

SOMETHING EVIL

Volume I: Books 1 & 2

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The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
The Gulag Archipelago

This is for you.

Book One: Dead Man's Party

*And besides, don't the darkest, most frightening things live
inside us anyway?*

1.

What Freddy Wise wanted to feel, more than anything, was something. It didn't seem like too much to ask, in fact it seemed like very little, and yet for twenty-six years he had felt nothing at all. Freddy was surprisingly introspective for a borderline psychopath, and sometimes, late at night when he could not sleep, when the streetlight shone through the gauzy curtain over his window like an accusing star, when the rhythmic snoring of the slut who'd passed out next to him in his bed began to torment his nerves like so much Chinese water torture, he shut his eyes and recalled his favorite passage from *The Call of the Wild*:

*He was sounding the depths of his nature,
and the parts of his nature that were deeper than him.*

Freddy had been much taken with that passage as a thirteen-year-old boy, and now, as a young man well into his twenties, he had developed it into a kind of mental exercise. In said exercise, he sat in an imaginary boat, dropping a lead weight into the waters that comprised himself, and watched the sounding line play out through his fingers until the weight hit bottom. Except that it never did. The weight went down and down, into the cold lightless depths of his soul, and never hit a goddamn thing. He was beginning to suspect that it never would, that maybe there was nothing to hit.

This thought troubled Freddy greatly—as greatly, anyway, as Freddy could be troubled by anything. He had known since he was a child that he had little in the way of genuine emotions. Impulses, certainly. The impulse to break things, or to take things, or to consume things, had always been very strong in him. Some mistook it as greed,

but the stark fact was that Freddy behaved as he did because *having* gave him a semblance, an approximation, a simulacrum as it were, of real feeling. The *act* of having tingled his nerve-endings and got his blood pumping a little harder and made him feel alive.

For a minute or two, anyway.

Having was not terribly difficult for Freddy Wise. He had been a good-looking kid, and he was a splendid-looking man. Beyond his looks, however, he projected that air of unflappable, heavy-lidded indifference that most of the female population found irresistible. There was Freddy, with his rumpled James Dean hair and Cupid's-bow lips, regaling a shapely undergraduate about the time he'd been knocked into an excavation hole in the Montana Badlands by a rampaging bison, and yet managing to convey the impression that he didn't really care that the fall had nearly killed him. All of Freddy's stories were of this ilk. He might be sifting dirt in Valley Forge, or shoveling sand in the Valley of the Kings, or waist-deep in a valley with no name at all, somewhere in the frozen bogs of Scotland... but the insouciant way he lighted his cigarette as he told the tale seemed to say, *Don't get the impression, babe, that I cared about any of it. I don't care about anything.*

Many young men affected this sort of pose to spread naive womanly thighs. Freddy did not have to pose. His carelessness was all too real. Lately, it had even begun to spread to his friends.

A full-blown psychopath is incapable of friendship, but it was Freddy's especial curse that he was neither emotionally "normal" nor completely emotionally defective. Rather, he had been born trapped in a misty gray area between the two, condemned to wander there rather like an unrepentant Jacob Marley. He was an attractive person, people were attracted to him, and some of those people he preferred over others. They made him *feel* something, almost—intellectual curiosity, amusement, desire. To the extent that he could care, he cared about them. In any case he had trained himself to *act* as if he did, and as George Orwell had once pointed out, a face twists to fit the shape of its mask. On this particular Halloween, however, the mask seemed to be cracking, revealing the yawning emptiness beneath.

Part of the problem, Freddy knew, was the contempt of familiarity.

He had been at Resurrection University since he was eighteen years old—first as an undergraduate, then a graduate student, and now as a journeyman in the doctoral program—and most of his friends had made that journey with him. He had known them as callow, pimply freshmen, nervously licking the foam off lukewarm keg beer while they made clumsy conversation in sweltering, smoke-filled basements off campus; and he knew them now, as overstressed Ph.D. candidates whose passports had been stamped more times than a porn star's lower back. He knew their faces, their moods, their opinions, their passions and their prejudices, and they had begun to bore him, individually and collectively. Everything bored Freddy in the end, but he had hoped that this all-encompassing boredom would spare his nearest and dearest. It had not. Which was why, on this Halloween night, a night when he ought to be celebrating his return to the United States, he occupied an overstuffed La-Z Boy recliner in his darkened living room, a beer nestled in the fork of his crotch, watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* on a Zenith television considerably older than he was.

Strictly speaking, of course, it wasn't *his* living room. The house was communal, an ancient bequest to the Archaeology Department from a long-dead benefactor named Mulder. Freddy hadn't resided in it since his undergraduate days, and he hadn't crossed the threshold. Nevertheless, he considered it *his*, from creaky attic to warped floorboards, from peeling wallpaper to stolen furniture. Much was missing from him, but not a sense of territoriality, or even nostalgia. When he was twenty-one years old, he had stolen the very La-Z Boy upon which he now reclined from an unlocked garage just down the street and dragged it through the rain-drowned streets and over the threshold, rather like a cheetah dragging a dead caribou. This act had begun a tradition, largely upheld, that Mulder House ought to be appointed *only* with things stolen, or at very least obtained in shifty and disreputable ways. This explained the decor, which was an eclectic mishmash collected from yard sales, junk shops, and, when Freddy had been at the whiskey, midnight raids on unlocked garages. In archaeology, the central fascination of the discipline was that every object told a story, and in Mulder House, every object really *did* tell a

story. But only to the initiates, people like Freddy, who knew their provenance. Being unable to feel much of anything else, not love or joy nor hatred nor fear, he cultivated nostalgia. And so, though he had moved out years before, he still thought of it as home.

Freddy took a gulp of beer and watched the doings on the television. As always, he was disappointed. The grisly sight of the killer, leering from behind his mask of harvested human flesh, the rip-roar of the terrible chainsaw, the deafening screams of the imperiled victim—none of it made the slightest impression on him. No horror movie had ever frightened Freddy Wise. He no longer believed he could *be* frightened. Disquieted, perhaps; startled, certainly; but not frightened. To be frightened, one had to care deeply about something. Freddy did not. Could not.

The woman in the movie pleaded for mercy. The hysteria in her voice, though simulated, fascinated him. What was it like to feel anything that intensely? Fear, to Freddy, was even more mysterious than love. It seemed an exotic, almost occultic, an emotional rite in which he was forbidden to participate. He was reminded of the stories his grandfather had told him—how he'd been blackballed from a secret society in college, denied promotion in the Army, and refused entry into a country club, all on account of his Jewishness. Freddy couldn't relate to that, for no one had ever given him a hard time on that score; but in his own way, he understood exclusion all too well, for some quirk of genetics, some tiny cellular flaw, some infinitesimal misalignment of chromosomes, had separated him forever from the normal range of human emotions.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

On screen, pleas had given way to screams of agony as the chainsaw hewed its way through flesh and fat, muscle and bone. The camera revealed none of this, of course; the close-ups showed only the girl's reaction to her own murder: bulging eyes, glistening teeth, clawed hands—and, of course, a truly histrionic scream of terror.

"Stop whining, bitch," Freddy said, draining the last of his beer. "You don't know how lucky you are."

2.

The killer stood at the intersection of Jackson Street and Jessop Place, contemplating an ax. It was quite an ax at that, long-handled and double-bitted, with the blades an aggressive shade of Fire Department red, and looked as if it could cut through any goddamn thing its handler put his mind to. This did not attract anyone's particular attention. It was Halloween in a college town, and costumed figures, many drenched in fake blood, were plenteous on the streets. Ghosts, goblins, witches, young men dressed as figures out of slasher mythology, and young women wearing dangerously close to nothing at all weaved up and down the vomit-spattered pavements, trailing the sweetish stench of marijuana, and leaving, everywhere they paused for long, a spoor of empty beer cans and still-burning cigarettes. This reflected no newfound irresponsibility on their parts, for as children most of them had spent this night depositing a similar litter of candy wrappers in their wake. The only thing that had changed was the pleasures in which they indulged.

Lust was in the air. The killer could feel it, though more strictly speaking he could smell it. It was heavier than the reek of the weed; it seemed to sit, motionless, in his nostrils despite the wind that raised the bedsheets some of the undergraduates wore as togas, exposing underwear or, in some cases, the lack of it. A few years past, when he'd been an undergraduate himself, the killer had put on costumes just as ridiculous and been every bit as interested in emptying his balls into something warm and wet and willing. But he was older now, and his pleasures had changed. He wore no costume, and the ax he carried, with its smooth hickory handle and its weighty steel head, was no toy. It was as real and as sharp as the hate that burned brightly inside of him, a hate that obliterated everything except his rage-heightened perceptions and the strange, almost joyous sense of purpose that sang within his heart.

The killer had once been fond of reflecting on the paradoxes of life, and even now, with his conscious mind submerged in murderous

need, part of him—a voice calling up from a well, so to speak—wondered at the crystal-clear focus this hate had given him. An hour ago, he had been a mediocrity, put-upon and taken for granted, but unmindful, unresentful, uninjured: just happy to be part of the gang. Now, reborn, he relived every slight, every insult, every humiliation he had experienced, and he relived these things all at once and with outsized intensity, as if his pain and anger rebounded inside an emotional echo chamber. It seemed to him that everyone he had ever known and loved stood around him now in a jeering circle, faces stripped of pretense as they gleefully recounted the wrongs they had done him. He could have spent a lifetime sifting through those wrongs, categorizing them, laying them out for display like so many shards of Phoenician glass.

