin as he spoke. "I am nearly grown. I not scared!"

Simon felt a pang—Paulo was so much like his own son, Ethan. Vexed by the intrusion of these feelings long buried, he pressed on.

"Then take me to the cliffs, Paulo." His tone was an unmasked challenge.

"No," said the boy, looking around, eager to change the subject. "I come here for akaku ‘ili—my first."

Simon remembered the leathery strips in his pocket. On a hunch he hedged his bet.

"So how is it? I haven't tried it yet myself."

The boy looked away, embarrassed. "They no give it to me."

"No? Why not?" Simon resisted a knowing grin.

The boy mumbled his answer. "Not a man yet."

Bingo!

"Ah, now that doesn't seem fair at all," said Simon. "You certainly look man enough to me."

In fact, the boy was strong and tall for a village teen, but he was still awkward and immature. Reluctantly, Simon used this fact to his advantage. Huddling against the shelter, he motioned for Paulo to come closer.

"How about a trade?" he said. "You take me to the cliffs, and I'll give you akaku ‘ili."

Simon pulled a handful of bark slivers from his pocket.

The boy's eyes widened. He looked around to see if anyone was listening, and after a brief flicker of guilt on his face, he said, "Okay, I take you ... but no tell father."

After some further negotiating, Simon handed over two small slivers of the bark, with a sincere promise from Paulo that he wouldn't chew it until they returned from their journey. Satisfied with this arrangement, they split up and hurried off to collect their gear and supplies for the climb to the Nightmare Cliffs.

* * *

The villagers swayed and chanted to the sound of the drums. Those outside the cooking shelter were oblivious to the rain and wind that blew through their flimsy palm shelters. With his heavy pack over his shoulder, Simon wove a path through the swaying crowd, the wet sand bogging down his shoes. He stopped to tap it loose when a cold hand shot out of the crowd and gripped his ankle. Caught by surprise, he nearly toppled over. A familiar face glowed up at him in the fire light, her wet hair ringed with pink orchids. Eyelids heavy with the effects of the akaku ‘ili, she nodded at Simon's pack. It was Peka.

"No ... leave ... beach," she said, still gripping his ankle.

His guilt for using Paulo flared. "I'll be back by tomorrow, Peka. Don't worry."

"No leave!" Peka struggled to her feet, grasping at his clothes.

Impatient with the interruption, Simon wanted to push her away along with the guilt he felt for tricking her son. Instead, he gently disengaged her hands.

Saving Peka's life had made them family, and he felt a strong kinship and tenderness toward her. Many times in the past she had inquired about his own family and the sadness she saw in his eyes, until finally, dispassionately, he had
shared the details of his life. She could not understand his numbness and how his tears did not flow, considering his loss. So like his own wife, she would do anything to love and protect her family, her ohana, the people she cherished, even Simon. With what little patience that remained before his journey to the cliffs, he guided Peka back to her spot in the circle.

The elder woman next to Peka said something harsh in their native tongue, chastising her and forcing her to focus on the ceremony. The old woman turned to Simon, and with a fierce squinty look, she thrust her chin toward the jungle. There it was again—somehow the natives all knew where he was heading—maybe word had spread that he was looking for a guide. At least no one tried to stop him, so Simon moved on toward the edge of the jungle, to the path that would lead him and Paulo to the cliffs.

The boy was there waiting with a fiery torch. Flickering against the wind and rain, its light cast ghoulish shadows across his face. Simon shivered at the sight and lifted his own bright lantern to dispel the shadows.

The boy smiled. “Come, Mr. Simon! It is long walk to Pahulu Pali.”

Leaving the drumming and the memory of Peka's worried face behind, Simon followed the boy into the dense jungle.

* * * *

Trekking high up the side of the jungle cliff, the thick canopy muffled the noise of the storm. Rain collected into rivulets along thick tree trunks and leaves, falling in fat drops like pebbles from the foliage. The deeper into the jungle they traveled the steamier the air became, making it hard to breathe, but Simon plodded on, trying to keep up with Paulo's youthful stride. As they drew nearer to the cliffs, the jungle became quieter. Trudging along, he glanced into the dark canopy—the jungle was devoid of the usual cacophony of animals and insects. After the relentless noise of the storm, the silence unnerved Simon, but it was more than the absence of sound. Lifting his lantern to the darkness above, he saw a flash of gold and glowing eyes blinking all around him in the foliage. He was startled by the sight, and with his attention off the trail, he tripped over a thick root. To catch his balance he grabbed at a smooth-barked tree, where his fingers sunk deep into a layer of warm, sticky slime. He yanked his hand free with a sense of revulsion, the stench of the substance making him instantly nauseated. Scanning the jungle nervously, he did his best to rub the slime off his hand onto wet leaves and moss, but the stench remained.

The eyes seemed to have disappeared, but Paulo had pulled far ahead of him. He rushed to catch up, not really admitting to himself that he didn't want to be alone on the trail. When he finally reached the boy, Paulo made a face at the foul smell wafting around Simon. The boy picked up his pace to get away from the smell. Simon said nothing about the eyes—it must have simply been a trick of the light in the wet leaves.

After an hour of hiking in a cloud of rank odor, Simon felt lightheaded. His sense of smell had never been keen, but it seemed that things in the jungle were different somehow.

"Paulo.” The boy was again out of sight ahead on the trail. “I need a break.”

He could hear Paulo stomping through the foliage, but there was no reply. They'd been hiking for hours, and Simon knew they should be near the entrance to the cliffs. It would be dawn in a few short hours. The boy was probably eager to get to the top, but Simon needed to stop. He would catch up with Paulo as soon as he did something about the putrid odor on his hand. By the light of his lantern, he dropped his pack and unhooked the canteen. After a couple of lukewarm swallows he nearly swooned. Must be the heat and exhaustion catching up with me ... or this damn stink. Shaking off the feeling, he dug his hands down into the wet jungle soil, rubbing the dark mud over his skin in hopes of removing the reek left from the tree slime. He glanced up at the trail ahead, but no longer heard Paulo moving through the jungle.

"Paulo?” he shouted.

Still crouching on the ground, wringing his hands with the mud, he felt the gritty paste turn slippery. When he looked down, his hands were awash in a thick red liquid—blood. Simon gasped. Alarmed, he checked to see if he was injured, but found no cuts or gashes on his hands.
Then the whispering started. It came like a buzz in the center of his head, unintelligible but relentless. Simon grabbed his lantern and held it high, searching the shadows of the forest in an attempt to find where the sound was coming from. He turned in every direction, but the noise remained constant. Finally, Simon covered his ears—the sound was still there, inside his head. At that moment, Paulo came crashing down the trail toward him.

"Mr. Simon, we here before," he shouted. Worry etched the boy's usually carefree features. "I see Sister Fork tree ahead on path and we passed her long time ago. We go in circle."

Disoriented by Paulo's news and worried about the whispering in his head and the blood on his hands, Simon squeezed his eyes shut, trying to make sense of what was happening. After a moment, he noticed the feel of grit on his palms. Opening his eyes, he saw that the blood was gone and the wet jungle soil was all that covered his skin. He snatched up the canteen and dowsed the mud from his hands, rubbing them dry on his pants. I've got to get a grip here. He tried to ignore the buzzing in his head, to stay calm, but his irritation sizzled. Finally, he looked up at the frantic boy.

"How?" is all he managed. He was trying not to think about the wasted hours and the strange effect exhaustion was having on his senses.

"I walk cliffs many times. Never go in circle, but..."

"But what?" The violent edge in his voice made the boy flinch. Simon gritted his teeth and continued with a barely controlled calm. "What happened, Paulo?"

Hesitating, Paulo scanned the jungle around him and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Spirits here now, Mr. Simon."

Simon rolled his eyes and struggled to keep his cool. The buzzing in his head was a hiss now, causing a maddening itch deep inside his ears. "Like I told your father," he said as he dug in his ear with a dirty finger, "they're not spirits. Those things on the beach—whatever they are—they're dead!"

"But it is legend, Mr. Simon. They sleep on beach and their dreams demand a feast in jungle on Pouli moon night. The elders say today is twenty years. I no believe stories before, but now..."

"What stories? I've been here for months and I've never heard any of this."

"Spirits come from mind of the white man, and only nightmares can fill spirits’ hunger. The prayers of my village provide for spirits—bring visitors, like missionaries and men from broken ships. Ancient promise—village bring sacrifice, then spirits make peace with my people and leave bounty.” Tears trickled down the boy's face. “I think you the sacrifice, Mr. Simon."

The buzzing in Simon's head suddenly escalated into electric shrieks that ripped like spinning blades through his brain. He clutched his head, falling to his knees. Paulo rushed to him as Simon collapsed unconscious on the jungle floor.

***

It was unclear how long he'd been unconscious, but when Simon came around he was relieved to find the excruciating pain in his head, as well as the noise, was gone. He was surprised by a sweet taste in his mouth—thick like honey. He didn't much care what it was, he was just happy the pain in his head had subsided. When he passed out, he thought for sure he was having a stroke.

Still lying on the soggy jungle floor, he blinked at the shimmery light that ringed the leaves on the trees above him. Slowly sitting up, he saw the same shimmer around everything—including Paulo, who stood wide-eyed and stone still, staring into the jungle.

"Paulo?"
The boy didn't respond. Idly noticing the absence of the normal stiffness in his joints, Simon climbed to his feet and turned to see what had gripped the boy's attention. A brilliant light shone behind the foliage ahead on the trail where the entrance to the cliffs should have been. Simon grabbed his pack and canteen and moved to Paulo's side.

"What's going on here?" he said.

Startled, the boy looked at Simon. A big smile brightened his face and he threw his arms around him. "Oh, I so glad you okay, Mr. Simon!"

"What happened?" Simon backed away from the enthusiastic embrace.

"I did not know what to do, Mr. Simon. I know I promise not to eat bark, but ... I remember stories from parents.
They say with no akaku 'ili on Pouli moon night, the spirits make men lost and mad. You look mad—I am lost, so I put bark in your mouth—and my mouth. That's when light come from path."

Simon smacked his lips at the sweet taste still lingering on his tongue, and he noticed that he felt strangely energized.

"At least the damn buzzing in my head is gone. Come on."

Paulo looked confused and more than a little reluctant, but Simon pushed him forward up the path toward the light. It wasn't long before they broke through the foliage and out onto the plateau that topped the Nightmare Cliffs. They stood motionless, mouths open and eyes squinting at the source of the brilliant glow.

A maître d' in a black tuxedo stood at the door of an enormous glass atrium. It radiated dazzling light, and inside a thick mist swirled. The man's slicked back hair and tiny mustache sent Simon's reeling mind in search of a foothold, anything to make sense of what he was seeing. His memory flashed on the image of a French maître d' in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Not exactly the foothold he was hoping for, but he figured in this context it was the best his mind could do.

With a sweep of his hand toward the glass doors, the Frenchman offered Simon and Paulo a silent invitation to enter the atrium.

"Paulo! What is this?" Simon whispered. He nudged the boy to get his attention.

Paulo stumbled a bit and looked at Simon, shrugging and shaking his head.

"Tsst ... tsst. The maître d' motioned again, a hint of impatience at the corners of his smartly pursed lips. When Simon and Paulo didn't respond, he clapped his hands twice, his manner crisp and curt. A moment later, two golden fish-scaled beauties drifted out from the edge of the jungle. Black hair floating weightless as if buoyant in the sea, the first of the Sirens glided to Simon's side, her fishtail swaying gracefully beneath her. She threaded her arm around his and, resting a hand on his bicep, offered a coy smile of approval at the muscle beneath his sleeve.

Alarmed, Simon tried to pull away, but her webbed fingers with their gold-tipped talons held him like a vise.

The other dark-haired beauty moved forward to face young Paulo, her mist-kissed cleavage full and radiant in the glow of the atrium's light. Beckoning him with a wink and a webbed finger, she smiled with deep red lips. As if attached at the throat by an invisible chain, seeming to float, Paulo followed her to the wide glass doors.

"Paulo!"

Completely entranced, the boy did not, or perhaps could not, respond.

But Simon continued to resist, pulling at the steel grip of the Siren. He tried to dig his heels into the rocky surface beneath his feet, but he was floating above the ground. Like Paulo, he glided toward the glow of the atrium. His escort's face beamed up at him, like a woman eager to join the most anticipated party of the season. Alarmed at his loss of control, Simon looked around frantically for a way to stop his movement toward the glass doors.

"Hey, hey! What's happening here? What have you done with the boy?" he said, his voice tight with panic. "Lady ...
lady, what are you doing to me?"

Simon struggled to wrench his body free, but unyielding, the woman wrinkled her brow in a feigned look of concern. Reaching up, she tapped his temple with the tip of a needle-sharp talon. Simon flinched and a perfect pearl of blood formed on the spot. Suddenly, all of his concerns melted away and Simon relaxed, floating on an invisible cloud toward the open doors. Bright light poured from inside. Paulo had passed through the door some time before. Now, with cool satisfaction, the maître d’ grinned as Simon floated across the threshold with his companion.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Rodan. We’re delighted to have your company this evening. The guests have gathered and are awaiting your arrival."

Simon offered a contented nod. Head held high, he felt like a benevolent king entering his court, but a gnawing sensation in his gut made him feel as if he’d forgotten something urgent. He pushed the feeling away and continued to enjoy his ride. He couldn’t see in the dazzle of light from the misty room, but the sound of music swirled around him, a Chopin Nocturne, one of his favorites. Ethan, his son, had played Chopin at a very young age, he mused. He missed hearing him play. The gnawing returned with a spike, and a blanket of cold sweat wrapped around him. A sudden change in the weight of his clothing caught his hazy attention—he reached up and felt a crisp collar, a bow tie, and a satin lapel. The feeling in his gut had mercifully dissipated with the discovery of his new clothing.

The mist faded, and stretching out in front of Simon was a grand piano the length of a limousine. Sitting at the keyboard was a blue-skinned woman with multiple arms and hands. Two hands moved with inhuman grace, fingers sweeping along the keyboard, while the other hands busied themselves with primping the woman’s raven hair and toying with the necklace of shrunken heads hanging like fat pearls around her neck. Simon chuckled when one of the heads stuck its tongue out. His escort nodded to the piano player and dropped a plump red ruby in the tip jar. Simon felt bad he had nothing to offer, but then he remembered his fancy white tuxedo. He reached for his cuff and removed a diamond cufflink from his sleeve, adding it to the odd collection of eyeballs, jewels, and nuggets of gold in the jar. The blue woman smiled at him, and with a free hand she blew him a kiss.

Still under the Siren’s strange spell, Simon observed the rest of the bizarre scene. A vast and ornately carved banquet table was surrounded by every imaginable figure from a world of nightmares. They lounged in the high-back velvet-covered seats, and they milled around with cocktails, mingling and laughing by the light of a hundred candles. Bipeds, quadrupeds, and tentacled guests alike, all were in fine spirits.

"Well, Mr. Rodan, we’ve been expecting you."

The bald man speaking was heavily muscled and nearly eight feet tall. Wearing an impeccable white tie and tails, he exuded the look of gracious hospitality, the single bulging eye in the center of his forehead glinting in the candle light.

Simon barely blinked at the appearance of his host. The grinding in his gut returned, intensified.

"When we saw you on the beach,” continued the host, “we hoped it would be you who would join us for the feast. And here you are. See, my friends,” he said, with a sweep of his eye around the room. “Dreams do come true.”

The crowd of guests roared, some literally, with laughter. Simon didn't get the joke, but he smiled politely. The Cyclops motioned for Simon to take a seat at the table. He glided into his place with the help of his escort. She kissed his cheek, served him a succulent appetizer of barbequed ribs, and stood behind his chair. Sitting across the table, looking terribly bored, a thick-scaled Japanese dragon-lizard picked raw bits of meat from his razor sharp teeth. An occasional puff of smoke escaped his wide nostrils. Beside him, a tidy mummy with a glass of red wine dabbed a dinner napkin at a burgundy stain blossoming on his chest.

"Oh dear,” the mummy said, “and my very best linen, too.”

"Would you stop prattling on,” said a red haired clown seated next to Simon. “Can’t you see our guest of honor has arrived? And it appears he's thoroughly enjoying the fine cuisine.”

As Simon nibbled his appetizer, the clown smiled at him with teeth filed to shark-tooth points.
The grinding in Simon's gut grew insistent and painful. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and pushed his plate away. Holding his stomach, a sour belch escaped him.

A hairy-faced man across the table noticed his discomfort. “Not to worry. Personally, I prefer my meat rare and a little livelier. In fact,” he said, turning to the Cyclops, “could we do something about this Siren's voodoo, Cyc? This has all become quite boring. If I wanted a zombie for dinner, I'd eat George over there.” He cocked his thumb at the man with the empty eye sockets and torn suit. “And now that we're on the subject of George, he smells!” He looked around the room and raised his voice. “Doesn't that bother anybody else? And no matter how much he eats, he's never full. Every time we get together it's the same thing—never enough flesh because of George.”

The zombie moaned and pushed back his chair.

"Hold it, you two,” said the Cyclops. “Let's be civilized here. It's our vacation, after all. You two can duke it out in some eight-year-old's nightmare when we go back to work."

The zombie moaned again and begrudgingly stayed in his seat.

"All right,” said the werewolf, “but what about livening up this party?"

"Very well,” said the Cyclops, turning to Simon's escort. “Release our guest from his sedation, my sweet Merrow."

The Siren behind Simon's chair laid her cold webbed fingers across his eyes and whispered a few words of Gaelic into his ear. Released from her control, his gnawing stomach exploded into a vomitous plume. He screamed and heaved and screamed some more, as the image of the source of the appetizer connected with his brain. In the center of the table lay the gray corpse of Paulo, his torso splayed open, eviscerated. The boy's facial features morphed into his son's face and back to Paulo's. Simon squeezed his eyes shut, tears seeping from the corners. His screams became wails and sobbing. He'd never cried this way, he'd never felt such sorrow. It was as if he were being turned inside out. His throat burned from the vomit and his ribs ached from the wracking sobs as he heaved the remaining bile from his cramping stomach.

"Hot damn! Now, that's what I'm talking about,” said the hairy-faced man, slapping the table.

The rest of the banquet guests clapped and cheered. The blue-skinned woman began a new selection: *Moonlight Sonata*. While she played, she breathed deeply of the misty air, and with soft ecstasy in her voice and a lilting Hindi accent, she spoke.

"Oh, my dear Cyclops, the villagers have sacrificed well for us this Pouli moon. Have they not?"

"Indeed, sweet lady,” he replied.

"The scent of this one's anguish and the exquisite quality of his nightmares are mouth watering,” she said. “This feast will feed us well, my dear."

The merrow's hands were like steel on Simon's shoulders. Held firmly in his chair, he shuddered convulsively and wept in wretched sobs. The rest of the dinner guests watched with anticipation as the Cyclops strode to the blue woman's side. Gracefully taking his hand, she rose from the piano and accompanied him to Simon's seat. His chair was turned to face her.

One blue hand reached forward and gently lifted his chin. Simon opened his bloodshot eyes, his face flushed and soaked with tears and snot. She leaned in and kissed his forehead, then licked his face with a long forked tongue.

"Delicious."

Like a lust-filled lover, strong blue arms wrapped around him and hands like stone gripped many parts of his body all at once. Simon shrieked as he felt his leg ripped from the socket of his hip, the sound of his flesh tearing like wet canvas ripping apart in a storm. Still conscious, what remained of him was flung onto the long wooden table for the others to share. Simon writhed and fought, the pitch of his screams sending the banquet guests into frenzied competition for their favorite parts of his blood soaked flesh.
Somewhere far away in his fading awareness, Simon heard the voice of the French maître d’.

"Messieurs et Mesdames, an unexpected guest has arrived."

The faint but familiar sound of a native woman's voice was followed by the Cyclops’ reply.

"Hmm ... a trade? We've nearly had our fill, my dear, but such a generous and enticing offer is hard to resist. It's been years since we've had exotic local fare. Our agreement has forbade us from indulging, but since you offered...” His deep, lusty laugh followed.

The dinner guests squealed with slavering delight at the sight of a special course added to the menu—an unexpected dessert. The screams of the woman were the last thing Simon heard before his mind and his unspeakable pain mercifully drifted away into blackness.

* * * *

After a seemingly endless stretch of black velvet silence, Simon was suddenly assaulted with a flurry of fast-forward images and feelings. In what he realized was a kind of theater of the mind, a place outside his body and outside the physical world, he was a visceral witness to a strange speeding assortment of moments and long-forgotten memories from his life. The nightmare's banquet had left him raw, his well honed numbness providing no protection. He felt the mounting force of each experience like the assault of a gale stripping him bare, his emotional nerves raw and exposed.

...his father's callused hand wrapped around his own small hand as a child—the safety of its hardness and warmth filled his heart; the rich leathery smell of his first baseball mitt was soon followed by the helpless shame of banishment to the outfield—no athletic talent, an embarrassment to his father; the hollow and conspicuous feeling onstage holding yet another award for academic excellence with the glaring absence of his father from the audience; his mother's wrenching sorrow by his father's deathbed and Simon's cold numbness already well intact...

A fleeting moment of relief swept through Simon when the images shifted.

...the pride and crooked gap-toothed grin of Ethan during his first piano recital; putting the boy's small red Little League cap on the dresser after tucking him into bed; his wife's beaming face holding their boy's graduation photo—Simon was sorry to miss the ceremony, but he had to be at that conference; his wife asking him to stay with her during a storm, but work was more urgent—she looked so frail—he’d never noticed—she never complained...

The excruciating parade of life experiences flickered on mercilessly, assaulting Simon with pangs of pride, love, and guilt, each one piercing his heart like fiery needles. The pursuit of his career and forever trying to become someone his father could be proud of had made him numb to the truth, to his blessings, to his family's true value.

His wife and son were proud of him, they loved him, but that wasn't enough. In his blind pursuit, that didn't even factor in, and the cost to them—to the ones he should have cherished most—had been enormous. The dawning realization of the depth of his loss and the price of his pride made him glad for his gruesome end at the hands of the nightmares. He preferred death to this unbearable accounting.

The painful flickering of his failures finally whiplashed to a halt at one of Simon's greatest regrets:

The others, huddled under umbrellas, bled away from his wife's graveside. Simon waited in the rain, watching Ethan across the still-open grave. Nearly grown and in college, he looked so young standing there beside his mother's grave. Hair soaked, arms hanging limp at his sides, the boy's shoulders shook with the quaking of his sobs. Simon stood frozen, helpless to go to his own son, incapable of offering comfort. He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat and turned away, walking toward the car. No funeral limo waited; he'd driven them to the cemetery himself.

He waited inside the car, and after a time, Ethan followed.

The pounding of rain on the roof did little to drown the silence between them. As Simon put the key into the ignition, Ethan slammed his fist against the car door.
“Don't you feel anything?” he shouted.

Simon closed his eyes, drew a deep breath and turned the key. Staring straight ahead, he put the car in gear and pulled away from the graveside parking area. He glanced in the mirror. Ethan turned to the window and buried his face in his forearm to weep alone.

* * * *

Simon felt the weight of his body in a rush. He opened his eyes to a sharp sliver of pale dawn sunlight—a view of the morning sky from Nightmare Cliffs. Ignoring the shattering pain in his body, Simon forced himself to sit up. He was still alive, still intact. He should have been grateful, but after what he'd been through, what he knew of himself, he wasn't sure he could bear it.

The air was fresh after the heavy storm of the previous night, and the breeze made him shiver. It felt as if his skin had been replaced, an old numbness lifted so that he felt vulnerable even to the warmth of the sun and the touch of the wind. Even his sense of smell was heightened, so much so he imagined that he smelled the scent of his wife's perfume drifting through the air. The memory brought real tears, not those from a nightmare. The pain of losing her hit him full on. He'd never grieved her death, but now he had no defense. Sobs wracked his aching body. He wanted to die, rather than feel such pain.

He could hear the sea, so he knew that the edge of the cliff was near, just over the rise of a small hill. The sound drew him. There, he could escape his pain. Not only did he bear the burden of his own family's agony, but he'd betrayed Koma and Peka. He'd taken their son, their beautiful boy, from them. He could never forgive himself and he could never face them.

Dragging himself to his feet, Simon stumbled over rocks and roots, making his way toward the rise. As he staggered to the top of the hill, he saw two women sitting side by side on a flat boulder at the edge of the cliff. Something about them seemed so familiar—one fair-haired, one dark with a ring of pink orchids encircling her head. The wind carried the scent of his wife's perfume to him.

Karen!

There she sat, holding hands with Peka! The women were chatting happily, dangling their feet over the edge of the boulder.

"Karen!"

The two women turned to him and waved. He rushed down the hillside to see them, but his weakened legs betrayed him. He stumbled and fell hard, hitting his head. Dazed, Simon lay in a tangle of vegetation on the rocky plateau. In a gust of wind, he heard his wife's voice calling.

"It's not too late, my love. Take care of our boys."

Ignoring the scrapes from his fall, Simon struggled to free himself from the prickly bushes. He needed to get to Karen. He had to see her.

"It's not too late.” Her voice was fading.

Staggering to his feet, Simon looked toward the cliffs but there was no one in sight. On wobbly legs, he rushed as best he could to the edge of the cliff, to the boulder where Karen and Peka had been sitting.

He called them, looking around frantically. No answer came back, the scent of Karen's perfume lost in the wind.

Simon put his hand on the boulder, feeling the rough surface. It was cold to the touch. He shook his head—just his imagination. Another dream, another nightmare. They were taunting him, punishing him.

Weary of it all, Simon sat down on the boulder. The rising sun slanted a brilliant ray across the stone as if lighting a path before him, inviting him to the edge. Taking a breath to bolster his courage, he walked toward the cliff's edge.
A burst of color caught his eye, and there at the brink lay a circlet of pink orchids.

Simon's heart pounded. As he bent to retrieve the ring of flowers, he heard a moan from below the brim of the cliff. On his hands and knees he peered over, and on a ledge below lay Paulo. Curled around his pack, his clothes torn and filthy, Paulo was alive.

Simon scrambled over the edge, his pain and weariness forgotten. At the boy's side, he reached out to touch him. Was he really there? Or was this another cruel trick of the nightmares? But at his touch, the boy's eyes fluttered open. Shielding his face against the bright morning sun, he smiled.

"Mr. Simon!" He looked around, his expression perplexed. "How I get here?"

"I don't know, Paulo, but I'm just glad you are." He embraced the boy, and with a look of surprise, Paulo hugged him back. After an awkward moment, Simon got to his feet and extended his hand to the boy.

"Come on. Let's get you home."

"But pictures—did you take pictures of beach?" he said. "Look!" He smiled, pointing to the shore below.

The beach was the last thing that concerned Simon, but when he turned to see what Paulo was pointing at, he couldn't believe what lay below. After the events of the night, he didn't think anything else could ever surprise him, but there on the shore lay the giant carcasses of the nightmare banquet.

The Cyclops with his white tie and tails, the Wolfman, Kali—the blue-skinned woman who had blown him a kiss and ripped his leg off. They were all there, all the hungry nightmares in giant living color. But the tide was moving in fast and dragging at the bodies, lifting and pulling them out to sea. Simon felt a tug at his vest.

"Come on, Mr. Simon. Take your pictures. That what we came all this way to do, yes?"

Simon stared at the monsters on the beach, watching the billowing linen of the mummy's corpse unwinding into the surf. He pulled his camera from his pocket and removed the plastic bag he had used the night before. That seemed so long ago. He lifted the camera to his eye and pressed the automatic shutter button. The camera whizzed to life, taking a series of photos in rapid fire. When he finished, he hefted the camera in his hand for a minute. Setting it aside, he dug in his pockets and found the rest of his sample bags and tools. He handed some to Paulo. The boy looked confused.

"Fill them with rocks so the wind can't blow them around, then throw them as far as you can. Throw them out to sea."

Paulo smiled and grabbed a handful of rocks. Together they filled the bags, taking turns tossing them over the cliff. After a couple of bags, they began to laugh, cheering each other on. Each time they threw a little harder and a little farther, the contents disappearing into the ocean. And with each throw, Simon felt a little more free, a little more whole.

Maybe it wasn't too late to start again. Karen and Peka, that's what they said. But how? How could they have been there? Perhaps Peka followed them, but Karen? It didn't make sense. Then he remembered the native woman's voice at the nightmare banquet just before he lost consciousness. No, it couldn't have been. But in his heart, Simon knew that Peka was completely capable of giving her own life for her family, her ohana.

Sadness swept over Simon with the realization of Peka's sacrifice. He watched as Paulo pitched the last baggie into the ocean, this one filled with samples of bright red hair as thick as cables. The young man beamed with the joy of the game, and after his throw, he celebrated with a high-five, a simple gesture, one he'd learned from Simon. In that moment, Simon knew he would spend the rest of his life doing whatever he could to make Paulo's life better, as well as the life of his own son. He'd do it for Peka ... and Karen.

Standing in the sea breeze, warmed by the sun, Simon sensed the rightness of the moment. He felt alive and glad about it. He could never change the past or make it right, but he could live the present and the future with a new heart and renewed hope. Could his son forgive him? Simon knew that no matter what would come, he'd die trying to
make it so.

He bent down and snatched up the carefully wrapped camera. Without hesitation he wound up like a major league pitcher and rocketed it out to sea with a throw his father could have been proud of.
Gravy is what Leonard loved most in the world. He loved that sweet, slimy brownness on everything he could think of. Fried eggs and gravy; tuna melt and gravy; peanut butter, jelly, and that's right, gravy.

You could call Leonard Hogtire a bona fide connoisseur of gravydom. He'd tried all the commercial brands, be they from jars or cans, or those concentrated packets of dried gravy dust meant to be mixed with water at a slow simmer. But after dropping out of high school for his dream job at his uncle's factory—Boss Hog's Pig Knuckles and Rendering, Inc.—Leonard moved beyond the commercial gravy fare his tired mama served him, seemingly by the gallon, and started experimenting with fine southern recipes.

He would have moved out on his own, but his mama was a widow, so rather than leave her all alone, he moved down to the cellar and fixed himself up a bachelor pad complete with a small but well-appointed kitchen for the pursuit of his favorite pastime—the search for the perfect gravy.

* * * * 

Miss Appledine, the town librarian, was always pleased to see new patrons enter through the doors of Eastville's Dewey Smithers Community Library, the first and only public library for a hundred miles. But when she saw the lumbering form of Leonard Hogtire silhouetted against the bright afternoon sun of the open library doors, she blinked hard in disbelief. Lifting her neck-chained glasses to her cool gray eyes, she took a deep breath and held it. She'd passed Leonard enough times in the street and the grocers to prepare her for the stench that followed the man like a humid cloud of putrid pig guts. Job hazard, she figured. Shame though, he seemed like a nice young man.

Leonard strolled up to the circulation desk with the silly grin he wore, and Miss Appledine nodded and tried to look natural—while holding her breath.

"Where's the cookbooks, Miss?" asked Leonard.

Miss Appledine blinked at the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. With a tight smile, she pointed to the last shelf in the far corner of the non-fiction section.

"Thank ya', Miss."

Leonard picked up his pace, excited to enter the latest source of his personal joy. As he moved out of hearing distance, Miss Appledine released her held breath, relieved that the threat to her olfactories had passed, only to discover that Leonard had left a trail of his personal scent behind for her smelling enjoyment. Even though the day was cool, she switched on the old wire-cased oscillating fan in hopes that the odor would dissipate before her all-too-sensitive gag reflex kicked in.

* * * *

For months, Leonard's gravy studies brought him back to the library with regular frequency. He never noticed the fan strategically pointed in his direction when he came to the desk with his library card and his latest gravy recipe laden cookbook. Eventually, he exhausted the cooking section and moved on to wilderness, hunting, and taxidermy topics.

He was genuinely touched by the kindness of the librarian, since most folks weren't exactly hospitable to Leonard. She always suggested that he keep his titles as long as he wanted.

"No rush returning ... them," Miss Appledine would say.

Leonard was, however, concerned about the little lady's health, always seeming to have a tissue up to her nose and dabbing at her watery eyes. She was such a sweet woman. Strange how she'd never married. He found a book on the shelf in the health section on allergies and viruses and left it on the counter for her when he checked out his latest title on wilderness survival, the one with the partially eviscerated rabbit on the cover.
Liberating his father's old rifle from the back of the hall closet, Leonard began his studies in small game hunting. Rabbits, birds, squirrels, snakes—anything that came into his path during his forays into the nearby hills. Leonard experimented with all the small critters he could get his hands on, learning the proper cleaning and rendering, all in pursuit of a gravy to die for—one so mouthwateringly sweet and savory, heaven might open up and swallow him whole. His daddy always loved gravy, and to Leonard, gravy was life—after all, it was a product of live things, their blood, their juices, their essence.

He found the small game experiment mildly satisfying, but he moved to larger prey like venison and black bear. He was happy for a time, with large quantities of meat to continue his culinary experimentation. He bought a chest freezer and muscled it down the steps to store his meaty trophies along with samples of his best gravies for later comparisons. The freezer was a good tool, but Leonard preferred his meat to still be warm, as close to live as possible. Those batches of gravy were noticeably more alive with flavor as they swirled on his refined palate.

But something elusive was still missing, and Leonard was determined to discover his gravy masterpiece. He returned to the library with renewed enthusiasm, studying hard for weeks, making notes, collecting spices and the proper utensils for his greatest gravy ever. He had a plan.

When the big day arrived, he was elated; everything was prepared. He showered extra-long with a special scented soap he'd found at the drugstore. He shaved his cheery round face, aglow with anticipation, and slapped on some fancy aftershave, and dressed in his brand new duds, dress pants and a button-down shirt. With a last look in the mirror to comb his hair, Leonard tucked his library book under his arm and headed out for what would be the best night of his life.

On his way to the library, he stopped by the flower shop and picked out a delicate bouquet. He'd timed his visit to the library perfectly. Just minutes before closing. The parking lot was empty, with the exception of Miss Appledine's little blue Toyota. Leonard smiled to himself; the perfect car for such a sweet lady.

He entered the library and strolled up to the counter like he always did, but this time, Miss Appledine looked pleasantly surprised, and there wasn't a tissue or watery eye in sight.

"Well, Leonard, don't you look handsome this evening."

"Thank you, Miss." He looked down at his feet with his usual silly grin.

"Looks like you just caught me. I was about to close up for the evening."

"Well," said, Leonard, "I was wondering if you were busy tonight." Still looking down, he scuffed the toe of his shoe on the floor. "I was just wondering if you might like to join me for dinner tonight."

Miss Appledine looked surprised by the offer, but she'd become fond of the young man—he was her most faithful library patron. And his usual stench was mercifully absent.

"Leonard, what a lovely offer." It was clear that she was about to decline, but after a thoughtful pause, she cocked her head to the side and smiled. "Oh, why not? I was going home to an empty house and leftovers anyway, and from the extensive cookbook reading you've done, I suspect you must know good eating when you see it."

Leonard grinned and nodded, thrilled that she accepted his invitation.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Leonard pulled the bouquet of flowers from behind his back. "These are for you, for being such a sweet lady."

"Thank you. They're beautiful, Leonard. You shouldn't have."

"It was the least I could do," he said. "Oh, and here's my library book. It's a little overdue. I guess you could say I devoured it."
"Not to worry. It'll be our little secret." She stamped the book and when she noticed the title, she chuckled at Leonard's sense of humor.

"The Dietary Habits of Cannibals. Must have been a fascinating read. I hope you'll tell me all about it over dinner." Leonard's grin widened. “It seems they love gravy.”
MASHED

1—Cody’s Revenge

Samantha Sommerville licked the frosting from her finger, grinning at the rich taste of chocolate swirling on her tongue. Surrounded by the warmth of her kitchen and the scent of baking, she marveled at how good she felt. It had been two years since her brother's disappearance, but with the support of her family and some good therapy she felt like she was coming back to life. Her curls moved around her face in the breeze from the kitchen window, and she breathed deeply like her therapist had taught her. Taking in the smells of the spring air, she was hungry to fill herself with the moment.

As she turned back to her work to put the final touches on the birthday cake, Cody slammed through the kitchen door at a trot.

"Hey buddy, how was school?” she asked.

On his way to the refrigerator, he whizzed past her in a blur of shaggy hair and baggy denim.

"Okay.” He shrugged, nabbing an ice cream sandwich from the freezer.

Samantha looked at the ice cream and then at her son with her patented eyebrow raise. “Sorry, buddy. Birthday or not, there's no junk food before dinner. Besides, you'll be in a sugar coma soon enough at the party tonight.”

The boy rolled his eyes at her and tossed the ice cream back in the freezer, then grabbed an apple from the bowl on the kitchen table. “Happy now?” he asked as he swiped a fingerful of icing from the mixing bowl. Samantha swatted his hand and smiled.

"You still haven't told me your special birthday dinner request,” she said. “What'll it be, buddy?”

With a sly grin, Cody answered, “Mashed potatoes!”

Chill bumps slipped across Samantha's skin—her son knew how she felt about “the evil spuds,” as he called them. But she was obligated by tradition to prepare his birthday request and she knew full well he was taking advantage of the chance for a little “no junk food” rule revenge.

"You okay, Mom?” He beamed with cherubic innocence.

"How about some rice instead, Cody?” She strained to maintain a neutral tone, knowing her son's ninja-like skill at detecting any sign of parental weakness.

"Nah, I've got my heart set on mashed.”

"Fine ... brat.” She mumbled, accepting defeat.

"See ya.'” The boy headed for the door, calling over his shoulder. “Going skating with Brian and Josh.”

Samantha didn't answer; her mind was quickly drifting toward old, uncomfortable thoughts. She was no longer thinking about the cake in front of her or the birthday dinner. Instead, she was remembering her brothers’ favorite childhood sport—terrifying Sam—and the root cellar on her parents’ farm.

* * * *

2—Brotherly Love

"You heard about Old Lady Carne, the witch, didn't ya'? How she kills people and chops 'em up?” said Eddie, looming over Samantha. Pretending to ignore him, she stared unseeing at her history book laying open on the kitchen table.
Eddie continued, “Folks say she's pure evil, Sam. She eats her victims’ hearts, then casts a spell on the leftover bits and stashes 'em in people's barns and root cellars. Those bits just sit there, waitin' for a new host to spread her evil. If you touch 'em,” Eddie whispered, leaning in close, “you're done for.”

"Yeah,” said Danny, sitting across from Samantha. “I heard the evil hibernates in your flesh, and all it takes to wake it up is a little blood.” He slapped his hand on the kitchen table, and Samantha's body jolted. She dropped her chin to her chest, hoping the veil of her hair would hide her flushed face.

With a satisfied grin, Danny said, “You know, Sam, when you get older, Mom's gonna make you go down in the root cellar—down in the dark all by yourself. We've had to do it.”

Eddie shook his head with regret and stared down at the floor. “Yup, it's just a matter of time before it's your turn, Sammy.” Her brothers stared at each other with concern. “Poor, Sam,” they said in unison as they walked by, patting her shoulder and snickering behind her back. “Just be careful what you touch down there.” Sam listened to them laughing as they ran upstairs, but of course, she knew they were right.

* * * *

"Go on down to the cellar and get me some potatoes, Samantha,” said her mother as she dressed a chicken for supper. Samantha froze on the spot and looked at her brother standing in the doorway. He looked back at her and nodded with his eyebrows raised in a “see, I told you so” look. Shaking his head sympathetically, he disappeared from the doorway.

Samantha dawdled, putting on her jacket and tightening the laces on her sneakers. “What are you waitin' for girl?” her mother asked, shoving a basket in her hands and chucking her under the chin. “Go on now. Those potatoes aren't gonna walk into this kitchen on their own.”

In the waning afternoon light of autumn, Samantha crossed the yard to the root cellar like she was marching to the drone of a funeral dirge. A chill breeze gusted up from behind her as if urging her on toward her fate. Accepting her doom, she sighed, put the basket down at the entrance, and opened the heavy cellar door. It squealed in protest, exposing the wooden steps below.

The stairway down to the root cellar was littered with shadows from the fading light. With stoic determination, Sam hooked the basket over her arm and clomped down the steps, one by one, feeling her way along the cool wall with her hands. As the darkness closed around her, she felt a sudden prick from something sharp along the wall. She cried out and stuck her finger in her mouth, tasting the rusty tinge of blood and feeling her thin courage slipping away like a ghost. Her face turned hot with tears and anger. Why would her mother put her in such danger? Hadn't she heard about the witch? It didn't matter, she thought to herself, because once her mother gave an order, there was no turning back.

Resigned to her duty, Sam continued down the steps with her shoulder to the wall until at last she felt the hard dirt floor beneath her sneakers. The damp odor of the room surrounding her smelled like an open grave; she shivered. Sam had watched her mother pull the light string at the bottom of the steps many times, so she groped around above her head in the dark, searching for the string. Unable to feel it above her, Sam's fear of what lurked in the cellar escalated. Her already shallow breaths became gasps in her desperation to find the light pull. Her groping turned into flailing, while the cut on her finger throbbed to the rhythm of her pounding heart.

When Sam finally felt the light string touch her palm, she grabbed and gave it a violent pull. The cellar burst into earthy color. With a heavy sigh, her shoulders relaxed and she looked around at the rows of shelves packed with homemade fruit and vegetable preserves, and baskets and sacks of produce neatly lined along the side walls. She was relieved by the tidiness of the surroundings and infuriated that her brothers had frightened her for so long about nothing. “I'll show them,” she said to herself as she tramped over to the bumpy brown sack marked “potatoes.”