Or he could avenge them.

All at once.

Tonight.

3.

Vijay Desai thought that the clock, more than anything else, summed up what was wrong with the planet on which he lived, and he was just drunk enough—after four or five shots on an empty stomach—to reflect a little on this observation.

This *epiphany* brought to him by Jack Daniel's.

To be sure, it was Daryl Stebbing who had bought the clock, from some thirdhand junk shop way the fuck out in the hinterlands: a place, Daryl had said with a gap-toothed grin, right out of *Sanford & Son*. You could always count on Daryl to do the most wasteful, profligate, and juvenile thing imaginable, and spending fifty dollars on this aesthetic abomination was entirely in keeping with his childish character. But Daryl, buffoon that he was, amounted merely to a symptom. The fucking *clock* was the disease.

You might not have thought so, to glance at the thing. The sheer size of it made a definite impression, and the quality of the

workmanship could not be denied. Vijay didn't know from Shinola where cuckoo clocks were concerned, and didn't want to, but you didn't have to be an expert on the subject to recognize the care that had gone into this one's construction. What Daryl had brought home was a haunted house in miniature, cross-gabled and black-roofed, with the ornate clock set in the face and two small doors on either side. The doors were connected by a track that described a semicircular arc through a tiny graveyard, and every hour on the hour, they opened with an oily little *click* and disgorged first a fleeing figurine with a comic-opera look of terror on its painted face, and then the cloaked and hooded form of Death, clutching at its scythe with bony—and precisely articulated—fingers. The figures made one revolution for every hour struck, and as he watched now, lip curled in disgust, the clock struck once more.

Bong. The doors opened. *Bong.* The little man in his 19th-century nightdress emerged and made his chugging half-circle through the little cemetery. *Bong.* The Grim Reaper emerged, the silver paint on his scythe-blade gleaming in the candle-light, and gave chase—an endless and futile chase, eleven revolutions long. Vijay watched each and every one of them, and when they had ceased, when Death and his would-be victim had retired behind their little doors, he poured himself another shot.

This clock, he thought. *This fucking clock.* Not one piece of plastic in it. Every roof tile, every shutter, every bat hanging upside-down from an eave, every miniature gravestone, had been hand-carved from what appeared to be mahogany and then painted with fine-detail brushes. He could only imagine what the inner works looked like: a delicate balance of brass and steel, sufficient not only to keep time but to push the Reaper and his would-be victim along that track countless times a day.

All that effort, all that expense, wasted on a bit of showmanship that struck everyone as hilarious on Halloween and absolutely pointless the other 364 days of the year. And Daryl, who never had any money, who was forever bumming cigarettes and digging in his pockets for that elusive quarter so he could pay the parking meter, had laid down fifty

simoleons for it.

Vijay lifted his glass and stared into the whiskey with wordless hatred. Why was it that, in a world where billions starved, where countless people slept under bridge abutments and ate out of garbage cans, someone should have the time and inclination to build a fucking clock like this? And that someone else—Vijay lifted his gaze from the surface of the whiskey to stare balefully at Daryl—should feel the need to buy it?

Vijay was an archaeologist. He had spent a lot of time digging up the bones of civilizations past. He knew that it was on the small things—a copper coin, a shard of glass, a fragment of clay pot—that the judgment of history often rested its boots. He wondered what the fuck that judgment would be when applied to his own civilization, *American* civilization, which had so much money to spend on vulgar, useless rubbish, yet shut its collective wallet tighter than a virgin's box when intelligence and compassion were needed.

Down went the whiskey, a fiery streak from mouth through esophagus into belly, and he realized it wasn't Western civilization that made him angry. Not a gaudy little clock, and not the fool who had bought it. It was the futile way Death chased that goofy-faced motherfucker in the nightdress. Vijay knew all too well what it was like to chase something he could not have.

That would not have *him*.

He watched the cluster of familiar faces in the Wreck Room. Daryl. Pamela. Lizzie. Cho. And Rosealeen. Sweet Rosealeen, who was innocent as Vijay was guilty, pure as he was soiled, gentle and soft-spoken as he was hard and abrasive. Rose of the pale gold hair and the sky-blue eyes and the tremulous pink lips that practically invited you to kiss them, with the exception that the invitation had never been extended to Vijay. This was bad enough, but when you considered just who that summons *had* gone to, it became exasperating, infuriating...

Intolerable!

Vijay looked up at the picture hanging over the bar. Someone had taken it just after they'd exhumed the Cipher in Scotland, and Pamela, with her insistence on commemorating everything, had paid to have it

blown up and mounted, as if that whole wretched experience was something anyone would *want* to remember. Indeed, if you looked at the fucking photo all you saw was a gang of dirty, exhausted doctoral candidates standing shin-deep in a peat bog, the strain of the most problematic excavation in the history of Resurrection University writ plain on their faces. Nobody smiled. Nobody except Marcus Hope, because Marcus Hope *always* smiled. Marcus Hope had a lot to smile about. He was brilliant. He was handsome. He was suave and self-assured and heir to a vast fortune.

And best of all, he had Rosealeen in his pocket.

Sounds of revelry on the streets below: an incoherent shout, laughter, the *thump* of a car stereo.

The bay windows on the second floor of Mulder House had been papered over by generations of retro rock posters—Led Zeppelin yielding to Van Halen yielding to Nine Inch Nails and so on, all the way to Coldplay and the White Stripes and beyond—so Vijay trudged unnoticed up the short stairwell that led from the Wreck Room to the attic and went to the circular window overlooking Jackson Street. Undergrads streamed over the pavements, their costumes making fantastical shadows beneath the dull glare of the streetlights. He was only five years older than the oldest of them, but those five years may as well have been twenty. He had the outlook—and the bitterness—of a middle-aged man, and this realization only served to make him bitterer still.

I'm too young to feel this way, he thought. *Too young to be this fucking miserable and angry. If Marc would just drop dead—*

But he had visited this fantasy once too often, and its once lurid colors had faded to a squalid sepia tone within his mind. Anyway, people like Marc didn't drop dead. That sort of fate was reserved for men like Vijay's father, who hadn't been brilliant, or handsome, or suave or self-assured, and most definitely not heir to a fucking fortune. He hadn't possessed anything, really, except a willingness to work hundred-hour weeks to put his son through school. Vijay remembered the last time he'd seen the old man, slumped gray-faced over the counter of his shabby little convenience store, one hand trembling around a coffee

cup, the stub of a cigarette between his lips. At forty-nine, Abhay Desai had looked a frail and feeble sixty, and oh, how Vijay had despised him for that. Was there anything more clichéd, more stereotypical than the work-worn Indian immigrant selling gasoline and potato chips from behind bulletproof glass? Vijay's cheeks burned with shame every time he even thought of what his father had done for a living, and the shame hadn't ended when Abhay had died. Somehow the stink of the gasoline and the disinfectant seemed to haunt Vijay's nostrils even now.

And the smell always seemed strongest when Marcus Hope was in the picture.

4.

Rosealeen Coates traced a finger around the rim of her glass. The nail was unpainted, as was her face: she never wore cosmetics. Marc told her she didn't need them, and in her rare moments of confidence she suspected this was actually true. Nevertheless, she would not have worn eye shadow or lipstick even if he had asked her to, and this, considering her feelings toward him, was a remarkable statement, for Rosealeen was as deeply in love with Marcus Hope as it was possible to be.

There were limits, or rather *a* limit; a single line scratched in her own personal sand, and this was where it had been drawn. She would not, by word or deed, do anything to bring attention to herself. While the gentle elegance of her looks rang out like a dinner bell that only men could hear, the permanent downturned gaze, the tremble in her voice when compelled to speak, the way she instinctively gravitated to the darkest corner of any room, all amounted to a plea to be left alone. Rosealeen detested the spotlight. Even now, among her closest friends, in the safe if shabby space of Mulder House, she was content merely to listen to the ebb and flow of conversation rather than join it, to nod frequently, smile occasionally, laugh when it seemed appropriate. The effort of being part of a group was enough to place a hefty tax upon her nerves. Only when Marc made his appearance would she

completely relax. He had enough sociability for both of them. He had enough sociability for the whole goddamn campus.

And therein lay the fear.

Just how social *was* Marc Hope?

She'd heard the rumors, of course. You'd have to be deaf, dumb, and goddamn blind (Rosealeen swore and blasphemed in her head in a way she would never do with her lips) not to have heard them. About how he would fuck a snake if you held its head for him. About how his bedpost had been notched into sawdust. About how no woman graduated from Resurrection without a taste for Irish whiskey and Marcus Hope's semen. Some of those rumors she'd heard in this very room, uttered by Vijay in the angriest of his angry humors, but her own experience had been entirely different. Marc was so gentle, so considerate, so *kind*. He held doors and pulled out chairs and never, under any circumstances whatever, made her feel as if there were any other women in the world, much less in the room. Perhaps he had been a player in his distant past, but what he had done as an undergraduate was little concern of hers. Indeed, part of his allure—she could admit this to herself and to Pamela and Lizzie, though never to Vijay, she could just imagine *his* reaction—lay in the fact that he was so worldly, so experienced. A part of her even took a fugitive, pornographic pleasure in picturing the parade of pussy that had clenched and quivered around his magnificent cock. And so long as all that pussy was behind him, it did not trouble her.

So long as it was behind him.

Rosealeen studied the picture she and Pamela had framed that very afternoon. A row of familiar faces with the cursed bulk of the Cipher standing upright behind them, shapeless and monolithic in the mist: Professor Van Winaker with his mad-conductor hair and fanatic's eyes. Steve Cho with his gaunt cheeks and perpetual spray of forehead acne. Pamela Bachmann, all mud and freckles, and Daryl Stebbing, caught in the act of wiping his glasses with his shirt. Freddy Wise, Vijay Desai, Lizzie Nackford. All present and accounted for tonight, or very nearly. There was only Mason Maguire, who was hard to notice, and Aurelia Sakara, who was impossible to ignore... and Marc. Marc, Marc, Marc.

Marc, baby Marc, the dark star around whom her world revolved.

Please, God, she found herself thinking. Let him be tinkering with that ridiculous car. Let him be playing chess with Father Desiree. Let him be bending his fucking elbow with Mason at the Hawk and the Dove. Just don't let him be doing what I think he's doing. Please God. Please God. Please—

5.

“—God!” Marc said.

Aurelia Sakara took her lips off his cock long enough to look him in the eye. “You like that, don’t you, baby?”

He didn’t answer. There was no need. The size and strength of his erection spoke volumes—and in a few minutes, if her lip-and-tongue massage didn’t stop, it would speak in quarts. Aura shrugged bare shoulders and took him back in her mouth until there was no cock left, nothing but a pair of balls throbbing desperately on her pretty little chin. The ease with which she devoured him was thrilling—and intimidating. He had often fantasized about this exact moment, but now that it had arrived, he found himself worried about his reputation. It wouldn’t do for The Great White Hope to empty his nuts in less time than it took to microwave a burrito, especially when Aura had yet to remove so much as an article of her scanty-ass Devil costume.

If you’re gonna cheat, he thought, only half-coherently, cheat all the way... and do it now, while you’re still temporarily insane.

Marc wrenched his gaze away from what Aura was doing and tried to focus on his surroundings. The only light in this part of Campbell Hall was the tawdry gleam of an EXIT sign, and somehow that scarlet glare made it easy, made it *natural*, as if what he were about to do had been foretold, chiseled into stone by some long-dead prophet. Nevertheless, there were security guards to worry about. That fucker Toliver, for one; the sleazy sonofabitch just lived to catch students with their pants down, and never mind if those students were only a year or two away from being teachers. Resurrection was a Catholic university, and Father Desiree didn’t look too kindly on sexual shenanigans

perpetrated within its walls. Father Carngahan, neither. Marc was too goddamn close to his doctorate to risk it all on a meaningless fuck, especially with a bitch like Aura, whose blatant sexual allure could not quite blind him to the fact that she had the soul of a switchblade.

I need a safe space, he thought.

Behind the silken sheen of his lover's shoulder was a staircase descending into darkness. Though he could not see it, he knew well enough what the sign on the steel door at the end of that darkness had to say:

Laboratory

Archaeology Department

Absolutely no unauthorized persons

This means you

And it really did... if you were one of Resurrection's 4,000 matriculated undergraduates or 2,500 commuters, and even if you were one of the 375 graduate students and doctoral candidates spread across its various higher disciplines—medicine, history, paleontology, archaeology. The injunction played no favorites; it applied to everyone. Absolutely everyone.

Who didn't have a key.

6.

The killer looked down at the figure sprawled in front of him.

His first victim—potentially—was perhaps a waste of muscular effort. Just a typical collegiate shithead, all testicle and no brain, nothing but an ambulatory meatsack whose contribution to the world was flatulence, feces, and carbon dioxide. One stroke and the ax would expose its empty skull, providing proof positive that a woman's right to choose wasn't exercised nearly fucking enough in this wretched excuse for a country. It was pathetically obvious that more doctors needed to ram more hooks into more cunts and drag more half-formed babies into bags marked MEDICAL WASTE. And if the medicos couldn't be bothered, the killer was happy to perform their abortions

for them.

Retroactively.

And yet....

The killer's rage—that wonderful, enlivening fury—seemed to be urging him to do otherwise. To be elsewhere. For *this* trembling fool, whose fear came off him like smoke off dry ice, there would be another time. Another night.

And yet....

There was something about the Halloween masks lying there in the street. Something oddly familiar. Something oddly *necessary*. It was not so much a memory as the echo of one—an echo that bounded and rebounded through the stony walls of eternity, distorted but recognizable. Faces on stone. Wet and glistening, peeled away from their owners and left to rot. A horrible thing to see, and all the more horrible when one of them was your own, lying there on the cobbles, eyeless, flat and empty, like a bloody bag with nothing in it. The killer, touching his own face with his free hand, seemed to remember what it was like to be faceless. Seemed to remember the need to hide that facelessness with anything handy.

The killer knelt and looked at the masks the shithead had been carrying before the killer had knocked him flat. Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers. Ghost Face and Leatherface. Pinhead and Chucky. Excrescences of a dying culture, masturbatory runoff of the feeble imaginations of men who claimed to understand fear without understanding the hate that drove it into action.

Carion. Garbage. Offal. Not one worthy—

The killer's breath hitched in his throat.

Lying against the fool's sneaker-clad foot was a hideous thing—domed red eyes, bristling hair, a disgusting snout that was half-phallic, half-vaginal, seeming at once to slobber and to suck: the head of a fly. The head from *The Fly*. And not the '86 remake, either, but the '58 original, something so ugly it transcended its own ugliness and became beautiful.

Became *art*.

The killer dismissed the collegiate fool, rested his weapon on the

ground, pulled the mask over his face. At once, he heard his own breathing magnified into a thick and terrible rasp. He felt complete now, whole. Shielded from shame. Ready to do the thing he had come here to do. When he stood, he saw the meatsack already running, disappearing into the night as if pursued by ravening wolves. No matter. *Another time, another night, another....* The killer's brow furrowed momentarily beneath its sheath of foam latex. Another *what?* He didn't know yet. He was still two people. A juxtaposition, not a whole. Not the One he was meant to be.

No matter, no matter. It would come to him soon. And if not, he would go and *get* it.

The killer strode down Jackson Street once more, the ax jouncing on his trapezius muscle, the light of innumerable jack o' lanterns glittering in his now-insectile eyes. On either side of him, lighted porches crowded with drunken partygoers, half-tangled in streamers of orange and black crepe or crude bedsheet banners advertising the superiority of this fraternity or that sorority. As he passed Newberry and Manor Streets and reached the intersection of Jackson and Pershing, the revelry began to change its character. He stood now on the invisible boundary between undergraduate and graduate domains. The old houses grew less shabby, the lawns better tended, the parties fewer and more subdued. The shadows, too, were deeper, for looming over the corner like a monstrous tombstone was an old Victorian home, almost twice the size of any of its neighbors: three stories of solidity and gloom that seemed to absorb rather than reflect the feeble flicker of the nearby streetlamps. Undecorated for Halloween, it managed to appear more sinister than any festooned with cutouts of broomstick-borne witches, silhouettes of black cats, or store-bought spider webs. It reminded the killer of a dog that was so certain of its ability to inflict carnage it did not even have to growl.

Mulder House.

Lizzie Nackford descended the steps with purpose. A tequila-fired purpose perhaps but purpose nonetheless.

The time had come.

She had been working up the nerve to seduce Freddy Wise for years now. Literally for *years*. In a sense, even before she had met him. After all, when you'd had a lust-crush on Johnny Depp since you were twelve, and then met a fairish imitation of him when you were nineteen, what other course was open for you but to act on it?

No course. No recourse, either. Do this thing, Lizzie. Act. Act now. It's Halloween, for crissake. You trick or you treat.

Granted, there were obstacles. They didn't call her Lizzie Plain and Tall for nothing. She stood precisely six feet, and if her body had been planned with curves in mind, God had forgotten to add them at birth. By some estimations she was nothing but legs; by others, nothing but nose. And the glasses perched upon that nose were Coke-bottle thick. But she was a woman, nevertheless, and she knew it.

Tonight, *Freddy* would know it.

Come down, he'd said. Watch some movies with me, he'd said. Drink a few with me, he'd said. Same old Freddy, acting as if she were his kid sister. Years of classes they'd sat through, hip to hip; a dozen digs they'd sweated through, elbow to elbow. In that time, Freddy Wise had burned enough rubber to wrap the Washington Monument, but not one of those erections had been pointed at Lizzie Plain and Tall. She was the study buddy, the comrade, the Girl Friend, with trenches and barbed wire between those two nouns.

How she hated that.

It was a helluva thing, to be more than halfway through your twenties and still feeling like you were in junior high school, crying beneath the bleachers because nobody asked you to dance. Too much competition, perhaps. Pamela was mostly gay, but she had that pixie chick thing going on; Rosealeen was the all-American beauty; Aura, the ten-megaton slut bomb. Amid that bubbling cauldron of estrogen, who the hell would notice the cool drink of water that was Lizzie Nackford?