She set her basket down on the dirt floor and reached into the sack. A putrid stench met her nose just as she sank her hand deep into a warm slime. Wormy fingers grabbed at her hand, sucking at her skin like starving maggot mouths. Before she could pull away, her wrist was squeezed tight in a firm-fingered grip within the swarming mass; the open
cut on her finger burned with the sting of acid. Shrieking and yanking at her arm, Sam finally wrenched her hand free. Just then the light snapped off, and she was left in complete darkness.

A deep panic rose in her belly, while under her skin crawled the ghost of the wormy fingers. Soaked in cold sweat, she panted like a frightened animal and stumbled back toward the stairs. The potato sack shifted behind her, and in the dying afternoon light still dusting the stairwell, Samantha saw a shadow pass in front of her. She stopped dead still, holding her breath, praying that her pounding heart couldn't be heard in the dark. A scraping sound came from behind, as something clamped down hard on her shoulder. Sam screamed and windmilled her arms around her.

A loud cackling echoed through the cellar. The light popped on. Her brother, Danny, held the pull string while Eddie doubled over beside her, his eyes watering from laughter. In tears, Samantha slapped one brother with her slime-covered hand and kicked the other in the shin as hard as she could. Pushing past, she screamed, “I hate you!” and ran up the steps, sobbing.

Samantha never forgave her brothers for their cruel prank, which of course became family legend. Since that day, she loathed the sight, the smell, and the feel of potatoes. For many years, she had full-blown phobic attacks of sweating and hyperventilating at the mere sight of a potato. Besides this problem, Sam was plagued by a strange reaction whenever she accidentally cut her formerly slime-covered hand. Even a paper cut could bring on a blazing rash from her fingertips to her shoulder, followed by an unbearable wormy feeling that swarmed beneath her skin. Unable to cure the problem, several doctors assured her it was all in her head.

Teased mercilessly by her brothers—“Spud Alert! Spud Alert!”—Samantha sought therapy for her potato phobia. After years of counseling, she was no longer thrown into a panic by the proximity of potatoes. French fries and hash browns lost their hold as subjects of her nightmares. With a family of her own, occasionally Samantha even subjected herself to buying potatoes, if only to prove that she could do it. Still, she never cooked them, leaving them to sprout, wither, and rot away in the safety of the potato drawer.

* * * *

When Samantha's parents retired, Eddie assumed the duties of the Sommerville Farm. After years of teasing her about her earthy nemesis, her brother suddenly stopped mocking her without explanation. In fact, she noticed that during her visits to the farm, they no longer served potatoes at the family meal. An uncharacteristic courtesy by her brother, Samantha suspected it had been the doing of his wife, Petra. When she thanked her for the kindness, she was assured that it was Eddie's firm instructions that potatoes be banned from the table, and from the house for that matter—apparently he'd developed an allergy. Samantha had her suspicions about the allergy but she thought it was best to avoid the subject. She was just grateful for the absence of what she secretly still considered to be putrid lumps of evil.

When Eddie disappeared without a trace a few months later, Samantha knew what had happened, but her years of therapy taught her that to believe such a thing was simply “surrendering to irrational fear brought on by stress and unresolved grief.”

* * * *

3—Tuber Duty

No longer noticing the fine spring day outside her kitchen window, Samantha took her time cleaning up after the baking project, glancing at the potato drawer with trepidation. Stalling as long as possible, she covered Cody's cake and placed it on the kitchen table. She washed and dried all the dishes—by hand—stacking them neatly in the cupboards. Sweeping the kitchen for any stray crumbs, Samantha steered clear of the potato drawer. Finally, with the kitchen spotless, she could no longer avoid the inevitable encounter with the dreaded tubers.

Like a soldier preparing for battle, Samantha pulled her heavy duty rubber gloves out from under the sink—the ones she used for nasty cleaning jobs and harsh chemicals. Shoving her hands deep into the thick red gloves, she walked toward the potato drawer like a bomb squad technician, the sound of pulsing blood hammering in her ears. As she reached for the drawer handle, she hesitated, hearing a muffled sound of rustling. She told herself that it was just the leaves on the trees blowing in the breeze outside the window. Cold sweat beaded on her forehead and her underarms
went slick as she reached for the handle. Taking a deep breath, she gave the drawer a tug. It didn't budge. She tried a better grip, but the drawer didn't move—it felt as if it had been glued shut.

Samantha considered her options—a stuck drawer could be a good excuse for not making potatoes for dinner, but then again she knew that her son would come along and pull the drawer right open. She’d never hear the end of the teasing. “Oh, come on Mom. They're just harmless potatoes. See!” he’d say as he chased her around the kitchen with a hideous potato. No, she had to get the drawer open on her own.

After several rounds of unsuccessfully yanking and tugging, Samantha's potato fear faded into the background, as the important job at hand was simply to open the stubborn drawer. Finally, she resorted to a good strong butcher knife for prying it open. Choosing the biggest and thickest blade she owned, she slid it free from its sheath in her butcher block.

The red gloves hindered her grip, so she tossed them to the floor and grabbed hold of the knife handle with her bare hands. Gripping the thick wooden handle fist over fist like a hari-kari blade, Samantha slotted the knife around the edge of the drawer with determination. She kneeled before the drawer, gritting her teeth, and levered back as hard as she could. With a loud Crack! the drawer popped open and her sweaty hands slipped down the razor edge of the blade, slicing deep into the flesh of her palms and fingers. With the shock of the wounds, Samantha dropped the bloodied knife, leaving it to fall into the open drawer; her warm blood mingled with the spindly roots that had emerged.

The old terror rose as the maddening wormy feeling rushed under the skin of her sliced palm, then crept up the length of her arm. The allergic reaction left her breathless; her chest tightened with fear.

Trailing blood behind her, she ran to the sink, cursing herself for being so careless. She turned the faucet on full blast and let the cold water run over the gaping wounds in her hands. The water spun red around the sink and down into the drain. Hot tears rolled down Samantha's cheeks as she washed the deep cuts with stinging soap. The allergic reaction intensified, the burning rash covering her skin. She mumbled self-recriminations and watched in horror as red hives crawled along her arm.

"How could I be so careless? How could I be afraid of stupid potatoes? What in the hell is wrong with me?"

She pulled a long strip of paper towels from the holder and wrapped a wad tightly around each hand—no doubt they would need stitches.

"Damn it," she said to herself. “What a fine thing to do on Cody's birthday!"

The shock and loss of blood made her feel woozy. On shaky legs, she turned and grabbed the phone. As she dialed her husband's work number, she looked down, feeling something squeezing her ankles. Horrified, she saw slender white roots spreading across the kitchen floor, winding their way around her ankles and crawling up her bare legs.

Screams pealed from deep in Samantha's throat.

Her feet were yanked out from under her and blinding pain seared the back of her head as it slammed against the edge of the kitchen table. Her world became a slow-motion movie as somewhere from a distance she watched the birthday cake tumble from the table and splatter beside her on the floor; bits of frosting and shards of the shattered plate flew at her face.

Samantha's eye welled with tears, gazing as if in a dream at the chocolate icing and the yellow innards of the ruined cake scattered across the floor. My poor, Cody, she thought. Feeling a tug at her wrist, she glanced down; a sharp pain shot through her head from the movement. She blinked hard to clear her vision and saw that the long, fingery roots had followed the trail of her blood from the open drawer. In a flash of clarity, she remembered the wormy fingers in the potato sack in the root cellar, the acid-like burning in the cut on her finger—her blood was tainted, dormant with the evil curse her brothers had thought was a joke. Her therapist had assured her that curses weren't real. The doctors said the crawling rash of her allergy was psychosomatic. As she lay paralyzed on the kitchen floor, feeling the slimy root fingers wrapping around her body, she finally knew they were all wrong.

Samantha felt the fleshy roots roping around her, tugging and pulling at her body until she began to slide. Unable to
resist, her back slipped across the smooth tiles of the kitchen floor, through the splattered icing, the chunks of broken birthday cake, and past the industrial strength gloves she wished she'd never taken off. Helpless to cry out, Samantha started to feel squishy, as if she were melting inside her own skin.

The long white fingers continued to flow and creep around her body, squeezing and tightening until breathing became nearly impossible. Drifting in and out of consciousness, she felt the tangle of roots rustling over her face, searching for any skin left bare, until they blinded her. The searing pain jolted her to full awareness one last time. She cried out, and the roots slithered into her mouth and up her nose. In a final moment of horror, the disappearance of Samantha's brother was no longer a question—her flesh was dissolving, like she knew he had dissolved at the farm. Hot tears of grief fell from her blind eyes and she gagged on the roots burrowing down her throat and worming up her nose and into her brain. With her final breath, she felt the crushing sensation of being squeezed into a drawer like a deflated rubber doll.

The memory of her husband's embrace flitted across her ebbing thoughts, along with images of her family ... Cody's cherubic grin, her mother in the kitchen at the farm, playing hide and seek with her brothers in the cornfield. As her mind slipped away, in a final flash of madness she felt tiny eyes bud on the surface of her melting skin.
THE SEA ORPHAN

Young Will Pennycock sat slumped on the hard bench in the back of the Eastville, Virginia meeting hall. The heavy coat from his father's sea trunk sheltered him from the chill of the building, but the cold stares of the villagers penetrated deep. Before his mother's trial they had been friends and neighbors, but now he sat alone amongst them, chin tucked to his chest, waiting for the Inquisitor's judgment.

Through the murmurings of the packed room, Will heard the nasal voice of the shopkeeper's wife deliberately snaking its way toward him.

"It was my duty to the Church, Elizabeth!" she confided to the woman beside her. "In fact, it was my devotion to King and country that inspired me to turn in that sorceress. Conjuring potions for the uneducated and charming wild animals. Wandering alone in the marsh, digging roots and horrid beasties. A blight on the community, she is." Her companion mumbled something out of Will's hearing.

"I don't care that she comes from money, she's a filthy witch!" said the shopkeeper's wife.

Nearing tears, she dabbed at the corner of her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief.

"And I saw her ungodly ways with my own eyes, I tell you. After her wretched husband's death, she enchanted my own good husband to do her bidding. For months my dear Mister Worthing, weak of will as he is, brought her food from my own precious stores and shoes for that horrible urchin of a boy. She continued to bewitch him, that is until I caught him—a duck from our yard tucked under his arm! I tell you, something had to be done!"

The Inquisitor pounded his staff on the long oak table in the front of the hall. Each sharp sound pierced through Will's fragile nerves, as if being struck directly by the man's ebony stick.

"Silence, amongst you. Silence!" His baritone voice easily commanded the attention of the assembled villagers.

"In the name of the Church of England, I am entrusted with protecting the mortal souls of this parish. I have carefully considered the words of the witnesses, as well as the accused, the widow Maire Pennycock..."

The Inquisitor continued on in a long explanation of the testimony of each witness, his voice becoming a drone inside Will's head. All the tension of the long trial and his separation from his mother came to bear on him in that moment, waiting for the judgment to be read. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks; the boy tightened his shoulders and clenched his teeth to silence the sobs that fought to escape him.

* * * *

Will's father, Matthew Pennycock, had taught his wife the tailor's trade. They met by chance when he came to America from the Highlands of Scotland. Although she was a girl of fine breeding, she was strong willed and fey in her ways. Leaving her comfortable life to be with Matthew, she became a fine seamstress. Together their business thrived, bringing work from the larger Virginia settlements and from sea traders that came to Eastville for supplies. Unfortunately for the Pennycock family, the traders brought sickness with them, as well, and like many of the villagers, Will's father was struck down by a fever.

Life was difficult after his father's death. Will's mother worked hard to take care of her small family and to keep their little tailor's shop in business. Although her work was of fine quality, the men who had traded with her husband would not trust a woman to have the proper business sense. Most of the shop's work fell away, and debt mounted. Renounced by her family, she could not call on them for help so she was forced to fall back on the ways held secret by her mother's lineage. Word spread quickly, as was common in village life, that Maire Pennycock was a fair master at remedies and potions, and particularly gifted in the taming of beasts large and small. With her help, many lives were saved and a great deal of suffering averted, especially in childbirth. But debt still plagued the family.

A few months before the nightmare of the trial began, Will accompanied his mother to the shopkeeper's store for supplies. As usual, on their walk through the village a parade of cats formed and followed behind them. Seemingly
deaf to the mewling cats at his door, Mister Worthing's mood lightened at the sight of the lovely red-haired woman with the green amulet resting on her ample bosom.

"Good day, Missus Pennycock! Young Will." He nodded in respect, his smile beaming.

"Good day, sir," said Will's mother, her market basket hanging from a slender wrist.

Missus Worthing, tidy and of a robust figure, rapped at the window, trying to dissuade the cats from loitering in front of the shop. She was visiting her husband with his lunch and scowled at his attention to the young woman, but he seemed hardly to notice. She fussed about while laying out his lunch on a table by the front window, while Mister Worthing gazed at the Widow Pennycock moving about the shop.

"Charles, your soup will be cold. Come and sit, dear. I will attend to Mister Pennycock's order."

Mister Worthing raised his eyebrows in surprise. His wife loathed anything to do with his dusty shelves and untidy ledger, but she was insistent, which was her nature. Visibly disappointed by losing the chance to assist the Widow Pennycock, he huffed as he sat down in his chair. Missus Worthing tucked a long napkin into his collar and quickly turned her attention to Will's mother, waiting at the counter with her meager basket of supplies.

Stepping behind the counter, Missus Worthing said nothing to the young woman. Will watched from his mother's side as the tightlipped woman tallied their bill and slid it across the counter.

"Could you please add that to our account, Missus Worthing?" asked Will's mother with a gentle smile.

With not a word spoken, the unyielding woman reached for the shop ledger. Shaking her head at the disorder of her husband's bookkeeping, she found the Pennycock account and gasped. Mister Worthing choked on his soup.

"Missus Pennycock, I am sorry, but you will have no more credit at my husband's shop until you pay your account."

"Pardon me, ma'am, but I thought our account was in reasonable order."

"Well, dear, it says here that you are several months behind in settling."

Will felt his mother's embarrassment, and he began to fidget as another patron entered the shop.

"Oh I'm terribly sorry, Missus Worthing," she said, clutching her empty change purse. "I had no idea."

"I'm afraid that's my fault." Mister Worthing spoke up. Tossing his napkin on the table, he rose and hurried behind the counter eying the ledger over his wife's shoulder.

"Yes, completely my fault. You know my bookkeeping, Missus Worthing, dear. I've simply forgotten to mark the account paid."

He reached for the ink and pen, took the ledger book from his wife's grip, and scratched a notation marking the account paid in full. Missus Worthing's face flushed red. She turned and stomped around the counter to the lunch spread she had laid for her husband. Gathering the entire contents of his unfinished meal in the tablecloth, she stuffed it, dripping, into the lunch hamper and marched out of the shop, slamming the door behind her.

From that day on, Mister Worthing personally delivered supplies to Will and his mother. He was kind and polite, gratefully accepting a cup of tea. He always brought Will a special treat of rock candy or a biscuit, nearly as happy giving it as the boy was receiving it. And when he was done with his tea, he offered his thanks with a slight bow and departed. He never allowed Will's mother to pay him for the supplies, promising to settle the account when business was better at the tailor shop.

Although uncomfortable with this arrangement, Will's mother was deeply grateful, since she had such limited means to acquire food for her child. She begged Mister Worthing for mending she might do for him and his Missus but he declined, suggesting that it might be best if they kept their arrangement just between them.
Late one evening after the first snowfall and a scant few days before Will’s ninth birthday, a frantic knock came at the door. At his mother's urging, Will opened the door and in flew Missus McTavish, the shawl around her head as much to hide her appearance, it seemed, as to stave off the cold.

"Close the door, lad!” she nearly shouted.

Running to Maire Pennycock's side, she clutched the seamstress’ sleeve.

"Listen to me, lass. You must leave this village before dawn. The shopkeeper's wife has been ravin’ some nonsense about ye being a witch. I heard she sent word o'er a month ago to the Inquisitor General, and he's bound to arrive on the morrow."

Confused by the news, Will's mother sat silently staring into the woman's worried face.

"Come on, lass! There's no time to waste,” said the woman. “Get up from your stitching and pack up the wee boy and be off."

"I don't understand, Maggie. What are you on about?"

Missus McTavish shook her head in frustration.

"She's saying you're a witch, and she's puttin’ the fear in others to speak out against ye. They'll hang ye, Maire. Don't ye understand? Ye have to go ... now!"

"I've nowhere to go, Maggie. The family won't have me back. And besides, I'm no witch, and the King's law will prove it. I'd rather face them than run and hide like a guilty dog. I'll not sully my good husband's name with such nonsense."

"Seems the King's law ain't for the likes of us, but I done me part to warn ye. I'm puttin’ risk to me own kin for bein’ here, so if ye haven’t the good sense to take me heed, than may God have mercy on ye."

The woman clutched at her shawl and bustled toward the door. Looking back, her eyes fell on Will and she began to speak, then clamped her mouth shut. She opened the door and ran out into the dark night, snow billowing in through the doorway behind her.

"Mum?"

"Hush, lad. Get me your father's coat from the sea chest. It's time I stitch that to fit you, boy. Now off to bed with you. You'll have you a new wool coat by morning."

* * * *

Will woke to a pounding on the door. The sun barely risen, he could see his mother at the entrance to the shop, men reading to her from a paper. Will put his feet on the cold floor and ran toward his mother. A large man he knew from the village stepped inside the door, blocking his way.

"Stand firm, young Will. Your mother has been charged and will be held until her trial. You'll not be seeing her until then."

Will tried to push past the big man, tears of rage and fear slipping from the corners of his eyes.

"Mum, don't let them take you! Mum?"

With tears in her own eyes, she called to her son as the men dragged her from her home.

"Will, the coat. It's yours now, lad. Keep it close, and remember, I'll always be with you. Always."

Those were the last words he heard his mother speak until the Inquisitor's trial.
He cried for days it seemed, and no one in the village would help him. No one would answer his questions about what was happening to his mother. Missus McTavish's door was closed to him, and even Mister Worthing averted his eyes when he saw Will. But true to her word, his mother had completed stitching his father's coat to nearly fit him. He had found it laying across the sea chest by the chair where she did her stitching. The coat was big, room to grow as she would have said. He had barely taken it off since the men took his mother away. He even slept in it, feeling closer to her somehow.

Now, with the trial coming to an end, he trembled with fear as the Inquisitor completed his long speech and prepared to proclaim his judgment.

The deep voice of the Inquisitor boomed through the rafters of the town hall.

"After many hours of deliberate consideration, study and prayer, I have reached my verdict. On this twelfth day of December in the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and twenty-one, and with my strictest devotion to the Church of England, I pass judgment on Maire Pennycock. I find her guilty of sorcery and the practice of witchcraft, thus endangering the mortal souls of all the people of the Eastville parish. The sentence for her sin is to be carried out at first light tomorrow morning, when she will be hanged by the neck until she is dead and left until dawn of the third day to stand as a reminder of the Church's good works in our trials against the devil. May God have mercy on your soul, Maire Pennycock."

With three final raps of his ebony staff, the Inquisitor General stood and walked to the back of the hall, where he exited the building to meet his waiting carriage.

Will looked up through his tears only long enough to see the guards lead his mother from the hall. He heard her calling his name as he collapsed on the bench. The world went black, and a merciful quiet fell around him.

* * * *

It was dark when Will awoke from a dream of warm bread dripping with summer honey. He was in his own bed in the back room of the tailor shop. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he imagined for a moment that the past weeks had been a mere nightmare, that he would find his mother warm and asleep in her own bed. But as he struck the flint to the candle, he knew he was alone, completely alone for the first time in his life. He began to recall the swimming feeling in his head when the Inquisitor read the judgment. He tore his thoughts away from the image of his mother—and of the gallows she'd be hanged from.

Instead, he forced himself to ponder how he had gotten to his bed. The faint aroma of fresh bread in the room made him wonder if he were still dreaming, but the growling in his stomach brought him to the immediacy of his plight. He'd hardly eaten in days; the meager stores of their pantry had dwindled away during the trial.

Sitting up, he noticed that whoever had laid him on his pallet had draped his father's coat over the bed covers. He climbed out of the covers and grabbed the coat, wrapping it around his body. Not only seeking its warmth, he needed the closeness to his mother that it afforded him.

The scent of the bread drew him from his bed. Wandering in the dim light of the candle, he stumbled on a basket left in the shadow of his mother's chair. Will rifled through the basket and found a loaf of hard crust bread, bringing it to his nose for a deep inhale of its sweet aroma. He took a ravenous bite, knowing his mother wouldn't approve of such behavior, his heart sinking at the thought. His hunger pushed the sorrow aside as he reached into the basket to find preserves, dried meat, root vegetables, eggs—and a tin of rock candy. Mister Worthing. He must have carried Will home from the meeting hall in spite of the trouble he would see for it. Will's eyes brimmed with tears at the kindness.

He sat on the floor with his legs curled around the basket and took each item out, lining it up on the floor. This would be his sustenance until he was able to find some way to feed himself. He had learned from his mother to ration food or go hungry, but all he really wanted was to devour it all at once. He resisted, enduring the hunger pangs that twisted inside his stomach.

As he removed the last item from the basket, he spied a folded bit of paper in the bottom. It was a note written in a
Dear Will;

It is with deepest sorrow that I offer this small token for the death of your mother. I cannot imagine your suffering at this time, and I will no doubt be judged for my part in her demise. I would bring you into my own home and adopt you as my son, but circumstances are such that this is impossible. I will be sure to leave you food from time to time when I am able. I wish I could do more for you, son. You have always been a fine boy.

Whatever you do from this time on to support yourself and find your way in the world, please keep your dear mother in your thoughts. Be the man that would make her proud.

With My Sincere Condolences,

Your Servant,

David M. Worthing

Just how long had he been sleeping? Small token for the death of your mother? Will ran through the doorway to the front of the shop. He stomped his feet into his shoes, pulled his coat tight around his chest, and threw open the door to the cold winter night. He ran down the moonlit street, the chill wind slicing at his skin, and there before the town hall stood the gallows, his mother's stiff body swaying in the wind.

He stumbled up the wooden stairs of the hangman's platform and tried with all his strength to pull his mother's body up from below. In his futile effort, the rough fibers of the rope dug into his small hands. The wind numbed his fingers, but he continued his work until the rope was slick with his blood. Falling to his knees on the moonlit planks of the gallows, young Will wept for his mother, Maire Pennycock.

* * * *

The boy holed up in the tailor shop for weeks. He lay curled in his bed, leaving only for a bite of food from his dwindling supplies or to relieve himself.

He finally decided to light a fire when ice formed on the chamber pot. His movements were slow and labored, the cold and hunger sapping his strength. He was huddled by the fire when a pounding came at the front door. A man had come each day, shouting to be let in, but Will ignored him. This time his shouting was relentless.

"I know you're in there, boy. I see the smoke coming from the chimney. You let me in or I'll come in after ye!"

He heard a crash and the tinkling of glass on the floor in the front room. Fearing for his life, he forced his cold body to move. He grabbed a thick piece of firewood, as heavy as his small hand could grip, and crept forward, peering through the doorway into the shop. A man's hand snaked through the broken pane of glass in the door and turned the key. Will rushed forward with his stick of wood and struck the man's hand as he was pulling it back through the broken window.

The man screamed and burst through the door, his hand dripping blood, cut by the loose shards in the window pane.

"Ye little bastard. I'll break yer neck."

Like a wild animal cornered in its den, Will ran for the safety of his bed with the man following in hard pursuit. As the stranger entered the back room he stopped cold, covering his mouth and nose with his good hand to stave off the stench from the un-emptied chamber pot and rotting food. He looked around at the filth and complete chaos of the room Will had been hiding in for weeks. The man walked to the side of the bed and struck Will so hard that his head snapped back against the wall.

"What have ye done to my shop, boy? Not only was your bitch of a mother in arrears for the rent, now I'll have to pay to have this shit hole cleaned because of the swine she left behind."
He looked around in disgust and eyed the boy trembling under the bedcovers.

"Get up, pig, and get yer clothes on. I'll have the missus clean the stink off ye', and you'll work off yer mother's debts at the inn."

Will didn't move.

"Go on before I drag ye through the snow and mud in that wretched coat and yer underclothes."

Slowly, Will reached for a pair of britches, already too short for him. He shrugged out of his father's coat, folding it carefully and laying it on the bed with reverence.

"What did I tell ye, boy? Get movin' or I'll call the constable. It's only my good Christian charity that'll keep ye out of jail for the witch's debts. I'll be lucky if I can ever rent this hovel of a shop again, knowin' what yer bitch of a mother had been doin' here."

Will pulled a sweater over his head, shrugged back into the heavy coat, and shoved his hands in the pockets. He felt a fold of paper—Mister Worthing's letter. He remembered the words, *Be the man that would make her proud.* He turned to face the angry man.

"Sir," he said, trying hard to steady his voice, "I'm deeply sorry for the trouble I've caused you. I'll work hard and pay off all the money owed you. It's what my mother would want me to do."

The man rolled his eyes and scowled, but Will thought he saw a flicker of softening in his hard expression.

"Come on then. The missus will be none too happy with the state of ye."

* * * *

He was right. The innkeeper's wife, Missus Cavender, was loathe to have a young boy to look after as well as running the only inn found in the Village of Eastville. But after a good scrubbing, a bit a food, and a full night's sleep, she put Will to work. He was true to his promise to work hard. Aside from her displeasure with his constant wearing of the heavy wool coat, the Missus seemed pleased with him. And from Will's perspective, Mister Cavender and his wife gave him a warm place to sleep and breakfast and supper. Compared to being on his own, he found his lot quite tolerable.

Thoughts of his mother often crept into Will's mind and darkened his heart against the villagers of Eastville, but in those moments he touched Mister Worthing's letter in his pocket to remind himself of his duty. After such a painful stretch in his young life, many months passed with Will content to live day by day, honoring his mother's memory.

His tenth birthday came to pass at the inn and the missus offered a sweetcake with his supper by way of celebration. She'd become fond of him, though Will could tell her husband did not share the sentiment. To Mister Cavender, Will's presence simply marked a debt being paid.

Late one night, a ship anchored at the docks. The rough crew came ashore, as they always did, to the Eastville Inn for a meal and a warm bed with feminine company, if it could be had. The innkeeper stayed up late drinking and singing with the men, his long-time acquaintances in trade, the kind outside of the King's jurisdiction.

The missus ran herself and young Will ragged, keeping the ale flowing and serving heaping platters of meat and potatoes to fill the seemingly bottomless stomachs of the sailors. She held her tongue when the wagering began, but she knew her husband's weakness. Soon her worries were realized when the ship's mate began a drunken rant.

"I shoulda known ye haddena silver a' hand. Pay up ye thievin' bastard, before I gut ye fer me supper," he shouted. He unsheathed the dagger from his belt, twisting it slowly as he pointed at the innkeeper's girth.

Always quick thinking, even saturated with drink, the innkeeper didn't blink at the threat.

"I've got somethin’ far better than a few coins, mate. I heard you're short of hands after the last haul to the Carolinas."
Crew took quite a beatin’ with the fever is what I heard.”

The ship’s mate bristled at the comment, leaning forward he pressed the tip of his dagger against the innkeeper’s gut.

"Cheat me, and now ye insult me. Aye, a guttin’s too good for ye."

"Aw, now don’t be frettin’, Mister Rutt. You know my word is good. Look here.” He pointed to the exhausted boy carrying a heavy load of greasy dishes back toward the kitchen. “There’s your prize, man.”

"What are you on about? That bairn can narey hold a stack of plates. He’s no use to me.”

"Oh, but he’s a pretty one, ain’t he, mate?” asked the innkeeper with a wink.

The ship’s mate took another look at the boy as he pushed through the kitchen door.

"Aye, he is that, but that still ain’t no rightful settlin’ of our wager. Add tonight’s meal and lodging to the pot and I’ll not carve a hole in yer bowels this time.”

Missus Cavender emerged from the kitchen to the hush in the room and the dagger pointing at her husband’s belly.

"Martha,” said her husband, “bring the boy here. The first mate of The Queen’s Promise will be his new keeper.”

The missus staggered where she stood, but forced herself to stand her ground.

"I’ll do no such thing, Mister Cavender. That boy is me hand and I’ll not part with him.”

The ship’s mate leaned across the table and flicked the tip of his dagger across the innkeeper’s cheek. Blood beaded from the wound and trickled to his chin.

"Martha,” said the innkeeper in measured speech, “the mate will see the boy ... now.”

Missus Cavender knew the ways of these men, these pirates. She turned and fled through the kitchen door, grabbing the bewildered boy up into her arms. She squeezed him tight, her voice trembling as she spoke.

"I’m sorry, dear Will. I’m so sorry.”

"What is it, missus?” said Will, his own fear beginning to rise.

The woman stood, avoiding his eyes. Without another word, she took him by the hand and led him into the dinning room. The place was nearly silent except for the snoring of a sailor face down on a table near the warm hearth. The ship’s mate, Mister Rutt, turned his dagger, admiring the firelight reflecting from the blade. He smiled at the innkeeper, clearly enjoying his discomfort.

Eyeing the blood dripping on the front of the man’s shirt, Mister Rutt said, “Sorry about the stain, Cavender.” He laughed and snorted at his own joke, breaking the tension in the room. The rest of the sailors joined in, laughing and slapping each other on the back. One of them shouted to the mate when the missus appeared with the boy.

"Hey, Mister Rutt, yer new girl’s arrived.” He smacked his lips and blew the boy a lusty kiss.

"Bring the boy here, Martha,” said the innkeeper.

Will had no idea what was happening, but his instincts told him he was in danger. The feral looks of the men terrified him. Before, they had barely noticed him, but now they stared and reached out to pinch him and touch his red hair as the missus guided him to her husband’s table. Together they stood before the pirate, Duncan Rutt. Missus Cavender pulled Will closer to her hip and put her arm around his shoulder.

"Come here, lad,” said the pirate.

"Won’t you change yer mind, sir?” asked the missus. “He’s just a wee boy and will only be in the way on yer fine
ship. He's a right dolt, he is."

Rutt ignored the woman.

"I said, come here."

Sensing the danger to the missus, Will stepped away from her trembling hands and stood before the dark skinned man.

He bowed his head respectfully. "Sir."

The pirate leaned forward and grabbed his face in a huge rough hand and pulled Will within inches of his nose. The man squeezed Will's cheeks so hard that the pain made his eyes water, but the stench of his breath would have been sufficient.

"You're mine now, laddy! Or better still, I'll bring ye' as a prize to the cap'n. He be sorely in need of a cabin boy. Anyways, we shares and shares alike!"

The men roared at that and drank to each other's good fortune. The singing commenced while Mister Rutt continued his inspection of his new cabin boy, turning him around, poking and prodding.

"You'll do, but if ye ken what's good fer ye, you'll be keepin' yer mouth shut and do what yer told. No questions asked. It's nothin' to toss a troublin' bairn overboard. Ye hear me?"

Will nodded, feeling sick to his stomach. He shoved his hand in his pocket, searching for the letter. It calmed him to know it was there, but he wasn't sure how he'd keep his promise now.

* * * *

After a fitful night of sleep, Will awoke to the voice of Missus Cavender.

"Come on, lad," she said, a gentle tone in her voice. "I'll get ye yer breakfast. The men will be risin' soon."

She set a bundle on the side table and lit the candle.

"I've packed ye some food, washed yer clothes, and cleaned that awful wool coat as best I could."

Will climbed from his bed, his bare feet on the cold floor, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Thank you, Missus," he said, holding back his tears.

He would miss her and the inn. The work was hard, but he felt safe in this place. He did not feel safe knowing where he was going, being pulled away again from everything he knew.

Still, a part of his fear was soothed by a secret excitement. His mother had warned him to stay away from the docks for fear pirates would steal him, but from time to time Will and his friends would sneak to the waterfront and hide to watch the men loading and unloading the goods. They were boisterous and often violent, so unlike his father had been, but their life at sea seemed an adventure to him and the other village boys. They played pirate in the creek behind the school house, waging battles, hunting treasure, and singing shantys they heard at the docks—songs their mothers would never approve.

So Will's fear was mixed with the call of adventure. But when the men took him away, the look on Missus Cavender's face made him wonder if there was something more to worry about than he was aware of.

* * * *

The ship's cook was assigned the duty of looking after Will, and he put him to work immediately. For hours, alongside the ship's crew, he loaded sacks of food and supplies aboard the ship. Some of the sacks and crates were nearly his own weight, but the sailors cursed him and pushed him out of their way, so he worked hard to look strong,
dragging what he couldn't carry.

Once the supplies were aboard, the cook handed him a mop and a pail full of water. Will's arms were so tired from loading the ship he could hardly lift the pail.

"Get to swabbin' the galley floor, lad. They'll be screamin' for their grub soon." The cook grinned at Will's sagging shoulders. "Go on, before the cap'n has ye flogged."

Will dragged himself through the task of washing the filthy floor. As he shoved the mop under a table, a huge orange tabby cat darted out with a shriek.

"Oh, sorry boy," he said to the indignant cat. He knelt down and put out his hand. The cat flicked his tail and circled Will, finally rubbing his broad face across Will's fingers.

"Well, if that ain't somethin'," said the cook from the doorway. "That cat don't bother with nobody. He's a mean bastard."

"What's his name?"

"That's Mog. The only reason we keep the blaggard 'round is his mousin' skills." Heading back to his preparations, he made his voice gruff. "Enough of this bilge—when yer done with that floor, get in here. Supper ain't fixin' itself."

Will dragged the pail to the deck to empty it over the side. He had been below when they set sail, so he stood at the ship's rail, enjoying his first taste of the open sea while the wind cooled the sweat beneath his heavy coat. Since he had boarded the ship, the weather had improved and the sun had warmed the chill from the air. The smell of the sea and the power of the sails moving the vessel across the waves felt like magic to Will, but his pleasure was short lived.

"Boy, what ye be doin' on the deck?" shouted Rutt. "You've work waitin' down below. And speakin' a down below, I'll be seein' ye in me cabin after supper." He laughed a lusty laugh and the crewman on deck roared along with him.

"I'll be waitin' me turn," shouted the man at the helm. His claim was echoed by many.

Will wasn't sure what they meant, but he felt exposed and very small as the men leered and taunted him. With aching muscles, he lifted the pail and dumped the dirty water overboard. As he turned to go, a large gull lighted on the ship's rail beside him. He reached out instinctively and stroked its back. The bawdy laughter and joking from the men stopped.

In silence they watched the boy stroke the gull, while another soon alighted beside him. He spoke to the birds in soft tones, hardly noticing the silence that had come over the men.

Knowing the superstitious nature of a ship's crew, Rutt intervened.

"Oy, what did I tell ye? Get below, boy. And ye poxied gits, back to work!"

The men mumbled to one another, glancing at the boy. It took another shout from the mate before they returned to their duties.

* * * *

The cook was ready to give Will a lashing for his absence, but when the boy looked shaken, he inquired. Will told him what the men said to him and what happened after the gulls visited him. The cook raised his eyebrows. He said no more on the subject, but appeared to be deep in thought. Absentmindedly, he handed Will a knife and pointed to a pile of potatoes waiting to be peeled.

* * * *

Many days passed with the cook keeping Will busy below in the galley and finding excuses to keep Rutt's demands...
at bay, but the ship's mate was becoming impatient. Whenever Will asked the cook what Mister Rutt wanted with him, the man always found a way to change the subject. Still, it was clear he was worried for Will.

That evening, after the cook served the captain and the rest of the crew ate, the bell rang on deck for all hands. The men grumbled and climbed the stairs to the main deck. The captain stood on the quarterdeck waiting for the men to settle, and Will, nearly asleep on his feet, followed the cook to a place behind the sailors.

"Men, there was rumor in Eastville of traders en route, so there's swag to be had on the morrow or the next. Keep your eyes sharp and your weapons at the ready.

"It has also come to my attention that we've a good omen in our midst. Since he came aboard, the storms have ended, the wind has been brisk, and no illness has followed us to sea. It is my ruling that Will Pennycock is to be protected at all costs until such time as I say otherwise. Look after him in our dealings with the traders."

There was an unusual hush amongst the crew. Normally, at the mention of conquering a trader vessel and the promise of booty, there would have been hoots and cheers. But talk of an omen, and this omen in particular, made them nervous. The first mate was quick to speak, and he struggled to cover his anger at the captain's edict.

"But cap'n, I won the lad fairly. Keepin' me bed warm at night won't bring 'im harm. It'll make 'im a man."

The crowd of sailors snickered.

"You're an arse, Mister Rutt. I'll not have my ship's safety endangered by a horny Scottish dog," said the Captain. "Mister Spiers," he said to the cook, "the boy will remain your responsibility. Keep him safe from these blaggards."

A wave of grumbling flowed through the ranks, but the captain paid it no mind. He headed to his quarters without further discussion. The sailors filed back to their stations and to their cold suppers, but Mister Rutt waited for the cook and his charge to pass.

Standing at his full six feet, he glared down at the stocky cook. "This is yer doin', Spiers, and I'll no have ye tinkerin' with me affairs. The laddie's mine and I've a right to 'im. I'll be seein' to it. Aye, I promise ye that."

The cook glared back at Rutt and nudged Will ahead toward the door leading down to the galley.

"I'll have ye, Lad. O' that ye can be sure," shouted Mister Rutt.

Will could hardly keep his eyes open. Holding him by the shoulders, the cook gently guided him to his pallet and sat him down. With a sigh, Will fell into the thick pile of empty food sacks.

Yawning wide, he looked up at the cook. "What's Mister Rutt mean when he says he'll have me?"

The cook shrugged his shoulders, “Ain't nothin’ for ye to worry about, boy.” The cook cocked his head, looking at the hem of Will's coat. “What's this?” He tugged at a silver chain hanging from a frayed corner of the garment, and a disk of smooth green stone engraved with a crest slipped out from inside the hem. Will's eyes widened and a smiled lightened his weary features.

"My mother's amulet," he said, reaching for the stone. “She always wore it around her neck. It belonged to her mother, and my grandmother, too."

"That's a fine piece, lad. You'll do well to keep it hidden from the thievin' lot on this ship. I'd a mind to have it meself, but since it was your ma's..."

Before he could finish, Will was fast asleep with the amulet clutched to his chest. The old salt tugged the coat tight around the boy, covering his treasure from the prying eyes of the crew. Not only was it a valuable piece, but from the family crest embossed on the stone, this boy was descended from money and would surely bring a fine ransom.
Will awoke to the sound of a loud explosion and a jolting of the ship. He was still holding his mother's amulet. He kissed it, like he saw her do so many times, and put the chain over his head, tucking it deep beneath his clothing. He ran up the steps to the deck and into the middle of a battle. The pirates' hooks and lines were fastened to a small trader's ship, and with cutlasses, pistols, and pikes they boarded the vessel. Will stood dead still in the doorway, having never witnessed such violence. The crew of the trader fought wildly, but the pirates were merciless, cutting them down with practiced ease. Will gasped as he saw a sailor's cutlass slice through the neck of another man, blood spurting and pouring from the wound, splashing on the deck. He retched at the sound of the man's cries gurgling through the thick blood and torn meat of his throat. Will closed his eyes, but the sound of death and violence engulfed him. Playing pirate had been a fantasy, but this was real, so real he could smell the putrid stench of death.

"Boy, what are ye doin’ on deck? Get below," shouted the cook, securing a thick line to the rail. A moment later, Will heard an ear-shattering blast and the cook collapsed onto the deck.

"Mister Spiers," Will cried, running to his side. The man's shoulder was a blackened and bloodied mass of meat.

"Get below, boy," he rasped, as he struggled to get to his knees.

"But your shoulder..."

"The cap'n ‘ll do worse than this if somethin’ happens to ye." Another pistol blast came from behind them, striking the mainmast and just missing Will's head. “Begad! Leave me be and get ye below.”

Will kissed the green amulet, ignoring the cook's warning, and helped him to his feet. A strange noise amidst the chaos caught their attention. Looking up, they saw a writhing shadow blot the sky above the ship. It descended, filling the air with the screeching cries of seabirds. They dove toward the captured ship, lighting only on the sailors of the trader. The pirates retreated as they watched the horror unfold. Men with eyes plucked from their sockets like bulging grapes collapsed on the deck, the stringy flesh left dangling down their bloody cheeks. Shrieks of birds and their victims filled the air as razor claws tore through clothing and flesh, leaving ribbons of meat on the deck to feast upon.

Will and the cook watched rapt in shock as the crazed birds continued to flay and blind the beleaguered sailors. Screams from terrified pirates and dying traders alike rose with the cacophony of bird sounds. Men slashed at the birds with swords and daggers, but the avian attack was swift and deadly. A few survivors remained, some cowering on the deck or thrashing overboard into the rough sea.

Without thinking, Will pulled the amulet from beneath his clothing and kissed it once more. He acted with complete instinct, as he had seen his mother do so many times in the forests and meadows of Eastville. She had a special way with animals, and with the amulet it seemed Will had it, too.

With a violent sound of flapping wings, the flock of birds returned to the sky, their shadow dissipating like a storm cloud on the wind.