Not Freddy.

Not *yet*.

Lizzie paused at the bottom of the stairwell, one gaunt, long-fingered hand tight upon the worn old banister. So many generations of Archaeology students had carved their names in it over the years that it felt like braille beneath her palm. Her name was there somewhere, and Freddy's too; though symbolically, not near enough to touch. She could hear him in the living room, talking to the television, a disgruntled mutter between the canned screams: he was remarking on the absurdity of a horror movie set in Texas where none of the victims owned a gun. That was Freddy Wise all over. When he spoke, he didn't give a fuck if anyone was listening.

It was so exciting. So *sexy*.

"That you, Lizzie?"

"Sure is."

"Be a love and pour us a few, huh? There's a bottle on the counter."

She went into the dimly lighted kitchen—dimly lighted because otherwise the pathos of the battered cabinets, sticky-looking breakfast table and scarred linoleum floor was too ugly to behold—and had a look at the bottle. Pinot Grigio. Flashy label. No-name winery. Vintage yesterday. With a grimace of disgust, she hid it in the cabinet, washed two smutty-looking water glasses very carefully at the sink, and then pulled a bottle of Hall Cabernet Sauvignon from her oversized purse. Napa Valley, 2012. Ninety-one points from *Wine Enthusiast*. The perfect mood-setter, and Freddy would never know the difference.

"Great choice," she said, raising her voice to overcome the growl of the chainsaw.

"Picked it out myself," he called back. "Got a real eye for the dark horses."

Let's hope so, Lizzie thought.

8.

The trouble with temporary insanity, Marc thought, was that it was so goddamn *temporary*.

While the madness persisted, everything had gone perfectly. The

key fit into the lock as neatly as his cock had fit in Aura's throat, and once the steel security door had shut, the two of them were as safe as money in a bank vault—cell phones didn't work down here, and aside from Mason, the only other person on campus who could get into to the lab was Professor Van Winaker, who was conveniently in faraway Chicago at an archaeological conference at the Museum of Science and Industry. The Mad Conductor had actually tried to browbeat Marc into accompanying him: *These people will be your peers, Hope. It's best if you get to know them.* But Marc had begged off; he had better things to do than sip third-rate Scotch out of a plastic glass while listening to white-haired bores moan about how the latest change of government in Egypt would affect mummy excavations in the Fayum.

Much better things.

Things like Aura.

Christ, she was a looker. Short hair, black as a crow's wing, perpetually falling over one lustrous eye. Skin like caramel. A tight little body, so smooth to the touch you had to use two hands to keep from slipping off. Even in Scotland, at that miserable dig site, with no running water and the mud shin deep and everyone dirty and hoarse-voiced and scabby at the knees, she had retained that ethereal beauty. Lara Croft, he'd thought, as portrayed by Alicia Keys. And always, in the frankness of her stare, an open invitation.

Wanna play?

Marc wanted to play. Yes, indeed he did. But every time temptation swelled to the danger point, his sense of loyalty to Rosealeen had pricked it like a needle.

Loyalty—sexual loyalty, *fidelity*—was a new concept for Marcus Hope. It challenged him, intrigued him, made him feel strangely fulfilled, in a way that his trust fund, abdominal muscles, and genius I.Q. did not. Part of him, the dark half, the shadow aspect, had always whispered that it was only the *appearance* of fidelity that mattered. Rose had demanded monogamy as the price of unlocking her thighs, so monogamy he had duly sworn. But oaths, like hymens, were made to be broken. And tonight, lust had gotten the better of him at last.

It was the goddamned devil costume that had done it: a bustier of

shimmery red satin, stockinged red garters, red boots with enormous heels. Not many women could rock five inches of stiletto, but Aura sashayed about in the goddamn things as if she'd been born in them. And so, they had stolen away from the dance floor at the Hawk and the Dove and ended up here, mouths clamped, fingers fumbling, just a minute away from delivering the deal that had been signed and sealed somewhere in Scotland months before.

Granted, the lab was a spooky-ass place for a bang. Rows of computers suffused the room with a sickly goblin-light that glinted on what seemed like an infinity of Plexiglas and stainless steel. The climate-controlled room had the cold, sterile look of an operating theater, and yet the air was spiced with the smell of ancient things. Here was a brass cannon, encrusted with petrified barnacles, retrieved from the wreck of the H.M.S. *Mandrigo*, which had gone down off Port Royal in 1681. There were the fragments of a medieval scroll containing one of the Lost Books of the Bible, coming together like so many yellowed puzzle pieces on a lighted table. And reposing on a work bench in the corner like a teacher observing a classroom, stood a weathered human skull, which Van Winaker had dug out of a mountain pass in the Andes last year.

"Most action he's seen in a thousand years," Aura had murmured, fumbling with his cock. And in a moment, those pillowed lips were enclosing him once more. It was precisely what he wanted; the stuff of fantasy made flesh. And yet....

Rosealeen.

I love her, he thought.

The thought was stark in its simplicity, an iceberg reaching out to sink his titanic erection: *If that's true, what the hell am I doing here?*

He couldn't look at Aura anymore. Instead, he jerked his lust-sharpened gaze upward, toward the deep shadows on the far side of the lab, resting place of the Cipher. Odd how the dull glare of the computer-light didn't penetrate that darkness. Evidently, the fucking thing was as exempt from the laws of reflection and refraction as it was from scientific understanding. An image came to him unbidden: Rosealeen's face as she'd knelt amid the ruins of the castle, a strand of

blonde hair falling over her forehead, a smudge of dirt on her cheek. There had been something so patient, so thoughtful, so *gentle* in the way she sifted the soil; something almost loving, and those four words were as perfect a definition of the woman as he could imagine.

He forced himself to look down once more and realized with a start that Aura was staring up at *him*. In the half-light of the computer screens, her dark eyes glittered—not with desire or excitement, but with triumph. And then, at last, he understood. What Aura wanted wasn't so much to *have* him as to *take him away*. For her, the act of stealing was twice the thrill of mere possession, and Marc, with a feeling of astonishment that was almost comical, realized he did not want to be stolen.

Especially not by a black-hearted bitch like this.

“Stop.”

Aura's lips came away from him with a startled gasp. “What do you mean, stop?”

“Just what I said.” The word echoed harsh and flat in the enclosed room. “Take your fucking hand off of me.”

She blinked, released her grip, watched in confusion as the thing that had been hers only moments before disappeared behind successive layers of fabric. “What are you doing?”

“Going to the house.”

“Is this a joke?”

His zipper went up with a metallic growl. “Goddammit, Aura, you know who I'm with.”

“Yeah, sure—the *wall*flower. And we both know you're not gonna walk away from *this* so you can go home to *that*. The way you look at me—”

“That was a mistake.”

“Your cock doesn't think it's a mistake.” She rested the flat of her hand against his groin, feeling the heat there, the rigidity beneath the denim. Her voice was like poured honey. “What you need is more persuasion.”

Marc wrenched away from her. “I said *lay off*.”

She stared at him. Hair falling over one eye. Lips parted. Breasts

heaving. The picture of desire—except that he did not desire her anymore, wasn't sure now how he ever had.

"You fucking serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"You son of a bitch." There was no honey in her tone now, only cold steel. "You think you can fucking play games with me? With *me*?" Suddenly, she seemed to grasp the absurdity of her position and rose to her feet. "Who's idea was this anyway, you asshole? Who came on to who? You *wanted* this."

"Look, Aura—"

She seized a microscope by its eyepiece and hurled it—not at his nuts, but directly at his head. He had just enough time to marvel at her strength—the Olympus CX 23 weighed twenty pounds—and then the \$2,000 instrument shattered against the wall beside him. Something stung the back of his neck; he felt glass in his hair.

"Jesus *Christ*! Are you fucking cra—"

But she was already looking for more ammunition, and God knew there was no shortage of it in here: chipping hammers, chisels, specimen bottles. Marc turned and shouldered open the heavy security door so hard he felt the impact all the way to his heels, no longer giving a fuck if Toliver or the whole goddamn Campus Security Department heard him. The last thing he *did* hear as he pounded toward the front doors of Campbell Hall at a dead run was Aurelia Sakara's voice following him like an outraged ghost:

"I'll get you for this, motherfucker! You crossed the wrong bitch! Do you hear me, Hope? You crossed the wrong bitch!"

9.

The door to Mulder House was locked.

The killer smiled beneath his mask. A rictus.

As if a lock could keep us out.

The thought sounded in his head like two voices at once: the first guttural and savage, the other a silken whisper. And only one of the

voices was his own.

Us.

I want to be One. I want to be us.

And *us* lay inside.

He turned the knob again, feeling the muscles in his forearm and triceps swell, feeling his anger swell with them. This place was almost home. It should have been left open for him. He had *asked* for it to be left open. But they had forgotten him as they always did. Held him of no account. Sneered and laughed and plotted against him. What other explanation could there be for his failures, for everything that had not been achieved, for the plodding mediocrity of his life?

He shook the door in its frame. His newfound strength was awesome, but the wood was old-growth oak, seasoned and hardened by a hundred Pennsylvania winters, and it would not yield. Not without the ax. And he (*we*) could not use the ax here. Too many witnesses. Not that he (*we*) gave a fuck about witnesses. But someone would call the police. And he (*we*) wanted no interference while he (*we*) settled this particular account.