The cook was not the only one who witnessed Will's actions. Rutt glowered at them from the deck above.

*I saw it with me own eyes, cap'n. The bairn's a bloody witch!" The first mate stood in the captain's quarters, shaking with feigned concern. “For the safety of the ship, that boy must be hanged at first light, lest the heathens slit his throat and throw 'im in the sea. Without a proper hangin’ we’d be cursed with the ghost of a witch.”

Busy with his charts and headings to trawl for their next trade acquisition, the captain sighed. “I should have seen it coming. Well, see to it, Mister Rutt, and make sure the cook keeps an eye on the boy until morning.”

The lamplight flickered across Rutt's face, and a faint smile crossed his lips. “Aye, Cap'n, but Mister Spiers is ailin’ from his wounds. I volunteer to take the bairn in me care until the morn.”
The Captain looked up from his work with a knowing glance. “So be it, Mister Rutt,” he said with an air of disgust. “Then hand the boy over to the master of arms for a proper hanging at first light.”

With a triumphant stride, Rutt left the captain's quarters and headed for the galley.

* * * *

Will carried a full tankard of grog to the fevered cook. Using two hands, he was careful not to spill a drop on the threat of being lashed by Mister Spiers as soon as he was well again. But the sudden appearance of the first mate startled him, and brown liquid splashed on the floor.

"Boy!" yelled the cook in a rasp from his perch in the corner of the room. His shoulder was bandaged and his arm neatly slung, but his white face and dark-circled eyes radiated the state of his fever. “What did I tell ye? I'll have the cat ‘o nine tails on yer hide when I'm able. Now bring me the grog and clean up yer mess.”

Without acknowledging Rutt's presence, the cook seized the tankard from Will and took a long, thirsty swallow. He closed his eyes with the pleasure of the drink and the tension melted away from his features. With a weary sigh, he opened his eyes and looked to the smug face of Mister Rutt.

"What is it you be needin', Mister Rutt?"

"On the order of the cap'n, Will Pennycock is to be hanged by the neck at first light. He be a witch, and a danger to our good ship."

Will's knees went weak, and he looked to the cook with sharp terror piercing his gut.

"The boy ain't no witch. I'll be talkin' with the cap'n about this.” He pushed himself up from the pallet and with a swoon, tumbled to the floor. Will rushed to help him back to his bed.

Rutt laughed—a deep, wicked sound. “By the time ye be fit to talk with the cap'n, the bairn's carcass will be swayin' from the boom."

Will found it hard to breathe. The image of his mother hanging from the gallows flashed through his mind. The sharp angle of her broken neck, her cold grey skin, and the stench of her emptied bowels. And her red hair, it was gone. They had shaved her bald, ridding her, it was said, of the mark of the devil.

Touching his fingers to his own red hair, Will was flushed with fear. He felt like a caged bird, frantic to escape. He darted around a table and dodged the first mate, fleeing up the stairs. Rutt followed, laughing, already enjoying the chase.

* * * *

On deck, Will met with stares and hisses from the crew on duty. Scurrying in a panic, he looked for a place to hide, but a large black-skinned pirate approached, small bones rattling in his long, twisted braids.

"Where you tink you goin', boy? The devil no save you now." The black-skinned man pulled a long dagger from its sheath at his waist. “Come—me blade she's thirsty.” He closed in on Will while the rest of the crew slowly drew in around him, tightening the circle like a noose. Gulls circled overhead.

Rutt viewed the show from the galley door. Flushed with the pleasure of watching the boy's terror, he stepped in before the sailor completed his task.

"Hold fast, mate," he shouted. “The bairn's under me care. If ye have argument with that, ye'll have me to fight.” The men shouted dissent, their fear making them hungry for blood. “Back to yer posts, ye wee heathens,” he said, his booming voice menacing. “I'll not have the witch's blood spilled on me watch. He'll be hanging soon enough.”

Rutt pushed through the circle of angry men and grabbed Will by the collar of his coat. “Come along, laddy. We've business to attend to in me quarters.”
As Rutt dragged the crying boy below deck, the black-skinned sailor shouted a warning.

"Careful wit dat one, mate. He got spirits, he do, and dey ain't happy. Kill 'im now, I say, before it be too late."

* * * *

Shuddering uncontrollably, Will watched as the first mate swept the debris from his bunk and unbuckled his sword belt. Laying the weapon aside, the pirate grabbed him by the back of the hair and yanked his head back. Will squealed in pain, and with a husky groan the man pressed his lips to the soft skin of his neck, biting and kissing him. Rutt stripped off the heavy wool coat and Will felt like he'd been stripped of his skin.

Rutt breathed heavily, his stinking breath filling Will's nose, as the man ripped at his trousers. Will reached for the amulet on his chest as his pants fell to the floor. The sweating pirate's lips pressed hard against his mouth, and Will gagged as the stinking tongue penetrated into his throat. Struggling to release his own trousers, the pirate held Will fast, turning him around and bending him over the side of his bunk.

Sobbing, Will begged the pirate to stop. Still gripping his amulet, he felt the ship shudder. An instant later, Rutt released his grip, screaming in agony. Will tumbled onto the bunk and turned to see a black serpent, its fangs embedded deep in the pirate's bare leg. With his trousers pooled around his ankles, Rutt stumbled backward, falling hard against a heavy table. He lay there silently as Will clutched the green amulet against his chest.

A sudden pounding came at the door, followed by the shouts of a crewman.

"Mister Rutt! Mister Rutt! We be rammed by humpbacks. A pod be circling the ship, sir."

Will huddled against the wall behind the bunk, holding his breath, as the crewman pounded on the door. With no answer from the first mate, he heard the crewman's footsteps racing up the stairs to the deck. Will exhaled in relief and gingerly stepped off the bunk to retrieve his clothes. The serpent's fangs remained deep in the pirate's flesh, a trickle of blood flowing from each wound. After putting on his trousers, Will wrapped the comforting weight of the wool coat around him. Side-stepping the body and the snake, he opened the door and escaped up the steps to the deck. The crew was lined along the rails looking out at the ocean, some with lanterns in hand, others readying the guns to fire on the attacking whales.

Whales breached and spouted, the ocean writhing in the moonlight. Another hull-cracking impact struck the ship. The whale song that followed sounded like an angry scream to Will as he skirted along the deck to the galley door. He slipped down below to the safety of his friend, Mister Spiers. As he descended the steps, the floor of the galley seemed to ripple in the dim light of the oil lamps, but as Will stepped farther down, he saw a mass of rats swarming the floor. The skittering sound of their claws on the wood planks made him shiver. And in the corner lay the cook, his pallet infested. His color was grey and the rats circled his lifeless body without biting or scratching his flesh. Clutching the amulet, Will staggered back up the steps. The rats followed in a stream of greasy dark fur.

Although dazed by Rutt's assault and the death of his friend, Will knew in his heart the rats would not harm him. Instead, they swarmed onto the deck and in moments began their attack on the crew. As the ship shuddered with another battering from the whales, the rats assaulted the distracted men.

In a horrified stupor, Will watched men covered head to toe with waves of filthy, starved rats. The animals stripped them of clothing and flesh like an army of small butchers as sailors bawled and screamed, blood slicking the deck. Men slashed wildly at the deadly rodents with daggers and swords, wounding each other in a frantic attempt to defend themselves. But the weapons were useless—the rats were crazed in their thirst for the pirates' blood and the crew was falling fast.

From the quarterdeck above, Will heard the captain hollering his name.

"Pennycock!” he shouted. “Pennycock! You must stop this. Stop this now before the ship's destroyed and all our lives with it!"

Will looked up at the man. He was swinging a bloodied cutlass in a futile attempt to guard his post at the helm, slicing at the rats as they climbed the deck ladder. Not sure what to do, Will brought the amulet to his lips then
shouted a desperate cry.

"Stop! I beg you all to stop!"

In quick order, the rats retreated from their attack, leaving the screams of the living and the bloodied flesh and bone of the dead behind. As quickly as they had come, the rodents filed down into the hold of the ship in a silent withdrawal. The whales circling the vessel spouted and sang as they retreated out to sea.

Will stood alone in the center of the main deck. All around him men wailed and moaned in agony and fear. Tears streamed down his face. He was responsible for the massacre, unable to move from the shock of what had happened all around him.

He felt something warm rub against his calf. It was Mog. The big orange cat looked up at him, mewling. Will bent down and scooped him into his arms. The tabby's warmth gave him comfort in the midst of the devastation.

He watched as the captain slowly made his way down the stairs to the main deck. His pant legs were wet with blood from the rat attacks.

Looking over the state of his men, he shook his head.

"What have you done, boy?"

"Sir," was all Will managed to say. He hung his head and hugged the cat closer to his chest.

"What do you want? What will stop you from destroying my ship?"

Without a thought, without a moment of hesitation, Will replied, “Take me home, sir.”

* * * *

With what was left of the able men aboard, the captain set course for the coast and The Queen's Promise limped back toward the port of Eastville, Virginia. After two days sailing, they anchored off shore and the captain himself rowed a jolly boat into port to deliver Will to the village that had been his home. With the big tabby in his arms, Will climbed free of the boat. Not a word spoken, he stared out to sea as the captain maneuvered around and oared his way back to his ailing ship.

Will kissed Mog on the top of the head. The cat gave him an indignant look, but continued to purr in his arms. The docks were dark so late at night, and the only sound was the splash of the waves against wood and sand.

Before his nightmare at sea, a dark night alone at the docks would have frightened Will, but now all he felt was the peace of it. Weary from the horrors of his journey, Will put the cat down beside him. He needed all his strength to climb the hill to the village, a shortcut he and his friends used when they hid at the docks. That life was so foreign now, so long ago. He climbed along the rocky path, Mog wandering along beside him, keeping pace as he headed to the only place he knew as home, the Eastville Inn. He hoped the missus still had use for him.

The inn was dark as he approached the old wooden building worn by the wind and the sea air. He knocked on the door—his attempt feeble for fear of waking the master. When no one answered, he pulled his wool coat tight around him and headed for the stable where at least he would find a bed of hay in which to rest. Mog stayed by the door, rubbing his whiskers against the jam.

"Come, Moggie. We'll try the door again in the morning."

A faint light appeared at the window near the door. Will heard the sound of the latch release and saw the missus’ face aglow in the light of a candle.

"Who's rappin' at me door so late this night?" she called.

"Missus, it's me, Will Pennycock. I'm sorry to wake you."
The woman threw the door wide and rushed out into the night toward Will, still standing in the shadows.

"Will, lad," she said as she wrapped her arms around him, "you must be froze out here in the night. Come in, boy. Come inside." With an arm tight around his small shoulders, she hustled him indoors. The cat slipped past her feet as she closed the door behind them.

"Shush, shush." She batted at the cat.

"If it's okay, missus, he's my friend. Mog."

"Oh well then, I suppose he's a friend a mine too then. Let's get ye somethin' warm in yer belly."

Missus Cavender guided Will to the great oak table in the kitchen. His weariness was heavy in his bones and his eyes began to droop. He was half asleep at the table before the kettle boiled.

Bringing tea with honey and a plate of bread and cheese, she sat down beside Will. She pulled a folded letter from her pocket and laid it on the table in front of him. The seal of red wax was broken. Elbow on the table, with his head in his hand, Will's eyelids drooped.

"Eat a bit, me boy. We'll have you off to bed soon, but I've somethin' to tell ye before ye go off to sleep."

"Yes, Missus." Will yawned, took a piece of the cheese and tried his best to listen. After what he had been through, the quiet of the inn and the kindness of Missus Cavender felt foreign, but safe and peaceful.

"Will," said the missus, "seems Mister Worthing sent word of your mama's death to her family and shortly after those pirates stole you away, a messenger came to the village looking for you. He gave me money to ensure yer safety if ye were ever to return." She paused and looked at him closely. "Do you have a green stone with a family crest, lad?"

She waited with earnest anticipation, her expression hopeful for his future.

Will dug his hand inside his shirt and pulled out the amulet.

"Is this it, Missus? I promise I didn't take it. It was my mother's."

Missus Cavender's eyes brimmed with tears. "Yes, Will. That's it. And not to worry, my boy. It's yours, all yours."

She rose from her seat and took Will by the shoulders, guiding him to the stairs. With wet eyes, she said. "Come along, lad. Tomorrow a new life awaits ye, but for now you've earned a fine long rest."

"Thank you, missus," said Will. Still bundled in his heavy wool coat, he shuffled up the steps, feeling safe and warm, the big orange tabby following close behind.
You look bad, man,” they said. “It'll be your last chance.”

They'll be back around in the boat later, so I need to say goodbye. But I can't. If I want to live, I need to say goodbye. He wouldn't—no matter how hungry, how hot and how afraid he was, he would never leave me.

We've been friends for years. He's warmed my feet on winter nights. And I'd eyed him when a couch cushion turned up gutted—“Bad! Don't you ever do that again.” Then I'd shrugged. Can't stay mad at someone who is never mad at me.

The water sits at the edge of the rooftop and the heat is bearing down. The shingles have rubbed my fingers raw and torn his paws. I cling to him, my arm around his strong neck. He struggles with the heat, his long hair matted down by my sweaty hands. But he never tires of my clinging, he never pulls away.

The water kept rising floor by floor, pouring through my broken windows. We had no where else to go but up. When I thought that I would die here on this roof, when no other soul in the world was here to comfort me, he lay beside me all through the watery night.

He's so calm. I am not. My skin is blistered from the sun, and my lips are cracked, my mouth rough and spitless. There is no help from outside. The guys in the boat are just guys with a boat—they offered me a ride. “No dog, man,” they said. “We got one more stop—we'll be back. Last chance.”

I can't leave him. He wouldn't. I can't. He'd die for me.

I open my sticky eyes and I see them coming—an aluminum oasis. The killing sun sets behind them—silhouettes with waving arms. My body has stiffened and I feel the fever and chills—sun poisoning. A hulking figure climbs onto my roof raft. I feel the thud of his feet hammer through my body. On my back, I cannot move—I can only open my eyes. A warm muzzle rests on my shoulder; brown eyes watch over me.

Hands grab my shoulders and the muzzle disappears from my sight. Lifted, my body is pulled, my heels dragging across the grit of the shingles.

"No,” I whisper. “I can't.”

My head rolls to the side and I see his fur lifting in the breeze as he sits near the peak of the roof, tongue lolling. The sunset colors him orange and golden.

"Please,” I beg with no sound.

I am lumped onto the floor of the boat, cool metal against my back. The boat thrusts forward with grunts and rowing. No tears fall with my voiceless sobs.

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Under the Dryer

I tried to warn them, but the humans wouldn't listen and the cats just taunted me.

The faint paw prints in the dust were the first sign. I started sniffing out the cause and became alarmed at my findings. The great mastiff, Old Sam, my sire's brother, warned me about such things, but I never thought I would see them for myself. I stayed with Sam's family whenever my humans went away, and at night in the dark when the masters were asleep, he would whisper the old secrets.

"Nowadays it's just considered dog lore, boy," he said in his deep, growling voice. "But believe you me, these things can still happen. And it's the forgettin' that gives 'em power. Promise me, boy, no matter what they tell ya', you remember the truth. It's your sacred duty."

I promised him, of course. And later I tried to tell my friends at the park about my talks with Old Sam. They laughed at me and told me he was an old dog and those were just stupid stories. The Doberman twins teased me so much one day that I lost my temper. One of them ended up at the vet—served him right. I got banned from the park.

But I never forgot Old Sam's stories, and as the danger to my masters grew, I kept my word. He was long gone when the trouble started, but I knew I couldn't let Sam down—it was my duty.

At first, the furry Long Tooths were confined to the space beneath the bed in Ashley's room—no chance of discovery by the humans amidst the teenager's detritus. I paced outside her door, but the silly girl wouldn't let me in.

"Get away from my door, you stupid dog," she said, followed by her favorite whine. "Mom! Goliath's going to mess up my room." As if I could make it any worse.

One of the cats arrived and curled around Ashley's ankles. She sneered at me as she picked it up for a cuddle. The cat grinned its smug grin as the girl carried her off into the room, slamming the door in my face. The cat would live to regret her preferred status.

* * * *

The unseen fiends seemed emboldened by my banishment, and their infestation spread down the hall. Their numbers were multiplying, as their kind was destined to do.

As my concern escalated, my mistress caught me digging and scratching under the boy's bed—apparently I damaged the finish on the hardwood floor. She gave me a stern warning and sent me to the laundry room for punishment. It was there I discovered the nest—it was under the dryer. I heard their dusty voices and the sounds of hopping before they detected my presence. At that moment, I decided—if need be, I would stand guard there for the rest of my days. I would not allow the evil to spread and harm my family. I had to stop the dust bunnies.

Day after day and night after night I held vigil in the laundry room. One of the cats stopped by, as usual, to mock my efforts.

"You lummox," she said as she passed by the door with her fluffy groomed tail held high.

She circled back and lingered, rubbing against the doorjamb.

"Goliath's the big hero—guarding the dirty underwear. Oh, I do feel ever so much safer now." She walked away with a dismissive glance over her shoulder.

"Loser!"

* * * *

Eventually the furry devils beneath the dryer became restless—I was thwarting their plans. If I nodded off for even a
moment, they darted out to pluck my whiskers or poke me with sharp objects. I thought if I could only hold out long enough, perhaps they would tire of waiting and leave through the dryer vent; then my humans would be safe. But my masters worried that I wasn't eating so they brought dishes of kibble and water to my stronghold. I tried to resist, but eventually they coaxed me from the laundry room to relieve myself, and the determined little beasts started to plan their operations around my forced relief schedule. While I was gone, they ducked out to spill my water dish and prove to me they were on the move and winning the war.

Finally, I refused to leave my fortress. I had to protect my family. They didn't understand the danger they were facing. Unable to hold my bladder any longer, I soiled the floor. My master's patience was already growing thin with my laundry room vigil, but the soiling completely destroyed my credibility.

My master hurled threats of the pound as he dragged me from the laundry room. I strained and pulled at my collar as he tore me away from the only safety I could ensure the family. I whimpered as the voices giggled and chittered and chided me from under the dryer. My master forced me to the front door and threw me outside into the yard.

"Maybe a night alone in the cold will sort you out, Goliath."

I was frantic. I barked and clawed at the door. As the lights went out for the night, I howled in wretched fear for my family. If only I could make them listen, get them to let me back inside the house.

But no one came to the door; instead they shouted from the upstairs window.

"You're going to the pound tomorrow! That's it! Now SHUT UP!"

I lowered my head and dropped my ears. I silenced my sorrowful howls. Wandering around to the deck at the back of the house, I peered through the sliding glass doors, hoping I could at least keep watch from there.

For hours nothing happened. A tentative relief came over me. Perhaps all the threats from the dusty nest were hollow. Maybe my family was safe after all. The moon washed over me in the chilly night. I was weary, and I stretched out on my stomach and rested my muzzle on my paws so I could keep watch through the big glass doors. Soon all the stress and burden of the last few weeks came over me. My eyelids felt like stones, and finally I fell into a deep sleep.

As I slept, I dreamed good dog dreams of running with the boy in the green grass of the yard and fetching my yellow tennis ball. My master looked on with pride and scratched behind my ears when I came to show him my ball.

"Good boy, Goliath. You are the best dog a family could ever have."

My heart soared with joy and love for my humans. I would give my life for them.

Tap, tap, tap. The sound roused me from my dream, and I felt the cold night air in my bones and the frosted dew on my nose. Tap, tap, tap. I opened my eyes to the sight of hundreds of the dusty little long-eared fiends on the other side of the glass doors. They were each holding a weapon. The one tapping on the glass was grinning a long-toothed grin and wielding a meat cleaver from the kitchen above his scraggy, cockeyed ears. Several of the others waved their paws at me, bouncing up and down on their mutant bunny hind feet. A procession passed in front of the door; at least twenty of the dirty beasts danced by, carrying a half-bald cat, legs tied to a broomstick like a pig ready for the spit. The cat's once pink tongue lolled bloody from her mouth. As they paraded by, whiskers twitching, I could hear their wicked laughter through the door.

I leapt to my feet and barked with all my might, and something hit the glass with a splatter. It stuck to the window in a red, sticky mass. As it began its smeary slide down the glass, I could see it was a human ear. I was too late.

In a panic, I barked and pounded my heavy paws against the glass door, but the little beasts turned their backs and shook their dusty cotton tails at me. Through the doorway across the room, I could see a mob of them dragging a body down the stairs, like grimy-furred Lilliputians. I pounced at the doors, throwing the entire weight of my mastiff body at the glass—the frame cracked and splintered. I barked and howled and continued to hurl myself against the glass until the wood around the door finally gave way. The doors caved in and the glass shattered on the hardwood floor, destroying the little fiends that hadn't managed to scatter.
Oblivious to my bloodied paws, I raced across the broken glass and into the living room, heading straight for the stairs and the dusty rodents that were dragging my unconscious master. They turned and attacked, hacking at my paws with knives and scissors, jumping on my back and stabbing me with ice picks and steak knives, but I snapped and I ripped and tore at them until their tiny bodies were strewn like rag dolls, motionless, around the room. Badly bleeding, I padded quickly to my master's side in hopes he was still alive. The gaping hole in the side of his head where his ear had been oozed with thick dark blood. I drew my tongue gently across his cheek. I could feel his warmth—he was still alive. I licked him again, and his eyes fluttered open.

With relief he looked into my face and whispered, “Goliath.” Then his eyes widened and shone with terror. “Upstairs, boy. Get them!” he rasped.

I bounded up the steps to save the others. The master's bedroom looked like a massacre—my mistress's body hung limp over the side of the bed, bloodied and shredded. I ran ahead to my boy's closed door, relieved when all there seemed quiet. Suddenly, shrieks sounded from the teenager's room. A wet trail of red paw prints led to her open door. As I burst into the room, I saw hundreds of the beasts swarming over the floor and around a fluffy feline mass at the foot of the bed. Some of the fiends had broken away from the pack and were beginning their climb up the bedspread. The terrified girl huddled against the headboard, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Goliath, they're eating the cat! Help me!” she whimpered through snot and tears. “Please...."

I leapt into action, mauling and trampling the Long Toohs, but there were so many of them. They swarmed over my body, ripping and tearing at my ears, slicing into my flesh with their household weapons and their razor claws.

As I felt my strength ebbing with the loss of blood, to my horror I noticed little Teddy standing wide-eyed and frozen in the doorway. I barked a warning and lumbered behind the bed, trying to distract the Long Tooths from the boy. Flailing my head around, I flung the beasts into the air. As I drew the mass of fiends away from the door, Ashley made a run for it, grabbing Teddy by the hand. For just a moment she glanced back at me, her face streaked with tears; then the two of them disappeared, leaving me alone with the horde. With great relief, I heard the children running down the stairs.

I struggled to survive, but the fiends kept coming. The blood loss and the pain of my torn flesh were draining me of strength, but the longer I distracted the dark rodents, the more hopeful I was that my family would escape with their lives.

Howling my final battle cry as my ancestors would have done, I reared up on my hind legs and tossed the beasts from my back. Coming down hard, I hammered them with my paws again and again, trampling their wicked bodies. I gnashed with my still-powerful jaws, the taste of their bodies sickening, their black blood spilling from my muzzle as I continued my assault.

Long, painful moments passed during the battle, how many I'm not sure, but I sensed the house was finally vacant of my humans. Bone weary and staggering with dizziness, I stumbled with the weight of the next wave of the Long Tooths’ attack. Taking advantage of my weakness, the rabid beasts dragged me to the floor. Snarling and drooling, they blinded me with their claws. As if from far away, I heard unfamiliar voices, shouts, the popping of gunfire.

My body failed me, and I could no longer struggle. As my pain passed away from my awareness, my thoughts wanderered to the ancient mastiff lore and Old Sam; I knew he would be proud. Entrusted with the sacred duty, I had saved my family from the old evil—from the Long Tooths.

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Close Shave

Triple-blade, double-blade, electric razors ... god, I'm tired of shaving my legs, thought Susan as she sank the potato peeler deep into the base of her shin bone. With a steady pull she scraped the tool up toward her knee, smiling as the first long strip of wet skin fell away, revealing the glistening red meat beneath.

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Connected at the Hip

"I'm sick of you. I wish you would die," said Sue. She turned away, switching off the light as she listened to her sister weeping in the dark.

Sue's clenched jaw loosened as she fell into a restless sleep. She dreamed of the past—two little girls, arm in arm, skipping in their identical Sunday dresses. She watched as Drew—her sister—stumbled, toppling them both to the ground. She endured the burning pain from Drew's scraped knee and the spankings they earned for soiling their dresses. So often she suffered for her sister's stupidity. Her only satisfaction was knowing that Drew felt her pain, too.

In her dream memory, Sue sliced a blade deep into the soft pad of her thumb. Blood dripping, she watched Drew's suffering with satisfaction. Torture after torture her self-mutilation continued just to watch her sister bear the phantom twin pain.

Startled from her sleep by a searing pain in her hip, Sue saw a flash of metal. Sobbing, Drew swayed at their beside, bloody cleaver in hand. The hacked flesh at her hip matched the bloody hole Sue discovered below her own ribs. A scream rose in her throat as her sister collapsed to the floor.

No longer were they connected at the hip.

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Special Prayers: The Making of Mama

Babies fell from the skies over Eastville. They bounced, they bled, but none cried. Their silence was eerie—their tiny bodies splattered and split open as they hit the rooftops, the road, and the sidewalks of our little street. For miles and miles, the sky was full of falling babies, dark blots against the blue.

Kiki Bordrow stood on the porch across the street hugging a baby doll to her chest. It was swaddled in a soft yellow blanket, tight like her mama taught her. Curls ringed Kiki's perfect face, now blank and stunned. Her mouth hung open in a slack-jawed "O."

I watched from my window as her expression changed, her eyes widening, as if someone had finally turned her switch on. Kiki wound up like nobody's business, her wail piercing the dull-thud-filled afternoon.

"MAMA!" she screamed.

As the bodies mounted at the foot of her porch, a nasty baby eruption splashed Kiki's dress and her dolly's soft yellow blanket. She screamed again; her hands flew up and the dolly went flying through the air like a yo-yo. Unrolling from its perfect swaddle, the naked baby doll appeared to dive headfirst into the pile of its fleshy counterparts. Just as Kiki Bordrow collapsed to the floorboards in fits, her mother blasted through the screen door, ready to defend her little darling from the latest neighborhood mistreatment.

Missus Bordrow skidded to a halt. Suddenly unaware of her daughter's fits, she watched the falling babies with the same slack-jawed "O" Kiki had worn on her face just moments before. One particularly plump infant smashed through the windshield of their shiny new Studebaker, the horn blaring to life.

My knees were raw from kneeling inside the sticky black circle at my window. I'd only gotten up for pee breaks and some water, but I was done now. I went downstairs to the kitchen and dug my finger into the tin of peanut butter. I hadn't realized how hungry I was.

I strolled to the living room window. More moms appeared at the front doors all along Blue Bell Street. I watched as they covered their mouths, cried, vomited, and clutched at their perfect children. Some rushed back into their houses, no doubt calling their husbands at work and phoning the fire department and police.

Obsessed with their own lives, as usual, none of them noticed me standing naked in the front window of our house. *It's the only way to pray.* That's what the pastor taught me.

He said I was special, a messenger of God. Brother Donald Godspeth, pastor of The Holy Blood of Jesus Pentecostal Church, taught me my prayers. He said he'd been waiting all his life for me, Sue Ann Brown. From the time I was three, he schooled me special. We'd pray and the spirit would take hold of Brother Godspeth and he'd give me the healing treatment, to purge my sins and make me the messenger God needed me to be. I never understood how all his sweating and rubbing on me made me clean, but whenever his healing treatments brought blood from between my legs, the pastor cried, blessed me, and then went to sleep in the wet sheets before the altar.

Brother Godspeth schooled mama, too, and the Lord would reward her with a baby inside. My daddy died in the war before mama found the church, so I was lonely with no brothers and sisters. So each time the blessing of a baby would come from mama's schooling, I was excited and couldn't wait for its birth. I'd pray real hard, but my mama wasn't clean like me—that's what Brother Godspeth told me. That's why all her babies died. He personally delivered every one of them to try to cleanse them of their earthly sins, but the Brother said my mama's sins were too great and the Lord took all those babies to heaven.

The last baby died just a few days ago. My mama died, too. Brother Godspeth said not to cry since she was finally cleansed of her sins. He told me I should pray for her and the baby. I'd been doing a bit of reading in the special book of prayers, the secret one Brother Godspeth kept hidden in the base of altar. I pretended I was asleep after a healing treatment and I seen him sitting naked on the floor of the chapel inside a black circle. Holding the book in his lap, he traced the strange symbols on the black cover with his fat fingers, muttering to himself. I figured I'd surprise him and practice the prayers, too. I was lonely, but being left by myself in the house was a perfect chance to
try them out. I figured since my old prayers didn't work, maybe the special prayers would.

Before he left me, we prayed together and the pastor gave me one of his private healings. The healings don't hurt my insides no more—the cleansing must be working. At least that's what Brother Godspeth said. When he left, I practiced the special prayers from the black book and I prayed for my mama and all her lost babies. I'd memorized as many verses as I could, but there was one that I thought was just right.

So I painted a black circle with shoe polish and I prayed for days, kneeling in front of my window. Some of the time, I did self-healings with my fingers. Brother Godspeth had taught me how.

After mama died, none of the neighborhood mothers stopped by to check on me. I didn't expect they would—they always said I was dirty and no good for their little darlings. But Brother Godspeth said I was special and I'm beginning to think he's right. Still, I kind of wished one of the moms had visited to see if I was all right. I was lonely praying by myself, but standing naked with my peanut butter, looking out the window at all those falling babies, I don't feel so lonely anymore.
Widow

Dew shimmers in the sunlight; a perfect morning to make love. She beckons to me, taunting me with her long, slender legs. Her eyes sparkle with desire and the promise of her undying forever-love. The dance of seduction is long and languid and our bodies quake with the finality of our devotion, our act of creation. As I watch the diamonds of dew fall from the web, her fangs pierce my tender throat. Forever is short in the eternity of the widow's web.
Spider Love

Gertie Kleinsmith was plain at best in her mediocre life, but after the surgery Dr. Beetleheim admired her long, dark, silken legs and her curvaceous abdomen. Many women like Gertie would benefit from his work—no longer invisible, unloved, sad little wasted bits of useless life. The doctor's eccentric clientele eagerly awaited his first success. Their bidding for the prize of the new woman was vigorous.

* * * *

Gertie's eyes fluttered open for the first time, and she swooned at the kaleidoscopic images flooding her brain. She reached up to touch her swimming head and two hairy segmented legs filled her fragmented field of vision. Screaming, she began to thrash on the recovery table, her legs and abdomen strapped down securely.

Dr. Beetleheim rushed to her side.

"Oh, you poor dear. I hadn't expected you to wake for some time. I had intended to cover your eyes to lessen the disorientation when you regained consciousness."

Gertie continued to thrash in near-hysteria.

"Who are you? Where am I?" she screamed, her throat dry and raspy. "What have you done to me?"

"It will be alright, Ms. Kleinsmith. I know it's a difficult transition, but a glorious one. You are my first, my blessing, my gift to the world. Because of you, the wonders that will follow are unfathomable. And, my dear, your patron awaits in my office suite, just beyond those doors. He's very eager to make your acquaintance."

As he reached to stroke her head, a tender gesture of a parent to a child, she bit him. Her fangs sank deep into his flesh, and she felt the ecstatic release of hot liquid jet through her body. A strange serenity washed over her. She salivated as the doctor shrieked in agony, fighting to release his hand from the pressure of her fangs. Wrapping her hairy arms around his neck, Gertie relaxed back against the table, drawing his warm, wriggling body close to her. His screams were muted in her ears by what she, as a virgin, had only dreamed of before this day—the intense feeling of sexual rapture.

Gone was her fear. Gone was her concern for anything but that feeling. She reached one long, hairy arm over the edge of the table and released the straps restraining her legs and abdomen. She wanted nothing more than to caress the doctor's body and immerse her whole self in the delight of the moment.

Instinctively, Gertie's legs began to work, weaving the fine moist threads spilling from her spinnerets. Back and forth, like a dance, she spun a loving shroud around the doctor. The screaming had ended, and all that remained of his movement was the occasional twitch of a leg or an arm within the cocoon, one made as an expression of Gertie's love.

She began to hum and sway with joy as the body in her grasp became a soft, liquidy bag. Somehow, in her swoon of pleasure, she knew the taste would be sweet even before she took her first swallow of the thick, warm juice that had been the good doctor. Nothing had ever filled her, satisfied her so completely.

As she drank deeply of the nectar that was Dr. Beetleheim, Gertie's mind began to clear. It was clearer than she could ever remember feeling, but at the same time, she could barely remember feeling anything before this moment. Only a dim impression of her life before remained, and with each swallow of warm, viscous human syrup, the memory faded further away.

Far too soon, the bag of Beetleheim juice was nearly empty and the cocoon deflated in Gertie's grip. Tossing the silken sack aside, a whimper of petulant disappointment escaped her. Skittering off the table, Gertie stopped to clean the bits of flesh still hanging from her fangs. She swallowed them whole, her stomach grumbling. Gertie smiled a greedy smile as she headed for the door. The scent of man was heavy in the air, and she had a lifetime of hunger to satisfy.
1.

Donovan kneeled on the wet pavement in the center of the mayhem, sirens screaming in the background. Warm blood oozed through his fingers as he cradled his wife's head. He watched helplessly as her life slipped away, taking their unborn child with her. The accident had been so quick; in the time frame of a glance, his wife had been struck by the Oldsmobile.

Through the pouring rain, he heard the desperate weeping of the elderly driver at the curb.

"No, no ... it should have been me," he said. "The dream ... they promised to take me..."

As he felt the life drain away from his wife's slender form, Donovan cried for help, drowning out the sound of the sobbing man and the murmurs of the gathering crowd.

"Someone help me! She's dying ... she can't die. Please!"

Cold rain plastered Donovan's blonde hair flat; his T-shirt clung, soaking, to his body. He didn't notice the chill seeping through his muscles; he was desperate, panicked. Clutching his wife's lifeless body to his chest, he looked to the crowd, pleading for someone to help him. His wife was the one thing whole and good in his life.

His eyes locked on those of a woman who appeared in the mass of onlookers and umbrellas. She held the hand of a frail child hugging a ragged blue-haired doll to her chest. The hood of the child's pink rain slicker had fallen back, exposing darkened eyes and sallow skin. The woman's eyes widened—she seemed to recognize Donovan. As she pulled the small girl close to her hip, she shook her head and waved her hand, frantically trying to push through the crowd to reach him.

From behind, a hand caressed Donovan's shoulder, its heat radiating so intensely that he looked away from the shouting woman.

"Hello, Donovan."

He heard the smooth voice and turned to see a man in dark sunglasses and a custom tailored suit, the kind Donovan had grown accustomed to in recent years. He had become successful in the business world and could easily spot a shark at first glance.

The noise around them stopped, the frantic woman forgotten. There was only the voice of the man.

"I heard you call, so I'm here to help," he said, his glistening black hair slicked back tightly against his skull. As he crouched down beside Donovan, he opened his leather briefcase and drew out a fountain pen and a crisp white contract. "There's not much time, so you must act now. I can guarantee that the scene around you will never happen, and your wife and child will be completely safe. Please sign here."

"What is this?" asked Donovan, his eyes wild with grief, unaware that the pouring rain was no longer falling on him. "What are you talking about? My wife is dead ... she's dead." Sobbing, he buried his tears in the ringlets of her red hair, pressing his face against her soft cheek.

With unshakable corporate cool the man continued his pitch, motioning for Donovan to take the pen. "As I said, Mister Hunter, there isn't much time. If you want your wife and child to live, sign here now."

Donovan looked up, his face ashen and wet with tears. "Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?"

"You asked for help, I answered. I'm in the business of checks and balances. It happens to be your lucky day, Mister Hunter, because it's time for a check to be paid and the balance returned. See that sickly child over there?" he said, pointing to the small girl with the blue-haired doll. Like everything else around them, the woman holding the child's
hand was frozen in place, her other hand still reaching toward Donovan. Only the girl remained mobile, grabbing at her mother's rigid body, crying to be picked up. Donovan's panic deepened, eyes sweeping back and forth, trying to make sense of the bizarre scene.

"What's going on here?" His voice was low, laced with fear.

"It's a simple trade. That girl's life for your wife and child. The girl's about to die anyway, so it's actually quite a loss on our part. Sign here, please," he said with a benign smile, tilting the pen and document toward Donovan.

Shocked and confused, he looked from his wife to the crying child and back to the man in the sunglasses. "How could such a thing be true? How could you expect me to..."

"You have 30 seconds to decide, Mister Hunter. If you're willing to let your wife and child die for the life of a kid that's practically dead anyway, I have plenty of eager customers waiting to take your place."

A smattering of raindrops began to fall around Donovan. The man, still perfectly dry, capped the pen and tucked it back in the leather brief. As he started to put away the document, Donovan grabbed his wrist.

"Wait, please," he said, jerking his hand away from the sudden searing burn. Barely noticing the white singe on his palm, he pleaded with the man. "Please, what do I have to do?"

"Just sign the contract and go on living your life. We'll let you know if there's anything further you can do for us. You have ten seconds."

Donovan looked down at his wife and the gentle swell of her belly beneath the rain-soaked cotton dress. They had waited so long for a baby; so many trials they had overcome, so many dreams and plans for their future together.

"Give me the paper!"

Ignoring the pain from the raw burn on his palm, he laid his wife's body gently on the pavement and took the document and pen in his trembling hands. For the first time in his life he signed his name to a contract without reading a word, his bloody fingerprints smearing the paper like crimson paint on white porcelain.

The man in the sunglasses verified the signature, signed his own, and tucked the contract in his briefcase. He retrieved his pen, and with a satisfied grin he stood up and extended his hand. Donovan did not return the gesture.

Straightening his tie, the man said, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Hunter. We'll be in touch."

Donovan watched as the man walked toward the crying child with the blue-haired doll. Swooping her up in his arms, he disappeared into the suddenly reanimated crowd. When the woman looked down and saw the child was missing, she looked back at Donovan through the pounding rain and screamed.

"No!"

* * * *

Hot tears soaked Donovan's pillow. He woke with a start at the touch of a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Are you all right, hon?" asked his wife.

Still shaking from the memory of the accident, he reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, breathing in the scent of her warm skin. With his back to her, she couldn't see his wet eyes. Clearing his throat, he kissed each of her fingertips then wrapped her arm around him.

"I'm okay, babe. Just a very bad dream. Go on back to sleep—everything's all right now."

He felt her round belly as she snuggled against his back. This woman had given him his life back; she'd helped him climb out of his alcoholic stupor during law school. And now she carried his child. With the loss of his parents at a
young age, building a family of his own was finally filling the void that had swallowed him for most of his life.

Donovan listened to his wife’s breathing return to the gentle rhythm of sleep, and he closed his eyes with tears of relief falling on his pillow to mingle with those from his nightmare. It had only been a dream. He drifted off to sleep, ignoring the sting of the burn on his palm.

The following day, Donovan and Ally had their usual Saturday movie matinee date. They held hands and huddled together against the rain as they crossed the street to visit the quaint old theater in the center of town. With Ally, he could be different; he could leave the corporate deals and stress of his profession behind. Together they were like two kids chattering away. Lost in each other’s company, they didn’t notice the ancient Oldsmobile barreling through the stoplight toward them. At the last second, it swerved away. Crashing up onto the sidewalk, it crushed the body of a small child as she pulled away from a woman’s hand to see the kittens in the pet store window. The head of the elderly driver smashed through the windshield of the car, killing him instantly.

The child’s body was mangled in a bloody heap on the sidewalk, her small hand clutching a blue-haired doll. The woman turned toward Donovan and began to scream.

2.

"You need to get help, Donovan," said Ally, as he sat hunched over the computer keyboard. “It's been more than six years since the accident. Seeing that little girl die was horrible for both of us, but this obsession is destroying you ... it's destroying us. You'd think it was Becka that died."

Donovan raked his fingers through his shaggy hair. Since the accident, his once carefully coiffed hair, like most of his life, was left unattended.

"You don't understand, Ally," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders, looking at him with disbelief. “Damn right I don't understand. We can barely make ends meet. It's been two years since you lost your job, and instead of finding work, you spend all your time online researching accidents. For what? You can't bring that child back.” With tears welling, she lowered her voice, looking toward her daughter sleeping on the sofa in the next room. “We used to be able to talk about anything, but now you're locked into some world I don't understand. Please, Donovan, I need you to get help. Now."

He felt like a monster, making Ally cry again. She’d been so patient, and she was right.

"I know, honey," he said, looking up at her, the fluorescent light deepening the dark circles under her eyes. “I'll call someone soon. I won't let my research interfere so much. I'll turn things around, I promise."

Ally’s jaw tightened as she swiped away her tears.

"How many promises does that make now, Donovan? Why is this one any different? I don't understand how..."

He watched his wife stop herself in mid-sentence, her expression shifting from anger to resignation. She took a deep breath and stared at the floor, speaking in a steady, determined tone. “I have Becka to think of now. She deserves a happy life, Donovan ... a stable life, and losing the house was the last straw. If things don't change, I'm done."

"What do you mean, you're done?” he said, a frantic pitch in his voice. “I love you, Ally. I love our baby girl. What are you saying?"

"You know I love you too, Donovan, but you've got to stop this obsession and find a job. If you can't do that, I'm leaving. That's what I'm saying."

"But I'm so close..." he said. He tried to stop himself, but it was too late. Ally shook her head and walked away. He was losing her, and his family was slipping away because of his fixation on the accident, the dream ... the contract. He couldn't tell her the truth, but how could he stop when he knew he was so close to a breakthrough? Something kept driving him—more than even the guilt, more than trying to prove his sanity. He rubbed the scar on the palm of his hand—he just needed a little more time.
After months of searching for her, Donovan still had no idea where Ally had gone with Becka. To ease the loneliness, he buried himself in his research, placing hundreds of anonymous inquiries about the contract on as many esoteric forums as he could find. With the exception of a few vague references to the contract, most of the replies were from strung out new age hippies talking about the astral plane or UFO nuts saying that the contract was a government conspiracy. He was beginning to think that Ally had been right; maybe he needed help. Maybe it had all been some bizarre fantasy. But what difference did it make? He'd lost everything already—his family, his home, his job.

His corporate contacts—so-called friends—had dried up with the rumors of his strange obsession. The head of his firm got a bogus report that he was trafficking in porn, which got him fired. But the truth wouldn't have made any difference, so he didn't fight the accusations. Secretly, he was glad to have more time to pursue the source of the contract.

Much of Donovan's identity had been his work, his ability to cut a razor-edged deal. But his family kept him sane and grounded, Ally and Becka's love filling the emptiness and loss left from his childhood abandonment. Now there was only the pursuit of ... what? An answer to a nightmare? A contract he couldn't prove existed?

When Donovan looked in the bathroom mirror, he saw the hollow-eyed face of endless insomniac nights staring back at him. The glare of the fluorescent light over the sink spilled out into the dreary motel room as he shuffled back from the toilet to sit on the edge of the bed. Looking down at his socks, the soles grimy from the dirty carpet, he decided he needed a drink. Just one. Maybe then he could ignore the pain of the truth, the choices he'd made. Maybe he could forget the child with the blue-haired doll and the dull ache of his vacant life without Ally and Becka.

He returned from the liquor store, shoulders hunched up under his coat like a thief trying to hide his crime. His hair, once a sleek blond crown, hung limp and dull, curtaining his eyes from the world around him. He locked the door and quickly poured two fingers of Jack. The bourbon shimmered amber in the palm of his shaking hand as he looked into the glass—it had been ten years since his last drink. All that time he'd kept his promise to Ally. He would have died for her. Now he simply wanted to forget her, forget it all.

As he took his first long, stinging swallow of whiskey, he knew it was done. There would be no future, no family, no need for answers. Resigned to his path, relieved in a way, he downed the rest of the whiskey in his glass. Its heat spread like vapor into his gut. Grabbing for the neck of the bottle, he heard a ping—an incoming email alert from his laptop.

He glanced over at the screen of the battered machine resting on his nightstand. The sender used the name *dreamcatcher*. He recognized the name from a single strange email years earlier, but he had never heard from dreamcatcher again. He reached over and clicked the message open—the action was automatic, which annoyed him. He was done with it all. He wanted no part of the pointless research, no part of anything but forgetting his past. But still the message drew him in, like a bad habit. It was cryptic, only an invitation to meet in a private chat room. With the burn of the liquor hot in his throat, Donovan resisted, aiming the cursor at the delete button. He was finished with the research, the dead ends, the guilt. He pressed the button and relief washed over him. Taking a hard swallow directly from the bottle of J.D., he closed his eyes and let his head fall back, enjoying the onset of oblivion.

Another ping from the computer. Somehow magnified, the sound grated on Donovan's eardrums. His head lolling to the side, he opened his eyes.

From: dreamcatcher

*Subject: I'm waiting for you ... I know you're there.*

Annoyed at the intrusion into his fragile peace, Donovan stabbed at the mouse and deleted the message. Within seconds, the computer pinged again, grinding on his nerves. Almost deleting it without looking, the subject line
caught his eye.

Subject: I can help you. They're safe.

So many dead ends, so much loneliness. The bliss of oblivion beckoned, but could he miss the chance that someone knew something about his family? Feeling the old panic rise in his chest, he clicked on the message and found a link. Hands shaking, he signed into the chat room. Dreamcatcher was waiting.

dreamcatcher: I've been watching you, Hunter.

hunter: What do you mean, watching me?

dreamcatcher: For years, I've watched you searching and I've noted your dedication.

hunter: Who are you? What do you know about my family?

dreamcatcher: I'm someone who can help with your research concerning the contract.

hunter: I don't give a damn about the contract anymore. Where's my family?

dreamcatcher: Would you rather they'd died on that street?


dreamcatcher: Would you rather they died, Hunter?

hunter: Who the hell are you?

Flushed with fear and anger, Donovan's heart pounded as he waited for an answer, but no reply followed. Dreamcatcher logged off without another word. The cursor blinked, marking time while Donovan sat alone in the chat room helplessly waiting and praying for the stranger's return.

For weeks, Donovan checked his email and the forums nonstop in hope of receiving a message from dreamcatcher. The stranger's knowledge of the accident and Donovan's mounting fear for his family's safety had reignited his obsession. He'd been so close to letting it all go, but the chat room encounter had left him filled with dread and paranoia. Lying exhausted on the unmade bed, Donovan heard the familiar ping. More spam, he thought, but he dragged himself over to the laptop.

I'm waiting for you. Click Here ~dreamcatcher

Jolted from his stupor, Donovan clicked on the link to find dreamcatcher waiting for him in the private chat room.

dreamcatcher: Hello, Hunter.

hunter: WHERE'S MY FAMILY???

dreamcatcher: Do you want me to leave again?

hunter: NO!

dreamcatcher: Then no more questions right now. Just do what I say.

hunter: You told me you had information about my family.

dreamcatcher: Follow my instructions and you'll get your answers. I know what you're looking for and I can help, but you have to prove you're a suitable candidate.

hunter: Candidate for what?
dreamcatcher: I TOLD YOU NO MORE QUESTIONS! Last chance...

hunter: I'm sorry. I'll do anything you say.

dreamcatcher: You'll receive an audio file. Listen to it with headphones before you go to sleep. I'll be in touch.

[dreamcatcher has left the chat room.]

Bewildered and shaken by the exchange, Donovan kept vigil at the computer for hours, nodding off until the next “you've got mail” ping would wake him. After dozens of spam messages, the audio file arrived at one minute before midnight. In his bleary-eyed state of too much drink and not enough sleep, he hastily downloaded the file, almost deleting it. The message had specific instructions for listening and emphasized that it was coded to only be listened to once. Following the directions, Donovan set the laptop beside him on the bed and turned off the lights. Plugging in his headphones by the glow of the blue screen, he lay back on the pillow in his rumpled clothes and clicked play.

Expecting to hear verbal instructions filling him in on his family's disappearance, the only thing he heard were long, discordant tones that turned into quiet ambient music. Donovan was pissed. “What the hell?” he snarled into the room, but since the file would work only once, he kept listening in case something else followed. Nothing did, only more strange mellow music. Within minutes, his aggravation unexpectedly melted away and much needed sleep overtook him.

That night the dreams started.

* * * *

dreamcatcher: Did you receive the audio file, Hunter? hunter: You know what's happening to me, don't you???

dreamcatcher: I have an idea, yes.

hunter: Catastrophic dreams! Every night for weeks. Someone always dies and I'm frozen and can't do anything to stop it.

dreamcatcher: Good, the audio entrainment worked and you've passed the test. There must have been an error in their records to have let you disappear from their radar, but we've been waiting for you.

hunter: Who are you talking about? Help me, PLEASE. These nightmares ... it's like witnessing hell every day. I'm so tired, but if I sleep, I dream. I can't live like this. I thought you were going to help me find my family.

dreamcatcher: It may be the only way to save your family, Hunter. Pay close attention to the details of your dreams.

hunter: I don't understand.

dreamcatcher: Keep hunting for answers, but stay out of sight! It's important that you don't bring attention to yourself. Study your dreams, watch the news, and maybe, as your mind clears, you'll remember the fine print from the contract. We have reason to believe it may be vital. That's all I'm privileged to say at this time. Good luck, Donovan, and goodbye.

hunter: Wait!

[dreamcatcher has left the chat room.]

* * *

Plagued by the dreams, Donovan's depression was crippling. He became a recluse, hardly leaving his room. In less than a year, he burned through what little money he had, most of it on alcohol. Eventually, he was evicted from the motel for not paying his bill.

Hocking his laptop for cash to buy liquor—his only solace—he took up residence in the city park. In a drunken
stupor, the chill of the coming winter didn't seem to matter. After weeks in the park, evading the vagrancy patrols, he slumped semi-conscious on a bench, vaguely aware of a foul odor—his own. A warm snap brought people to the park: roller bladers, dog walkers, couples holding hands, and parents with their children. Donovan was watching the parade through a haze of drink and exhaustion when a mother pushing a baby stroller, with a child in tow, passed in front of him. They were a blur until the little girl, illuminated by a slant of afternoon sun, glanced at him and giggled.

"Look, mama. That man is drooling like Mikey."

Her glowing red curls caught Donovan's attention as the mother tugged the child away with a disgusted backward glance.

"My baby girl!" Donovan began to shout, his words slurred. "Becka, come to daddy, honey. Becka..." He pushed himself up from the bench and stumbled toward the little girl. The mother scooped her child up and pushed the stroller ahead as she ran, shouting for help. Donovan continued his drunken pursuit until a roller blader collided with him, knocking him hard to the ground.

"Watch where you're going, asshole," shouted the teen. Hardly missing a beat, the boy continued on his way.

"Becka ... Becka," Donovan whimpered with his face pressed against the grit of the sidewalk. His clothes soiled, greasy hair fell across his face. A police officer approached on foot while a black sedan with smoked-glass windows purred to a stop at the curb.

Hands on hips, standing over Donovan, the policeman spoke in a thick Brooklyn accent. "All right, I've had about enough. Chasin' you outta da park at night is one thing, but you're just bustin' my balls now. People tellin' me you're stalkin' their kids. Get up, you piece of shit." He nudged Donovan with the toe of his black shoe. Unaware, Donovan continued whimpering his daughter's name. "Gonna make dis hard on both of us, are you?" said the cop. He squeezed the mic on his shoulder, calling for backup.

"Officer," a man in dark sunglasses called from the back seat of a car idling at the curb. "Let me save you some paperwork. I'll take care of this gentleman for you. He's an old friend just having a bad day."

"I don't care who da hell he is. He's scaring kids and taking up precious space in my park. If he's not outta here in two minutes, he'll have a room without a view for da night."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, officer."

He disappeared as his window hummed to a close. Another man emerged from the driver's side dressed in a fine black suit. Body like a pro wrestler, skin satin black, he gathered up Donovan from the sidewalk like a rag doll. The diamond in the man's earlobe winked at the cop in the afternoon sunlight as he carried Donovan around the car, depositing him in the back seat. With the big man back behind the wheel, they slipped away into the weekend traffic.

Shaking his head, Mister Sunglasses said, "Donovan, Donovan, Donovan. I've been looking for you. Where have you been hiding? Frittering away your life, I see ... a most important life, at that."

A cool glass was placed in Donovan's hands. Deeply thirsty, he managed to drink the sweet liquid in two greedy swallows, leaving some to dribble down his chin. Head lolling, he tried to focus his alcohol-soaked brain on what was happening, but soon the drink, the smooth ride, and the comfort of the soft leather seat put him into a deep sleep. After a long time drifting with a blissfully empty mind, he dreamed.

This time, instead of being a helpless witness to another death, he saw himself signing the contract, his bloodstained fingers smearing across the white paper at the scene of his wife's death. The picture suddenly slowed down, and his frantic actions came to a halt. For the first time, beneath the bloody fingerprints, he could see the contract:

**Terms and Conditions**

1a. The life you have chosen to retain will heretofore be exchanged with a death of your choosing. If you are unable
to make that choice for any reason, a death will be chosen for you.

1b. In signing this contract, you are agreeing that your own death will occur, at a later date, in a life exchange at the convenience and necessity of the Contractor. Before death, your services may be required at any time and in any form deemed necessary by the Contractor. Should you try to alter the outcome of this agreement beyond the bounds stated in this instrument, strict penalties greater than death will be levied against you immediately upon discovery [see section 3b for definition of penalties].

**Liability**

2a. The Contractor may not be held responsible for any life circumstances that may arise from your choice of life retention or death choice. Once this document is signed by the Customer and the Contractor, the agreement is final and no changes to this agreement will be considered. [For exceptions please refer to section 22r.]

Donovan's dreaming mind anxiously scanned the document for section 22r, but the sound of a slamming door jolted him awake. He struggled to go back to sleep, to the dream. He needed to read the contract, but he felt the waking world drag him to consciousness. At the click of a turning lock he opened his eyes, startled to find himself lying on a bed, clean sheets tucked beneath his chin. With a slight chill on his scalp, he reached up to feel his hair was damp and cropped short. Still groggy, he pulled back the covers and put his feet on the clean carpet of an immaculate motel room. Making his way to the window, he peered out over the dark parking lot. A light in the tidy flowerbed around the wooden sign illuminated rough-cut letters, “The Devil's Den Motel, Eastville, Virginia—Open Year ‘Round.” The parking lot was empty, but the “No Vacancy” sign glared neon red into the night.

Standing there, bewildered by how he ended up at The Devil's Den Motel in a pair of new boxer shorts, Donovan remembered the hazy events that had occurred just before he'd fallen asleep ... and the contract dream. He felt a sudden urgency to write down what little he remembered before it slipped away completely. Grabbing the pen and notepad by the phone, he leaned over the desk, and with a trembling hand he jotted as many details as he could remember. But at the edge of his mind's eye he saw the bloody fingerprints smeared across the contract ... his wife's blood. But she was alive and Becka was alive. The depth of his sorrow for his missing family stabbed at his gut. As always, his concern for them was soon followed by the choking guilt for the small child crushed by the Oldsmobile. The sound of the woman screaming rang in his mind—looking directly at him from the crowd, she had pointed an accusing finger. “You did this!”

At the time of the accident, Ally had grabbed his hand and rushed him away from the scene, annoyed that the woman had singled Donovan out as the cause of the child's death.

"What's wrong with that woman?” she'd said. “You had nothing to do with that accident. How dare she blame you for her own negligence. If she'd been watching the child, that couldn't have happened.” Seeing the upset on Donovan's face, she'd given his hand a gentle squeeze. “Don't give it another thought, honey. It's a terrible tragedy, but there's nothing you could have done. I guarantee, you'll never have to worry about our baby being put in such danger.” She'd smiled at him reassuringly and patted her pregnant belly.

Swooning with a rush of nausea, Donovan's thoughts were pulled back to the motel room. Grabbing the edge of the desk to steady himself, he twisted around just in time to find the trash can as his stomach emptied itself in a hurry. With a final dry heave, the rhythm of his spasming stomach finally subsided, and he was left covered in a sheen of cold sweat. He waited, then stood up slowly, trying to avoid another swoon.

Donovan had no idea how much time had passed since the incident in the park, but it was enough to leave him in obvious alcohol withdrawal. He dragged himself to the bathroom, and after rinsing his mouth of the rank taste of bile, he splashed handfuls of water on his face, trying to ease the pounding in his head. He avoided his reflection in the mirror. He needed a drink.

Stumbling back into the room, he searched for his clothes. He didn't care if they were clean or filthy; he just needed to get out and get his hands on a bottle. He checked the closet, finding several fine tailored suits and pressed shirts. Hanging beside them were new jeans, T-shirts, and a warm leather jacket. New shoes and sneakers sat in a neat row on the floor beneath the hanging clothes. Donovan fingered the soft leather of the coat, wondering who had brought him here. Then he recalled something the man in the black limo said to him before he fell asleep. “Donovan,
Donovan, Donovan. I've been looking for you ... a most important life, at that.” Now he remembered him—the slick black hair, the sunglasses—the man with the contract.

A most important life? He balked at the irony. His life was a hell he couldn't wait to drown again in a nice deep bottle of Jack, but any booze would do right now. Head still pounding, he grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt from the closet. He dressed in a hurry and shoved his feet in the sneakers, nearly passing out when he bent down to tie them.

Plopping down in a chair by the bed, he noticed paperwork lined up neatly on the side table: a bill for The Devil's Den Motel marked paid in full for one year; a bank statement in Donovan's name with a balance of $10,000; a debit card paper-clipped to the top with a note—To be replenished monthly; and a business card for a private driver with no last name, just Easy.

Already confused by his location, the clothes, the haircut, not to mention the fact that someone had undressed and bathed him, and now they were giving him money. As much of a relief as it was to be clean and out of the park, the whole scene was too strange. Donovan stripped the pillowcase from the bed and shoved shoes, clothes, and anything else he could fit inside the makeshift luggage for a quick getaway. As he shrugged into the leather jacket, the phone rang with a piercing old-fashioned bell, jangling Donovan's already frayed nerves. Reflexively, he grabbed the phone, if only to stop the noise. He answered without thinking, regretting it immediately.

"What?"
"Mister Hunter, I'm sorry if I disturbed you. I was instructed to check in to see if there's anything you need."
"Who in the hell are you?"
"My name is Sienna, and I am your personal dream liaison."
"Look, I don't know who you are or what the fuck you're talking about, but I've had enough of this—"
"Mr. Hunter, for the safety of your wife and daughter I suggest that you cooperate fully. Any diversion from your contractual obligation will result in their immediate and painful deaths. We are keeping them alive and luxuriously cared for in your name, Mr. Hunter. Their comfort is not part of our legal obligation, but we're providing it as a special courtesy to you."
"Where are they?" shouted Donovan. “Where are my wife and daughter?"
"I cannot disclose their location. I can tell you that they are unaware of your circumstances, and they believe it is you who is providing for their luxurious lifestyle. They've been instructed that they are to have no contact with you, and in order to maintain your support, your wife must send periodic letters affirming the well-being of herself and your child. Per our contractual agreement, you will receive these letters—once they've been scrubbed of unacceptable details—to verify that your family is still alive."

Donovan's head pounded and he felt faint. He dropped down on the bed, massaging his forehead, drained by the confusion and the threat to his family.

"I don't understand what's going on here."
"You'll receive a package from a courier tomorrow afternoon. All the instructions you need will be in that package. If you have any questions following a thorough examination of the equipment and manual, you may call my answering service. I'll return your call as soon as possible. You'll find my contact information in the instruction packet."

In that moment, the years of stress, the threat to his family and the strange ordeal he found himself in all crashed in on him. Trying to hold back the tears, his shoulders shook with his muffled sobs.

"Why are you doing this to me?” he said, his voice barely audible.
"Mr. Hunter, you'll want for nothing. Once you've completed a trial period and proven reliable, you'll be rewarded with greater freedom and everything you could ever desire. But in the meantime, you'll be confined to a five mile radius of your room and you will be accompanied by a trained companion whenever you leave The Devil's Den Motel."

Donovan was shaking. His shirt was damp with sweat. "I need a drink," he said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hunter. Alcohol will inhibit your ability to do your job. I suggest you get some rest. The courier will be arriving tomorrow, and you will be required to begin work in the evening. Good night, Mr. Hunter."

The dial tone buzzed in Donovan's ear. "Hello? Hello?" He pressed the buttons on the phone, dialing 911. The phone beeped at him with a busy signal. He tried again and the line clicked off. No dial tone; no busy signal. Donovan swept the phone off the table and it smashed against the wall.

Nausea squeezed at his stomach. Light-headed, he staggered to the door and gripped the handle—it was locked from the outside. He pounded and kicked the door until his hands and feet were bruised. He tried the window, but it was locked, too. Nearly blind with the throbbing pain in his head, he picked up the desk chair and threw it at the window, but it bounced back off the thick glass and hit him in the chest, knocking him to the floor.

Lying there panting in his pain and rage, Donovan closed his eyes and let the tears flow. Broken, defeated and completely lost, the sobs wracked his chest until he felt empty. Exhaustion finally released him from his waking agony and delivered him to a deep sleep where the pain of his dreaming world took over:

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Sitting at an outdoor café, Donovan notices the steam of his espresso swirling above his cup. Everything appears vivid and strangely alive. A bright slash of morning sun shines on the golden hair of the woman at the table in front of him. She feeds little bits of bright orange melon to the toddler in the stroller beside her; a tiny drop of juice glistens on the baby's chin.

"Zoooom! Open the hangar, Matty," says the young woman.

The child giggles as they play airplane with the food, his eyes bright with the game.

Chaos erupts suddenly as an old man collapses on a nearby sidewalk, his hat rolling into the gutter. He clutches his chest and the woman with him screams for help. The man gasps for breath and he reaches for her, but his arm falls limp to the sidewalk. The old woman cries, gripping his lifeless hand and bringing it to her chest.

"Morty! Don't leave me. Morty ... darling ... I love you. Please ... someone...?"

People gather around her and a man in a suit kneels down to help. Light glints off of his dark sunglasses, then everything freezes in place, including Donovan. He can't move, and everything around him is silent except for the voice of the man in the suit and the crying woman.

"I can make it so that your husband will be fine, Missus Schwartz. Please sign here," he says, holding out the contract and the pen.

The old woman's reply is muffled as she sobs, her expression a mixture of confusion and grief. The man points his pen in the direction of the blond-haired woman and the toddler. A piece of airplaning melon is still on the fork between them. In a confidential tone, he rattles off a quick explanation, then Donovan clearly hears him say, "You have 30 seconds to sign or the deal is off."

Donovan panics. He wants to call out to the old woman—to warn—her but like the rest of the bystanders, his body is rigid, his voice mute. Missus Schwartz glances at the woman and child and back to her husband's limp body. Her shoulders drop as if all the strength has gone out of her, but she reaches for the pen and with a trembling hand she signs the contract.

"Thank you, Madam." The man in the sunglasses retrieves his pen and puts his own signature on the contract. "A
pleasure doing business with you.” He stands up and walks away, leaving the bewildered woman behind.

The scene suddenly returns to chaos, the crowd coming back to life. No one else seems to notice the man in the sunglasses walking away through the crowd. Donovan jumps to his feet, but before he can reach the old woman, her husband coughs and sits up on the pavement, rubbing his chest. His wife wraps her arms around him.

"Oh Morty. I thought I'd lost you.” She glances back over her shoulder, and Donovan follows her line of vision.

The airplaning melon is no longer on the fork and the toddler in the stroller is struggling to breathe. The young woman is frantically trying to put her finger in the child's mouth to clear his throat.

"Come on, Matty. Spit it out, honey.” She fumbles with the stroller buckle, trying to release it.

Turning bright red, eyes bulging, the child thrashes in the stroller while the woman screams for help. Donovan reaches for him, but in a flash of eye-searing light he is wrenched from his dream and back to the motel room in a ragged heap on the floor.

* * * *

With aches screaming from all parts of his body, Donovan rolled over on to his back, shaken by the dream. It was so vivid ... real, like the dream of Ally's death so many years ago. His head pounded, making thinking difficult. He needed a drink, and to do that he needed to get out of the room. Taking a breath, he braced himself and climbed to his feet, ignoring the pain and nausea still plaguing him. In the quiet of the room, Donovan heard the sound of crickets and caught the scent of moist sea air. He glanced around and realized the singing bugs were outside his room, and someone had left the door open.

With a surge of adrenalin, he wasted no time rushing to the bed to grab his makeshift luggage. When he lifted the stuffed pillowcase, he noticed a folded note as it slipped to the floor. Afraid to stop long enough to read it, he shoved the paper into the pocket of his jeans and hurried to the door. Forcing himself to quiet his breathing, he peeked through the crack in the door. From the edge of the horizon he saw the pale pink light of dawn creeping into the sky, but the red blaze of The Devil's Den's No Vacancy sign continued to bathe the empty parking lot in its glare. With no cars and no sound other than the crickets, Donovan heard the sound of crickets and caught the scent of moist sea air. He glanced around and realized the singing bugs were outside his room, and someone had left the door open.

"Good morning, Mister Hunter,” said the man, his voice the belly-rumbling bass of a kettle drum. He reached out and clamped his dark fingers like a vise on Donovan's shoulder.

"Steady there,” he said.

The grip tightened, a painful bone-crushing pressure. Donovan's eyes watered as he tried desperately to twist out of the man's grip, but instead he soon found himself begging on his knees in the effortless control of a black man in a tailored suit with shoulders as wide as a yoke. The contents of the getaway sack lay spilled on the sidewalk.

"Going somewhere, Mister Hunter?"

Donovan moaned in agony, waiting for his collar bone to snap at any moment. He glanced up, and through the pain he saw a wink of light flash from a diamond in the man's earlobe. The grip on his shoulder released and he collapsed to the sidewalk. He lay there panting while the man stood there calmly—he hadn't broken a sweat.

"I'm afraid you can't leave the premises at this time, sir, but if there's anything I can get you, I'm here to help."

Donovan couldn't refrain from laughing at the absurdity of it.

"Help? You damn near broke my shoulder."

"I apologize for restraining you, Mister Hunter, but if you had left the grounds without an escort, the penalty would
have been death for you ... and for your family. I was protecting you from a tragic mistake.” The big man extended his hand to help him to his feet, but Donovan ignored it and stood on his own.

"Who the hell are you?” he asked, rubbing his aching shoulder.

"I'm Easy, your personal assistant. It's time to return to your room, Mister Hunter, so I can order your breakfast.”

* * * *

In protest, Donovan refused to touch Easy's offering of fried eggs, thick crispy bacon, and plump pancakes topped with a dollop of sweet melting butter. His mouth watered at the smell of the food and he almost succumbed to a taste from the basket of fresh strawberries, but he was a prisoner. Although he knew in his heart it was futile, he felt the need to show his defiance.

At midmorning Easy knocked on the door, but Donovan didn't answer. He lay on his bed with his back to the door, his head still pounding from alcohol withdrawal. After a minute, the big man entered to remove the breakfast dishes.

"Hmm ... Mister Hunter, you're just lucky G ... uh, my mama isn't here. You'd get her starving children lecture for sure.” He picked up a piece of the thick cold bacon and had a bite. “Mmm ... shame to let such fine food go to waste. Anything else I can get you?"

Donovan didn't answer, but on his way out Easy pulled a bottle of Excedrin from his coat pocket and left it on the table along with the basket of strawberries.

Lunchtime passed with no sign of Easy. And as the dinner hour approached, Donovan tried hard to ignore his ache for alcohol and his hunger pains, but the sweet scent of the strawberries drifted around the room, intensifying the gnawing in his empty stomach. His hands shook as he snatched the Excedrin off the table, downing three with a handful of water from the bathroom sink.

Wiping his hand on his jeans, he felt the crinkle of paper in his pocket. He pulled out the note that had fallen on the floor during his attempt to escape. He sat on the bed and unfolded the paper, trying to steady his hands.

Donovan,

I'm sorry they found you. I'm doing what I can to help, but for now your fate is to do as they say. That's the only way to keep your family safe. Don't resist. When the time is right, your destiny will be fulfilled.

They're called the Order of the Red Angel or the ORA. They've enslaved the dreamers for millennia. Utilizing the dreamers' gifts, the Contractors use coercion to force the exchange of the soul energy of innocents as payment to their master for eternal life and power in the earthly realm. You're from what they call the Bloodline, Donovan—a harvester of dreams—a dreamer. You and your kin have the special gift that the ORA both fear and covet. You can guide them to their prey, but you also have the power to destroy them. As with all things to do with heaven and hell, there is a balancing force.

After the death of your parents, they carelessly lost track of you. We've been watching and hoping they'd never track you down, but with the conception of your child your combined energy was exponential and you were quickly identified even before her birth.

I wish we could protect you from what lies ahead, but you must endure the dreaming for as long as it takes and learn everything you can about the process. You'll witness the suffering of many, but you need to remain strong. You're the key that could end this cycle of misery. The contract is the final link and one we don't have access to, but we believe, in time, you will. There is always a hidden balancing clause in dealings with the Order—it's the rules—and this is what we must discover.

They have your child, and she is already exhibiting signs of the special abilities of the Bloodline, so her fate too is in your hands. Signing the contract helped keep her alive not only for you, but for the ORA. It was a well-orchestrated trap.
I've risked a great deal in this communication. My identity must remain secret or we'll have no way of assisting you when the time comes. Destroy this message immediately after reading it. It may be a long time before I can contact you again, but rest assured I'm watching and doing all I can to help.

Stay strong,

*Dreamcatcher*

A knock sounded at the door and Donovan crammed the note back into his pocket. After his usual minute delay, the big man entered the room.

"A package has arrived for you, Mister Hunter." He put a large box on the table, and stood with his hands clasped in front of him. “Inside, you'll find your equipment and instructions for tonight's session. I'm to make sure you follow through with your work. If you have any questions, you're to call your liaison, Sienna.” He turned to leave and looked back over his shoulder.

"Supper?"

Donovan felt the presence of the note in his pocket like a hot piece of iron. *That's the only way to keep your family safe. Don't resist.* He sighed through his nose.

"Yes, supper ... please."

The big man smiled; not smug, but seemingly relieved. “What do you feel like eating?"

"Anything."

And Donovan noticed the pain in his head had begun to subside, but at the thought of food his stomach growled loud enough for the big man to hear it.

"I'll make it something quick,” he said with the hint of a smile as he left the room, locking the door behind him.

Donovan dug the note out of his pocket and rushed to the bathroom. Taking one last quick read of the contents, he tore the paper into tiny pieces and flushed it down the toilet. He kept flushing until all traces of the note were gone.

At the sink, he washed his face in cold water and realized that Dreamcatcher was right. For the sake of his family, this was his fate. He dried his face and crossed the room to open the package the big man had left behind.

Inside was a new laptop, Bose headphones and a small binder of instructions. After a quick skim of the instructions, it seemed simple. Use the headphones and listen to the recorded music which contained embedded brain pattern coding to assist in detailed dreaming. Record every element of his dreams in an encrypted email and send it to his liaison. Eventually he wouldn't need the encoded music to reach the dream state, it said, and from the vivid state of his café dream early that morning, Donovan suspected they were right.

3.

Donovan's new life began that night, if it could be called a life. He did as he was told: he dreamed; he recorded; he reported, night after night, knowing that he sealed the fate of innocents by providing the Order of the Red Angels with the location and details of their prey. He wondered how often the contracts were signed, hoping they resisted often ... unlike he did.

For months, he never left his room. Easy offered field trips to the sea, dinner at the local crab house, a matinee at the little cinema downtown, but Donovan sank into a stupor of depression. The only thing he wanted was a drink.

When his mood started to interfere with the quality of his dream reports, Easy stepped in.

The knock on the door came early one morning, before his normal breakfast wake-up interruption. As usual, Donovan had fought sleep because he always dreamed when he slept, but his depression left him unable to do much else. He never reported his private dreams, sticking only to the deal of his nightly obligation.
"Rise and shine, Mister Hunter," said Easy, his tone not a request, but an order.

As the big man pulled the drapes back and let in the bright morning sun, Donovan moaned.

"Go away, man. I've done my part, so leave me alone."

"Apparently there's some concern about the quality of your work. Besides, you're rotting away in this room. By the stink in here, that's not far from the truth." He waved a hand in front of his face. "Have you had a look at yourself lately?"

"Fuck off."

The big man raised his eyebrows, and without further conversation he ripped the covers off of Donovan and proceeded to pull the sheet off the bed with his reluctant charge still on top of it. Donovan fell like a lump to the floor, wearing only his boxers. He didn't move, so Easy strode into the bathroom, filled a cup with water, and without hesitation poured it over Donovan's head. He spit and cursed at the big man, then grabbed the sopping covers and pulled them tight around his body.

"I know you don't want me to wash and dress you, Mister Hunter, so please shower and get dressed. I'll be back in twenty minutes. We're going for a walk."

He turned and left the room as Donovan flipped him a classic third finger bird. The anger felt good. Defiant, he lay on the floor in the tangle of covers and fell back to sleep.

A warning knock woke him.

"Five minutes ... and if necessary, the Easy grooming method will begin."

After another bird aimed at the door, he got to his feet and shuffled to the closet. From his first encounter with Easy, Donovan knew he meant business, so he pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and slipped his feet into his sneakers. He shuffled back to the bed and waited for the next knock.

"I guess that will have to do ... for today," said Easy, inspecting Donovan's disheveled appearance. He opened the door, and for the first time in months Donovan went outside. The weather was warm and he could smell the moist sea air. As he staggered along the walkway behind the big man, he felt the warm sun on his face, and as much as he hated to admit it, it felt good.

"Come along," said Easy. "First stop: a walk on the beach. And then breakfast at Liaguno's. Vince will whip us up something memorable ... that is if they don't throw us out because of the stink. Tomorrow, Mister Hunter, you shower."

* * * *

The slog along the beach showed Donovan just how out of shape he'd become, but it felt good to move his body. The depression still hung around him like a fog, but after breakfast he went back to his room and showered off the stink. He toweled himself dry, feeling better than he had for sometime. He opened the bathroom cabinet for his toothbrush, and there, taped to the inside of the door, was a note.

Donovan checked outside the bathroom to make sure no one was in the room, then he locked the bathroom door and grabbed the note.

D.

I understand the burden of the dreams, and I've been concerned about your state of mind. It's important that you got out of your room today. Please take every opportunity you can to get out. Maintaining your strength and sanity is imperative to your survival and the success of your destiny. And remember, they'll ultimately replace you with your daughter if you should fail to effectively do their bidding.
Now is the time to take notice of the details of your dreams, Donovan, not just the work you do for the ORA, but for yourself. Notice the patterns in common in the dreams, locations, names, time of day, etc., and consider that perhaps there's more you can do than simply observe helplessly. As you know, the aftermath of signing the contract is devastating. Use your life and your talent to help in any way you can. You might not be able to stop the outcome, but you can ease the suffering.

They won't let you interfere with their work, but the ORA has one agenda only—maintaining their power and satisfying their greed. Do your part to help them succeed, and if you're smart about it, the rest of your activities will seem unimportant to them. And remember, all the experience you gain will ultimately serve you when the opportunity to destroy the ORA arises.

When it's time, I'll be there to assist you.

Dispose of this message immediately.

d.

Donovan felt resentful of the burden of this new expectation—to do something more with his life—but the message rang true. Being more than a prisoner controlled by the ORA was the only way he could see to survive long-term. But the realization that shocked him most was the fact that Becka could be trapped into the same prison. No matter how long it took, he had to do whatever was necessary to bring down the Order of the Red Angel to save his child from this fate.

* * * *

The daily walk soon became a routine for Donovan and Easy, and as winter approached, they decided on a local park to avoid the cold wind of the beach. As they rounded the far end of the duck pond, Easy spoke casually in his rumbling bass.

"I probably shouldn't tell you yet, but in a few months they'll be moving you into a beach house. No more motel for you, pal. And it'll be big enough that you won't even know I'm there." He pulled an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to Donovan.

"And besides that, the head office is pleased with your progress and thought a reward was in order. Keep it up and they'll forward the letters to you, as well."

News of the house was enough to shock him, but the contents of the envelope left him speechless. Inside he found a small stack of photographs—pictures of his family. His eyes watered. Easy walked ahead on the path and sat down on a bench to wait, his big hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

Donovan shuffled through the photos, proud and amazed at how Becka had grown. She was smiling and tall, nearly nine years old now. His spirit lifted at the sight of her. She was going to be a beauty, just like her mother. But looking at Ally's photos made his heart ache. Though she was smiling, the pain and sadness in her eyes was devastating. She had the look of a woman lost and nearly broken but still doing her best for the sake of her child. Donovan understood that feeling too well, and a quiet rage rose up inside him for what Ally must be enduring.

Seeing the hurt in her eyes, Donovan knew he had to redouble his efforts to discover everything he could about the contract and the Order of the Red Angel. He had to stop them, but he knew there was little he could do for Ally and Becka immediately. He could, however, at least hold them in his heart as he sought a way to ease the suffering of others whose lives were devastated by the ORA.

* * * *

Donovan began his new focus by keeping detailed records of his non-working dreams. At first he wrote them on random slips of paper, stashing them around his room, but eventually he asked for a notebook. Easy complied with his request and brought him a pocket-sized journal. To be sure that no one could access his records, Donovan kept the little journal with him at all times, stashed in a pocket or under his pillow when he slept.
In the months that followed, he noticed a pattern to his dreams, and with practice he developed a small amount of lucid control. Until the Contractor arrived on the scene, he could move around more freely in his dreams. This allowed him to quickly assess the times, dates and the locations involved. Although he had no control to stop the events from occurring—he had tried many times—he learned to quickly identify the likely targets for harvesting and brace himself for the horror of the exchange. The contract was always completed in his dreams; he only hoped that in real life at least some were unsuccessful.

He waited patiently for a local exchange to occur in his dreams, and he felt particularly drawn to the first one that surfaced. He soon enlisted the help of an unsuspecting Easy.

"How about a road trip, Easy?" he said between sips of coffee. "We've been cooped up in this town too long."

Easy looked up from his breakfast and raised an eyebrow.

"Can't go too far without approval."

"How about we take a ride down to Norfolk to see if any of the big ships are docked at the naval yard. I've always wanted to see one up close."

With a mouth full of food, Easy chewed slowly, staring at him. His unreadable expression made Donovan nervous. Maybe Easy knew what he was up to, but finally he took a long swallow of orange juice, then nodded.

"Let's go."

Without another word, he tossed some cash on the table for their meal and headed for the door. Relieved and a little bewildered by the sudden departure, Donovan grabbed a piece of toast and followed Easy out to the car.

* * * *

It had been so long since Donovan left the town of Eastville that the trip down the coast to the ship yard felt like a great adventure. As their black SUV cruised from the blue skies above down into the depths of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, Donovan reminded himself to stay focused. Since Easy had been so quick to leave for their trip, they'd arrive at the ship yard earlier than planned. He needed to stall.

Easy's deep voice broke into his concentration. "How about we check out Virginia Beach first?"

A little surprised at his good fortune, Donovan replied, "Hell yeah."

* * * *

Virginia Beach was a nice diversion. Unlike the sleepy village of Eastville, there were lots of people and places to visit. After a pit stop at a little seafood hut and a cup of local crab soup—Easy was a bottomless pit—they were on their way to neighboring Norfolk. Their timing couldn't have been better, but as they approached the naval yard, Donovan began to feel anxious. When he saw the battleship, the memory of his dream was visceral, steeped in pain. The silent hulking mass cast an ominous shadow over the people waiting on the docks. Two distinct crowds had gathered: families embracing and saying their goodbyes, and others waving signs protesting the war. A contingent of armed Navy shore police stood between the families and the protestors. The SPs held a line not to be crossed.

Easy stopped the car and stepped out, his arms folded. Leaning against the driver's side door, he surveyed the scene. Donovan hesitated, then climbed out in a daze. He hoped that Dreamcatcher would be there to assist him, as promised. As he wandered into the crowd toward the clutch of families, an SP stepped up and put his hand on Donovan's chest.

"That'll be far enough, sir. Unless you have a military ID or you're accompanied by a family member who does, you'll need to step back."

"But I have to speak with——"
"You heard him, sir," said another SP as the entire line of arm-banded sailors turned their attention toward Donovan.

A shout came from a protestors wearing a tattered green fatigue jacket. "Hey, it's still a free country, last time I read the Constitution. Let the man through."

"Yeah," shouted others as the protestors moved toward the line of SPs.

Donovan looked around, bewildered by the scene. In his dream he was on the other side of the shore police line when the chaos started.

The man in the tattered fatigue jacket pushed forward, holding his American flag high. A young man at his side grabbed at his arm, trying to pull him back from the crowd of protestors.

"Come on, dad," Donovan heard him say, just like in the dream. "You promised if I came this time there wouldn't be any trouble."

The man in the jacket wrenched his arm free. His face was full of fury at the SPs. "Support me, son, or leave me be. Sometimes you've just got to stand up."

The son stayed behind, head down in apparent resignation, as his father and the mob of protestors charged the line of shore police. As they surged forward, Donovan was pushed through the line of SPs. He stumbled forward and was spun around into a scene from his dream. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears.

A shot was fired and then another, followed by a screaming, scattering mob. Suddenly, there was an ominous silence. When Donovan opened his eyes he was frozen in place like the rest of the crowd around him. He watched helplessly as the man in the tattered fatigue jacket kneeled beside his dead son. Another man from the crowd was frozen in a crouch clutching his bloody shoulder, still holding a gun in his hand. The SP he had missed returned fire, while the gunman's bullet struck the son of the now weeping man.

"Oh my god, what have I done? Oh, Tod," he said, stroking his son's hair. "I should have listened. Oh, my boy. Oh my sweet boy." Tears fell heavy from his eyes, dark splotches lost on the boy's blood-soaked T-shirt. "God, help me," he wept, his shoulders heaving.

"God doesn't seem to be here at the moment, Mister Clark, but I am," said the well-dressed man in the sunglasses. "I can assure you that this tragedy will never occur and your son will live a long and healthy life." He held out a pen and a fresh contract. "All you need to do is sign here and we'll be done."

"Who the hell are you?" said the man through his tears. He noticed the frozen scene around him.