A muffled voice through the door, familiar in its insolence: "*Light's off, assholes! No candy for you! Beat it!*"

Freddy Wise. A walking advertisement for vasectomy.

A moment later, another voice; faint, female, but just as familiar: "*Who was that?*"

Lizzie Nackford. The virgin with the instincts of a whore.

"Just some pain in the ass kids. You bringing that vino or what?"

The killer's smile returned. They had a nice little evening planned. All of them. What a shame to crash the party.

He turned and walked back into the yard. Looked up at the house. A few cracks of light shone through the papered-over second floor windows, and he could hear the dull thud of bass through the panes. Through the circular attic window, he saw a shadow—the outline of a man, staring down at him. The killer couldn't be sure, but he thought he recognized the distinctive tilt of its head, the deliberate, somehow disgruntled way it brought the firefly-glow of the cigarette to its lips.

Vijay Desai.

Gang's all here, he thought. *So be it.*

And he went around to the back of the house.

10.

Lizzie was rummaging through the pile of stolen cafeteria cutlery in the drawer, looking for a corkscrew, when she heard it.

A dull dragging sound, steel on stone.

Something about that sound brought her hand to the nape of her neck. The hair there stood on end. She looked out the kitchen window and saw a blur of movement. Someone walking past. Into the backyard. Just a glimpse, but it unsettled her. Because the someone dragged an object behind it along the walkway stones. Something that struck sparks in the darkness.

Whafuck?

The security light switched on with a metallic *click*. She heard footsteps approaching the back door. The knob turned, and the door jerked open—about an inch and a half before the chain stopped it. But for just a moment, she thought the chain might *not* stop it. The links bulged, twisted, squeaked. The door swung shut, then slammed forward, rattling the frame. The chain tightened once more and then went limp.

“What the hell is that?”

Freddy’s voice, from the living room. The sound of it reminded Lizzie she was twenty-six years old, a doctoral candidate, a grown woman—and far from alone. There were half a dozen people in this house. Her unease evaporated.

“Your pain-in-the-ass kids,” she said.

“Jesus. Throw them some rat poison and bring me my wine!”

Lizzie laughed, heard relief in the sound. *Play it like he would*. Raising her own voice, she shouted, “We don’t leave the doors unlocked on Halloween, numbnuts! That’s how horror movies start. Go bother somebody else.”

The door came forward again. Hard enough to buckle the metal

on the lock track.

“Jesus Christ, do I have to call the fucking cops? Get *lost!*”

The door burst open, scattering broken links across the dirty linoleum, and something strode into the kitchen—something that had the head of a fly and the body of a man. Something that carried an ax in its hands.

Lizzie’s heart seized, and for a moment—it really was only a moment, but it felt as long as the Pleistocene Epoch—she felt terror reach beneath her breastbone and clutch at her with cold, cruel fingers. Then, the monster hefted the ax so that the feeble gleam of the overhead bulb played on the edges of its blades, and she saw the tattoo on the inside of its exposed forearm. The stupid-ass tattoo she had seen almost every day since her sophomore year, when she had first met its owner in Intro to Anthropology.

“You *bastard.*” The words escaped her in a cracking hiss. “You broke the fucking *lock!*”

“Liz?” Freddy sounded mildly alarmed, and the sound of the television abruptly muted. “What’s going on in there?”

“It’s Mason.” She hated how relieved she sounded, how shaky, and tried to force some contempt into her tone. “Playing the fool as usual. Nice *costume*, Mase. Run out of money from the neck down?”

The man in the mask said nothing. Just stood there. She could hear the wet rasp of his breathing, and though the air streaming in through the door was cool and redolent of fall, felt the heat of his body from six feet away—a feral sort of heat, almost gangrenous. He held the shaft of the ax so tightly that the tendons in his hands bulged. Lizzie, having recovered from her shock, began to feel the first stirrings of anger. This was such juvenile *crap*. Something a drugged-up fratboy might pull.

I thought I left this shit behind years ago, but nothing changes. The jocks still like to fuck with Lizzie. Christ, look at the muscles on him. And not a brain in his fucking head. Does he really think he’ll pass his qualifying exams?

“Tell Mason the search party came back and couldn’t find his personality,” Fred called, and a moment later the television began blaring once more—screams, chainsaws, more screams. Lizzie knelt as

casually as fright-weakened knees would allow and retrieved the corkscrew she'd dropped when he'd burst through the door. The masked head lowered slightly, following her movement, then rose as she did and turned to watch her move to the counter. She picked up the bottle, drove the screw into the cork and began to twist, but adrenaline made her fingers shake.

"Word to the wise, genius: next time you want to prank me, cover up your tattoo. There aren't many guys running around campus with Mickey Mouse on their freaking forearm. Where'd you get that thing anyway? A tent at the county fair?"

The man in the mask—the Fly—slowly brought the ax into striking position. In the dim light, with the leaves blowing in through the door to swirl between his sneakered feet, the tableau was unnerving. And the sound of that breathing—*heeeeehh, heeeeehh, heeeeehh*—struck her as disgustingly vulgar, like the pre-orgasmic pants of an obscene caller. Drawing the cork free with a *pop*, she said coldly, "It wasn't funny the first time, asshole. And you are gonna pay for that lock."

The ax drew back farther, slowed, cocked. The huge red eyes of the mask regarded her with insectile indifference. Lizzie couldn't help but see the coiled-spring tension in the body beneath it, and now she became seriously angry at last.

"Quit screwing around, dammit!" she shouted. "You could kill somebody with that!"

He did.

11.

Marcus Hope drove a blood-red '69 Dodge Daytona with a 440 Magnum under the hood and a spoiler so enormous it looked like it belonged on a rocket ship. As he idled beneath the entrance to campus—an enormous archway of wrought iron now rippling with banners of orange-and-black crepe in honor of Halloween—waiting for the light to change, he reflected that the dysrhythmic rumble of that enormous, gas-devouring, ozone-spewing engine was appropriate.

His heart was behaving the same way.

Marc was not an easy man to upset. Some accused him of taking nothing seriously, but the real reason for his ready grin and even readier shrug was absolute confidence in himself. He always got what he wanted, either because of his family's money, his looks, his charm, his intelligence, or—this was a last resort, to be used only in the event of emergency—his will. When all else failed, Marc knew he was capable of battering down any obstacle through sheer *resolve*. He disliked doing this, because it tapped into part of his personality he would have rather left alone: a grim, relentless, pitiless place, a dark dimension where the ends did not even bother justifying the means, because the means justified themselves. When he was in that place he did not recognize or even like himself, but he would go there if he had to, and knowing this made it hard not to look at adversity and smile.

What had happened with Aura had shaken him badly. Not because of her histrionics—any woman with a tattoo on her ribs that read BOSS BITCH had to be taken at her words—but because of the awful guilt that turned in his belly like a knife.

I cheated on Rosealeen.

It wasn't the act that surprised him.

It was the guilt.

Marc had gone through a dozen girlfriends in his life and betrayed every last fucking one of them without the slightest trace of remorse. He'd assumed it would be the same with Rosealeen. He could cheat if he wished: he could even get caught. It would make no difference. A few soothing lies, a fake heart-to-heart talk, some hand holding, and he would be free to prowl again when the mood struck him.

Not so.

I love her.

The realization astonished him still.

He had never believed in love. God knew there had been none between his parents, and he had never experienced it with any of the legion of women who had shared his bed, girlfriends or no. Affection, perhaps. Friendship, maybe. Desire, certainly. But not love. Love did not exist. Love was a Hallmark card, a canned sentiment, a drum-

hollow ritual without meaning or significance.

Until now.

I have to see her. I have to tell her. Before Aura can get to the house and ruin everything.

The traffic light hanging over Springettsbury Avenue remained an obstinate ruby. Marc repressed an urge to flatten the accelerator pedal and scatter the drunken partygoers staggering in and out of the cones of streetlight before him, but he'd put down a half dozen beers before his lip wrangle with Aura, and he wasn't sure if even his mother's thousand-dollar-an-hour lawyer could get him out of another DUI.

Be patient. It's barely six blocks from here.

Patience, however, was not his strong suit. He dug into the pocket of his leather jacket and produced his cell phone, depressed the screen so hard over Rosealeen's name that it nearly cracked the glass.

"Pick up, baby," he said, tapping impatient fingers on the steering wheel. "I've got news for you."

12.

The killer pulled the ax from Lizzie Nackford's head.

It wasn't easy. Not even with all his newfound strength. The blade had gone deep—almost the entire way through her skull. Blood had spattered in a 180° arc from the point of impact, speckling the refrigerator, the grease-yellowed kitchen walls, the killer's mask. Wrenching the steel from the mess of bone, brain, and intraocular fluid only added to the mess, as did the bottle of wine glug-glug-glugging its contents all over the floor.

It was so *wonderful*.

The killer stared down at the body as it jerked on the dirty linoleum like a landed fish. Lizzie. Fucking *Lizzie*, with her Coke-bottle glasses and big, blackhead-infested nose. A loser from the cradle onward, better off dead.

So they all would be.

From the living room came the deafening sounds of simulated

mayhem. Hollywood's idea of terror. Scary music and Red Dye No. 5.

What a fucking joke.

You don't know from scary, fuckholes. But I—

(we)

—can give you an introduction.

The killer hefted the ax again, admiring the viscous slime that glistened on the edge. Smart little cunt, Lizzie. And now her smartness decorated the blade. Everything she'd ever been or wanted to be, just a fucking smear on that beautiful high-grade steel.

How's that for a qualifying exam, bitch?

A belch, loud as a shotgun blast, sounded from the living room, followed by the *tink!* of an empty beer can landing in the trash. "Jesus Christ, Lizzie, are you stomping those grapes yourself? I want my wine, woman! I want what's MINE."

The killer smiled once more beneath his mask and started down the hallway, gripping the ax just below its head. He felt the fury within him growing to critical mass and savored it as a man might savor the smoke from a barbecue.

You'll get yours, Fred. Oh, how you'll get yours.

13.

"There are five—*hic!*—five levels one must ascend to obtain the mighty rank of doctorate," Steve Cho said, waving his cigarette. "Undergraduate. Graduate. Doc—*hic!*—toral student. Doctoral candidate. And doctor of philossss... philossss..."

"Philosophy," Daryl said. He slopped fresh whiskey into the row of shot glasses along the bar. "Doctor of philosophy."

"Precisely." Steve tried to stub the cigarette into the ashtray and missed by half a foot. The burning tip drowned in a puddle of spilled beer. "The pyramid is fearsome in size and terrifying in—*hic!*—aspect. It daunts and intimi... intimi... it *scares* motherfuckers who lack the fortitude necessary to scale it."

"But not us." Daryl looked into the imaginary distance, nostrils

flaring with drunken pomposity. “Not us. We won’t be daunted. Think of the travails of Scotland! The drama we went through! Picketing. Slashed tires. Police lines. To say nothing of the rain and the mud and the cold and the food. I *still* don’t know what haggis is. And yet, was a man among us dismayed?”

“A *woman* among us was dismayed,” Pamela said, turning a bottle of beer between her palms.

“Does that count?”

“Ask Vijay,” Daryl replied. “He’s got some very strong feelings about women.”

“About *a* woman,” Steve said and hiccupped into his whiskey.

A silence fell in the room. It was momentary—just long enough for the enormous clock Daryl had bought to *bong* the quarter-hour—but it seemed very long indeed to Rosealeen. She felt the blood rushing to her face, said a swift prayer of thanks that Vijay was sulking upstairs; otherwise, he might have knocked Steve’s cigarette-yellowed teeth out onto Jackson Street. In that moment, she felt a little like doing it herself.

Probably the greatest disappointment of Rosealeen’s life had been the realization that graduate school brought no relief from the stupidity and lewdness that had plagued her all throughout college.

The classes grew tougher, the papers grew longer, the excursions into the wilderness to dig up bones and belt buckles grew more frequent; but human beings remained the same. Crude. Crass. Cruel. Or in Steve’s case, clueless. They just didn’t get it. Didn’t get the tightrope a woman had to walk every hour of every day of her life, knowing that a single misstep could break an ego, a friendship... a heart. Maybe it was because they were men and emotionally dense by nature. But it wasn’t much better with her girlfriends, either. Pamela was too thick-skinned to notice, Aura too much of a bitch to care. Lizzie understood, but only from the other end of the telescope: the girl had waited her whole life for someone to notice she could be more than a friend, and she was still waiting.

“This shit,” Pamela said loudly, lifting the bottle curled in her workworn fingers, “tastes like someone whispered ‘beer’ into a glass and didn’t even mean it. How about somebody pours me something

with a little guts?”

“Didn’t want to hurt your delicate sensibilities,” Daryl said.

“I’ll put my foot in *your* delicate sensibilities you don’t stop hogging the booze.”

Rosealeen looked at Pamela in gratitude. *Thick-skinned, but not stupid.* Conversation staggered drunkenly away from the subject of Vijay, but Rosealeen couldn’t help but think of him, brooding up in the attic. Vijay was always brooding about something. It was in his nature to brood, and he didn’t seem to understand that it was this tendency, more than his hair-trigger temper or superiority complex, that had repelled her. In fact, she could never think of him without remembering a rhyme of her grandmother’s:

Beware the brooder

More deadly than the fire that brightly burns, and quickly dies

Is the brooder’s smoldering fury

Which from little things, arise

No, she could never love Vijay. Couldn’t even date him. He carried too much darkness, too much anger and resentment. There was no *joy*. On the rare occasions he ventured a smile, it looked as if his face might crack from the strain. Not at all like Marc, whose knowing, ready grin weakened her at the knees every time she saw it....

A dull buzz against her right hip startled her heart against her breastbone. Eagerly, almost pathetically, she dug her cell free of her pocket and saw with exquisite sense of relief who the caller was.

Thank you, Lord, she thought. *I should have had more faith. I should have trusted him. I should have known. Thank you, thank you, thank you....*

14.

Freddy yawned his way through the end of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, then reached for a beer that wasn’t there. His fingers, dipping into the cooler, met only ice and cold water. He sighed deep enough to

empty his lungs.

“Life is only just barely tolerable *with* alcohol,” he said loudly, and belched once again. “It just plain fucking sucks sober, Lizzie.”

Silence. Some scuffling sounds from the kitchen over the noise of the credits. A cabinet banging. He wondered with faint amusement if Liz was making out with Mason Maguire. God knew she needed to make out with *someone*, poor thing. The lass practically shivered with pent-up desire. But then so did Mason. With that fair hair and those blue eyes and lumberjack’s body, he ought to have been banging ‘em two at a time; instead, Fred sometimes wondered if the guy had ever *been* laid. He was the beta-male type, not physically but between the ears. A born follower. The sort who stood on the edges of any crowd, who never raised his hand, never made his voice heard. Not, like Rosealeen, because he didn’t *want* to, but because he didn’t seem to know how. There was no *confidence* there. God knew he was a diligent worker, in classroom, lab and field, but the work he did was unassuming, unimaginative, plain. His papers read like lists of ingredients. Freddy was convinced the only reason he’d lasted as long in the program as he had was because Van Winaker, shrewd and heartless bastard that he was, understood the value of having a mule among the workhorses, someone who could be counted on to swing a rock pick all day in the blazing sun without complaining. But he would never get his doctorate.

Graduate assistant for life, Freddy thought, and shook his head. He could imagine no worse fate.

Footsteps in the hallway behind him. The tread sounded too heavy for Liz.

“I hope you brought my wine,” Freddy said, shaking the ice water off his fingers and reaching for the remote. “A man could die of thirst around here waiting for Nackford to stomp the grape. I could write a play about it. *Waiting for Nackford*. It’d be more entertaining than these sorry-ass horror films. Look at this: next up is *Child’s Play*. Two hours about a homicidal Cabbage Patch Kid. I think I could fall asleep to this sh—”

Fingers knotted in his hair. He could feel the knuckles hard against his scalp as his chin was pulled away from his chest. Something cold

and hard and wet pressed violently against his Adam's apple, and as he looked down, he saw the head of a double-bitted ax at his throat, a man's hand gripping the haft just below the steel head. He had just enough time to form the word *what* on his lips when the blade jerked sideways.

Through his windpipe.

Through his left external jugular.

Strictly speaking, it did not slice anything. The edge was not sharp enough for that. It *broke* through. It *backed* through. The effect was less a knife parting butter and more a truck slamming into a storefront window.

The end result, however, was the same.

Fred Wise stood up. The hand that gripped his scalp, strong as it was, did not have the power to hold him down. At that moment, nothing on earth could have done so. Shock drove him to his feet, even as his own blood sprayed the air around him, even as the opening credits of *Child's Play* began to roll before his bulging, disbelieving eyes. His lungs took in a panicked gasp of air, and that air flowed not through his nostrils and mouth but through the jagged hole in his neck, with a sound like the sudden unclogging of a drain. His hands, quite of their own accord, flew to the gaping wound, and it was only when his palms pressed against it, felt the layers of skin and fat and cartilage, felt the piping-hot blood and the suction of the air, that he truly realized what had been done to him.

He fell to his knees. Rather, the floor reached up and struck them hard. The living room was dark, save for the ghost-light of the television; the stuff that spurted through the tight weave of his fingers in pounding jets looked quite black. It was as if a demented painter were using a sputtering hose to redecorate the walls and ceiling. Jackson Pollack in hell.

—*thesuck?*

The heart of Freddy Wise had beaten at an adagio for the whole of his twenty-six years. Now, with one movement of tool-grade steel across his throat, it hit vivacissimo and then presto. His slumbering adrenal glands exploded, dumping enough C₉H₁₃NO₃ into his system

to send him scrambling on all fours over the dirty old carpet, onto the cold, well-worn floorboards of the unlighted foyer. Behind him he heard the thud of boots—thick-soled Timberlands, Mason Maguire’s signature. He did not understand why this horrible thing had happened to him, only that unless he managed to escape, to find help, to get to a paramedic or a doctor or hospital, he was going to die.

The concept of death had never frightened Freddy because he could not think about it, any more than he could deeply contemplate the future or the past. A tiny design flaw within his brain had condemned or blessed him to a perpetual *now*, a world of momentary sensations and impulses. Fear, real fear, required more stamina than he had possessed.