"Today, you could call me your guardian angel ... or at least, Tod's. I'm also looking out for Seaman Urbancik over there." He nodded toward a fresh-faced young man in his starched white uniform and sailor's cap. He was frozen in place, shielding his mother from the gunfire. Their likeness was unmistakable. "You see, Urbancik over there will be killed shortly after he's deployed. He'll be critically burned in a chemical accident aboard ship, but he'll remain conscious for hours, suffering unspeakable pain while waiting for the decontamination crew to do its job.

"But together you and I can save him from that horrible fate and give your son a second chance. It's up to you," said the man in the sunglasses. "You have thirty seconds to decide."

He checked his watch and held the pen and contract out for the man to sign.

"How could you ask such a thing?"

"Just doing my job. Twenty seconds to save your only son," he said, tapping his watch with the pen. "You know he only came today because he was worried about you. How will you live with yourself knowing he died because of you ... and how will you explain it to his mother?"

"Fuck you," mumbled the man in the jacket, but he reached for the pen and scribbled his name on the contract. Mister Sunglasses added his signature and the young man on the ground took a breath, coughing and gasping as his
heart began pumping once again. The sound of another gunshot split the air, and the crowd screamed as Seaman Urbancik collapsed to the ground, red blood blossoming across his uniform, his mother screaming, “Scotty! No!” She clutched at her dying son in a frenzy, with no regard for her own safety in the midst of the mayhem.

The Contractor tucked the document into his breast pocket and walked toward a shaken Donovan. As he passed, he made a pretend finger gun and shot at Donovan with a wink.

"Good show, huh, Mister Hunter?"

Donovan felt sick. More dazed than when he arrived, he somehow managed to escape the chaos without being stopped by the shore police. Angry and confused why Dreamcatcher never arrived to assist him, he was relieved to see Easy waiting in the idling SUV not far from the scene of the exchange. He climbed in, laid his head back against the headrest, and the realization hit him.

"Oh my god, you knew why I came here, didn't you?"

Easy nodded and pulled away from the curb. Donovan turned his head away. It was a long silent ride back to Eastville.

***

Instead of the punishment he expected after his appearance at the Norfolk ship yard, he was moved into a sprawling beach house on the Chesapeake Bay and told by his liaison, Sienna, that his spending account would now be unlimited, within reason, of course. He was confused by this development, but he intended to use it to his advantage. Remembering the name of the slain seaman in Norfolk, his change of status inspired him. He scoured the Internet for information and soon tested the financial waters of his new spending account with success.

***

"Hello, Missus Urbancik?" said Donovan over the phone. “This is Steve Montoya of the Sid P. Cobain Foundation."

"Yes?"

"We recently heard about your son's passing, and we'd like to offer our sincere condolences for your terrible loss."

"Thank you ... Mister Montoya, was it? But this isn't a good time..."

"I'm sorry for the intrusion, but I won't keep you long, ma'am. I just wanted you to know that we'll be offering a scholarship in your son's name to a needy student. We understand that your son Scott joined the Navy mainly as a way to pay for his college education. With your approval, each year we would like to provide an alternative that Scott didn't have to a deserving student in your hometown. We've created a trust for this purpose, and if you and your family would like to be part of the selection committee, you can let me know when the time is right for you."

There was silence of the other end of the line.

"Again, our deepest condolences, ma'am. You'll be receiving some additional information in the mail. Thank you for your time."

Donovan heard the woman sniffing back tears, then clearing her throat before she spoke.

"Mister Montoya, I don't know what to say. But the thought that some other child will benefit from this ... this nightmare ... gives me a sense of peace that I can't begin to explain. And I know that my Scotty would be so proud."

"It's an honor, Missus Urbancik."

***

Donovan used all his experience as a corporate attorney to find ways to assist the victims of the ORA, both those of
the families who had been killed and those who signed the contracts. From his own experience, signing was a sentence to a life of intense guilt and self-recrimination. Whether felt or buried deep, it would torment the signers for all of their days. Donovan suspected that somehow the ORA was benefiting from the energy of the suffering signers as well as the immediate pain of the souls taken in the exchange.

4. Donovan had no immediate way to stop the Order, but he was trying to help, and it was the first time in his life he wanted to help others—needed to help others. Besides his worry for his family, it was the only thing that sustained him. Years passed in this way—Donovan dreaming the dreams that created the victims, then trying his best to pick up the pieces of the shattered lives left over. The ORA never interfered with his philanthropic ventures, with Easy always available to assist, but this cycle wore on him and ate away at his own desire to go on living. He became solitary, seldom leaving the beach house except when necessary to assist with victims’ issues. He contemplated suicide on many occasions, continuing on only for the sake of his family. Photographs were rare, but the letters from Ally continued, one of the few things that he looked forward to. They were short and filled with perfunctory information, a requirement of the maintenance agreement she had been told that Donovan demanded. But then the letters stopped, and by the end of the second month Donovan worried that something was wrong.

He called Sienna, but she was evasive and said the problem was likely an issue with the mail service. Donovan hoped that Easy would be more helpful.

* * * *

Easy put a bowl of homemade gumbo in front of Donovan for lunch.

"My letters have stopped coming,” said Donovan.

"Yeah, I noticed that myself. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.” There was an odd tone to Easy's voice. As his only companion for nearly a decade, even the big man's well-honed cool couldn't hide the undercurrent of a lie from Donovan.

"What's happened?” he said, standing up suddenly.

"I don't know, Hunter.”

"You don't know or you won't tell me?” shouted Donovan. “I've been your goddamn prisoner for how many years now, Easy? Don't you freakin' owe me something? It's my wife and my kid, goddamn it.”

Easy dropped his gaze.

Donovan swiped the bowl off the table, china and hot gumbo exploding into a mess across the kitchen floor. “Fuck you to hell,” he screamed as he stormed out.

Doing the only thing he knew to do, he went to his computer and started to search. Over the years, he knew the ORA did a thorough job of scrubbing any information concerning his family from the Internet, but in the meantime, Donovan had learned a thing or two himself. And before long he found an obituary in an obscure Native American newsletter, under Ally's maiden name, Dinan.

When he saw her death notice he felt cold and weak, as if his life's blood had drained away in an instant. His chest was tight like a steel band, and he could hardly breathe. He forced himself to read on for any explanation of Ally's death and the fate of his daughter. He rubbed his forearm across his face to clear his wet eyes.

In a local tragedy, a dear friend of the Nansemond tribe, Ms. Ally Marie Dinan, was found dead in her Virginia Beach home after what has been determined an accidental overdose of pain medication. She is survived by her daughter, Rebecca Ann Dinan, but according to friends close to the family, the daughter has been missing since the day of her mother's death. Local authorities are investigating her disappearance. Funeral services will be held on Friday at the Angel Brothers Funeral Home on Seaboard Road in Virginia Beach, Virginia. For further details, contact Ezekiel Dreamcatcher, Funeral Director, at 555-8181. Please leave a message.
Donovan’s mind swam with shock and confusion. Dreamcatcher had no doubt left the message just for him. In the last few years, contacts with him had been few and brief—notes somehow stashed in unusual locations that only Donovan would discover. But had Ally been so close all this time—a spike of anger drove through his heart—and had Dreamcatcher known all along? For now he pushed back his anger and his grief. He had to move ... he had to do something. Becka was still out there.

Unable to risk a call from the beach house, Donovan hunted for Easy. As always, dressed in a custom-tailored suit, he was sitting in the living room in silence, staring through the wall of windows looking out across the bay. He appeared to be waiting.

Too rattled to think straight, Donovan said, “I need to go out for ... something.”

Easy stood up and walked across the living room to the front door. Pulling the keys from his pocket, he waited for Donovan to follow.

* * * *

Donovan left Easy behind in the air conditioning of the SUV as he ran into the convenience store in desperate need of a Slushie. He got five dollars in quarters from the clerk and headed directly to the pay phone in the rear of the store.

With a shaky hand he deposited two quarters and punched in the phone number.

"Hello,” said a tinny electronic voice. “You have reached 555-8181. We're unable to take your call, but the funeral for Ms. Ally Marie Dinan will be held on Friday. Services begin at noon. Arrive promptly at 777 Seaboard Road. It's time, and everything else will be clear once you arrive. We'll be there to assist you. Thank you. Please RSVP by leaving your name at the beep.”

After the tone, Donovan spoke his name. Another beep followed, then a final “Thank you for calling.” He was disappointed to hear a recording. He had thought at last he would be able to speak directly with Dreamcatcher. He had so many questions to ask. With his mind racing, he pulled his notebook from his back pocket and jotted down the time and location from the recording. The address sounded familiar, perhaps one of his previous dream locations. Then the words, it's time, rang in his mind. Did he hear that right? He put in another two quarters and dialed again.

"I'm sorry, the number you have reached, 555-8181, is no longer in service.” He slammed the receiver down against the cradle. “Damn it!”

With the rest of his change, he went back to the cashier and ordered a large cherry Slushie. He grabbed a handful of candy bars and tossed them on the counter. He figured he needed to make it look like a binge when he got back in the SUV with Easy. He paid for his purchase and rushed out into the wilting summer humidity.

"I want to go back to Virginia Beach,” he said, his anger still biting from the conversation over lunch.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"Yep. Friday. We leave at 11 a.m. Wear a suit,” he added sarcastically.

* * * *

Donovan had 24 hours to wait before the Friday service, and he was going mad. He knew he had to make it appear as if everything were normal, so he carefully continued his routine, uploading his dream reports from the previous night and sending the encrypted files to Sienna. But he avoided Easy, not venturing into the rest of the house. They'd become friends over the years simply by default, and although Easy's well-honed exterior was nearly opaque, they'd spent everyday together and Donovan knew him well; he was sure that Easy had information about his wife's death. Something must have been happening for months, since the letters stopped. His mind wandered to horrible scenarios of his wife being tortured and tormented by the sunglass-wearing demons of the ORA, their searing touches burning her tender skin. When he started to think about Becka, he finally forced his mind to stop. That line of thinking would
paralyze him, and he needed to be ready for whatever was to come on Friday. If it was truly his destiny to destroy
the ORA, he doubted if he would have a second chance.

In the meantime, he needed to keep himself busy. He took a walk on the beach in the heat of the afternoon with Easy
in tow, suit coat draped across his arm. Donovan enjoyed seeing Easy suffer, with wide dark circles of sweat ringing
the armpits of his tailored shirt. He realized that staying angry at his jailor helped to ease his grief about Ally. Smug
in his breezy shirt and shorts, Donovan strolled off the beach and out of the humid Virginia heat, deciding that in
addition to finding ways to aggravate Easy, he could keep his mind busy by returning to his research. He figured if
one message had slipped through to him, maybe the ORA had become complacent and there were more to find.
Besides, he needed to see Ally’s obituary in the Nansemond tribal newsletter again, in case there was something he
missed.

Leaving his sweaty companion behind in the wide foyer of the beach house, Donovan went directly to his computer
and found the bookmark for the newsletter. When he clicked it, the link was no longer valid. In his haste he hadn't
saved the text. He searched for the newsletter and found a new edition dated that day.

He paged through what looked like local tribal news of births and celebrations, potluck dinners and fund raisers for
the new community center, but nothing of help to him. At that point he assumed that Dreamcatcher's use of the
newsletter must have been a one-time deal, but a heading on the last page caught Donovan's attention: Trials from
the Bloodline of Donny Red Feather, Review by Zeke Dreamcatcher

Bloodline? Red Feather had to be a reference to the Order of the Red Angels. His heart pounded as he read on.

*For a great summer read, you might consider Trials from the Bloodline of Donny Red Feather. This historical
account plays out like a modern day thriller with a brotherhood of monks secretly preying on the powerful bloodline
of native seers to provide prophesies that would allow the monks to accumulate earthly wealth and influence in the
world. For centuries, the monks used the bloodline sparingly, but a new breed infiltrated their ranks, their greed for
power and money insatiable.

Tragically orphaned from his family, Donny Red Feather had disappeared from the monk's registry. Many years
later, they uncovered clues to his whereabouts, and in an elaborate trap, his aunt who was running from the
brotherhood with her granddaughter unknowingly led them directly to Donny. This is the story of his enslavement by
the brotherhood and how, with the help of a rogue monk, he was able to find the document that was key to ending
the tyranny of the brotherhood.*

Donovan sat staring at the screen. The woman at the accident when Ally was hit by the old man's car—was she his
aunt? It all made tragic sense—the family he'd longed for growing up had stayed away to protect him. And the child
with the blue-haired doll was his cousin. Donovan shook his head. His body filled with rage at the deception used by
the ORA. They had staged the whole thing: the accident, the aunt and child, even the old man. "No, no ... it should
have been me," the old man had sobbed. "The dream ... they promised to take me ... " He had never understood what
the man had been trying to say—in all the chaos he could only focus on Ally—but the words had stuck in his
memory for all those years. No doubt the man was a dreamer, too. Perhaps his age, like the sickly child, made him
less valuable to the ORA, so both were expendable in the elaborate trap. Expendable? The thought made him sick.
His whole life had been expendable to the Order, costing him everyone he ever loved.

He tried to continue his research, looking for more clues to the activities of the ORA, but as he sat in front of the
computer, he felt the weight of what he had uncovered bearing down on him. Along with his grief for Ally, he tried
to hold it all at a distance, but his heart and his body were weary. The hint of the old longing for a drink surprised
him as he lay down on the bed. His eyes closed with the thought of a warming sip from a two-finger tumbler of J.D.

* * * *

Donovan dreamed, but it was more a memory of one he had already reported—with that familiar Seaboard Road
address. And with his skills of dream lucidity, he took note of every detail he could gather. When he woke from the
dream, he was shocked to find it was morning. For the first time in ten years, he had missed his dream cycle for the
ORA, but he was not due to file a report to Sienna until the afternoon, and he hoped in his heart by that time he'd
never have to report to anyone ever again.
After making quick notes of his dream, he showered and dressed. As he looked in the mirror, tying his tie, the reality of where he was going hit him. He was going to attend his wife's funeral. He had failed her. And after a decade, his first sight of Ally would be in a casket. He wiped at his eyes and shrugged into his suit coat. At least there was still a chance for Becka. He would give his life without hesitation if it would free her from the ORA.

5.

Easy was waiting in the black SUV promptly at 11a.m. Donovan joined him and they followed the same route to Virginia Beach as before.

"Hmm ... nice tie," said Easy with a curious glance at Donovan's suit. "Now are you going to tell me where we're going, Hunter?"

"I figured you knew already. You did the last time."

Easy took a deep breath and sighed.

"777 Seaboard Road," said Donovan, reading from his notebook. He turned away, staring out the passenger window. Easy punched the address into the GPS. They drove all the way to Virginia Beach without speaking a word, the silence between them weighted and weary.

When they turned from Princess Anne Road onto Seaboard, Donovan experienced an ominous déjà vu, similar to the one he felt at the ship yard in Norfolk. Sitting forward in his seat, he saw something that made him grab the dashboard. He realized why the Seaboard Road address was familiar—this was the site of his dream.

"STOP!"

Easy slammed on the brakes, and Donovan jumped out of the vehicle and ran across the street, ignoring the oncoming traffic and blaring car horns. He ran to the corner and looked up at a street sign, Leroy Road. Shielding his eyes, he watched as the busy noon traffic swept by him, kicking up dust in the hot wind.

Suddenly, he turned and ran 20 yards off the road and waited. He closed his eyes, then he heard the crash. Running to the scene of the accident, without hesitation he rushed to the driver's side of the demolished red compact, a light pole nearly shearing the hood in half. The passenger compartment was compressed and the driver was struggling to free his legs.

Donovan yanked the handle and the car door squealed open, hanging broken on its hinges. The young man's face was covered in blood from a gash across his forehead and his leg was trapped under the steering column. When Donovan tried to pull him free, he screamed; his leg was broken.

"You'll never get me out." The man panted his words. "Help my girlfriend. Please. Is she okay?" He was going into shock.

Other motorists had stopped and were climbing out of their cars, calling for help on their cell phones, but Donovan kept his attention on the young man. He knew that everything hinged on getting him out of the car and stabilizing him enough for him to listen. He reached in and grabbed the young man's pant leg and twisted hard. The leg came free, but the bleeding man fainted from the pain. Donovan pulled him from the car and laid him on the grass at the side of the road.

"Come on." He patted the young man's cheek, trying to bring him around. "Come on, son. You've got to open your eyes, before it's too late." But everything was going silent around them. A grip that seared through his jacket yanked him away from the young man's side.

"You again?" said the man in the sunglasses. "You're becoming a bit of a bother, Mister Hunter." And with an effortless flick of his hand, Donovan went flying into the grass clear of the crash. Like the rest of the bystanders, he was frozen in place. But unlike the others, he heard everything being said, and he would never forget what he was seeing. He'd failed to stop the inevitable exchange. He had failed to find a contract to discover the key and any chance he had of stopping the ORA. He felt betrayed that Dreamcatcher had abandoned him again to a life of
imprisonment by the Order of the Red Angel, and worse, they would eventually find Becka and do the same to her. With a touch from the Contractor, the young man startled into consciousness. His broken leg was bent behind him, but, whimpering in pain, he tried to crawl to the car, toward the lifeless woman still trapped in the car. The Contractor stopped him with a scorching touch and the young man cried out.

Looking impatient, the Contractor began spinning his lies, first pointing his pen at the woman in the car—the only thing visible was her blood-matted red hair—and then at a child standing in the grass, having wandered away from the schoolyard. A teacher nearby was frozen, her face tight with worry, a hand extended as if calling the child back.

As the young man took the pen and looked across the wreckage at the child, Donovan felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. It felt warm and comforting, and the cold stiffness melted from his body. He looked back to see who had released him from the helpless frozen state and he gasped.

The big black man stood tall in his well-tailored suit, sunglasses covering his eyes. He pointed toward the young man with the pen in his hand.

"Hurry."

Donovan ran screaming toward the scene of the accident.

"No," he shouted. "Please ... please don't sign that. He's lying to you."

The Contractor turned and glared at him. Shaking his head in disgust and still looking directly at Donovan, he said, "Mister Brown, you have thirty seconds to decide."

"Please, listen to me," said Donovan. "He's lying to you. His lies will ruin your life and everyone you touch. Don't sign."

The young man was weeping, still holding the pen.

"But she's dead. I killed her," he whimpered.

"Ten seconds, Mister Brown," said the Contractor, looking at his watch. "He killed her. Not you," said Donovan.

"But you were the only one who could have made sure she lived, Mister Brown, but sadly, your time is up." The Contractor snatched back his pen and tucked it neatly inside the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Wait, please. I'll sign," begged the young man. "Please! I'm sorry."

"We have strict rules, Mister Brown. It's all in the contract. Maybe you could discuss the problem with Mister Hunter here. He's an expert ... or so he thinks. Oh, and by the way, what was your girlfriend's name?"

The young man sobbed. The Contractor ground his heal into the broken leg. "I said, what was her name?" His voice was a dark, resonant growl.

"Rebecca ... Rebecca Dinan," he said, then vomited from the pain.

Donovan's legs buckled under him and he fell to his knees.

"That's right, Mister Hunter, you let another one of your women die. As far as I'm concerned, the loss of the Bloodline bitch was worth the look on your face." With a snap of his fingers, a red flame appeared on his palm. He dipped the edge of the contract into the flame and laughed as he watched the heat of the burning paper carry it into the warm afternoon breeze.

He turned to Easy, waiting a few yards away, and popped off a round from his finger gun with a wink.
"Hey, thanks, pal. That was fun. Too bad you blew your cover. You looked good in the sunglasses, too. If only you'd kept your feathers on the right side of the fence. Hey," his face morphed into Marlon Brando's, "ya' coulda been a contender." He chuckled at his joke and walked across the street as the chaos of the accident scene came to life.

Easy crouched down beside Donovan.

"I'm sorry, Hunter."

Donovan didn't have enough energy left even to cry. Feeling the depth of his failure and the well-orchestrated betrayal by the ORA, he simply felt drained of all hope and life. With no one left to protect, no need to provide prey to the beasts, he knew what he would do. He looked over at Easy with the only thing he had left to say.

"So you were Dreamcatcher all along?"

Easy nodded.

"Who are you really? Just tell me that." He didn't know why he cared anymore. He just had to know.

"I'm the angel Ezekiel, Donovan," he said. "I infiltrated the Order of the Red Angels centuries ago. I was entrusted with the task of ending the enslavement of the Bloodline."

"All these years together," Donovan said, mostly to himself. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I couldn't risk it. You were our best hope, and I couldn't give them any reason to doubt my allegiance."

"Best hope." Donovan scoffed at the thought, his self-loathing etched in the lines of his face. "Is it any wonder they beat us, Easy? An angel and a dreamer?" He looked over at the big angel with a smirk. "EZ, is it? Ezekiel?"

Easy nodded, then looked down at a piece of debris that had blown against his ankle. He pulled it loose and his black eyes widened.

"Donovan!" The rumble of his voice shocked Donovan out of his stupor. Easy shoved the piece of charred paper in his hand. The contract, still largely intact.

"What good is this now?" he shrugged. "My daughter's dead."

"Look at it." Easy poked at the document with his finger. "It's the fine print. These are the details we've been trying to access."

Feeling the weight of his grief and hopelessness, Donovan read what remained of the contract with little interest. He remembered it vaguely from his dream in the limo years ago on the day the ORA captured him.

**Terms and Conditions**

1a. The life you have chosen to retain will heretofore be exchanged with a death of your choosing. If you are unable to make that choice for any reason, a death will be chosen for you.

...blah, blah, blah...

**Liability**

1c. The Contractor may not be held responsible for any life circumstances that may arise from your choice of life retention or death choice. Once this document is signed by the Customer and the Contractor, the agreement is final and no changes to this agreement will be considered. [For exceptions please refer to section 22r.]

The contract droned on in his mind as he read, but something in his clouded memory niggled at the edge of his awareness. Then Donovan gasped—*section 22r.*

"Oh my god, Easy." He jabbed at the paper. "Look!"
He ran his finger across the page and read aloud what he found buried in very fine print:

[Exceptions]

22r. A member of the Bloodline may offer to exchange his/her own life for the life of another. In the event this exchange occurs, all past, present and future contracts for the Order will be null and void, providing:

a. the member of the Bloodline is present at the death of the individual with whom the exchange will occur b. the exchange is made within twenty minutes of the exchange recipient's death c. the member of the Bloodline offering the exchange signs the contract d. a member of the Order signs the contract and is witness to the death and the Bloodline signature.

"That's it, Easy. That's it! They never thought in a million years a member of the Order would sign."

"But it's not a complete contract," said Easy.

"Who gives a fuck. We'll write in the rest. Here's where their precious rules are going to hang them." He patted his pockets. “Pen ... pen. We need a pen!"

Easy pulled one out of his breast pocket. Donovan grabbed it and started writing. In minutes the document was complete; his attorney's eye was still sharp. He scrawled his signature across the bottom.

"Here. Sign it. You're one of them, right?"

"Well, yes, technically." Easy paused and looked in Donovan's eyes. “Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've never been more sure in my life. I'd do anything to save Becka.” He was breathless with excitement, but a shade of sadness crept into his voice when he thought of his wife. “I only wish I could have saved my Ally, too."

"She'll be waiting for you, Donovan."

He looked at Easy and realized he knew what he was talking about.

"Sign it, Easy! We've got to hurry."

There was a sudden gust of heat and a loud crack in the air.

"A little trouble with the paperwork, I see," said the man in the sunglasses. The scene around them was once again frozen while the Contractor hovered over Donovan, ready to pluck the contract from his hands.

With a speed Donovan's eye could not follow, Easy seized the Contractor's wrist. A sizzling sound and the stench of the big angel's burning flesh rose from his grip. The Contractor writhed, his face twisting into the hideous beast beneath his cultured mask, knocking the sunglasses from his blazing eyes. He screamed with rage, and Donovan staggered as he watched its clothing tear at the seams, revealing the dark angel beast beneath.

With a sound of rending flesh, ridged horns jutted though its bony skull and the body undulated with maggots and vermin beneath the translucent skin. The beast slathered a long rotting tongue over fangs capped with tarnished gold and gnashed at the great black angel's face. Its oily flesh caused Easy's grip to falter. He bellowed in a deep, cavernous voice, rattling windows and setting off car alarms, adding to the cacophony of the battle. His determination unflagging, he tightened his grip and pulled the beast closer, clenching its throat with his free hand. He held firm for what seemed an eternity, his great wings unfurled like sails behind him. The red angel thrashed and clawed, and smoke rose from its body as it spit threats and curses in a tongue from another realm. The more the demon resisted, the more brilliant the light of the black angel became. He shined like a nova. Donovan shielded his eyes until the beast roared a final insult and collapsed to its knees before the great angel.

"I submit, Ezekiel," it said, its voice filled with a raging discord of demons, “but you know your kind cannot triumph. We are too strong.”
Ezekiel cocked his head and looked down at the beast, his eyebrow raised.

"Right."

The ground beneath them split with a deafening sound and the form of the angel beast collapsed in Ezekiel's hand, its energy escaping like a blaze of red fire sucked back to hell. Without a moment of hesitation, Easy rushed to Donovan and grabbed the pen in his smoldering hand.

"The contract, Donovan. Hurry ... the time."

He shoved the charred document into the angel's hand and watched him sign. The scene around them suddenly came to life—someone shouted from the passenger side of the demolished car.

"Help. Somebody give me a hand. The woman in the car—she's alive."

A number of people worked to pull the young woman from the wreckage. As they were freeing her, Donovan was on his feet running toward the crowd.

"Oh my god..." He only hoped he could see her face—so like her mother's in the photos—just one time before death took him.

A woman from the group of rescuers wiped Becka's face with a handkerchief.

"Are ya hurt, honey? There's blood in your hair, but I can't find no wound anywhere."

"I feel okay. Just a little shaken up." Her face looked suddenly stricken. "Where's Billy? He was in the car with me. Billy?" she shouted. She got to her feet, pushing past the woman and the crowd of rescuers and onlookers. "Billy?" She was nearly frantic when Donovan saw her face for the first time in over a decade. All he wanted to do was run to her and hold her in his arms, but she wouldn't know him—his own daughter wouldn't know him—so he did what he could do.

"He's over here," shouted Donovan, pointing to the young man lying unconscious on the ground. Rescuers were tending to his wounds and waiting for the emergency vehicles to arrive. Becka ran to his side. Donovan admired her tender touch as she stroked the young man's hair.

"Oh, Billy, I'm so sorry I got you into all this." Her tears were streaming. "I'm sorry."

Donovan's heart broke, seeing her pain and knowing he was responsible for whatever she was running from. He approached the circle of people around her.

"Becka?"

The girl's first reaction was fear as she looked for the person who had called her by name. She squinted up at Donovan standing there in his battered suit.

"Becka, I don't have much time, but I know someone who can help you." He pointed to Easy, his wings once again securely concealed beneath his torn clothing. "I'm sorry for everything you've suffered," said Donovan, "and I'm so sorry about Ally."

At the mention of her mother's name, Becka climbed to her feet and stepped protectively in front of the unconscious young man.

"What do you know about my mother?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm Donovan Hunter," he said, his tone gentle; almost inaudible.

The young woman stared, tilting her head to the side.

"Oh my god." She started toward him slowly and then, gaining speed, she reached for his outstretched hand, but he
was gone. Startled, Becka looked around and saw a big man moving toward her; a spark of light flashed in her eyes from his earring. He lifted his hand and a cold sensation flowed through Becka's body—suddenly rigid, her mind went blank.

* * * *

Kneeling beside her injured boyfriend, a violent shiver washed through Becka Hunter's body. She was relieved to hear the sound of approaching sirens and turned to watch for their arrival. As she lifted her hand from the young man's shoulder, she found a business card stuck to the drying blood on her palm. Perplexed, she turned it over in her hand and read the name and the message scribbled beneath it:

**Ezekiel Dreamcatcher**

I'm a friend of the family. I'll be in touch. ~EZ

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Black Sheep

My last breath begins
when I glimpse you, cold.
Daggered of hope
my heart weeps blood tears,
spilling my life
in wet dying rhythm.

"Better to have loved..."
a lie of lovers.
Loss, the blade
that rakes hearts raw
and severs tender arteries
to run dry.

I walk to my grave,
pallid feet in dewed grass.
My sad head I lay
against the cold pillow of the earth,
waiting for black sleep
to release me.

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"Frank, you were just beginning to remember some important things when our last session ended. Have you been thinking about them, as I suggested?"

"Yeah, Doc." He squinted his lashless eyes at her. "You know, you look like someone..."

"Yes, Frank, you've mentioned that before, but let's focus. Why don't we begin where you left off last week," said Rebecca. She avoided the dark eyes peering from Frank Doe's disfigured face.

"Okay, Doc. Whatever you say."

Frank smiled and paused; his gaze softened with nostalgia.

"What I remember is keeping my buck knife sharp as a straight-edged razor. Just like my daddy taught me. Besides, it made taking mementos quick and clean. Like the last one in Baltimore—a firm chop across the bone, ‘Thwack!’ Popped it in a baggy, and I was on my way. Is this okay, Doc?"

"Yes, Frank," she said, a strained calm in her voice. "Please go on."

"Well, don't get me wrong, it sounds bad, but that doesn't mean I didn't care. As a matter of fact, I thought she was the one. Her sleek black hair, the almond eyes—she treated me like a prince ... well, that one time, anyway. But Mama didn't approve, and Mama's opinion was gold. She always knew what was best for me, so when she said that girl was a dirty foreigner, I knew what I had to do."

He looked up at Rebecca. "But don't worry, I didn't take the goodbyes to heart. I knew that Mama just wanted me to find the right girl, that's all. I missed each of my girls for a little while, but the mementos kept me company, especially late at night. Mama wasn't much comfort anymore, not in that way. I was too grown, she said. But I made do. She was suspicious, but she didn't say anything about my black bag of mementos, and I didn't say anything about the little boys that visited her room."

January 10—Personal Journal

I tracked down Doctor Silvani in the hall this morning. He filled in some important information...

Rebecca quickened her stride to catch up with the director as he marched down the long grey corridor of the maximum security psych ward of Penn's Asylum. It was clear that his advanced years didn't slow him down.

"Doctor Silvani," she said, keeping pace with the tall, distinguished man. "I just wanted to thank you."

"What's that, Doctor?"

"I said, I want to thank you. I know you've taken a chance by hiring me, and I'm truly grateful."

"You're young, but it's seldom—well, actually never—that a doctor graduating near the top of her class at UPenn would seek us out. But frankly, if you weren't qualified you wouldn't be here."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said.

"And I've heard about the progress you've made with Frank Doe. I've been here since the day he was admitted, and he hadn't spoken a word until you arrived. That seems testament enough that I made the right decision."

The young doctor blushed at the compliment. "Well, my mother inspired my work. Her painful struggle with severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is why I became a doctor. I researched a lot of facilities before I applied, sir, and I was certain that this was the place I'd been looking for."
"Uh-huh, I see." The director marched on, shooting out his left arm for a quick watch check. Rebecca kept pace.

"Is there something else, Doctor?" asked the director, glancing over at her, his reading glasses resting on his shiny forehead.

"Actually, yes," she said. "Since you were here when Frank Doe was admitted, maybe you could tell me a little about his history. Nobody seems to know anything about him, and his admission records consist of a single medical discharge file. No intake interview. No history. Just his treatment schedule and evaluations since his arrival."

Lowering his voice, the director leaned in toward Rebecca. "Well, let's just say we had some problems back then, and I'm not surprised there's paperwork missing. It's a wonder the patients didn't go missing," he said. "Patients like Frank Doe were low priority. He was medicated and housed. That's all we could really supply at the time. Our budget was worse back then than it is now."

"Is there anything you remember that might help me?" asked Rebecca. "We have a session today, and I think we're close to a breakthrough." Long-legged, Rebecca matched strides with the director as he contemplated her question; their heels echoed a cadence down the length of the grey corridor.

"Well, it's been more than twenty years," said the director, "and as far as I know, he has no known history. He was a John Doe. If I remember correctly, they found him near a burned out van on the side of a road somewhere north of the city. Blue Bell, I think. His license was fraudulent and the scarring from his burns made him impossible to ID. Apparently, dentals turned up nothing.

"Ultimately, he came to us because of violent outbursts, but he arrived mostly non-responsive," said the director. "We suspected that he couldn't speak because of his injuries, but the transferring physician assured us that it wasn't physical."

"He's made excellent progress in communication," said Rebecca. "And he's even participating in general activities."

"Yes, apparently the meds are working. Seems you're a wizard in the area of psychopharmacology, as well as therapeutic technique. As a matter of fact, Mister Doe is scheduled to be moved to another facility. Your work has proven that he no longer requires high level security, and I can't justify the cost of continuing to house him here."

"What?" said Rebecca, a frantic pitch in her voice. "His progress has been good, but there's so much more to do." She tightened her jaw, struggling to remain calm.

"I know, his progress is a double-edged sword, but you'll have a few weeks with him before the paperwork goes through. And trust me, we'll keep you busy when he's gone. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Just one more question," she said.

The director exhaled with an impatient sigh. "Yes?"

"Why do they call him 'Frank'?"

The director paused, as if deciding whether to reply. "Well, all I can say is, because of his injuries, he looked like quite a ... monster when he arrived, and amongst the staff, it was a bad joke that stuck."

With a nod, the director turned off into an open conference room, greeted his waiting colleagues, and closed the door behind him.

January 10—1:02PM: Frank Doe Session, continued.

"And how did your father feel about your 'activities,' Frank?" asked the doctor.

"I don't know," he said. After a pause, "He died when I was a kid."
"What happened to him?"

Frank looked down at his hands. Rebecca waited a few moments for his response.

"What happened to your father, Frank?" she asked again.

Frank's lips clamped shut and his eyes went dull.

"Frank?" Rebecca reached forward and touched his scarred hand. His shoulder twitched, but his stare remained unfocused.

Crossing the room, she opened a tall cabinet and removed the plastic covering from a clay sphere resting on a square of plywood. Chewing on her lip, she slipped a small glass vial from the pocket of her white jacket and emptied the clear liquid into a spray bottle filled with water. Giving the clay a thorough spritz, she squared her shoulders in preparation for the next phase of her plan for Frank.

She sat the clay in front of him, lifting his right hand onto the slick surface.

"How's that feel, Frank? You did some beautiful work with the clay last week. Would you like to continue?"

She lifted his other hand to the clay, and his fingers began to squeeze in small, slow movements. As Frank continued to knead with his fingertips, the dullness in his eyes cleared. He focused his attention on the clay form in front of him.

Patiently, the doctor waited and observed. This was Frank's normal pattern at the mention of his father. As if nothing unusual had happened, he started to speak again.

"When I was thirty, we got the news about the inheritance. My daddy left us well cared for when he died years before, but this news was unexpected. Seemed a relative passed away, and I was next in line to inherit a Pennsylvania estate that had been in my daddy's family for generations. I didn't even know my daddy had any family, and a rich one at that.

"The papers from the lawyers said that most of the wealth from the estate had been siphoned off for taxes, but a large family mansion and some land still remained in a rural suburb just outside of Philadelphia-Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

"We got the news just after I said goodbye to my almond-eyed Keiko in an abandoned warehouse near the Baltimore harbor. It was definitely time to move on. When Mama said we should head north to Philadelphia, I ditched our old Chevy Nova. It was on its last leg anyway. So I doused it with gasoline and made sure it burned real good to erase any evidence of my fling with Keiko. Best to make a clean break and not leave painful memories behind that other people might misunderstand.

"We cashed the inheritance check and hopped the Greyhound bus north to Philadelphia."

Frank paused to fashion a crude nose in the center of the forming face. He smoothed the clay with care, tilting his head to inspect the placement. Rebecca added a spritz from the water bottle and left it where Frank could reach it himself. Without looking at her, he continued.

"From years of practice we traveled light, but it had gotten harder for Mama to move to new places. Her dizzy spells were getting worse, but we had to go. If we stayed in one place too long, the past had a way of creeping up on us. I didn't mind moving—I loved the adventure of it.

"I had never been to Philadelphia, and I couldn't wait to see the sights and look for my new girl. I knew Mama wasn't keen on Yankees, but maybe since my daddy's folks were from those parts I thought she might make an exception. Sure enough, we rolled into the summer heat of the City of Brotherly Love, and like fate, it wasn't long before I found my girl.

"Not far from the bus terminal, I left Mama in the taxi's A/C, parked outside of the convenience store on Arch Street.
She needed some aspirin for a headache, and heat or no heat I was hankering for a cup of strong black coffee. My new girl was right there at the counter. She was busy with the rush hour crowd, shaking her little fanny as she bustled around behind the cash register. Tall and fair skinned, she had her thick black hair twisted up in a messy knot. I resisted the urge to reach across the counter and pull it loose. I just wanted to watch it fall down around her shoulders, but I had learned that it wasn't good to be too forward, at least not right away. So I waited my turn to pay for my coffee and Mama's bottle of aspirin.

"When I got up to the counter, I smiled and said, ‘Good mornin’,’ but the girl just turned away without a word. Now, I'd heard that Yankees could be rude, but I would have at least expected a simple ‘Good morning’ in return.

"I continued to smile as the girl took my money. Vicki Lystner, it said on her name tag. As she turned to the register for my change, I admired the curve of her breasts in the clingy white T-shirt. Without even a glance at me, she put the change in my palm. I saw my opening—you know, carpe diem and all that—so I grabbed her hand and flashed her my biggest smile. I squeezed hard so she couldn't pull away, until finally she looked up at me with her beautiful blue eyes all wide—no doubt surprised by my friendliness.

"Hunching up her shoulders, she tried to get loose but I held on tight. With my best southern manners, I said, ‘Good mornin’, Miss.’ Then I nodded, giving her the hint that it was her turn to reply. She was so touched that tears welled in her eyes, and she replied in the softest little voice ‘Good morning.’ With one last squeeze, feeling her delicate bones crushing together in my grip, I said, ‘Thank you, Miss.’

"When I released her, she slipped and fell backward into the bagel bin. Bagels flew everywhere. Looking dazed, she gripped the counter to steady herself and just stared after me as I waved goodbye."

Unconscious of her actions, Rebecca glared at Frank as he rested his clay-covered hands on the edge of the table. She was speechless, her knuckles white from a death grip on her pen. Her notepad remained empty. Frank smirked at her and continued on with his story.

"I admit," he said, "I wasn't the best looking guy, but Mama helped me accept that reality early in life. ‘Henry, you're one homely boy,’ she'd say, ‘but you know your mama will always love you.’ And she did. When I met Vicki, I was a hundred and sixty pounds, five ten and balding, but I still knew I had a powerful affect on her, as I did with all women. My teeth weren't so good—kinda nasty from a lack of doctorin’—but still women were stunned by my smile. Southern charm, I guess.

"What a nice name—Vicki. Don't you think, Doc?"

There was so much she wanted to say, but Rebecca forced herself to be silent. She simply nodded. Frank turned back to his work, poking his thumbs deep into the clay eye sockets.

"But we had to go with the name ‘Victoria,’” he continued. “I realized the sooner Vicki accepted that name, the sooner she'd be a good bride in Mama's eyes. Mama didn't approve of nicknames.”

A sheen of sweat surfaced on Rebecca's face, dampening the black tendrils of hair around her forehead. She rose to switch on the fan, a necessity in the unpredictable heat of the ancient building.

"Please go on, Frank," she said as she sat back down with forced calm. “Your account is ... fascinating.

"Well, Mama was miffed when I got back to the taxi. ‘What in god's name were you doing in there, boy?’ she said. ‘You know my head's splittin' out here, but do you care that I'm sufferin'? Of course not! You don't think of nobody but yourself.'

"I saw the driver scowling at me in his mirror, but he glanced away when I noticed.

"'Here's your aspirin, Mama,’ I said, handing her the bottle.

"'Where's the water, Henry? You expect me to take them damn pills dry? They'll scratch my throat raw.’"

Frank's imitation of his mother's voice was eerie, and Rebecca felt a shiver slip along her back.
"'Sorry, Mama,'" he went on. "'I'll go back and get your water.'

"'No, I can't wait no more,' she said. 'God only knows how long you'd dawdle around in there. Give me some of your coffee.'

"'But you don't like coffee, Mama. Let me go get you some water.'

"'No, goddamn it! Give me the coffee and open this godforsaken bottle. Can't no normal people open these damn things.' I handed her my coffee and opened the bottle. 'Give me three!' she said. She took the pills and slurped the coffee. Screwing up her face, she said, 'I don't know how in hell you drink this slop.' She shoved the coffee cup back at me, but I couldn't bring myself to drink after her and her ugly lipstick smear, so I stuck it in the cup holder and tried to ignore the red stain.

"The cabbie was getting impatient. 'Have you folks decided where you're going yet?'

"'We need to get out to Blue Bell,' I said.

"'Well, that'd cost you a pretty penny for me to drive you out there, and the thing is, buddy, it's getting near the end of my shift. You'd be better off renting a car, if you asked me.'

"Mama grumbled, 'So who asked you?'

"The driver looked at me in his mirror and raised an eyebrow.

"'How about you take us to the nearest car rental place? Thanks for the tip,' I said.

"The cabbie edged into the rush hour traffic without another word. I glanced down, and there it was again: the red stain of old lady lipstick on the lid of my coffee. The sight of it turned my stomach, and my mind flashed to the first time I ever saw that stain up close.

Rebecca remained quiet. Listening to Frank's story, she reminded herself to breathe. Even with all her training, the account was excruciating to witness, but she didn't dare interrupt as Frank's memories continued their rush to the surface. Her years of work were finally paying off, but all her preparations didn't lessen the impact. Forcing herself to relax, she listened as Frank continued.

"I saw it on my first day of fourth grade. It had been a good day," Frank recalled. "We were still living with my daddy back then, in a nice little house in a nice little neighborhood. There were always lots of kids around, and I raced home from school so I could go back out to play before dinner.

"In September it was still hot in Texas, and when I ran into the house, I saw Mama in front of the oscillating fan. She was slumped on the sofa with her dress hiked up above her bare knees, and her long red hair lifted as the air blew around her. Her eyes were shut, and I thought she was sleeping. She didn't like being disturbed during her naps, so I tiptoed by. Just as I thought I was clear, she reached out and grabbed me by the arm.

"'Where do you think you're goin?,' she hissed.

"As she turned toward me, I could see her eyes were red and puffy and her cheeks were wet. I smelled the stink of liquor on her breath as she hauled me closer. I stayed quiet—I had learned the hard way that it was better not to speak when Mama had been drinking. But I could tell something bad had happened. She looked more miserable than drunk. Digging her nails into my arm, she said, 'I asked you a question, boy. I know you're dumber than a board, but are you deaf, too?'

"I bowed my head. 'No, Mama.'

"'Well, I'm sick of you. You hear me? I'm sick of the whole damn lot of you!'

"I stayed quiet and kept my head down.
"'Look at me when I talk to you!'"

"She hauled herself upright on the sofa, grabbed both my arms and pulled me between her knees, forcing me to face her. The smell of the alcohol burned my nose, and I must have made a face. That's when she slapped me—hard. My head swam, and I could feel a trickle of blood seeping from my throbbing lip. I didn't dare touch it, and I knew I didn't dare pass out. I gritted my teeth and tried to look at her without looking into her eyes.

"'Pathetic! All men are pathetic. Especially that filthy excuse for a father of yours. Taking the word of a stinkin' neighbor boy over his own wife.'"

"I tried hard to wait out the storm, but the blow to my face had rattled my head so hard that I began to swoon.

"Mama shook me. ‘Stand up, you lazy sack of shit!’ I slipped from her grip and crumpled to the floor.

"As I came to, I could feel cold pressure on my mouth, and I opened my eyes to the pain in my head and the cut on my busted lip. My mama was kneeling beside me with a bag of ice on my mouth, stroking the sweaty hair back from my forehead.

"'I'm so sorry, baby. Mama didn't mean to hurt you so bad,' she said. ‘It's just that your daddy doesn't understand my needs. He said he'd leave us, if I didn't stop. You love me, don't you, Henry?'

"She removed the ice pack and pressed her red lips against my mouth. She held me there, hot breath spilling out of her nose until finally she moved away with a dreamy look in her eyes. She was waiting for my answer.

"'Yes, Mama,' I said feeling strange. ‘I love you.’

"Still inches from my face, she stared into my eyes. ‘I can't have your little friends come and visit with me no more, Henry.’ I didn't know they had visited her. ‘But they liked our visits—and the special lovin’ I gave them.’

"Mama kissed me again and she started to rub my belly. I felt afraid, but not like usual when I knew I was going to get whipped. She moved her lips close to my ear; I could smell her stale perfume and sweat.

"'You don't want your daddy to go away, do you, Henry?' she whispered.

"I started to feel panicky. ‘No, Mama,’ I whispered back.

"'Good boy,’ she said, her lips brushing my ear, her breathing husky. ‘Then I can save all my special lovin’ just for you.’ She kissed me hard on the mouth and slid her warm fingers from my belly down inside my trousers. I felt nauseated and confused—my lip ached, and Mama's rubbing felt good and bad all at the same time.

"Then she stopped. She pulled away quickly and looked me hard in the eye. ‘But you can't never tell your daddy about this. He'll leave us if you do. You hear me?’

"With tears in my eyes, I nodded, ‘Yes, Mama.’

"She put the ice back on my lip and set off for the kitchen as if nothing had happened. ‘Your daddy will be back soon, so I need to start supper. Go on and clean yourself up. You look like shit.’

"I stayed there on the sofa for a minute. I didn't know what had just happened—all I knew was that my head hurt, my lip ached, and my penis was hard.

"'What did I just tell you, boy? Get up before your daddy comes home and finds you like that. Didn't you hear a thing I told you?’ She shook her head in disgust. ‘Pathetic.’

"I got up, staggering as I walked, but I made it to the bathroom before I vomited. I wiped my mouth on one of Mama's white towels, and that's when I saw the dark red lipstick mixed with my blood. My stomach heaved again. When the retching finally stopped, I looked in the mirror and saw the sticky red stain still smudged across my mouth. What if my daddy saw it? I scrubbed my face and rubbed so hard with the towel that my skin was nearly
There was still some red around my swollen mouth but if Daddy asked, I could say I had fallen and busted my lip.

"I knew Mama would kill me if she saw that I had ruined one of her towels, so I bunched it up under my shirt, ran to my room and hid it in the back of my closet behind the toy chest. I was nine, and somehow I knew I wouldn't be playing with those toys much anymore."

Frank's hands were idle against the clay. He stared at the empty eyes of his sculpture, his face wet with tears.

"Henry? Did you say your name is Henry?" Rebecca had restrained herself from interrupting earlier, and now she forced her back straight against the chair, struggling to maintain her professional composure.

The man looked up in shock. "Oh, God! You won't tell anyone, will you?" he said.

Stalling, Rebecca glanced at the ceiling and tapped her pen on her notebook.

"Hmm ... how about I make a deal with you, Henry? You tell me more about your father, and I won't tell anyone about your name."

Still looking shaken, he wiped his wet eyes with the back of his hand, and considered the deal. "Promise you won't tell?"

"Yes, Henry. Your secret is safe with me," she said, with a benign smile. "Please, go on with your story, but remember our deal."

Henry nodded like a petulant child caught in a lie, then he snatched the bottle from the table and sprayed the hollow sockets of the clay eyes. Rebecca noticed that his face relaxed like magic as his hands caressed the moistened clay.

He went on with his story.

"Back in Philadelphia, our cabbie pulled away from the convenience store right into a heap of traffic. After twenty minutes of horn blaring and a few choice gestures by our driver, we pulled into the Broad Street Rent-O-Wreck. Leaving Mama in the taxi, I climbed out while she ranted on about the shabby establishment we'd been brought to. I closed the car door behind me, but I could see Mama's mouth still going. The cabbie frowned at me with his heavy eyebrows as I headed for the rental office.

"'It's late in the day, son, but I think I can find something for you,' said the old man at the rental counter. His shirt was wrinkled and his clip-on tie was twisted. I was a sight myself after all the traveling. I wore my favorite black Zeppelin T-shirt with the silver blimp on the back, my best Wranglers, and my big Texas Son belt buckle. By that time, I was sweaty, tired, and ready for a beer, but of course I never drank in front of Mama—she didn't approve.

"After signing some paperwork and haggling about not having a credit card, the old man settled on a fifty for his troubles. I smiled and thanked him. He pocketed the cash, fished around in a drawer behind the counter, and brought out a set of keys on a battered Rent-O-Wreck key chain.

"'Come on. This way, son. I'll show you to your chariot.' I followed the old man out into the afternoon heat and around the side of the building where a beat up cargo van was parked.

"'There you go.' He handed me the keys. 'Not much to look at, but she runs good, and the A/C works.'

"Sure enough, the old white Ford started right up, and she ran like a top. I drove around the building and saw that the cabbie was leaning against the outside of the car. His arms were crossed and he had a sour look on his face. I watched Mama's expression through the taxi window when she saw the van. You didn't have to be a lip reader to figure out what she was saying.

"I transferred the bags and Mama to the van. I strapped her in the front seat, all the while trying to calm her down. ‘It runs fine, Mama.’ ‘Don't worry, the wheels are not going to fall off.’ ‘Mama, it is not a death trap.’ I paid the taxi driver, who snatched the cash from my hand, slammed the door of his taxi, and sped away faster than a bat outta hell.
"While Mama fussed, I looked at the map. Once I sorted out how to get to Blue Bell, we set off and I made my way through the downtown traffic. When we hit the highway, Mama finally quieted down and fell asleep. I began to wonder what the Rutt Estate would look like. When the letter came about the inheritance, Mama seemed shocked. I asked her about Daddy's family, but she ignored me. I pressed her on it, and she grumbled something about the Rutts' disapproval of my daddy's choices, but she refused to say anything more.

"The thought of having a permanent home was tempting. We hadn't lived in one place for very long since I was thirteen—after Daddy's death. I loved Mama, but I sure missed Daddy. He was a police detective, and he loved telling me stories about cases he worked on, especially how he figured out crimes with the smallest clues. He was proud of what he did, and I was proud of him, too.

"Daddy loved his work. He even did some private investigator's work on the side. Sometimes he'd take me with him on stakeouts. Nothing dangerous, just stuff like watching a door to see who went in and out. It was mostly boring, but I loved being there with my daddy."

Henry gazed down at the clay, then out the office window. Sullen, he lowered his eyes and looked at his slick mud-covered hands.

"You're doing fine, Henry," said Rebecca. Trying to hide her impatience for him to continue, she kept her voice steady and low. "Take your time. Just go on when you're ready."

With a deep a sigh, Henry continued.

"On the night of my thirteenth birthday, Daddy invited me on one of his stakeouts. Most of the excitement had worn off for me by then, but I still wanted to go. I didn't really have friends anymore, so rather than staying home with Mama, I thought it would be good to get out of the house. Mama could get very ... demanding when Daddy wasn't home.

"I helped Daddy get his gear together, and as I was heading out the door, I heard him and Mama arguing. They hadn't been getting along for some time, but things seemed to be getting worse. I hid on the porch to listen.

"'Where's that boy goin'?' I heard Mama say.

"'He's going with me tonight, Sue Ann,' said Daddy.

"'Well, the hell he is. I need him here with me! What am I supposed to do here alone? You ain't never around.'

"'Now don't start that business again. You know I gotta work if you want a roof over your head.' And with a hush in his voice, he said, 'And besides, Henry's been spending far too much time with you.'

"Mama went silent for a minute. That almost never happened, but she rallied, full of venom. 'I don't care what the hell you think. I want that boy home with me!'

"'Not tonight, Sue Ann,' he said, looking back and shaking his head. 'No more.'

"I ran down the walkway behind Daddy as Mama screamed through the screen door, 'Henry, you get your ass back in this house, right now! HEN-RY!'

"I could still hear her hollering all the way down Oak Street as we drove away. I felt liberated by my daddy's defiance, but at the same time, I was worried what Mama was going to do to me later when Daddy wasn't around. And what he meant by, 'No more.' Thinking about it gave me a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Daddy and I were both quiet that night. We sat in the car and he let me take a few stakeout pictures with his camera, and he told me about a new recording device the department was using for phone taps. But it felt awkward after the argument with Mama, so we both kept quiet, trying to avoid the whole mess. We were packing up and getting ready to go home when Daddy stopped and looked at me. I thought he was going to say something, but he just stared."
"I was getting nervous, so I fumbled with some film cases and asked, ‘So is that it, Daddy? Ready to go?’

"He took a deep breath and said, ‘Son, I'm sorry I haven't been around much. And I'm so sorry I haven't been there ... when you needed me.’ He looked stricken.

"I didn't know what to say, and the sick feeling in my stomach knotted into a sharp pain. I tried not to let Daddy see that I was scared.

"'Everything's okay, Daddy,’ I said. ‘Ready to go?’ I wanted out of the car. I knew what he meant, and he knew that I knew it. Mama had warned me time and again that if Daddy found out about us, he would leave us and we'd be homeless in the streets. How did he know? Mama would never believe that I didn't tell him. I started to shake.

"'It's all right, son. It's over.’ He reached out and touched my shoulder. I don't remember him ever touching me like that before. I shuddered and pulled away, feeling a sudden rush of anger.

"'Don't touch me! I don't know what you're talking about. Just shut up! Shut up!’ All the tension and the years of lying caused something inside me to snap. I had never spoken to my daddy that way. I could see the anger boiling up into his face, but he clamped his jaw tight struggling to stay in control.

"'Now, Henry. I know what's been going on between you and your mama. It's not right, boy, and it's got to stop.’

"'I don't know what you're talking about!’ My heart was pounding in my chest, and the ringing in my ears sounded like alarms going off.

"'Your mama promised me she stopped that perverted shit a long time ago. Hell, Henry, we had to move because of it. The neighbors were talking, and my job was at stake,’ he said, almost pleading. ‘When the boys stopped coming around, I wanted to believe it was over.’

"I was petrified, feeling caged in, and Daddy just kept going on and on, like he couldn't stop himself.

"'I saw it, Henry, with my own eyes. I came home early and the two of you were so busy fucking you didn't hear me come in. I saw my own wife on top of you, boy!’ His face was red and tears were welling in his eyes. ‘My own wife, Henry!’ He slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

"I pulled the handle and flung the car door open, and I just started running. I ran even harder when I heard Daddy calling after me.

"'Henry! Where the hell are you going? Henry!’ he shouted. ‘I'm sorry, son. Come back!’

"I just kept running, crossing the tidy yards and the side streets. I jumped fences and ran until I thought my chest would explode. My world was coming apart, and my mind felt like it had shattered. Exhausted and stumbling, I blacked out. Sometime in the night, I dreamed dark dreams of my mother whispering my name, telling me I was more of a man than my father could ever be. Then I woke up at the park in the Little League dugout to the sound of lawn mowers and the smell of cut grass.

"My head ached, and I realized that my nose had been bleeding—my shirt was splattered with dried blood. I figured it happened when I blacked out and fell. I splashed water on my face from the drinking fountain and wiped my hands on the grass. I didn't know what else to do, so I headed home. It was a long walk and I figured Daddy would be gone when I got there, just like Mama always warned. When I came around the corner to Oak Street, I was shocked to see police cruisers with flashing lights in front of my house. Before I got to the front door, a police officer stopped me and asked for my name.

"'I'm Henry, sir. This is my house.’

"'Henry? Oh ... your father spoke of you often. We worked down at the station together.’ He put his hand on my shoulder and turned me away from the door.

"'Worked? ‘Where's my father?’ I said. A deep dread tightened in my chest.
"'You need to calm down, son,' he said. ‘There's been an accident.’ I tried to run for the door, but the cop grabbed me by the shirt. ‘You can't go in there right now.’

"'Where's my father?' I screamed, trying to wrench myself free.

"The cop jerked me hard toward him and looked me square in the eye. ‘Your father's been shot, Henry!’ he just blurted it out. Then he tried to compose himself., ‘And I'm sorry, son, but he didn't make it.'

"My mind was swimming, ‘Shot ... didn't make it?’

"'What happened?' My eyes started watering.

"'Seems he was getting ready to clean his service revolver and it discharged,’ said the cop.

"That could never happen! Not as careful as my daddy was with his guns.

"The cop looked away for a moment, and I broke for the door. I didn't believe it. Daddy couldn't have shot himself. I busted in through the screen door and saw the detectives with their white gloves moving around my daddy's easy chair. He was slumped there like usual, as if he were sleeping, but his face was gone—only bloody meat and bone remained. His shirt was stained dark red down the front; the back of his easy chair was wet with blood and ruined bits of skin and hair.

"'Henry! Henry!' Mama was hysterical, screaming my name. Something inside me froze, and it hardened and died in that moment. I knew Mama was responsible for my daddy's death. And I thought about all those years she warned me and badgered me and swore me to secrecy about our ‘special lovin’ so Daddy wouldn't leave, and now he was dead—and it was her fault. The grief and shock and fear all turned to rage. I despised her. I thought I could have killed her barehanded, right then and there.

"'Henry, my baby,' she sobbed. She was sitting in a chair just beyond the kitchen door, her red hair falling around her shoulders. Calling to me, her arms open, she pleaded, ‘Henry, please come here, baby.’

"'Like a robot, I walked to my mother. I let her wrap her slender arms around me and run her fingers through my hair. Laying her head on my young shoulder, she said, ‘Henry, I need you, baby. You're the man of the house now.’

"She wept ugly lying tears, and still, I let her touch me."

January 17—Personal Journal

I'm not sleeping; no appetite to speak of. And lunch with Rob was difficult today. But no matter what, I've got to stay focused on Henry...

Fashionably rumpled, the young doctor set his lunch tray down on a table in the cafeteria and stepped around to hold the chair for Rebecca.

"Thanks for accepting my invitation. I know it's not Bookbinders, but I've been trying to catch up with you since you started work."

"I'm sorry I haven't called, Rob. I've been preoccupied with my case work."

"So I hear. Making quite a name for yourself already. But you know the saying, all work and no play." He raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"I know, and the fact is, I owe you big for this job."

"No way,” he said. “You got the job on your own merit. I just helped to put a little bug in Director Daddy's ear. No need to thank me ... but then again,” he said with a wink.

"You're incorrigible, Robert. You never give up."
"Well, you're one to talk. I've never seen anyone pursue a position with such determination. Why the hell you wanted to work here is beyond me."

"It's for my mother, Rob."

"Yeah, I know the story. But my grades sucked, and my father's the boss. That's why I'm here. But you? With your residency recommendations, you could have worked almost anywhere."

Rebecca shrugged. "Here I can make a difference."

He leaned forward with serious eyes. "If you really want to make a difference, Becky ... then stop breaking my heart and have dinner with me." A silly grin spread across his face; he looked hopeful.

"Soon, Rob, but not right now. I have to get back to work. I've got a patient at one." She stood up with her tray.

"You just got here! And you haven't eaten a thing."

"I know, but duty calls. I promise we'll do dinner soon." Rebecca turned away, disposed of her untouched food, and headed back to work.

January 17—1:00PM: Frank Doe Session

"Henry, I have a surprise for you today," said Rebecca.

"Maybe you should call me Frank."

"I promised I'd keep your secret. In fact, all of our work together is completely confidential," she said. "It's just between you and me. So, for the purposes of our work, I think it's best to call you Henry. Don't you agree?"

"No." He scratched at the lone wisp of hair on his scar-riddled scalp.

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun. Besides, I brought Henry a present. I can't give it to Frank." She tilted her head and gave him a smile.

"What present?" he asked.

"First, are you in? Is it Henry, or Frank?"

He rolled his lashless eyes. "Okay, it's Henry."

Rebecca opened the top drawer of her desk and pulled out a leather pouch, handing it to Henry.

"Here, they're yours."

"What is it?"

"Go on, open it," she said.

Henry unfastened the flap, and the pouch rolled open. It was slotted with the tools of a professional clay artist: the wire trimmer, the needle tool, the clay knife, and shaping tools.

"You've been doing such beautiful work, I thought it was time you had some proper tools."

Henry fondled the knife.

"But, of course, you can only use them during our sessions. I'm bending the rules for you, Henry. I trust you won't let me down."

"Thank you." Henry smiled with childlike gratitude.
"Well, let's get to it, shall we? Might as well give your tools a test drive today."

She retrieved Henry's sculpture from the cabinet, along with the spray bottle. With new enthusiasm, Henry began work immediately. Orbs for the eyes were his first order of business.

"Henry, last week you were telling me about your trip to Blue Bell. You checked the map, and were on your way to the estate."

He thought for a moment. “Yeah, once we hit the Skippack Pike there were just a few turns before I found the road that lead to the estate. Two large stone pillars marked the entrance—RUTT was carved in fancy letters. When I got out to open the rusty entry gate, I realized just how much I still missed my daddy. I knew I'd rather have him than the estate. With the thought of his death, my old anger at Mama flared up inside me. I hated her, and I hated myself because I let her get away with murder. But most of all, I hated myself for letting her touch me again, letting her take me to bed, their bed, the very night of my father's death. After the police left that night, I cried in her arms, despising her and loving her all at once. And standing there at the gate of the Rutt estate, I knew both those feelings were still true.

"Back in the van, I drove along the washed out drive leading up to the estate. The lawyers warned me, but it was worse than I imagined. The old mansion sitting at the top of the hill was in sad shape. The setting sun illuminated broken windows with shutters hanging crooked off their hinges. Faded paint peeled like bark and overgrown hedges and weeds choked what must have once been a gardeners dream.

"As the van bumped slowly up the long driveway, Mama stirred from her sleep. I braced myself for her opinion of the rundown estate. One particularly bad pothole in the road jostled her around in the seat; she woke up at once with a frown already plastered on her face.

"'Where in god's name are you takin' me, Henry?' she said. Then she looked up—her frown turned to disgust. 'What in the hell is that supposed to be? Those Rutt bastards did this to me on purpose! It's a sick joke, I tell ya'. They hated me from day one.'

"She stopped ranting about the Rutts when she caught herself saying more than she meant to. To cover her tracks she shifted her aim to me.

"'What in the hell do you think you're doing, bringing me to this dump? You just turn this piece of shit truck back around and take me some place nice. This just proves what I've said all along, Henry. You don't care about nobody but yourself or you would never bring your own mama to a shit hole like this!'

"I pulled up in front of the big wraparound porch. I could see that the boards were warped from the weather, but I wanted to take a look; I needed to take a look. This had been my daddy's boyhood home.

"Smacking at my arm, Mama continued her rant. 'I told you to turn this heap around, boy!'

"'Yes, Mama, in a minute.'

"'Right now I said, you little shit!'

"I turned off the engine, and for the first time in my life, I simply ignored one of Mama's orders. Something about Daddy's house made it possible. I opened my door, leaving Mama behind fuming like a coiled rattlesnake.

"I climbed the steps and crossed the wide porch, rummaging for the key in my pocket. It was a skeleton key, tarnished black with age, but it fit right in the hole and turned with a loud click. The door moaned as if the hinges ached from the movement, and the pent up heat rolled out of the house with the musty smell of decay. From behind me, the low sun poured into the entry hall, lighting a huge room with covered furniture and a massive curved staircase. The stairs dominated the entrance and climbed to the second floor in a broad curve, its dingy spindles like the grin of an old crone.

"The lawyers had tried to have the utilities turned on, but only the water could be restored. They told me the old place needed to be rewired for proper electric service, but there'd be lanterns to use. Mama was going to love that
"HEN-RY! Where in the hell are you?"

"I turned back to look just as Mama stepped out of the van, collapsing to the ground in a heap. I ran, leaping over the steps, to find Mama unconscious. As I lifted her in my arms I could see that her head was bleeding. My god, what had I done? I should never have disobeyed her. I should never have left her alone in the van. She groaned and her head lolled around as she began to come to. I carried her inside to the big room and laid her on the sheet-covered sofa.

"Mama, I'm sorry.' I stroked her hair and dabbed my handkerchief at the cut on her forehead. Her eyes fluttered, and she started to come around. 'Mama, are you okay?'

"What did you do to me?" she whimpered. "You hit me, didn't you? Your own Mama.'

"No, no,' I said, trying to calm her. 'I would never ..' Seeing her fragile state, I couldn't stop my eyes from watering.

"Oh, Henry, what's happened to you? You used to be such a good boy.' She began to cry. I dried her tears in the dim light, and bent to hold her, to comfort her. 'You don't love me anymore, do you?' she said in my ear, as I leaned over her.

"Of course, I love you.'

"I repulse you,' she said.

"No, Mama.'

"She wrapped her thin arms around my shoulders and nuzzled into my neck. 'Henry, I miss my little boy. You know that no other woman will ever love you like your mama.' She kissed my neck. I felt her reach back and pull up my shirt; she skirted her long red nails across the bare skin of my back.

"Mama...' I tried feebly to pull away, but it was never really my choice.

"Tell me you love me, Henry. Tell me you love your mama,' she whispered, her breath hot against my ear.

"It had been so long since she held me that way. I groaned as my body responded to her touch. The old longing and loathing were mixed with my body's need. She slid her hand between my legs, probing for my response. When she found it, I could feel her smile widen against my cheek.

"I see that you do still love your mama,' she said. 'That's a good boy.'

"She bit my neck and pulled me closer, tugging at my pants. With the force of my need, I shoved my tongue deep into her mouth, my hand slid beneath her dress. I slipped my fingers under her panties, feeling for the familiar wetness that she taught me to coax, to penetrate, to love. But new hate was flowing through me, too. I ripped at her panties as she shoved my pants down. I slammed into her. She moaned, then screamed—grinning. I pressed deeper and harder, wanting her to feel my pain and loathing. Instead, it excited her. She rode my rage, bucking against me, clawing and urging me on.

"I climaxed as she screamed in ecstatic victory. She had won, again. I was hers and would always be hers. I collapsed against her, weeping into her soft hair, hating my need for her love.

"She stroked my back and cooed, 'Yes, you're a mama's boy, aren't you?'

"I slept naked in my mother's arms until a chill slipped into the room. I'd left the front door open, and a breeze rustled in the dry hedges outside. Mama slept the deep sleep of a satisfied lover, and I covered her with sheets from the furniture. She preferred young boys, so it had been a long time since I fucked my mother. I'd forgotten just how good it felt.
"She still looked beautiful, her red hair streaked with silver. But her health was failing. Many years of heavy drinking were taking their toll. In the dim light, I looked down at her and worried that I might lose her. I hated Mama, but I despised myself because I couldn't live without her."

Henry stopped speaking and looked down at the clay orbs he had crafted into eyes. Rebecca jumped when he struck them with his fists, pounding over and over until the clay was flat, flaccid. The tension in his jaw forced a pulse in his temple. His face flushed red, and his breathing came fast as he clenched his fists into white knuckles.

"Breathe, Henry. Breathe," said Rebecca in a smooth tone.

Flinching at the sound, he shot her a dark look but she did not react. Holding her gaze steady, Henry finally looked away.

"That's it. Keep breathing," said Rebecca. "Relax your shoulders and release the tension in your jaw. Good, that's it, Henry."

Before she spoke again, Rebecca waited until his rage appeared to have passed.

"How did it feel to smash the clay, Henry?" she asked.

With shocking speed, he snatched the clay knife into an angry fist, and with a slow deliberate turn of his wrist, pointed it in Rebecca's direction.

"Henry?" Her voice was steady, but tight. For a long time he glared at her with cold, hooded eyes, fondling the knife. Rebecca remained vigilant, watching as Henry's expression changed, like a storm passing from his features.

As his dark mood shifted, he turned his knife to the flattened circles of clay and worked to scrape them free. Shaken, Rebecca maintained a close watch, her jaw steeled with tension. Still scraping the clay, Henry went on with his story, talking to her as if he had never stopped. Rebecca felt chilled by his detachment and the casual tone of his voice as he went on.

"I left my mother covered on the sofa. Then I thought of Victoria—my girl from the convenience store. I knew that with her, I would never be alone.

"She was different than the others, like my first. I wouldn't need to pay her. I would take my time, get to know her and groom her to be the perfect bride. Then Mama could teach Victoria to be the perfect wife; after all, she knew exactly what I liked. And I was sure Victoria would grow to love Mama.

"I found a lantern and matches on a table near the front door. As I lit the flame, its light cast deep shadows around the corners of the great room and up the long staircase. The shadows seemed to slip and flow like ink. I figured it must have been the globe of the lantern that made the light act so strange.

"When I went out to the van to get the bags, I was surprised that it was still warm outside. Inside the house was downright cold.

"While Mama slept, I explored the old mansion, lighting lanterns as I went. Slippery shadows moved along the walls as I carried our bags up the staircase to the second floor. I found the master bedroom, deciding right then that it would be the perfect honeymoon suite for my bride. Against the wall was a large canopy bed, and even though the curtains were tattered and the quilts were yellowed and covered with dust, I would transform it for my Victoria. I'd replace the peeling wallpaper, polish the dirty floors, oil the woodwork, and make the windows shine. The entire mansion would become a palace for our little family."

Henry put down the clay knife and picked up the spray bottle. Rebecca let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. She forced herself to relax.

"Our time's up for today," she said, feeling stiff. "We'll start where you left off, next week." She reached over and grabbed the knife, tucking it inside her jacket. She opened the office door, calling for the orderly to take Frank back to his room.
"He's not expected out for another fifteen minutes," said the orderly. "And they're cleaning the patients’ rooms. What am I supposed to do with him?"

"Get him washed up, and take him for a walk. I don't know. That's your job."

Looking a little bewildered by the abrupt end of his session, Henry got up and followed the orderly out into the hall. He glanced back at Rebecca as she closed the door in his face.

January 17—Personal Journal

_I had an unexpected visit from Rob today. He could complicate things if he realizes..._

As the darkness of the winter night bled into Penn's Asylum, Rebecca's office was awash with shadows. With its snake neck curving toward her, the desk light held the only warmth in the cluttered room. Unaware of the piles of books and files that clogged the office around her, Rebecca leaned into the circle of pale light, pouring her thoughts about the disturbing session with Henry onto the pages of her journal.

The knife had exposed the memories she wanted to elicit, but she knew that giving it to him had been a reckless decision. But withdrawing it at such a vital stage could destroy the delicate trust she'd been building, and Henry's trust was central to her plan. But could she trust him enough to continue?

Tap! Tap! Tap! Rebecca was startled by the sound. Someone was rapping hard on the frosted glass of the office door. Flustered by the interruption, her heart raced as she shouted a curt, "Yes?"

The door creaked open and the sheepish face of Rob Silvani peeked in. "Sorry, Beck. Did I disturb you?" He eased his way into the dreary room.

"No, you just scared me half to death."

"Sorry. As usual, my timing sucks. I was just stopping by to see if you would make good on that dinner you promised me." He gazed around the file-cluttered office. "But by the looks of things, you need more than dinner—you need a vacation."

"Look, Rob. I've got a lot on my mind."

"I know, Becky, but this looks like some of your old obsessive-compulsive crap from college. You just work here. You shouldn't be living here. This place could drive you mad." He chuckled at the pun, but Rebecca wasn't amused. Rob spied an empty vial on her desk. He picked it up, looking at it closely.

"What is this, Becky?" he asked, with shock in his voice. "This hallucinogenic shit nearly killed you in college. No more self-research—you swore to me!"

"It's not what you think, Rob." Feeling panicked and angered by his discovery, she lashed out. "It's none of your damn business, anyway. Someone like you wouldn't understand."

"Not my business? Someone like me?" He raised his eyebrows. "I get it. Use the idiot when you need him, then insult him until he leaves you alone."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"Oh no, don't worry, Doctor. Sit here and rot with the lunatics. I don't give a shit anymore."

"Rob," she said, exasperated.

"You're right. I'm pretty damn stupid. Trust me though, I won't be the one bailing you out of your dark hole this time."

Before she could reply, Rob turned and walked out. Rebecca closed her eyes and sighed, hoping that he would
forget about the vial, but she wondered if he was right. Was Henry worth it? But she was so close, she couldn't stop now.

January 24—1:00PM: Frank Doe Session

Note: Henry refused to come to his session today. He was upset about the way the previous appointment ended. After some coaxing...

"Henry, thank you for agreeing to come. Again, I'm sorry you felt hurt by our last encounter." She brought out Henry's sculpture.

"I don't want the fucking clay!"

"Okay. We'll just put it at the end of the table in case you change your mind."

"No! Get it the fuck out of my face," he shouted.

There was a knock at the door, and the orderly popped his head in. "Everything okay in here?"

"I think we're fine. Thank you."

The man gave Henry a stern look, "I'll be right outside if you need me, Doc." He closed the door with a click. "So, what's going on, Henry?"

"What's going on? I'm having fucking nightmares because of you! That's what's going on."

Rebecca waited. Henry sulked, and minutes passed. Then in an outburst he blurted:

"Since last week, it happens every damn night. I dream I'm working on the old Rutt house. It's dark and I can't see, but I'm sawing and crying, sawing and crying. The saw just keeps grinding away while warm liquid oozes over my hands and down into my shoes until it floods the room, but I keep sawing as it rises past my waist. I'm still pushing and pulling the blade when the slippery juice covers my mouth. I spit and cough, struggling to breathe and then I drown until finally I wake up."

Henry looked down at his shaking hands and back up at Rebecca, tears welling in his eyes.

"Dreams can be powerful healing tools, Henry. It's probably your mind sorting through something you've forgotten. Given time, we should be able to uncover what it is. Maybe continuing with your account from last week will give us some clues. Do you think you can do that?"

"I guess," he said, swiping at his eyes.

"I know it's hard, Henry. But you're right on track." She glanced down at her notes. "I believe you left off with the honeymoon suite."

Still reluctant to go on, Henry took a loud breath and thought for a moment. His eyes looked far away, his tone robotic, but he began his story once again:

"After I left the honeymoon suite, I discovered a room with a small bed and a kid's dresser—both were painted with faded cowboys and Indians. I wondered if it might have been my daddy's room. It was cold and I felt a wave of dizziness as the light of my lantern wavered along the walls. Shaking off the feeling, I blamed it on the late hour and my lack of sleep, so I spread my bedroll out on the bare mattress to get some rest. It had been a long day and no doubt Mama would have demands in the morning. Seems I was asleep before I even put my head down.

"Waking up, as I usually did, before dawn, I heard footsteps on the creaky floorboards of the hall. I was surprised that Mama had come looking for me; usually she'd just scream my name and wait for me to come running.

"'I'm in here, Mama.' I yawned and stretched, preparing myself for whatever mood she might be in. The footsteps
stopped.

"'Mama?' No answer. Must have been the settling of the old house. I rolled out of bed and into the chilly room, looking for my clothes. I was putting on my Wranglers when I heard the doorknob twisting behind me.

"I thought I heard you, Mama.' I turned and saw her fingers curl around the door from the other side. As I walked toward her, the fingers disappeared and the sound of footsteps started again in the hall. I opened the door but no one was there, just a wet, musty smell—probably from the cellar.

"Mama was never one to play silly games, but she must have been feeling better if she ran down the hall that fast. I thought I'd play along to keep the peace, so I went down the hall after her. Hearing a rustling, I entered a room that was heaped full of boxes and junk, broken toys, dishes, and crumbling newspapers. I was squeezing my way through the stacks of boxes, in case she was hiding behind one, when I heard a bump in the closet—I knew I had her.

"I snuck up to the closet door, ready to jump in with a 'Boo!' My hand was on the doorknob when the door burst open, smashing me in the face and knocking me backward into a heap. I was dazed and tangled up in electrical cords and old clothes when a horrible screeching sound came from the depths of the closet. I scrambled to my feet, forgetting the pain in my face, and peeked from behind a stack of junk.

"Something large loomed in the shadow of the closet door. Thinking it was Mama playing a trick on me, I inched forward. Suddenly, it crashed to the floor at my feet, glass shattering everywhere. I jumped back, scared out of my wits. With my heart thundering, I saw that a huge brass floor lamp had tipped over in the closet, forcing the door open. The screeching must have come from the globe rubbing against the closet door as it fell to the floor. I felt foolish for being scared by a lamp.

"From the corner of my eye, I saw something slip by in the hall. Ready to be done with the silly game, I went out to find Mama. The door to the honeymoon suite was open a crack. How dare she go in there!

"Furious that Mama had gone in the room I was saving for my bride, I stormed in, tired of playing hide and seek and ready to tell her so. And there she was, legs splayed wide, naked on the filthy bedcovers. Her hand was on her breast and her head was twisted at an odd angle as she stared up at the ceiling.

"'Dammit, Mama! I'm tired of this game.' She ignored me, so I walked over to the bed.

"'Come on, Mama,' I said, grabbing her hand. It was limp and cool.

"'Mama!' Not blinking, she just kept staring while the corner of her mouth twisted down and a string of drool hung from her chin.

"With Mama showing no signs of improvement, I spent the next several days trying to convince her to go to the emergency room, but she made me swear never to take her to the hospital, no matter how bad it got. It got pretty bad, but I kept my promise.

"I watched over her as best I could while I got the house ready for Victoria. I found some tools for making repairs and propped Mama up so she could watch me work. First thing on the list was some sawing. Together we decided that some ... physical modifications would make things easier for her. Depressed by her deterioration, my eyes watered a little as I went about the sawing. She watched closely but didn't say much after that—sore throat, I think—but I could tell by the look in her glassy eyes that she approved of the changes."

Henry paused. With his scarred hand, he motioned for the doctor to bring him the clay. He misted it, watching the droplets spill over the empty eyes. With a gentle touch, stroking the moist, bald scalp of the head, he turned to the job of making a new set of eyes. He continued:

"Now that Mama was ... stabilized, I was able to turn my attention to my beautiful Victoria. Mama always told me that one way to tell a woman you love her is to show that you're interested in her life. I had always done that with my other girls, and they loved it—all except Lilly."

"Who's Lilly, Henry? You haven't mentioned her before."
"She was my first girlfriend, besides Mama, of course. But being she's my mama, I guess that doesn't really count, does it?"

"Why didn't Lilly appreciate your interest?"

"I don't know. Everything was going so well. I met her in the Eastville town park after school one day. I was sixteen and pretty lonely, and she was new in town and didn't know anybody. I understood what that was like because of moving around so much with Mama. We talked for a long time and kind of hit it off, so I started meeting her in the park at night. Her daddy did shift work and her mama lived in another town, so it was easy for her to sneak out.

"Mama got really mad when I first mentioned Lilly, so I didn't tell her that we were seeing each other. But, of course, she was suspicious, which lead to a huge fight one night. As I was leaving the house to see Lilly, Mama lit into me.

"'You're gonna see that harlot, aren't you?' she said.

"'No, Mama. I'm just going out for a walk.'

"'Like hell you are! I need you home with me, boy.'

"Mama's face was flaming. ‘Get the hell out, I said.’ She threw her shoe at me, and then she started throwing anything she could put her hands on. I dodged a glass of gin, and it smashed against the wall; then she wielded an ashtray, continuing to scream, tears running down her face. ‘Get out. Get out! GET OUT!’

"'You'll never fuck me again, you little shit,' she screamed. She was slinging the heavy ashtray when I slammed the door; I heard it shatter as I ran down the steps. At first I was upset, but the further away from the house I got, the better I began to feel. I was free—free of Mama; free to start a new life ... with Lilly. By the time I reached the park, I had plans for our future racing through my mind. I couldn't wait to tell her.

"'What are you doing?' she said.

"'I'm kissing you.'

"'Well, I don't want you to. Okay?' She moved away and turned her back on me. I stepped up from behind and wrapped my arms around her. She was tense, but she didn't resist.

"'I have some great news to tell you,' I said. ‘I had a little talk with my mama tonight.’ It felt so good to be holding her, and without even thinking I just reached up and squeezed her delicious little breast. She spun out of my arms before I could tell her my plans.

"'Stop it! What's wrong with you?' She scowled at me. I was confused.
"Well, you're my girl. I just want to show you how much I love you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then it dawned on me, ‘Oh, I get it now. You like to play games.’ I reached out, grabbed her by the arms and pulled her in close, kissing her neck and biting her ear. She scrunch up her shoulders and struggled out of my grip."

"What are you doing?’ she snarled at me.

"God, I wanted her so bad, but her teasing was starting to piss me off.

"'Look, Henry. I don't like you that way. We're just friends, okay? Besides, my father would kill me if he knew I was here with you.'"

"'But I'm gonna marry you, Lilly.’ I started feeling an old panic rising in me.

"'She laughed at me. ‘Are you kidding? I'm fifteen! And besides, I'd never marry you. You buy me beer and cigarettes, and there's nobody else to hang out with.’"

"Stung by her words, I struck her hard across the face and she fell to the ground. She tried to get up and I hit her again. When she cried out, I felt excited, powerful, and grabbed her by the hair, clamping my hand over her mouth to silence her screams. As I dragged her into the woods, I knew exactly what to do. I'd show her how much I loved her—and I'd make her love me back. If I was anything, it was a great lover.

"Pushing her down into the leaves, I straddled her. She bit my hand and started screaming for help. I had to hit her again so she wouldn't draw attention, but I struck her a little too hard. She went limp and her head dipped to the side.

"While she slept, I took off my belt and tied her hands tight. Mama always liked that. I knew that once I finished, Lilly would feel happy again, satisfied.

"She started coming around, so I pulled down my pants so she could see how excited I was for her. Her eyes went wide and I flipped her over, clamping my hand tight over her mouth again. I kneeled behind her, lifted her skirt and slid her panties down. Breathing in her sweaty, ripe smell, I knew she was ready for me.

"I slid in, and she was so tight. Not like Mama. It felt so good to take her, to show her how much I loved her. She cried and whimpered as I pushed hard, but with all the excitement I didn't last long. When I was done, I turned her over and looked into her beautiful green eyes. Her tears sparkled in the street light filtering through the trees.

"'I love you, Lilly,’ I panted, stroking the hair out of her face. I lifted my hand from her mouth, waiting for her reply.

"'You bastard,’ she sobbed. ‘When my father finds out, he'll kill you.'

"Rage boiled up inside me and I smacked her. ‘Who's gonna tell him?’ She didn't say anything. Her lips were clenched in a tight line but I could tell she was thinking. She looked scared, and I liked the way that felt. ‘You do love me, Lilly. Don't you?’ No reply, just more tears. Whimpering, she turned her face away from me. ‘Why don't you love me?’ I screamed. ‘I've given up everything for you, bitch!’