Until this moment.

In this moment, he understood fear better than he had understood anything in his life. He *felt* it. And he did not like the feeling.

If I don’t get out of here—

Freddy heard a deep indrawn breath above him—a wet, glottal rasp, like the panting of a predatory beast, and his bladder let go in a gush nearly as frantic as that which escaped his throat. On hands and knees, on knees and elbows, he managed to reach the front door of Mulder House and lift a dripping hand to the knob.

The ax took his arm off at the elbow.

The blow was almost painless: Freddy’s brain was too crowded with agony to bother acknowledging any more. He watched fingers, hand, and forearm flop nervelessly to the doormat like a broken stalk of celery.

Oddly enough, the sight did not add to his newfound terror. He understood now what had happened to Lizzie just a few moments before, what that scuffling sound in the kitchen had meant, and it hit him nearly as hard as the knowledge that his game was up, there would be no escape, no rescue, no relief from the sudden inexplicable doom that had descended upon him. It was this thought that drove him, against all odds—against, perhaps, the laws that supposedly govern the human body—back to his feet and into the stairwell.

Lizzie was dead. His friend—and how that word suddenly took on

meaning now that his perceptions had begun to grow dim at the edges!—had been casually and wantonly murdered. As he was being murdered now. And that left the others upstairs.

If he could only reach them. If he could only *warn* them.

Freddy accepted his death as he accepted the fear, offered them now in trade—his own life for the life of his pals. And from behind him, as if the thought had been spoken aloud, he heard a startled grunt.

What?

He tried to scream a warning and got lungs full of blood instead. The next moment, the ax struck him again, in the back of his shoulder, just beside his neck. The icy-cold part of Freddy's brain, which even now weighed and judged events without emotion, registered this blow as weaker than the last. As if somehow his assailant, having discerned his purpose, had been momentarily repelled by it. Freddy very much wanted to pursue this thought. He wanted to slip into a corduroy jacket and light a pipe and open some dusty old tomes in the Schmidt Library and spend years—decades!—pursuing it. But his heartbeat had gone from presto to cataclismico, and he knew the end was imminent.

Got to warn them. Got to save them.

Instead, he fell face-first into the steps and their threadbare runner of carpet, which had been accepting feet since the Taft Administration or before, which his own sneakers had pounded countless thousands of times. He realized at last that he truly loved this house and the people in it. And this epiphany inspired Freddy's final thought, as the ax withdrew from the meat of his shoulder, as he heard his attacker's muscles tense for the final blow, which, Fred knew somehow, would be delivered into the back of his skull.

Why did I have to die to learn how to live?

15.

"Hey, baby!"

Marc thought he heard relief in Rosealeen's voice. Shading his own to a tone half-flirtatious, half-soothing, he said, "How's my girl?"

"Lonely in a crowd. Everyone's here. Almost. Where are you?"

"On my way." He paused a moment as the light turned a merciful green, thought, *Keep the lie as close to the truth as possible*, and hit the gas. "I had to stop in the lab for a minute."

"Oh, God. Can't you give it a rest on Halloween?"

He forced a chuckle. "Well, what's spookier than *that* place at night?"

"Truth! Have you seen, ah, Mason? He hasn't shown up."

You mean, have I seen Aura? "Actually, I went down there looking for him. He asked for help fixing the Aircscribe this afternoon, but I didn't have a chance to go until now." *Because I was busy cheating on you with that heartless bitch.* "Anyway, he wasn't there, so I bailed. Damned if I'm gonna try and tangle with that thing myself. Now I just need to find a place to park." He turned a hard right onto Jackson Street, saw with irritation some asshole had stopped in the middle of the street: the emergency lights of the asshole's car painted the asphalt a blinking yellow. *Goddamn it, of all fucking times!*

"Well, hustle your sweet self over here. Pamela reserved a table at Fleur de Lis for ten o'clock, and before we start adulterating, I'd like to drink some cheap liquor with you and tell dirty jokes and possibly smoke a cigarette."

"Horrors." Marc said, slamming the Daytona into reverse. He'd have to take Newberry to Cottage and then cut down Pershing, a.k.a. Townie Central, and hope none of the local brats decided to hurl eggs at him as he did so. *Karma for all the bags of flaming dog shit I left on doorsteps as a kid*, he thought miserably. "Going back in the old homestead has corrupted you."

"It's not the house. It's Daryl. He brought a Ouija board. On top of that ridiculous clock! We're gonna light candles and try to summon Elvis. Vijay is going to have a fit. Remember when he yelled at that girl for asking what his sign was at the pub in Aberdeen? All she wanted was his phone number, and he started quoting Carl Sagan at her: 'Astrology is bunk! Astrology is fraud!' I thought she was going to—"

A startled yelp hit Marc in the eardrum. The sound jarred him because he had heard Rosealeen make it only once before, when they had ordered Chinese food from that sleazy little joint on East Market Street and she'd discovered a deep-fried beetle on the end of her fork.

The gabble of conversation behind her voice stopped like a record whose needle had been wrenched from the wax. There was a long moment of silence, broken on Marc's end only by the sound of the Daytona's engine, and then he heard Steve Cho say, quite distinctly, *"What the hell was that?"*

"Rosealeen?"

More silence. A faint sound of music: the bass line from "Thriller." Someone—it sounded like Pamela—muttered, *"Jesus. That's not eggs. They throwing pumpkins at us?"*

"Rosealeen?"

"Hold on, babe."

And then he heard it. A fast, furious thudding. No, not thudding; a *chopping*. Muffled but unmistakable. As if someone, somewhere, were trying to cleave Mulder House from its foundations. *Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop! Chop!*

"Rose—"

"Marc—"

The sound stopped. Daryl's voice, thickened by drunkenness but slightly alarmed: *"Somebody go find out what that was."*

Pamela: *"Why don't you do it yourself?"*

Daryl: *"Who would stay and look after the whiskey?"*

Pamela: *"Coward."*

Steve: *"Oh, for God's sake."* A *thump* as what sounded like glass slammed into what was undoubtedly the bar top. *"It's probably just Fred and Lizzie doing it on the stairs."* Sound of a door opening. *"He's screwed everybody else, he had to get to her sooner or—"*

Chop!

And that's when the screaming started.

16.

Rosealeen watched Steve Cho put down his glass and head for the door, his gaunt-cheeked face flushing crimson with the swift and certain anger of the drunkard. A very intense guy, Steve—shrill-voiced

and edgy, with restless hands and a cigarette habit that would have shocked Phillip Morris. She remembered a dismal afternoon in Scotland; cold and mud and endless rain, and Steve out there sifting for bone fragments, the stub of a John Player Special Blue burning in the corner of his mouth, refusing pleas to come into the tent where it was, if not warm, at least dry.

Koreans, he had replied calmly, *never stop three things: working, drinking, and smoking*. And then, with a fleeting cheerless grin, he'd pulled a flask from his rain slicker, taken a long pull, and returned to his work.

It became a running joke on the excavation, and *Working, drinking, or smoking?* a sort of ritual greeting. He might, however, have added a fourth category, at least to the Korean known as Steve Cho: *pissed off?* Steve had a temper that never missed an opportunity. It was true his tantrums were fleeting and touched more by hysteria than genuine rage, but they were frequent enough to have become part of the strange rhythm of the group. He was always giving an earful to *somebody*. And now it was the turn of whoever had produced the state of *drunkus interruptus*. He seized the knob. Flung the door open.

Took an ax directly to the face.

Rosealeen flinched as if she herself had been struck; her cell slipped from her slackened fingers and hit the floor. The sound Steve made now was like nothing she had heard in her quarter-century on the planet: a puling sort of wheeze, full of shock and agony and terror: *kubbbbbbbbbbbbbb*. It filled the Wreck Room, obliterating the noise of the radio, freezing everyone into place as if they were images in a photograph. Then, Pamela let loose a sudden, lung-emptying scream. The blade had split Steve's chin in two and buried itself in his throat and upper torso with a sound very much like the cracking of a crab claw. Rosealeen saw Steve standing in the orange glare of the Halloween lights strung 'round the doorway, transfixed like an insect on a pin; saw the figure who had driven the ax behind him, a man with a misshapen head and a red-spattered T-shirt, whose biceps bulged grotesquely as he worked to free the blade from Steve's face.

"Honey?"

Marc's voice. A faint familiar sound from between her feet. But she

couldn't answer, couldn't even move. Could only watch as the attacker—was that a *fly* mask he was wearing, with those hideous red eyes?—lifted a booted foot, braced it hard against Steve's groin, and wrenched the ax clear with a another crack as loud as a gunshot. But as Steve began to topple back through the doorway, spraying blood like a broken water main, a blur of movement intercepted him: the door, driving itself shut. No, not driving itself—being *driven* by the meaty shoulder of Daryl Stebbing. The impact knocked Steve forward once more into the hallway, and Rosealeen got a last look at him from the back, bleeding and staggering directly into the arms of his own murderer; then, the latch clicked home. As Daryl fumbled frantically with the bolt-lock, Rosealeen heard Pamela gasp, *"You can't just leave him out there!"*

"The fuck I can't! Now call the fuckin' cops!"