"But she wouldn't answer me, so I hit her. Then, I hit her again. I kept hitting her until she stopped crying. Once she was quiet, I gathered her in my arms and held her until she grew cold, then I dumped her in the river.

"I slept on the river's edge until it began to rain. With nowhere else to go, I walked home, wondering if Mama would let me in the house. She didn't, so I slept on the porch. In the morning I found the door open, so I went inside and climbed into my own bed.

"For days, we went around the house avoiding each other. Mama and I hadn't talked since the night Lilly died. After a few days of peanut butter sandwiches, she started leaving food in the refrigerator for me, and I started doing the dishes and taking out the garbage like I'd always done. I wasn't sure how long it would take for the police to come and take me away. Nobody but Mama knew that Lilly and I were seeing each other, but I thought they'd figure it out
sooner or later. Sure enough, after a couple of weeks, a policeman showed up at the door. I listened from upstairs.

"'No, Officer, my son ain't home. He's out runnin’ errands for me. He's such a good boy,' she said. ‘Is there somethin’ I can help you with?’

'The cop told Mama that Lilly's body had been found, and they needed to know my whereabouts the night of her death.

'Well, I'm sure he was right here with me that night, Officer. He hadn't been feeling well for days. You know, that nasty stomach bug that's been goin’ around.’

'The cop probed further, but Mama knew just how to flash a smile and flip her long red hair just right. Finally, the officer closed his notebook and thanked Mama for her time. He lingered at the door, but I couldn't make out what was being said. They were whispering. Finally, Mama laughed her sweetest southern girl laugh and said, ‘See ya’ later, Officer.’ And that was that.

'We began speaking again that night and I thought things were back to normal. After all, she'd lied for me. So I followed Mama to bed, but she informed me that I was too grown to be sleeping with her anymore. In a week or so, little boys started visiting the house again.

'I hated them. I hated the thought of Mama's soft fingers touching them instead of me. I started looking for a new girlfriend—one that wouldn't be able to resist me ... and my money. There were always girls available if you knew where to look, but none of them turned out to be right for me. But I made sure they didn't touch anyone else ... like Mama was doing.

'Then I found Victoria. I was sure she was the one. She would love me for me, once she got to know me. So I made it my job to get to know everything I could about her. The stakeout tricks and information gathering that my daddy taught me came in handy. With a little microfiche research at the library, I was able to find some important facts about Victoria's life. My poor girl had been in a mental hospital. It appears she suffered years of sexual abuse at the hands of her own father. Her former family doctor had been named, so I called his office to get the particulars on her history.

'It's surprising how willing doctors are to share information with their colleagues. Of course I lied a little when I identified myself as Doctor W.R. LaRue, Victoria Lystner's new psychiatrist. The doctor's receptionist was very flattered when I told her that she had a lovely voice, and I wished that I had such a professional and sexy sounding woman working for me. At that point, she was eager to make sure her boss would sign-off, providing me with a copy of Victoria's records.

"'I might even drop by to pick them up myself, Miss Hart,’ I said. ‘Say around, five? And by the way, what are you doing for dinner tonight?’

'She was willing on all counts, and it was a shame to disappoint her. But I showed up as a courier, sent to pick up the records and deliver a hand written note for Miss Hart. Doctor LaRue sent his sincere regrets for having to cancel their plans. He had an emergency, but he promised to call and reschedule their dinner date.

'With Victoria's medical history, I had completed the first step in my plan. But I would continue until I had all the important details. I knew she'd be impressed by my intimate knowledge of her life.

'The records from the doctor listed her address. They also revealed that Victoria lived with her mother, Becky Lystner, in North Philly. The notes gave me a picture of a girl that had overcome terrible trauma and was working hard to put her past behind her. It seemed like she and her mama were very close. That was something special we had in common.

'I had one last thing to do before I paid Victoria a visit. I needed to know her likes and dislikes, the kind of things only friends or family would know. Armed with a high school yearbook I borrowed from the local library, I made a few calls until I found just what I was looking for.

"'Hi, is this Wendy Fitzgerald?’ I said to the young woman on the phone.
"'Yes?' she said. ‘This is Wendy.’

"'Well, I'm a reporter with Vogue magazine and we're doing a feature story on an up and coming fashion star, Victoria Lystner. I understand the two of you did some modeling together in high school.'

"'Yes, we did!' said Wendy. ‘I didn't know Vicki was still modeling.’

"'Oh, yes. She's in Paris at the moment, and I'm doing some background info gathering for the article, to add a personal touch—you know, ‘the people behind the success’ kind of thing. I thought you'd be a perfect person to quote.’

'I told Wendy a little about my reporting credentials. Very impressed, she couldn't wait to tell me every detail she knew about Victoria's life. By the time we were done chatting, I knew the name of very boy Victoria had a crush on in high school, her favorite songs, what flavor of ice cream she preferred, and even her choice of lipstick.

"'Thank you, Wendy,' I said. ‘You've been very helpful. Please give me your address so I can send you a complimentary copy of the magazine when the article is published.'

"'Thank you, Mister Cronkite. I can't wait to see it,' she said. ‘Please tell Vicki to call me when she's in town. I'd love to do lunch. And I'm so glad to hear she's, um ... better.'

"'What a load of crap. I could tell she really didn't give a damn about Victoria. She was only interested because she had become a celebrity and her name would appear in a magazine. Even so, I got what I wanted, and from her yearbook photo I could see that Wendy was hot. I decided to keep her address, just in case things didn't work out with Victoria.'

Rebecca spoke up before Henry could continue. “Henry, you've done some fine work today, but we'll need to stop for now. We'll pick up where we left off next time.” She handed Henry a paper towel for his clay-covered hands. “And I have some good news for you.” She reached out—trying to hide her repulsion—and touched his arm to get his full attention. Henry looked down at her long fingers.

"It's still tentative, and I really shouldn't be telling you, but I think you've earned the right to know.”

"What?” asked Henry, his curiosity piqued.

"Well, your progress has been so good, you're being moved to a low security facility. You'll be given more privileges, and you may even be able to leave the hospital from time to time.”

Henry looked shocked. His eyes watered. “I didn't think I would ever leave this place.” His voice was thick with emotion. “Thank you, Doc.” He looked up at her with genuine gratitude.

"Well, we're not done yet, Henry, but we're close.”

Suddenly, he looked worried, “But what about our work together? I couldn't tell these things to anyone else.”

"There's still time. And I'll see if I can get permission to step up your session schedule until you leave. If that's okay with you?”

Henry nodded. “It's okay, Doc ... as long as I'm with you. I don't want to talk with anybody else.”

"Okay, Henry. Well, we're running overtime and I'm sure the orderly is getting restless for us to finish. I'll be in touch about the schedule.”

Henry beamed at Rebecca. “Okay.” He waved as he left the room.

She forced a smile and waved back.

January 24—Personal Journal
The patient review meeting today was a disaster...

Rebecca was already seated as the psych ward doctors filtered into the conference room, coffee cups and files in hand. Rob Silvani made his way around the table, sitting down next to her.

He leaned toward her, and in a quiet voice, he said, “Listen Beck, I'm sorry about the other night. I shouldn't have gone off like that. I know you've got a lot on your plate right now. Forgive me?”

Rebecca sorted through her files, trying to ignore him. “Can we talk about this later, Rob?” Rob leaned back in his chair. He shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. The room settled down, the director made a couple announcements, and the patient reviews began.

"Rebecca, please give us an update on Frank Doe. He's slated to be moved to the new facility within the next three weeks."

"Well, although Frank has made remarkable progress in his ability to communicate and to return to normal activities, I'm afraid he's showing disturbing signs of severe delusion. He is having terrifying nightmares and indicating an extremely violent fantasy life. I would advise strongly against moving him at this time. He may not only be a danger to himself, but he could be a threat to others."

"Thank you for your assessment, Doctor, but he hasn't exhibited actual violent behavior for close to a year. I appreciate your recommendation, but for now his transfer stands."

"But Doctor Silvani, I've been working very closely with this man, and I'm concerned about his volatile state."

"I understand that, Doctor, but we have certain criteria we must follow. I wish we could always make these decisions based on our gut feelings, but I have a hospital to run and serious budget issues to face. To keep good doctors like you on staff, I have to move non-violent patients elsewhere, to someone else's budget."

Rebecca sat back, trying to cover her upset. She had known the director planned to move Henry, but she had hoped there would be more time. Hearing very little of the other patient reports, she ran plans through her mind for accelerating Henry's process. When the meeting ended, Rob shoved his chair back hard, stalking out of the room without looking at Rebecca, but she was focused on getting to the director before he dashed out.

"Doctor Silvani!” she called as he headed for the door.

"Yes? Please make this quick. I'm running late."

"Would you please reconsider Frank Doe's case? I really don't..."

"Rebecca, my decision is firm. Now, please excuse me.” He walked into the hall; Rebecca followed.

"Would you at least consider increasing the frequency of his sessions until he leaves?"

The director stopped, files tucked under his arm, well-worn briefcase in hand. He exhaled heavily before he spoke.

"Look, Doctor. We're all impressed with your work, but you need to keep a healthy perspective or this job will burn you out. But against my better judgment and since it's only for a few weeks, you may increase the sessions—but on your own time. You must maintain your other duties. Understood?"

"Yes, Doctor."

The director turned and marched away down the hall.

January 26—6:00PM: Frank Doe Session

"Henry, thank you for agreeing to work with me this evening. As you know by now, I've been given permission to see you more frequently. So why don't we get started right away. How about the nightmares you were suffering—
any improvement there?"

"A little bit," said Henry.

"That's good news. It means we're on the right track. Since that's the case, why don't you pick up where you left off on Tuesday—you'd gotten some information from one of ... uh, Victoria's high school friends?"

Rebecca crossed her legs. Henry noticed.

"You look very pretty today," he said, blatantly scanning her body.

Rebecca shifted in her chair. Suddenly uncomfortable in her short skirt, she resisted tugging at the hem.

"Thank you. Now, shall we begin?"

"I'm always talking, but you never tell me anything about you."

"That's how it works, Henry."

"Well, it's not fair. I want to know something about you. Are you married? Do you have a family?"

"I'm not supposed to share that kind of information with you, Henry."

"You can tell me something, can't you?"

"No, I really can't. Now let's get back to work."

"Well, I'm not telling you anything else until you tell me something." And he drew his fingers like a zipper across his thin lips.

Rebecca's cheeks flushed hot under Henry's rheumy gaze, and she worked to maintain her composure. "There's nothing to tell, Henry. I'm married to my work."

Henry crossed his arms and waited in silence. The mixed expression of child and lech on his hideous face unsettled Rebecca. She felt small and frightened, like the girl who first heard her mother's terrifying stories of abduction.

"Okay, I have no family. My mother ... died ... when I was a child." Sweat beaded along her hairline.

"Sorry about your mama. What happened?"

"She's dead, Henry. Okay? That's it. Back to work or we'll just end this session right here."

"All right! I just asked a simple question." Henry looked hurt. Furrowing his brow at her, he pouted.

"I want my clay!" he demanded.

Relieved to step away, Rebecca retrieved the clay from the cabinet. Placing it on the table without looking at him, she handed over the spray bottle, happy for its spiked contents.

"Where are my tools?"

Rebecca hesitated, considering the recent incident with the knife. Then she turned and pulled the pouch of tools from her desk drawer, and with something bordering on petulance, she thrust them at Henry. Trying to regain her professionalism, she masked the tension in her voice as best she could, "Can we begin now?"

Henry stared at Rebecca with a self-satisfied grin and nodded, turning his attention immediately to the clay. He began his next account.

"Okay, Doc. Whatever you say."
"Well, I guess you could say I studied Victoria's life real careful-like, and I knew it was time to move to the next step of my plan—a personal visit. That's where all my patience would pay off. But I still had to take it slow, so I decided that my first visit would have to be secret.

"I knew her schedule like clockwork, so at the end of her Friday afternoon shift, I slipped into the convenience store. She was busy cashing out and talking with the grungy girl waiting for her own shift to begin. Wearing a hat and sunglasses, I walked by unnoticed, dropping a small package at the end of the counter. Then I headed for the coolers in the back where I could watch from behind the bakery shelves.

"Shortly after, an older woman walked into the store. I recognized her from newspaper clippings. It was Victoria's mother, Becky Lystner.

"Victoria smiled. ‘Mom! What are you doing here? I thought you were working late.’

"'I got off earlier than I expected, Hon. Good thing, too. The warehouse was a zoo today. Since I got done early, I thought we could ride the bus home together.'

"'Yo, Vicki,' her spiky-haired co-worker interrupted from the end of the counter. ‘Looks like someone left you a present.’

"'What do you mean?'

"The girl held up the little box, shaking it with a sly grin. ‘A present, duh? It's got your name on it.’

"Victoria took the package. She had a strange look on her face, like she was real uncomfortable. I hadn't put a message on the card, just her name in fancy letters.

"'Well, it is very pretty,' she said as she touched the little box with the pink ribbon. Her favorite color. ‘Must be a mistake, though,’ she said. “I don't know anyone who would leave me a present.’

"'Maybe it's from a secret admirer,' said the grungy girl.

"Victoria and her mother looked at each other funny. I was confused, but I knew she'd be happy once she opened my surprise.

"With elegant fingers, Victoria unwrapped the package, being careful not to tear the paper. She opened the box and pulled back the tissue, and saw my special gift. She must have been really surprised, because she dropped the box on the counter and stepped back, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Vicki, what's wrong, honey?” asked her mother. She looked worried.

"Victoria was quiet; stunned, I guess. I had no idea such a small thing could have such a big effect. Her mother reached over and pulled the pretty tube of lipstick from the box. It was Victoria's favorite, according to Wendy.

"'Oh my god,' said Missus Lystner. ‘Whose sick joke is this?’

"'What! I almost said it out loud. Confused and pissed off, I started to fidget. I was finding it hard to stay quiet.

"'What's wrong with it?’ asked Miss Spikey Hair.

"'My father used to make me wear that color lipstick,’ said Victoria, brushing the back of her hand across her wet eyes. Her mother pulled a tissue from her purse.

"'Shit, my father wouldn't let me wear lipstick at all.’ The stupid girl rolled her eyes at Victoria. ‘Hey, if you don't want it, I'll take it,’ she said. ‘That shit's expensive.’

"'Take it,’ said Victoria with a wave of her hand. ‘Just don't wear it around me.’

"I was outraged. How dare she give my gift away? How dare she disrespect me like that? I was her husband, or at
least I was going to be. I couldn't tolerate it anymore. In a fit of anger, I slammed my shoulder into the bakery shelf; bread and donuts spilled all over the floor.

"The women gasped as I ran past them, escaping through the door and into the street. Running down the sidewalk, I turned the corner and screamed, ‘That lying bitch!’”

"I jumped in the van and took off, disappearing into the traffic. Rummaging through the papers on the passenger seat, I nabbed just what I was looking for—Wendy's address. A little side trip was in order before going home to Mama. I reached under my seat, excited by how good it felt to wrap my fingers around the hilt of my buck knife again. And besides, my memento collection was getting a bit stale.

"Wendy and I had a great time that night—that is, once she apologized for being such a bitch and ruining Victoria's surprise with her lies. But I was forgiving and treated her like I treated all my girls. If I'm anything, it's a gentleman.

"It was a night to remember for sure. A slice here, a stab there, and an amazing fuck. What a shame to have to end it, but I had to be true to my Victoria. Wendy was just a distraction—an appetizer before the main course. But she did have lovely fingers. Although I hadn't planned to visit the bitch, I was fortunate to find plenty of bags in her kitchen. I didn't think she'd miss them anymore.

"It was well past midnight when I got home, and I was surprised how understanding Mama was when I went in the bedroom to say goodnight. It seemed that she'd had a real change of heart since her illness. In fact, she didn't really say much of anything anymore—she only seemed to talk when I was feeling upset.

"I hadn't told her about Victoria yet, but after my evening with Wendy I was feeling better about the whole lipstick mess and decided to make the news about Victoria a special surprise for Mama. She hadn't left the house since her illness, so I thought we'd make an outing of it.

"'You get a good night's sleep now, Mama. I've got a surprise for you tomorrow.' I kissed her cold forehead. The twist at the corner of her mouth hadn't healed yet, but I was sure I saw a hint of a smile. By the haze covering her eyeballs I could see that she was tired, so I tucked the covers up around her ears so she wouldn't roll off the bed or get a chill. Even in the warm weather she was cold—poor circulation, I guess.

"Since there was no electricity, I'd rigged up a propane tank and a heater for the bath. It was time to get myself cleaned up after a busy day. Wendy had turned out to be a very dirty girl, but truth be told, I liked it messy. So I fired up the heater and filled the old tub. One of those odd chills in the house made the steam roll off the water like fog. I added some of Mama's rose oil and slid into the hot water with my buck knife and sharpening stone in hand. The curve of the old claw foot tub felt good against my back as I circled the blade of my knife slowly around and around on the smooth stone. Sharpening was like meditation for me, and soon my body relaxed and my mind began to wander.

"The thought of Victoria's milky skin and long legs came into my head. I imagined her naked, stepping into the tub with me. I felt my dick harden at the thought of her smooth ass lowering into my lap and the curve of her back pressing against my chest. In my mind, steam from the bath beaded on her long black hair as I smoothed the soap over her shoulders and around her breasts. She'd arch her back when I bit her tender neck. Then my beautiful Victoria would move in slow circles against me, and when she finished her teasing, she'd lean forward onto her knees, lifting her ass in front of me. Grabbing the rim of the tub, she'd looked back with a smile, and say, ‘Fuck me, Henry.’

"I kept hold of my buck knife while my other hand slipped from the sharpening stone to my dick. I was fully enjoying my fantasy when I heard a sound outside the door. It was late and Mama wasn't getting around so well these days, so I was surprised to hear her out in the hall. She stopped outside the bathroom door.

"'Goddamn it, Mama,' I thought to myself, but instead, I said, ‘What is it, Mama?’ No answer. So I continued with the work at hand.

Just as I was about to finish my business, the door opened a few inches. I was too far gone to stop. I still had a grip on my knife and I jerked my dick with a vengeance just to spite Mama for interrupting me. I wasn't giving this one
up for anything. It was for Victoria!

"Hen-ry."

I jerked harder and faster; ready to go. *Fuck her!* I thought.

"Hen-ry."

"A rotting gray hand curled around the edge of the door, and through the steam I saw the index finger had been hacked away. All at once, I came and screamed and leaped out of the tub, brandishing my buck knife. Body still twitching, I stood naked, dripping on the dirty tiles of the bathroom floor. The fingers slipped away and the door closed after them as I stood there staring, bug-eyed.

"The room was suddenly ice cold and reeking with a musty smell. I shook from the chill or my fear, or both. *What the fuck was that?* I inched over to the door, and with the tip of my knife I flicked the lock. Reluctant to touch it, I listened for sounds in the hall, but hearing nothing I finally gave in and pressed my ear hard against the wood door, straining to listen. **BAMM!**

"The sound seared through my ear as something smashed into the door with such force that it split the oak panel. I nearly pissed myself jumping back behind the tub, clutching my knife so tight that my fingers ached. I stood there shaking, waiting, but the house stayed quiet and the chill in the room disappeared and it was filled up again with the warmth of the steamy bath and the scent of Mama's rose oil.

"I managed to dress myself without letting go of my knife. What I'd seen just didn't make sense—it couldn't have happened. Since putting things out of my mind was a skill I learned from life with Mama, I tried to convince myself that it had all been my imagination. With my knife and lantern in hand, I opened the bathroom door. The split wood panel was hard to explain, so I just ignored it. The house was silent, but when I shined the light outside the door, the hall floor was covered from end to end with hundreds of empty baggies.

"'What the fuck is going on?' I screamed to the house. Trying not to fall on the slippery plastic bags, I went down the hall to the room where Mama had been sleeping. I slammed the door behind me and locked it. Lifting the lantern, I could see that Mama was lying peacefully, tucked right into the middle of her pillow like I'd left her. She was oblivious to what was going on in the house. Not knowing what else to do, I held onto my buck knife and climbed into bed next to Mama. Of course, I was only there to make sure she was safe. She never stirred. I layed awake most of the night, but drifted off eventually, waking just before dawn, as usual. I was still holding my knife and Mama was there beside me.

"Slipping out of bed so as not to disturb Mama, I walked across the cold floor and poked my head out the door. All the baggies were gone from the hall. Suspicious of what might be waiting for me, I made my way to the bathroom. There was no crack in the door. Relieved, I decided I must have dreamt the whole thing. What else could it be?

"Mama was groggy and her eyes were cloudy when I woke her, but I could tell she wanted to go out. I washed her face and brushed her hair, taking a little extra time to make sure it was just right. Since her illness, Mama's appearance had deteriorated, and because she was so self-conscious about it, I wrapped her up and tucked her in a sack. Since she was always cold, it worked out well. The flies had become a nuisance, so I grabbed some bug spray on the way out.

"I carried Mama to the van. She complained that the seatbelt was uncomfortable across her chin, so I unbuckled her, hoping she wouldn't roll off the seat. I fired up the van and we headed into Philadelphia for a surprise visit to see Victoria.

"'Mama,' I said, ‘I know you've been worried about me finding a good girl. Right?’ No response, but I could tell she was listening by the tilt of her head. ‘Well, I've found her! Her name is Victoria Lystner, and I'm taking you to meet her right now.’

"I was worried when Mama didn't say anything. I thought she'd be more excited, but I knew once she saw Victoria she'd be happy for me. We parked close to the convenience store, and I went around to help her out of the van. Carrying her to the store window, I said, ‘Now Mama, this is kind of a double surprise. Victoria doesn't know we're
coming, so I'm going to let you peek in the window before we go inside.' I uncovered her and lifted her up so she could see over the signs in the window. 'Just keep your eye out for her. She's the tall, pretty one with the long black hair.'

"I thought I heard a scream from inside the store, but I didn't want to alarm Mama, so I said, 'Isn't she beautiful?' No response. 'Mama?' She seemed a little miffed, so I stepped up to the window myself. No Victoria. There was only the stupid girl that stole her lipstick. She was screaming about something, and pointing in my direction.

"I was pissed. Where in the hell was Victoria? She was supposed to be working that day. I had painstakingly mapped out her schedule for weeks and she should have been there!

"'Goddamn it!' I said. ‘Oh, sorry, Mama. I know you don't like it when I cuss.’ Mama didn't say anything, she just stared off into the distance, but I could tell that she was insulted that Victoria hadn't shown up. I was beginning to have second thoughts myself, and feeling that old rage rising in me like it did with the other girls. I tried to contain my anger, but I was a little rough with Mama when I put her back in the van. I couldn't seem to get her in the seat right. She kept listing to one side. Noticing how upset I was, she looked at me with her hazy blue eyes, and spoke clearly for the first time in weeks.

"'Henry, if that girl can't even show up to meet your mama, she ain't no good!'

"'I don't know, Mama. I thought she was different.'

"'Well, any girl that stands my boy up ain't worth shit, as far as I'm concerned. But don't you worry, your mama will always love you.'

"I felt a little better with Mama talking to me again. ‘Thanks, Mama,’ I said. ‘I know I'll never find a girl like you.’ As we rode home in silence, I decided I needed to make a phone call. I headed for the nearest payphone. ‘Hello, this is David,’ I said. ‘I'm the new assistant manager at the Arch Street Shoppette. I was wondering why Victoria, uh, I mean, Vicki didn't show up for work today.'

"'Vicki's home sick,’ said Missus Lystner. ‘What did you say your name was?’

"'David. I'm the new assistant manager. When can we expect her back at work?’

"'I already told Mister Harris that she would be out for a while.'

"'Are you sure? He didn't tell me that. What exactly's wrong with her that kept her from coming to work on such an important day?’

"'What are you talking about—important day?'

"'Oh, nothing. I'm sorry, I must be confusing her with someone else. But it's important to tell me what's wrong so I can pass it on to Mister Harris.'

"'Well, if you must know. Some creep played a very sick joke on Vicki in your store. She's had a difficult past and that prank really upset her. If we didn't need the money, she'd never come back to work there.'

"The damned lipstick! I felt worried that my plan was unraveling. Mama's condition was getting worse, so I needed her to meet Victoria soon.

"'Well, if she wants to keep her job,’ I said, ‘she better be back to work by Monday. We've got a business to run here.' It was a gamble, but I had to push her.

"'I don't like your tone.'

"'Well, does your daughter need this job or not? I have a list of candidates eager to fill her position.'

"'Well, yes. Unfortunately, she does,’ said Missus Lystner.
"'We'll see her on Monday, then. Right?’ I sounded too eager, but the gamble had worked.

"'Yes.’ She hung up.

"I was back on track, but with Victoria's unstable condition and Mama's deterioration, I had to speed up my plans. Victoria would be going back to work on Monday, so that left only three days before I'd have to put my final plan into action. The house wasn't nearly ready, but Victoria would be marrying me, not the house.

"By Sunday, the honeymoon suite was almost complete, with white satin linens, new curtains, and a lace canopy with fringe. Mama told me girls like fringe. I scrubbed and polished the fancy woodwork, and I hung out of the windows, cleaning them until they shined. In the morning, I would add candles and flowers as the finishing touch.

"The rest of the house was still a sight, but the wedding suite was ready, and by the end of the day I was dead tired. After tucking Mama into bed for the night, I turned in. It had been a busy weekend, but worth it to please my Victoria. I knew Mama would love her once they met. Or at least, I hoped so.

"For once it was warm in my room from the heat of the day, so I stripped down to my underwear and climbed into bed. I'd fallen asleep quickly, but sometime in the night that damn chill filled the room again, and I woke up freezing. It was still summertime, and I couldn't explain the cold that kept creeping into the old house.

"It was dark as pitch and the wood floor was chilly on my bare feet as I shuffled around, feeling for my shirt and pants. Moving around blind, my foot hit something cold that blocked my way to the dresser. I didn't remember leaving anything in the middle of the floor. If I was anything, it was neat and tidy.

"When I reached down to move whatever was blocking my way, my hand sunk into a cold and fleshy blob that shivered when I touched it. Shocked, I stumbled backward and fell, hitting my head on the bed frame. I yelled in pain, and a female voice from the fleshy mass began to giggle under its breath, the sound growing until it became a hysterical cackle that echoed through the house.

"Terrified and freezing, I groped for the bed and squeezed myself underneath, the old springs stabbing my naked back. I held my breath, straining to see what was in my room, but it was too dark. The laughter stopped suddenly and a slow shuffling sound moved across the floor toward me while the springs of the bed creaked to life above.

"'Hen-ry, you can't hide from us,” a voice teased from on top of the bed. An icy cold hand grabbed my foot, and the cackling started again. I screamed, struggling to get loose. Like a vise, the hand held my foot and another hand yanked at my toes.

"'This little piggy went to market,’ it giggled. ‘This little piggy stayed home. This little piggy had roast beef.’ Then it screamed, ‘But this little piggy had no fucking toes to keep counting because Henry Fucking Rutt cut them off!’ A searing pain ripped through my foot as my toe was severed. I shrieked in agony.

"In a frenzy, I screamed and kicked until my foot came loose from the icy grip. I scrambled on my hands and knees toward the door; mercifully, it was open. Grabbing the doorframe, I struggled to stand up and hobbled down the hall as fast as I could move.

"A shrieking voice came from behind me, ‘Where do you think you're going, Henry Rutt?’ Heading for the stairs, I tripped and fell in a heap at the open door of the honeymoon suite. I stood up, wincing, and saw that the room was ablaze with candles. The canopy was shredded to pieces and streaked with dark stains; the furniture lay smashed and scattered around the room; and my black leather bag of mementos was tipped over, the wet fingers oozing over the satin covers. MURDERER!! was scrawled on the wall above the headboard in dripping red letters.

"A glint of candlelight caught my eye. Skewered on the bedpost by my own blade was a severed toe. A sharp heel struck my back, and I toppled to my knees. With a gust of cold wind, the candles blew out and I was hit hard across the back of the head. As my consciousness faded, a chorus of cackles grew with one voice cutting through the noise.

"'We're just getting started, Henry ... and your mama can't help you now!’"

January 27—Personal Journal
I received an urgent call...

The pudgy floor nurse struggled to keep up with Rebecca's strides. She didn't notice the nurse's breathlessness.

"I'm sorry I had to call you so early," said the nurse. "But Frank Doe wouldn't speak to anyone but you. He's been extremely agitated, and last night he became inconsolable."

"I understand. Do you have any idea what the problem is?"

"It started with a nightmare and escalated to wrapping his foot in blankets and demanding pain killers. He wouldn't let the PA touch him, so the orderlies restrained him. We couldn't find anything wrong with the toe, but as soon as they let him loose, he wrapped it back up again."

An orderly was waiting at Henry's door and unlocked it when Rebecca arrived. She found Henry huddled on his bed with his knees drawn up to his chin. He rocked and whimpered, holding his swaddled foot.

"My toe ... my toe."

"Frank?" He didn't respond.

"Frank, it's me, Doctor R."

He continued to rock, but he glanced at Rebecca with wary eyes.

"What's happened to your toe?"

Wild-eyed and still rocking, he tilted his head at the nurse and the orderly, then back at the door.

"Oh, I see," she said. "Would you mind stepping outside while I talk with Frank?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea, doctor," said the orderly. His thick muscles appeared coiled with tension from a long night dueling with his patient's neuroses.

"Leave the door open. We'll be fine, won't we, Frank?" she said.

He rocked, offering only a silent blink.

"Nurse, you're free to return to your station. Thank you for your assistance."

The orderly left the room with a "you've been warned" shrug, but the nurse looked relieved to be going back to her desk. Relief by way of the morning shift would be arriving soon.

"What about that toe, Henry?" asked Rebecca.

Craning his neck to make sure no one was listening at the door, Henry whispered, "They cut it off."

"Who cut it off?"

"The ... the orderlies."

"Why would they cut your toe off, Henry?"

"They know what I did." He rocked harder and began whimpering again. "They're punishing me. They've been listening to our conversations. They know!"

"I've told you our sessions are completely confidential."

"Devices," Henry whispered. "They're using devices to listen—like my daddy used."
"I'll be sure to have the office swept for bugs so they can't do that anymore, but you have to let me take a look at that toe. Okay?"

"Pros. You've gotta hire pros for the job, or they'll find out."

"Okay, pros it is. Now how about letting me see your toe?"

Henry looked at her like she was crazy. "How can you look at it, if it's not there?"

"Okay, how about let me see the empty place where the toe used to be?"

Henry peered around the room, up at the corners of the ceiling and back to the door. Satisfied, he slowly unwrapped his left foot while the doctor stood by him.

"Is it okay if I touch your foot, Henry?" He nodded like a wounded child. Reaching over, she took hold of his foot and helped Henry extend his leg out straight. With a firm grip on his foot, she used her other hand to count. Starting with the big toe, "One, two, three, four, five," she said. "Hmm ... everything seems to be in order here, Henry. Maybe it's the other foot."

He looked startled, staring down at his toes. The doctor counted them for him again. He pushed his right foot forward and watched the count.

"Yup, five toes there, too, Henry. Seems your toes are safe and sound."

"But I felt it," he said. "They cut it off with a knife, last night while I was sleeping."

"Henry, you've had a tough week. We'll give you the weekend off so you can rest up. If you feel up to it, we'll start again on Monday. How's that sound?"

Henry just wiggled his toes and stared at them.

"How about I see if I can have your clay project brought here to your room? I'll have to keep your tools, but with the spray bottle and your talented fingers, you should still be able to enjoy your work. Sound good?"

Henry nodded, still staring at his feet.

"Okay then, I'll see you on Monday." Turning to leave, Rebecca was startled when Henry grabbed her hand.

In a cold, calm voice, Henry said, "Thank you ... Rebecca." Still gripping her hand, he gazed at her fingers and smiled a twisted smile.

Rebecca yanked her hand free and shoved it in the pocket of her white jacket. As she was leaving, she replied in a cool tone, "You're welcome, Henry. I'll be sure you get your spray bottle and clay for the weekend."

January 30—6:00PM: Frank Doe Session

Note: Received reports of increased delusional behavior over the weekend, after working with the clay (claimed the sculpture was threatening him). The clay was confiscated and Henry arrived lucid to his appointment.

"Feeling better, Henry?" said Rebecca.

"You know they took my clay away, don't you?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Well, there were concerns about what you thought you were hearing from the sculpture, Henry. They took it away to protect you, but I have it here for you along with a fresh misting bottle." She lifted the plastic covering from the sculpture on the table.

"I don't want them touching it anymore! It upsets her..." Henry's ranting trailed off as if realizing he'd said too much. "But it doesn't matter now," he said as he reached for the clay, handling it with tender care. "I have a lot to tell you
Surprised by his abrupt change of attitude, Rebecca slid the freshly mixed spray bottle toward him. The empty vial rested in her pocket.

"Whenever you're ready, Henry."

He misted his hands and then the clay, smiling as if his skin were thirsty for it. Beginning the final stages of refining the facial features of the sculpture, Henry said, "Well, I had a bad night when they chopped off my toe."

"The orderlies, again?"

"No." He looked at Rebecca as if she had gone mad. "The girls in the mansion!" He shook his head and went back to working the clay, talking to Rebecca as if they were having a friendly chat over coffee.

"I woke up very late the next day with the noon sun glaring into the room. I'd never slept that late before, so I woke with a start. Naked beside Mama on the bed, I sat up too fast and she rolled onto the floor with a thud. I jumped up to help her, and that's when I felt a throbbing pain in my foot. I yelped and looked down at the jagged stump where my toe had been. I fell back against the bed, gripping my aching foot as the memory of 'We're just getting started, Henry' rang in my head. My entire body ached. It all came back to me—the sound of the cackling laughter, the sight of my toe skewered to the bedpost, and my rage at the destruction of all my hard work in the wedding suite.

"The pain in my foot was screaming. I'd been squeezing it hard to try to stop the ache, but when I opened my hands to finally take a closer look, the toe was there! I touched it and tugged at it. I was so relieved, tears wet my eyes, but the throbbing continued and I knew that somehow they were responsible.

"'You bitches, whoever you are! You can't scare me. Fuck you!' I winced with pain, but I kept shouting. ‘Hear me? FUCK YOU!’

"I heard a muffled voice. It was Mama, and she was lying face down on the littered floorboards. As soon as I lifted her, she started in on me.

"'Henry, you're a disgrace!' she said as I propped her on the pillow. ‘How could you let them women bully you like that last night? They touched me, you know. And I don't like their kind touchin' me!'"

"'I'm sorry, Mama.' I cringed as the pain in my foot got worse.

"'You wimp! What's wrong with you, boy? Are you gonna give them bitches the satisfaction of seein' you in pain? Take some of Mother's Little Helpers.'

"It might have been the pain, but it seemed like Mama wasn't moving her lips. ‘But Mama,’ I said, ‘you always told me those were special, just for you.’

"'I know, boy, but times is changed, ain't they? Are you gonna be a pussy all your life?"

"'No, Mama,’ I said.

"I found Mama's little blue pills and swallowed a couple. It wasn't long before the pain began to subside. It was a good thing too, because I was running late to see Victoria. I got dressed, and when I was putting on my socks, the image of the jagged toe-stump wavered in my vision. But I touched my toes and they were all still there. The pain was gone, but just in case, I shoved Mama's Little Helpers in my pocket.

"Pushing the old Ford hard, I made my way into the city in record time. Like magic, traffic just seemed to move out of my way, and when I got into town I was even lucky enough to get a spot near Victoria's work. Seems fate was on my side, and I was just in time to greet my bride. She was crossing the street, heading for her bus stop as I walked toward her through the afternoon rush. She didn't see me coming when I bumped into her with a hard shove.

"'Hey!' she hollered as she crashed to the pavement.
"'Oh, I'm so sorry, miss,' I said. 'Please, let me help you with that.' Her purse had fallen and the contents spilled out onto the sidewalk. I picked up each item, fondling it before handing it to her. I could feel Victoria through each thing I touched. She glanced up, and I could swear she recognized me, but she looked away and scrambled to pick up the rest of her things. I noticed a tear on the knee of her tight jeans. Blood was oozing through the rip in the material.

"'Look, I've hurt you,' I said. 'Oh, miss, I am so sorry.'

"When she looked down at her knee, I grabbed her arm to help her to her feet. She stared into my face, speechless with her eyes nearly bugging out of her head. I had that effect on women.

"I guess she was in a hurry, because she wrenched her arm out of my grip and rushed to the bus as it pulled to the curb in a cloud of dust and heat. She glanced back at me and I waved as she climbed aboard. Being coy, she turned away without waving back. The rush hour crowd moved around me while I waited and watched the bus pull away. I was pleased to catch a glimpse of her peeking at me through the crush of bodies on the bus. I grinned when I saw her, and she quickly turned her head. I just loved that she was playing hard to get. In fact, I thought our date went well. It felt so good to touch Victoria again. I couldn't wait until the next day, when she would meet Mama. If Mama approved, I could finally take Victoria as my bride.

"The pain started to creep back into my foot, so I took a few more of the little blue pills. Mama was right—they were very helpful. Several pills later I was back at the estate, and I slept like the dead all through the night with no interruption from them.

"I woke up at noon, late again. Feeling nauseated, I headed to the bathroom and found YOU'RE A DEAD MAN written on the medicine cabinet mirror in Mama's red lipstick. I smeared it around with some toilet paper, then brushed my teeth staring into the sink. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of mocking me. I washed and got dressed in my best Wrangler jeans and a new white T-shirt I bought special for the occasion. And of course I wore my cowboy boots.

"As I was leaving the mansion, I saw KILLER painted across the front door. I was in too much of a rush to clean it off since I still had another wonderful surprise to take care of for Victoria. I was picking up her mother so she could be waiting at the mansion with Mama when we arrived tonight for our special evening together.

"To give me a boost for the long day ahead, I took a couple of Mama's Little Helpers and headed for the city. It was getting late by the time I convinced Missus Lystner that it would be in her best interest to go along with my surprise. When I dropped her off at the estate, it was dark outside. Fortunately, Victoria was working the late shift so I rushed back to town for the rendezvous with my bride.

"I had all the details carefully planned, and the first was a single pink rose. I paid a teenager on the street to deliver it, and of course, I added a romantic note: 'For my beautiful bride. Love, Henry.'

"I watched through the window as Victoria received the rose. I told the boy to say only, 'For you, Beloved.' She tried to ask him a question, but he kid ran out the door without answering.

"Alone in the store, she looked around nervously. She was so moved she just set the rose down on the counter and stared at it. I was getting impatient for her to read the note. Finally, she picked it up, opening the folded paper in her shaking hands. Suddenly, she crumpled the note, threw the rose on the floor, and stomped it under her heel until it was smashed into a pulpy pink mess.

"I was furious! How could she do such a thing? I was ready to run into the store and smack some sense into the ungrateful bitch. Then I remembered—Wendy! She was the one who told me about the pink roses. Fucking Wendy, lied to me again.

"'Goddamn it!' I shouted. I turned back to the window and watched as Victoria dialed the phone with shaking hands. No doubt she was calling her mother. No answer, so she slammed down the receiver and ran out the door, straight into my arms.

"'Victoria! I've been waiting for you,' I said. 'I'm sorry you didn't like the rose.' She was feisty, yanking and twisting
in my arms, but I held her tight. She wasn't getting away this time.

"Let me go," she screamed. The few people still roaming the streets at that hour glanced at us, but they didn't stop—city folk are good that way. Anyway, I'm sure it was obvious that we were lovers—or at least would be soon.

"Help! Someone help me!" she screamed. I put my hand over her mouth and she bit me. Since it seemed she liked to play rough, I slapped her hard across the face and smiled. 'I don't think Mama would approve of this behavior, Victoria, but I love it!' She started to scream again, that is until I mentioned that her mother was visiting with Mama at my house and that I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her.

'I suggested that screaming was a no-no here on the street. 'Let's save it until later tonight, my love,' I said.

'The mention of her mother waiting at my house seemed to calm her down quite a bit, but the little vixen still struggled in my grip. At least she stopped screaming. I loved the feeling of her sweaty body pressing against mine as I wrestled her into the van. To be sure she was comfortable on the ride home, I had a pile of blankets for her to sit on in the back. I also looped some ropes through the metal frame inside the van, just to make sure she'd feel secure. She moaned and struggled as I tightened the ropes around her wrists. I wanted to take her right there in the van while she scratched and bit me, but Mama had insisted that I marry a virgin. I knew Victoria wanted me, too, but she had to wait.

'Lifting her wrists above her head, I tied them to the frame of the van and serenaded her with one of her favorite tunes—well, at least according to Wendy. 'And when at last I find you, your song will fill the air ...'

She glanced up at me with tears streaming down her face. 'Oh darlin', I'm so glad you like the song,' I said. 'Can't beat the Beatles.' I laughed at my joke.

'Where are you taking me?' she asked, whimpering. I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped her tears. 'I'm takin' you home, darlin'.

'She began to sob. I was touched, and my own eyes welled with tears. I'd waited so long for this night.

'I was feeling no pain, but just to be sure, I took two more pills for the trip back to the estate. The traffic was light, and the few cars on the road just seemed to part as I drove straight up the dotted yellow line in the center of the road. Friendly folks beeped their horns as we passed.

'While I was nudging the bumper of a Ford Pinto, Victoria got very quiet. I thought she might have been in awe of my fine driving, but glancing in the mirror I noticed she was wrestling with the ropes. 'Now Victoria, you must be patient, darlin'. I know you're eager, but we have to wait until Mama gives her approval.'

'I pulled the van over to the side of the road and climbed into the back and tightened the ropes. Victoria was sweaty and flushed and she looked so delicious I could hardly restrain myself from giving in to her desires. I pressed my mouth to hers and slipped my hand down her shirt, pinching her erect nipple. She squealed, and as her lips opened, I shoved my tongue deep into her mouth. She bit me. This time it hurt. I drew back and slapped her hard across the face. Her lip began to bleed.

'I guess you need to learn some manners, Victoria.' I climbed back up front and dug under the seat for my buck knife. I unsheathed it in front of her, the blade glinting in the dim light of the cabin. Using the smooth edge of the knife, I scraped the trailing blood from her mouth, then smeared it down her throat and between her breasts.

'You've been a bad girl, Victoria. I wish I had more time to teach you a proper lesson, but we'll save that for later.' I shoved my tongue in her mouth again. She responded with a deep moan but this time she didn't bite—a quick learner. 'Mmm ... Good girl,' I said, licking my lips. 'I wish we could play more, but we have a big night ahead of us. Don't want to keep our mamas waiting.' Her tears started again, but she was quiet.

'Checking her ropes one last time, I kissed her forehead and hopped back into the driver's seat. We hit the Skippack Turnpike in no time and hurried on toward the estate. Turning past the entry gate, we bumped along the rutted road until we arrived at the mansion. I'd managed to tidy up the front garden to make it respectable before Victoria's arrival, and I was relieved to see that the graffiti had been cleaned off the front door.
"Buck knife in hand, I climbed in the back of the van and cut my bride loose, but I left her wrists tied to help her stay calm. I lifted her into my arms and kissed her tenderly on her lips, careful not to disturb the cut on her mouth. She didn't respond, but I realized she was nervous. And besides, I prided myself on how to make a woman respond when the time came. If I was anything, it was romantic.

"The moon was shining bright as I carried Victoria to the porch steps. I paused. ‘Look, my love, a full moon just for you on our special night.’ I gazed up at the night sky and looked back down at my bride, when she smashed her clasped fists into my nose. I heard the crack inside my head and nearly passed out. I dropped Victoria in a heap, and before I could recover she was up and running for the van. This one liked to play rough. That was fine in the bedroom, but now was not the time for games.

"She must have thought I was stupid enough to leave the keys in the van, but holding my bleeding nose, I waited until she reached the door. Bleep. Bleep. I clicked the automatic door lock. She looked around like a caged animal. She started down the driveway, but the pulsing pain in my nose and the blood all over my new white T-shirt made me cranky, so I chased her down, grabbing her by the hair in mid stride. Yanking hard, she fell back against me, squealing in pain.

"'Serves you right, bitch! Now, stop fucking around.' I jabbed my buck knife into her ribs and guided her back to the house. She gasped and stopped struggling. ‘Look at you, you're a fucking mess! Now I'm going to have to clean you up before you meet Mama.’ She cried as I forced her up the staircase, my blade pressed against her ribcage.

"I was saving a surprise for later, but you've ruined it. We'll just have to use it now.” I opened the door to the bathroom. It was filled with flickering candles and the bathtub was steaming; pink rose petals floated on the surface. Granted, the tiles were still grimy and the tub was brown with rust stains, but it still looked nice in the candlelight. “Take your clothes off!’ Her eyes looked dazed and she staggered.

"'Now!' I said. She dropped down on the edge of the tub looking limp, so I took matters into my own hands. ‘Stand up!’ I ordered. She complied. I unbuttoned her pants, slid the zipper down, and let them fall to the floor. I couldn't help my arousal at the sight of her thin panties and her long slender legs. I used my buck knife to slit the buttons off her blouse, enjoying each pop of the thread. I slipped her blouse off her shoulders, uncovering firm white breasts in a skimpy bra. I was standing so close I could smell her sweat.

"With the tip of my tongue I tasted her neck, and then pressed myself against her. Slipping my hands around her waist, I felt something sticky. I turned her around like a rag doll, and saw the bleeding wound in her side.

"'You stupid bitch! Look what you made me do to you!' I was beginning to feel anxious and out of control. I must have stuck her too hard with my buck knife when she tried to escape. She'd lost a lot of blood, and now I'd have to waste time patching her up. When I poked my finger in the wound to see how deep it was, she crumpled in my arms, passed out cold. I let her drop to the floor so I could think. My dick was hard and my mind was racing. Time for another dose of Mama's Little Helpers. I took a couple of the pills and before long the future was looking brighter.

"Feeling relaxed, I dressed Victoria's wound and went about cleaning her beautiful body. When I was done, I laid her down naked on the floor. I undressed and washed myself as I watched my bride sleeping. The temptation to take her was growing stronger, but I tried to convince myself to wait. Mama would never approve of my bride if she wasn't a virgin, so I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore my throbbing erection.

"I wrapped my bride in a satin sheet and carried her to the staircase. The house was freezing again. As I walked naked down the steps, I felt something touch me like wind across my skin. A low whisper swirled around me, Murder-er. My legs trembled, but I tried to ignore the voice. You're a dead man, Henry. The whisper slipped around me as I neared the bottom of the stairs.

"Still gripping my buck knife with Victoria in my arms, I made it to the front door when the cackling laughter started. It continued as I carried Victoria into the moonlight and down the path to the family chapel. When we passed through the gravestones of the old cemetery, something brushed by my back, tugging at my bride's satin shroud. A shriek of laughter sliced into the night."
"I'm sorry to have to stop you, Henry, but that's all we have time for today," said Rebecca. Disoriented and annoyed by her abrupt interruption, Henry furrowed his brow in a pout and stared at the clay head.

"I'll see you again tomorrow evening." Glad to step away, Rebecca picked up Henry's clay, observing his progress. "This is really coming along."

Henry's pouting expression disappeared at the compliment. He smiled with pride, spritzed the clay-covered knife with the spray bottle, and wiped it clean with a paper towel.

"Becky," he polished the blade as he spoke, "I really like you."

"Please, call me Doctor." She struggled to speak firmly.

"Becky, you know all my secrets now, and you're the only person who has ever really listened to me. You understand me."

"Well, that's my job, Henry. Your job is to get well." Trying to steady her hand, she reached out and motioned for him to pass her the knife.

Henry held onto it, tilting the blade back and forth, causing its reflection to flash in Rebecca's eyes.

"But I want to know you, Becky," he said, his voice husky and low. "I feel connected to you. When I get out, then I'll be able to visit you ... and really get to know you."

"That's not appropriate for a doctor and her patient, Henry. Now, please give me the knife. It's getting very late." Her voice was thin and wavering.

"What's your last name, Becky? At least tell me that."

"Give me the knife."

"Why won't you tell me your name?" he shouted. "All the others tell me their name."

The orderly knocked on the door, "Everything okay in here, Doc?"

Rebecca held out her trembling hand. Henry winked and placed the knife in her palm.

"Come in," she said. "It's time for Mister Doe to return to his room."

February 7—Personal Journal

I don't know how much more I can take. I never thought it would be this hard. I got another call from the ward nurse today...

"Doctor?" said the frazzled voice. "Dana Haulker here. We met Friday. I'm the floor RN on Frank Doe's ward."

"Yes, Dana. How is he?" asked Rebecca.

"We've been administering the additional meds you prescribed, but I'm afraid he's getting worse. His nightmares have intensified and he's become extremely agitated since you cancelled the past week of his sessions. He hasn't eaten and he refuses his meds. We have to restrain him to administer them. Now we can't get him out of his bed."

"I've rescheduled him for this evening at six," she said. "Let's see if he settles down when you give him that information. I can't come to his room every time he has a tantrum, or it may reinforce the behavior."

"Yes, Doctor," said the nurse with an impatient huff. "I'll keep you informed."

February 7—6:00PM: Frank Doe Session
Rebecca had just finished laying out Henry's sculpture and tools when he entered her office looking jittery and sallow. Avoiding eye contact, he sat down at the table but refused to touch the clay, mumbling to himself and turning away from the sculpted face with its strange twisted mouth.

"Hello, Henry," said Rebecca. "I'm sorry I had to cancel our sessions last week."

"No, I said!" he shouted at the sculpture.

"No, what, Henry?"

"Nothing," he replied, in a hushed voice. He sat sideways in his chair, avoiding the head and avoiding Rebecca.

"Is everything all right?"

"What do you think?" he said, verging on tears. "I can't sleep without having nightmares. People keep whispering around me, and I feel like I want to crawl out of my skin. I have to get out of this place. It's making me crazy. You've got to help me!"

Rebecca masked her smile. "Let's see what we can do to help you get out, Henry. I know it's a difficult phase, but we're so close. Just hang in there," she said. "Why don't we start with where you left off on Monday?"

In a frenzy, Henry opened the pouch of tools and pulled out the knife.

"Shut up!" he screamed, pointing the knife at the head.

"Henry, put the knife down!" said Rebecca, looking toward the door, expecting an orderly to enter at the sound of the commotion.

"Shh ... she'll hear you," he said.

"Who will hear me?"

He tilted his head toward the clay sculpture.

Rebecca was shaking from Henry's violent outburst, and there were no orderlies in sight. She scrambled for something to say. "Maybe if you give her a good spray, she'll quiet down."

Wielding the knife, eyes darting, Henry looked unconvinced.

"Here, I'll do it for you." Fighting to still her shaking hand, she reached for the spray bottle. Henry grabbed her wrist, looking at her with wild eyes.

"Don't!" he said, nearly crushing her wrist in his grip. He stared into her blue eyes and paused as if recognizing her for the first time, then his wild look returned and he pushed her away. He snatched up the misting bottle.

"You better let me do it. She might get angry." With a set jaw of renewed bravery, he glared at the eyes of the head and sprayed. He soaked the clay until it was dripping with muddy water. Glancing at Rebecca, he whispered, "I think it worked."

"Good job, Henry," she said, letting out her breath and forcing herself to relax her knotted shoulders. "Why don't you sit back down so we can gather our thoughts and get started ... before she dries out."

Henry continued to clutch the knife, looking askance at the clay face, a feminine rendition of his own scarred flesh. Wanting nothing more than to send him back to his room, Rebecca knew her days with Henry were few. She couldn't waste this opportunity when she was so close. Regaining her composure, she held out her open palm to Henry.

"The knife, Henry."
He cradled it to his chest and looked at Rebecca with concern. In a strained voice he pleaded, “But I need it ... to protect you.”

Knowing the danger, but weighing the potential that the session held for resolution, Rebecca nodded at Henry and withdrew her hand. Reaching for her notebook and pen, she paused, reading her last entry. She squared her shoulders and looked at Henry's pitiful ruined face.

"I would like to know what happened after you carried Victoria from the house,” she said firmly.

Henry’s facial muscles twitched under Rebecca’s hard stare, but after a pause he complied with a stuttering start.

"Th ... they were ta ... taunting me as I carried her through the cemetery,” he said. “But I didn't want anything to interfere with our meeting with Mama, so I continued on, ignoring the voices. That terrible chill followed me from the house, and I could feel Victoria shivering in my arms. I pulled her close to keep her warm.

"Killer! came a screech from behind me, followed by a stinging slap across the back.

"I stumbled forward into the crypt that led to the chapel, nearly dropping my beautiful Victoria. Recovering my balance, I laid her on the heavy slab of my ancestor's tomb and the satin sheet slipped away, exposing her naked body. It was time to wake her so she could meet Mama. As she lay unconscious, I traced the dark circle of her erect nipples and the smooth curve of her belly with my blade.

"I stroked her silky black hair, trying to wake her. ‘Victoria,’ I called. ‘Victoria?’ But she didn't move. Touching her face, I allowed my hand to move slowly down across her soft skin, feeling the tiny hairs rising at my touch. Her hands were still bound, and without thinking I raised them up above her head and tethered them to a metal loop at the end of the slab. With her back arched and her head turned to the side, her lips parted—teasing me. I felt her body's silent desire and my erection stiffened painfully. As if in a trance, I climbed on top and slipped her legs apart with my knees. I could no longer deny the call of her body, so I thrust and penetrated, enjoying her complete submission until my passion rose to a peak. I moaned in ecstasy, and in perfect timing Victoria began to move beneath me. I came with mind-numbing pleasure as she opened her beautiful blue eyes, screaming and bucking.

"Exhausted and satisfied, I collapsed on top of her. She began to cry, her tears wetting my cheek as I lay against her.

"'Don't worry, darlin', I whispered into her soft hair. ‘Mama doesn't have to know what you've done. This will be our little secret. I just didn't want you to have to wait any longer, my love.’ I lifted my head and looked into her eyes, but she turned away and continued to sob. I grabbed my buck knife and trailed the blade from her neck to her navel. ‘Pull yourself together,’ I said. ‘That's no way to behave before meeting Mama. Besides, I have another surprise for you.'

"I cut her loose, releasing her hands, and lifted her down from the slab. She was still a little tired from our lovemaking, so I wrapped my arm around her waist and guided her across the cool stones of the floor. On top of the twin slab sat my black leather bag. I opened it for Victoria to see, exposing my prized collection.

"These are my mementos, Victoria—special memories from all my past relationships. But for you, my love, I'll retire my bag, and together we can bury it in the family cemetery. We'll make it part of our wedding ceremony, our promise of fidelity to one another.'

"Victoria looked very pale and suddenly doubled over, vomiting and heaving. It must have been nerves, and the blood loss. When she finally finished her retching, the tears started again.

"'I know you're moved by my devotion, darlin', but no need to cry. And besides, it's time to meet Mama. She wouldn't be happy to see you all teary-eyed and snotty.'

"A muffled sound came from behind the door leading to the chapel. ‘Just like I promised, your mama’s here waiting for you. But if you want to see her, you have to stop crying.’ Buck knife in hand, I chuffed her chin and smiled.

"Victoria sniffed back her tears, still looking pale and a bit disheveled, but there was no more time to delay. With my arm around her waist, we entered the Rutt Family Chapel, naked as the day we were born. I carried my blade
proudly—a gift from my daddy. I would at least have him with me in spirit on this important occasion.

"In the candlelight, the crumbling sanctuary still looked charming. With a gentle nudge, I guided my bride up the aisle toward the altar where our mothers were waiting. Mama was looking quite pretty with her hair combed up. I had done my best to apply her makeup, including the old lady red lipstick, which made me gag.

"Earlier in the day, after picking up Missus Lystner, I had placed Mama on the altar next to the cross, balancing her on the rotting stump of her neck. I used the Bible stand to keep her from rolling off onto the floor, and I tried covering the stench of her with a little of her rose oil, but Victoria would just have to get used to it.

"Next to the altar, Missus Lystner sat secured in the pastor's chair. She had become rather chatty, so I taped her mouth. The tears streaming down her bruised cheeks were evidence that she was happy to see us. I nodded to her, and Victoria sagged at the knees. I held her tight.

"'Mama,' I said, ‘I would like to present my beloved, Victoria Ann Lystner. And with your blessing, I will make her my wife.’ Tears welled in my eyes as I gazed at my beautiful bride. Then my worst fears came true. Mama looked down at us with a sour expression.

"'You will not marry that whore, Henry Rutt!'

"'But why, Mama?'

"Mama spoke without moving her twisted mouth. ‘She seduced you into beddin’ her. We could hear your disgusting carnal grunts through the door of the chapel. She's a filthy whore, and she's soiled you, Henry.’ She paused, looking stern with her hazy sunken eyes. ‘You know what must be done now.’

"'No, Mama! Please!'

"A chill wind blew past me and the chapel door slammed closed like thunder. I jumped at the noise, but I was too busy pleading with Mama to notice what had caused it. Wind blustered through the old stone hall and the candles flickered and guttered around us. Victoria slipped from my grasp as I fell to my knees before the altar."

Rebecca kept a cautious eye on Henry while he gripped the clay knife and pleaded with the sculpture on the table before him. He continued to rave:

"Mama, I can't do it!” he said to the clay head. “I love her. Please, don't make me.”

"'You'll do it now, Henry, you piece of worthless shit!'

"I plunged my blade into the floor beside me, defying Mama's demand. ‘I will not!’ I screamed, and buried my face in my hands.

"Even as I spoke the words, I knew that I couldn't defy Mama—I simply couldn't. As I cried into my hands, I was struck from behind. Stunned, I rolled onto my back. Through the fog of pain, I could see Victoria standing over me, gripping a heavy candle stand. She stood there, frozen in place, staring down at me. I heard Missus Lystner's muffled cries and Victoria's spell was broken. She dropped the stand beside me and ran to her mother. I struggled to sit up, shaking my head and trying to clear my vision.

"Laughter echoed off the stone walls of the chapel, and its shrill familiar sound rattled around in my aching head. Henry, I heard a windy whisper in my ear. I know a secret. I ignored the teasing voice.

"Freed from the tape on her mouth, Missus Lystner was screaming for Victoria to untie her hands. I looked over at the two women as my vision cleared. Something about their frantic fear excited me. I grabbed my knife and climbed to my feet, starting up the steps toward them. Victoria's back blocked their view as I came up from behind and grabbed hold of her thick black hair. She struggled, but her strength was fading. I could see dark blood flowing again from the wound in her side. Missus Lystner shrieked as I dragged her daughter toward the altar.

"The cackling in the hall grew louder, boring into my brain. Henry, the voice teased. Wanna know my secret?
Something sharp raked across my back. I flinched at the pain, losing my grip on Victoria. She crawled like a wild animal toward her mother. I felt warm blood trickling down my back.

"Bitch!" I screamed into the room.

"Murderer!" the voice boomed back. A shadowy figure flew at my face and something hard struck me in the chest, knocking me off my feet. My black bag lay empty beside me. I scrambled to stand, then stalked toward Victoria. I could see her hands trembling as she loosened the last of her mother's bindings.

"This is all your fault, you bitch," I bellowed at Victoria, wielding my knife in front of her. My penis was flaccid now, but I knew I needed to make that bitch pay for ruining my plans.

"Henry!" the cackling voice shouted. "What about that secret?"

"Something struck the back of my legs and I fell forward onto my hands and knees. Before I could climb to my feet, disembodied hands with stitched-on fingers held Mama right in front of my face.

"She's dead, Henry!" the voice chided. "In fact, she's just a rotting head, you stupid prick. But that's not the secret."

Rebecca watched Henry blink and shake his head. With a blind stare, he examined the clay face, his body shuddering, tears wetting his cheeks. As if in another world, he continued to speak.

"Mama's eyes were a cloudy blue—like the eyes of a dead fish. My stomach lurched when I saw maggots slithering from the corner of her mouth. 'That's not my mama!' I screamed. Lashing out with my knife, I stabbed the hideous head, feeling the blade penetrate the rotting flesh with a thud. 'She's not dead,' I whimpered.

"It's okay, Henry," said the head. 'It don't hurt much.' I screamed and scrambled backward dropping my knife.

"Mama!"

"She ain't your mama, said a voice in my ear. She's a maggot factory, JUST ... LIKE ... ME." A decaying corpse flew toward me, dropping maggots on me like cluster bombs. 'It's me, Henry! Keiko. Or can't you tell BECAUSE MY BROWN 'ALMOND EYES' HAVE ROTTED OUT OF MY HEAD?"

With a violent thrust, Henry stabbed the clay sculpture and shoved himself away from the table. Rebecca watched with caution as he smacked at the air with empty hands, his vacant eyes sweeping blindly back and forth above his head. His voice sounded strangely like a woman's as he spoke.

"Remember me, Henry?" said another corpse as it flew at my face. "And me?" said another, followed by a string of others. Through the chaos, I saw that Victoria's mother was free and rushing for the knife on the floor. I climbed to my feet and lunged for it. She reached the knife first, but I grabbed her wrist, wrestling the knife from her grip. She lashed out and her fingernails scratched my face. She shrieked at me like a rabid animal. 'I'll kill you for hurting my baby, you psychotic bastard!'

"In the struggle to keep her from gouging out my eyes, I stabbed her over and over with my blade. She staggered and fell at my feet. Silent for a moment, she looked around frantically for her daughter. A gurgling sound escaped as she called out Victoria's name.

"Beside Missus Lystner's body, I saw Mama's head looking up at me with her maggot-filled grin. 'She shouldn't have tangled with you, huh, Henry?' said the head. 'After all, there's really only room for one woman in your life. That's right—you're a mama's boy, aren't you?'

"'Shut up, Mama!' I shouted.

'I felt dazed. My world was falling apart, my plans for the future destroyed, and it was all Victoria's fault! Enraged, I ran down the aisle of the chapel, looking for her between the pews. 'Where are you, bitch?' I bellowed, slicing the air with my knife. 'You'll pay for this.' I stalked up to the altar and pounded my fist. 'You'll ALL pay!'
"Wind whipped around me, and I looked back to see a line of corpses filing in through the chapel door. I squeezed my eyes shut, but when I looked again they were still there. The billowing wind blew remnants of their tattered clothing; the stink of their decay filled the hall. I pointed my buck knife at the long line of corpses.

"'Fuck you! Fuck all of you!' I screamed.

"I ran behind the altar and nearly stumbled over Victoria, who was huddled on the floor, her arms hugging her knees. As the corpses advanced, I raised my blade above Victoria's head and laughed hysterically into the wind.

"'Too late, bitches! She's dead, too!' Just as I was ready to plunge my knife, Victoria rose up in one swift movement, revealing something hidden in her lap. In a powerful arc, she swung the heavy brass altar cross, striking me on the side of the head. Light exploded in my vision, and I fell to the ground, paralyzed. Victoria loomed over me with the cross in her hands, and in a long, slow movement she lifted it above her head and slammed it down into my face. Unable to move, I felt the sharp edges slice into my skin, crushing my bones. For a long time she continued to beat me. Exhausted, she finally stopped and stared down at me with blank eyes, tossing the bloodied cross at my feet.

"As she walked away, bone-cold fingers lifted my limp body and dumped me in the pastor's chair. Blinking my eyes was the only movement I could make, but I could feel every excruciating inch of my broken body.

"A tall male corpse in a police uniform appeared in the corner of my vision. He removed his jacket and placed it around the shoulders of the naked Victoria. He leaned down and picked up Missus Lystner's body. Walking slowly past the parade of corpses, the man escorted Victoria up the aisle as he carried her mother in his arms."

Sensing the end of her work was finally near, Rebecca sat forward, rapt. Henry gasped. He pulled his knees up under his chin. Wrapping his arms tightly around his legs, he began to rock back and forth in his seat. A strange female voice came forward as Henry's story unfolded.

"Recognize him, Henry? the cackler shouted at me.

"You ought to, said another. YOU KILLED HIM!

"Now, Keiko, you've gone and spoiled the secret.

"The shrieking laughter that followed ripped through my head like a hot blade. My mind spun with dizzying images, like watching a jumbled movie swirling into focus. The sounds of the chapel faded, and I was thirteen years old again in my daddy's car.

"'I saw it with my own eyes,' said my daddy. 'I came home early and the two of you were so busy fucking, you didn't hear me come in. I saw my own wife on top of you, boy! My own wife, Henry!' He slammed his fist against the dashboard.

"I flung the car door open and started running—I ran and ran until I blacked out and found myself outside my house on Oak Street. I staggered in through the kitchen door and saw my mother crying at the table.

"'Oh, Henry. Thank god you're here. Your daddy's gonna send me to prison!' She clawed at my shirt and pulled me to her.

"'You've gotta stop him!'

"I heard Daddy's heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. I pulled away from Mama, watching around the corner of the kitchen door as Daddy sat down in his big chair. He was in his uniform, ready to go to the station. He laid his holster and gun on the table beside him and covered his face with his hands. Deep wrenching sobs poured out of him.

"Mama moved up behind me. Wrapping her arms around my chest, she pressed her soft body against my back. 'You've gotta stop him, Henry. He's gonna take me away,' she whispered, her hot breath against my neck. 'Then you and me won't have no more special lovin'.' Sliding her hand down from my chest to my crotch, she massaged until I was hard and aching for her, needing her. 'There ain't nobody ever gonna love you like your mama,' she said as she
nudged me toward the living room. ‘Stop him,’ she hissed. ‘Please, Henry…’

"I moved like a zombie, I didn't think. In a few big steps, I came up beside my daddy. I grabbed his gun from the holster, and he looked up with his face all wet from tears. His eyes flickered with confusion as I clicked off the safety and pulled the trigger, shooting my daddy in the face. With the stink of the spent bullet in my nose, I dropped the gun on the floor and ran from the house. The next morning I woke up in the baseball dugout with my father's dried blood splattered on my face and hands.

"Right then, the movie in my mind went black, and my vision returned to the Rutt Family Chapel.

"Oh, poor Henry's crying. He misses his daddy," said the cackler.

"No, I think he wants his mommy," another voice whined from behind me.

"Awwww, too bad," said Keiko. "SHE'S DEAD! But we'll take care of you, won't we girls?"

"Loud shouts of agreement followed. One of the fresher corpses stepped in front of me. She waved the buck knife in my face, and I recognized the high school ring dangling loose around her decaying finger. Wendy! I closed my eyes. With a sharp pain in my right hand, my eyes opened wide and I saw that my wrists were tied to the arms of the chair. Wendy was pressing the knife blade against my pinkie.

"They say an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. She grinned, and the corners of her mouth cracked open. But I say, an eye for an eye and a finger for a finger! How about it, Henry?"

"I watched in terror as she raised her hand and brought it down hard on the back of the blade. Thwack! My pinkie tumbled to the floor. Black spots filled my vision.

"Someone slapped me to bring me around, then one by one the ladies took turns amputating my fingers. Some were quick, but others just hacked away until they got to the bone, then they hacked some more. When I passed out, they slid the knife across my throat to warn me to stay awake. I wasn't sure what was worse, death by slow amputation or a quick slit to the jugular. But I opened my eyes by instinct, forced to watch as my fingers dropped one by one to the floor. When they were gone, the girls moved on to my toes. My mind was fading, but I was jolted awake when Wendy shouted.

"I get dibs on his prick!

"Someone chimed in, Henry IS a prick. They all laughed and cackled and coughed their agreement.

"It's a pitiful little thing," said Wendy, but it'll make a nice MEMENTO. Huh, Henry?

"In agony, tears streamed down my face as my last toe tumbled to the floor with a quiet plop. Boney fingers untied me and lifted me from the chair. My head was spinning as they laid my naked body on the altar.

"A small corpse, unrecognizable from decay, came forward and stepped up beside me.

"The honor is yours, Miss Lilly. You earned it," said Wendy as she ceremoniously handed over the buck knife.

"With withered bone fingers, the corpse reached up and lifted my flaccid penis by the tip.

"I was your first, Henry, but this is your last!

"With a quick slice of the blade, my severed penis came off in her hand."

Henry's story ended, but he continued to rock and stare with blind eyes. He was gone for good this time. Rebecca watched his rhythmic movements, confused by the mixture of feelings that surged through her. She got to her feet and paced the room with jagged tension building in her mind. The old rage welled inside her as she turned back to the silent head of clay, its twisted mouth mocking the pathetic man rocking catatonic in his chair.
Rebecca reached out, gripped the knife still embedded in the clay, and yanked it free. Feeling its slippery weight in the palm of her hand, her body trembled as she turned her hot gaze on Henry. She knew one swift slice of revenge would spill his blood, his evil draining away with his life.

She closed her eyes and envisioned a world without Henry Rutt, without the object of her life's purpose, her life's origin. She imagined him released and free from the torture of his silent purgatory, and she smiled.

"No," she whispered. Instead, she let the knife fall from her hand, turning away from Henry's scarred face, the drool hanging elastic from his chin.

Before she called the orderly to take Henry away, she slipped the remaining vials of hallucinogenic from her desk into her pocket. Opening the spray bottle, she dumped the contents into a planter by the window. As she tossed the bottle in the trash, she let out a desperate cry for the orderly.

March 1—Personal Journal

Mom: It's finally over. I love you.

Morning sun blazed through the windows as Becky sat at the empty desk, the packing boxes stacked around her ready to be taken away. There was a knock at the door just as she completed her letter.

"Come in."

Rob Silvani entered the room with a huge bouquet of pink roses. “I know they're your favorite, so I hope they cheer you up."

"Thanks, Rob," she said, after inhaling their sweet scent.

"Look, Becky, I know we've had our problems, but I want you to know how sorry I am about your job. You've worked so hard. To lose it all over a knife? It's ridiculous."

"It's okay, Rob. With the disaster I made of Frank Doe's case, I don't deserve to stay."

"That wasn't your fault, Beck. Frankly, it's lucky you uncovered his violent behavior with that knife before he was transferred. I don't think even my father and his sacred budget would move him now."

"Well, I guess that's one good thing," she said. “And Rob, I'm sorry about everything. If you still want to have that dinner with me, I'm free.” She gave him a weary smile.

"That's a deal."

"Oh, and could you please do something for me?"

"Of course, anything, Beck."

"It's my resignation letter. Give it to your father for me. He needs it for the files."

Rebecca turned back to her letter and signed it with a final flourish:

Sincerely Yours,

Rebecca Ann Lystner

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Story Notes

Fine Print

Like a lot of my stories, the inspiration for “Fine Print” came in an unexpected image that flashed in my mind. I saw a man on wet pavement holding his critically injured wife, which became the opening scene for the story. Thanks to my sassy voyeur of a muse, this type of image acts like a window—if I look closely, a story unfolds in little clips or scenes, like a movie in my head.

"Fine Print” originally began (and failed) as a series for The Horror Library. Parts one and two were well received, with frequent inquiries about the missing conclusion. Well, life interfered and the story went cold. Although I hate to fail at anything—or worse, disappoint wonderful readers—I'm glad I let this story stew for a while.

Having the chance to revisit “Fine Print” for the collection, I've been a little self-indulgent with it in a couple of ways. I let the story wind out a bit and tried my hand at a slower pacing. When I read the work of master writers, I'm always amazed at their confidence to let a story breathe, like the space right after the arc in the last movement of a symphony. They don't race relentlessly from start to finish but rather they allow the reader time to breathe and sink more deeply into the story. At the risk of boring you, I gave this pacing thing a try in “Fine Print.” I fear it may have fallen into the yawn category, but a gal's got to take a chance now and again.

My second indulgence and the real fun of this story was inspired by Wendy, my online buddy from Australia. At the Shocklines message board she stated a burning desire to be “offed” in a story, so in a grand inspiration I granted her wish in the rewrite of Mama's Boy. When I posted a thread called “I Killed Wendy,” the floodgates opened and I discovered that a lot of folks wanted in on the action. Consequently, most of the characters in “Fine Print” are guest appearances by my beloved Shocklines friends and colleagues. I must confess that I had entirely too much fun killing them off ... in a literary sense, of course!

Gravy Pursuits

"Gravy Pursuits” was born in AJ Brown's flash fiction group with a prompt from Stephen Sommerville: food. The first line of the story popped in my head almost immediately, and Leonard Hogtire was born. It was one of those wonderful stories that basically wrote itself. Next time you have a little gravy on your mashed potatoes, be sure to remember Leonard and his “Gravy Pursuits.”

Beach of Dreams

"Beach of Dreams” is set on a fictional Pacific island, and since I moved to the beach recently, my environment seems to be seeping into my stories.

BoD was an AJ Brown's flash fiction group inspiration from Dameion Becknell's simple prompt: monsters. The image of dead or sleeping giants on a beach popped into my mind and compelled me to write the story so I could find out what they were. I wrote a really rough first draft (sorry Tom!) for my submission to the Borderlands Press Boot Camp, and the Hawaiian names used were in honor of Tom Monteleone (Coma), F. Paul Wilson (Paulo) and Elizabeth Monteleone (Peka). These amazing instructors and my fellow “grunts” gave me a great deal of help with a very challenging story.

As an experiment, I let my imagination run amuck with this tale. Like I told my HWA mentor, Lisa Morton: going so deeply into that imagination-run-amuck zone felt like a loss of control, but it was also a great lesson in learning to ride the dragon without being eaten alive in the process.

Also, I'd like to apologize to the Hawaiian people for any mangling of their beautiful language in this story. I actually have a secret desire to be Hawaiian, but alas, I was born in Maryland.

Spider Love

This was yet another story born of the flash fiction group; this time the prompt was from AJ Brown. His subject was
... uh, spiders. I know, what a surprise, but as usual my mind did a twisted variation on a theme, and I must confess it was very satisfying story to write.

Orange and Golden

Like so many people, the Hurricane Katrina disaster was a wrenching experience to witness from a distance and unfathomable to imagine living through. There were many images that brought me to tears during the coverage of the aftermath, but one in particular left me sobbing: in the midst of the makeshift camp set up at an underpass in New Orleans, a young man was reunited with his dog. He was wracked with sobs, his face buried in the big dog's fur. It took me to the heart of the disaster—not just the physical disaster but the visceral emotional devastation. I wrote “Orange and Golden” with tears streaming down my face.

The Sea Orphan

"The Sea Orphan” was a failed attempt at writing a story for a pirate anthology—failed in that I totally missed the deadline. Why, you might ask? Because I became strangely obsessed with the whole pirate mythos—involuntarily, at first. I must confess I knew almost nothing about pirates, had never been very interested, but I was enticed by the money to give it a shot (oh yes, greed—the great literary motivator ... that and hunger). When my husband discovered my interest in pirates, he declared himself my personal concierge into the wonderful world of the high seas.

My hubby is a very laid back guy, but certain topics, like pirates, spark in him a kind of fiendish enthusiasm ... and I became the unwitting pupil of this fiend. First, there was the mandatory reading of Treasure Island, which I pooh-poohed. Turns out I loved it! Second was a week-long festival of pirate movies, ala such classics as Captain Blood and The Sea Hawk.

You're beginning see my husband's dastardly plan, aren't you? That's right, draw me in slowly with the entertainment angle, then BAMM!, number three hits home: hardcore research. He was a slave driver: pirates versus privateers, ships and weaponry, pirate language, global trade routes during the pirate's heyday, and on and on. You get the picture, and I suppose you can see why I missed the deadline for the anthology. I left the story unfinished figuring I'd never place a pirate tale, but when the opportunity to write the collection came around, I jumped at the chance to visit the pirates again. Even though I whined about it, I actually had a blast doing the research and now I'm a true blue blimey fan. Aaargh!

Close Shave

This nasty little ditty was written for the Insidious Reflections Magazine Gross Out contest. Inspired by challenging myself to think of “gross” from a cringingly feminine perspective, I was perversely proud to have won third place in the contest.

Connected at the Hip

I submitted Connected at the Hip for Wicked Karnival Magazine's 2006 Flash Fiction Calendar. Born in June, I chose the twins of Gemini as my subject matter, and I was thrilled to win a spot in the calendar amongst writers like Elizabeth Massie, James Newman, and Bob Freeman, along with Tom Moran's brilliant art that graced every page.

Under the Dryer

I've always had a bit of a concern about what lurks in spaces we can't really see, especially the commonplace areas we become complacent about. Oh, you may scoff, but have you looked under your dryer lately? Well, I have; hence this story. Thank goodness for Goliath, is all I have to say.

The Widow

"The Widow” came spinning out of my brain in a flash, if you'll pardon the pun. The inspiration was a writing prompt from a friend. I can't remember the details of the prompt, but I recall thinking that the result felt more like poetry than flash fiction, but what do I know. I just write stuff down.
Black Sleep

I used to write a lot of private poetry. I found it very therapeutic to express my feelings, but I hadn't written a poem for a number of years and never for public consumption. However, when a friendly competition arose with my blogging partners at The Horror Library Blog-O-Rama, I took the challenge.

"Black Sleep" came to my mind in the powerful image of a grief-stricken man laying his head on a pillow of soft, loamy soil. The subject matter wasn't personal (at least not consciously), but it felt good to write poetry again. More than anything I've ever written, it felt scary to share a piece of poetry publicly. I admire fine poets, because I suspect their work comes from a very tender and vulnerable place, and to share such a thing takes courage.

Mashed

"Mashed" was inspired by my love of spring and by my three older brothers who enjoyed a good taunt every now and then ... every day ... endlessly. The story first appeared at The Horror Library in a slightly different form. Incidentally, potatoes are one of my favorite foods.

Special Prayers

This story was inspired by a flash fiction prompt from Dameion Becknell. “Weather” was the topic, and as usual, my mind went about twisting the prompt into something somewhat out of the ordinary. “Special Prayers” is actually one of those stories that I worry about publishing. I happen to really love babies and I'd never want to use a subject that would hurt or offend anyone, but for me this was a powerful story to write. It had a hard edge and somehow felt like it was an expression of a truth I didn't quite understand, but that I needed to write. So please accept my apologies if this story makes you uncomfortable. Oddly enough, at this stage of my life, I think a little discomfort may not always be a bad thing.

Mama’s Boy

*Mama’s Boy* had a strange growth process. It started as a micro-mini flash fiction response to a Valentine's Day writing prompt. The prompt was simply, “And that's why I love you.” I’m really not as horrid as this makes me sound, but the first thing that entered my mind was the image of a woman lying on a cement slab with a man standing over her—and the words that came to mind were: “And that's why I love you,” he said as he trailed the tip of the sharp blade from her collarbone to her heart.

Don't ask me where this stuff comes from—I don't even watch slasher movies. Go figure.

Anyway, MB went from that micro-flash to a short story for a writing class, to a medium length novella for an anthology (ultimately, they rejected it—lucky for me), to a hefty novella published by Insidious Publications. And no one was more surprised than I when it made it through the many layers of judging by the Horror Writers Association to become a finalist for the 2006 Bram Stoker Awards. I was quite stunned, and very honored.

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Acknowledgments

Writers can write until the cows come home, but if they want their stories to be unleashed on the world in any semblance of order they need the help of a lot of great people, so I'd like to take a moment to show a little love to a few folks. Along with my specific thanks, my love goes out in bunches to the impossibly long list of those not mentioned below.

When Mama's Boy needed a new home after its beloved tenure with Insidious Publications, publisher Jason Sizemore rode in on a fancy white stallion (okay, he walked in wearing sneakers, but a girl's got a right to embellish) at the World Horror Convention in Toronto and swept me off my author's feet. Now mind you, Apex Digest is my undisputed favorite mag and one of my early writing goals was to be published by Apex, so this event was a little coup of fate according to my sensibilities. Anyway, a deal was made and one of the most pleasurable professional relationships of my life began.

Jason Sizemore is immensely patient, generous, and kind, and through our work together I feel I've gained a lifelong friend. For me, this will be the best personal legacy of writing Mama's Boy and Other Dark Tales. But don't let that Sizemore mild-mannered façade fool you. I take it you've seen that Apex Global Domination logo? Well, it's real people! You've been forewarned.

Thanks also go to Deb Taber for her magical editing talents. When I received her edits I realized just how sad and inferior I really am. Ms. Taber was gracious, professional, and brutally good.

Tod Clark and Kurt Dinan—where would I be without your eagle-eyed critiques and excellent recommendations? Thank you.

My thanks also go to:

- AJ Brown and the crew at the flash fiction office at Zoetrope. They're responsible for inspiring more than a few of the stories in this collection, as well as helping me regain my mojo after a long and difficult year.

- RJ, Boyd, Bailey, and the gang for keeping the home fires burning at The Horror Library. And of course there are my magnificent bloggers—AJ, Chrispy, Dan, Erik, and Petra from the Horror Library Blog-O-Rama—for their endless support.

- Jennifer Perssons for her magnificent encouragement and for the inspiration to write the collection.

- The master instructors and grunts at the Borderlands Press Boot Camp for the literary calisthenics, and to F. Paul Wilson for reminding me that sometimes really smart people can be wrong.

- Gary Braunbeck for being my unsuspecting mentor with every word he writes, and for his generosity, kindness and inspiration. Unbeknownst to him, his words of encouragement kept me writing through some pretty dark days. As long as I live I don't believe I'll ever receive a more wonderful book introduction. I'm humbled beyond words.

My deepest love and gratitude go to Paul, my husband, my best friend, my harshest critic, and my greatest fan. He's my inspiration and the sole reason I have the luxury to keep hammering words into stories.

And finally, to the kind readers who spend their precious time and money on my work. You're the folks who make the mad hours spent in my writing cave worth every minute. Seeing my books disappearing from the shelves and taking up residence in your homes is simply amazing to me. And your kind words? They give me a thrill you can't imagine. Thank you so very much for letting me tell you stories.

Fran Friel,

Springtime in Connecticut, 2008

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About the Author

Fran Friel writes and blogs by the sea on the coast of southern New England where she lives with her wonderful husband and daughter, and a dog named Sandy. Fran is a 2006 Bram Stoker Award finalist and is currently working on a novel about scary things. Please stop by and visit her at www.FranFriel.com and at her blog, Fran Friel's Yada Feast at blog.myspace.com/franfriel.
About the Artist

**Billy Tackett** is a multi-talented artist living in Northern Kentucky. His skills as an artist drift into all things dark and ominous. Billy is also a talented musician, photographer, graphic/web designer, writer, and make-up artist. The self-proclaimed “Creepiest Artist in America,” he is all that and more.

His current projects include being the “Official Artist” of Shane Moore’s Abyss Walker book series, creator and writer of the soon to be released graphic novel based on his series of paintings “Dead, White & Blue,” and designing a line of T-shirts featuring his work.

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