There was a thudding noise from behind the door, a startled grunt, and then a sound of blade hitting bone so loud Rosealeen flinched again: Had she actually heard the blood splatter against the hallway walls?

"Rosealeen, answer me!"

Dumbly, she looked at the phone between her sneakers. Marc on the other end of that line. Marc, always so strong and self-assured, the sort who could make his girl feel safe in the darkest of alleys. Marc—

Chop! Chop! Chop!

Daryl managed at last to ram the bolt home. *"Would you for crissake call the—"*

The ax head exploded through the door, bursting through Daryl's splayed right hand. He uttered a bellow of horrified surprise, fell heavily to the floor, teeth bared in an agonized death's-head grin. The glistening blade withdrew and reappeared with an even more violent crash, splintering the wood. The sight freed the logjam of nervous impulses piling up in Rosealeen's brain. She knelt, seized the phone, shouted, *"Marc, hurry! There's somebody trying to get in!"* and then killed the signal before he could respond, tried to tap 9-1-1 with trembling fingers as the door began to disintegrate. Heard ringing, chopping, ringing, chopping, and then suddenly a much-harassed female voice in

her ear:

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"For God's sake send help, he's going to kill us!"

17.

It's got to be a prank, Marc thought.

His hammering heart argued otherwise.

So did the raw panic in Rosealeen's voice.

There's somebody trying to get in!

It wasn't unheard of. There was a lot of street crime in a college town like Progress: assaults, burglaries, robberies, rapes. Marc had thrown his share of punches as an undergrad. And it was Halloween. Lot of loonies out there.

There's somebody trying—

He hit the gas. Hard. Heard a scream of rubber on asphalt. The lamps above Newberry Street became a foreshortened blur as all horses beneath his hood went from canter to gallop. The Daytona was capable of two hundred miles an hour, but right now it didn't seem fast enough.

18.

Vijay Desai stood in the attic stairwell and wet his pants.

A nasty place, the attic. Dark. Dusty. Home to cobwebs and mouse turds and boxes of junk that had probably been up here since before he was born. The smell of his cigarette had *improved* the odor, though its smoke hung motionless in the stale, dead air. He had just ground it out on the floorboards when he'd heard the battering-ram sounds from somewhere below him.

His first reaction, and a typical one, was exasperation: someone's idea of Halloween hijinks, though God alone knew what hijinks could produce sounds like *that*. But the feeling was momentary. In its place came a skin-tightening sense of alarm; it was as if a ripple of tension,

driven outward from some hostile source, had passed through the house, reaching even into the attic. Vijay was a scientist to his core and dismissed paranormal and psychic phenomena with the same contempt he held for astrology, flat-earth theories, and organized religion. Yet the sensation he had just experienced drove home to him for the first time in his life the meaning of the saying, *I feel like someone just walked over my grave.*

Or, to be more precise: *I feel like someone is coming to bury me.*

Vijay cocked an ear down the short stairwell that led to the Wreck Room. Everyone had gone silent at the first intrusion of those strange, chopping bangs; this had been followed by a murmur of questioning voices. Someone had laughed—a little too shrilly. Then he'd heard the distinctive pitch of Steve Cho in anger and heard the bump of the hallway door lock as it released.

Which was when Pamela started screaming.

It was that more than anything that sent the fear coursing through him. Pamela was one tough bitch—he'd once seen video of her gutting and quartering a deer, and the expression on her pale, tight-boned face had been that of someone flipping through a magazine in a dentist's office. She could drink straight whiskey, chew tobacco, handle a revolver, and—if the rumors were true—fuck the ever-loving blue-eyed shit out of man *or* woman without breaking a sweat. Lizzie might scream, Rosealeen would *certainly* scream, but not Pam. Unless—

Unless the sky is falling.

The commotion got worse. Sounds of a struggle, the door slamming back into its frame... and then that dreadful, god-awful hacking noise, like nothing Vijay had ever heard. Something savage about it. Something vicious.

Something deadly.

What the hell's happening?

The answer was half a dozen steps away. It would take two seconds to get through the door.

The door!

An old one—as old as the Mulder itself. Mahogany. Fitted with a sliding iron bolt, from some long-ago time when this had been a

boarding house, and the attic someone's room. A theological student, perhaps, or a traveling salesman. Some poor footsore bastard with sad eyes and a sample case, peddling soap powder door to door until the sun went down. Long dead now... but he'd needed his privacy. His *security*. Hence the bolt.

Lock the fucking thing.

The thought was so cold it startled him even through the pulsating waves of fear. It was as if the devil he didn't believe in had spoken directly into his ear.

No, he replied within his mind. Those are my friends in there.

The hacking resumed, louder, more violent than ever. Steel on wood. Fresh screams now—a drawling, masculine sound of pain. Rosealeen's voice, muffled but discernible: *There's somebody trying to get in!*

Vijay thought of the figure he'd seen down on the sidewalk a few minutes ago—a sinister shadow with a bulbous, misshapen head and an ax resting upon its shoulder. He'd thought it just another drunken fool in a costume, and the ax nothing but a prop, so much hollow plastic.

Now, he could hear it, hacking its way toward him.

Vijay knew all about violence. His father's gas station had been robbed five times, twice when Vijay had been working there. That was the lesson of his childhood: sometimes men in masks came and took what you had. Your money, your dignity—and if you resisted, your life.

If you resisted.

Lock the fucking door.

But Daryl and Pam and Rosealeen—Rosealeen, my love!

Marc's love, fool. Not yours, never yours.

But—

If the ax is busy with her, it won't have time for you.

There are moments when a man finds out he isn't who he thought he was. Vijay Desai, descendant of rajas, great-grandson of a recipient of the Victoria Cross, had one now. He jumped down the stairwell and slammed the cold iron bolt into its hole.

And listened to his friends die.

19.

"Miss," the emergency operator said sternly. "I can't understand you. Please state the nature of your emergency."

Rosealeen watched in horrified fascination as the hole in the door grew, in a matter of seconds, from softball to basketball to beach ball in size. She remembered once seeing something called the Lumberjack World Championships on ESPN; the speed with which those men could reduce a foot-thick aspen log to matchsticks had unsettled her. But this—*this* was as if some ancestral memory, slumbering for a thousand years within the depths of her race consciousness, had suddenly awakened, bringing forth terrible images of barbarians pounding at the gate. Merciless men, berserk with blood lust, wild with desire to breach the walls and paint the town red. Men who couldn't be reasoned with, who knew neither fear nor pity, who would gladly trade their lives for a chance at taking yours.

"Are you there, miss?"

What was left of the door exploded outward in a rain of splinters and blood. The fly-masked man stepped through the threshold, glistening with gore, the ax clutched in both hands. He regarded first Rosealeen and then Pamela with seeming calm through those monstrous-looking red eyes, then looked down at Daryl, writhing at his feet. The intruder's head cocked in a strangely child-like way, as if baffled by this fresh obstacle to his progress. With a slight shrug, as if it were all in a day's work, he raised the ax once more.

That was when Pamela hit him with the lamp.

The blood pounding in Rosealeen's temples had narrowed her field of vision to the man in front of her—his blood-spattered T-shirt, heaving chest, and the oddly familiar shape of his forearms. She hadn't even seen Pamela wrest the lamp from its table, yank the cord from the wall, and swing it like a baseball bat over the intruder's skull.

It was a tremendous shot, delivered with all the power Pamela could muster. Enough to kill a man, perhaps; to knock him unconscious, certainly. Shards of glazed earthenware sprayed like

buckshot in every direction. But the Fly didn't fall down. Didn't even *react*. Just stood there, breathing heavily through his mask with his ax half-raised, as if he'd forgotten precisely what he'd meant to do. Then, with terrible deliberation, he turned and stared at Pamela through the bulging domes of his compound eyes. He did not speak, but the gesture did, and what it said was, *Really?*

"Oh my God," Rosealeen said in a very small voice.

"False emergency calls are a misdemeanor," the operator replied.

20.

The alleyway behind Mulder House was a fitting sight on Halloween: long, dark, and forbidding. The left-hand side formed a long wall of detached garages, many of which hadn't been opened in years—a patchwork of faded graffiti, rusted locks and cobwebbed jambs. The right was an irregular line of yard fences, measuring six to eight feet in height. To discourage midnight burglaries, most of the homeowners on Jackson Street had either chained their yard doors or simply nailed them shut, and the House itself was no exception; but Marc, climbing from his car amid a cloud of burnt rubber, didn't want to waste the fifteen seconds it would take to run around to the front of the house and fumble for his keys.

So, he took the fucking door down with his foot.

Granted, it wasn't as easy as the movies made it look; he felt the impact all the way through his body, then stumble-ran through the neglected, leaf-strewn lawn to the back door.

And found it hanging on its hinges.

And Lizzie Nackford dead on the kitchen floor.

21.

Pamela Bachmann had often been reminded of her resemblance to a young Mary Stuart Masterson. On dig sites across the world, she

sometimes amused her fellow archaeologists by flipping short, sweat-soaked blonde hair from her eyes, resting a work boot on the shoulder of her shovel, and reciting dialogue from *Some Kind of Wonderful*. Certainly, she had a tomboy quality, a go-to-hell sparkle in her eyes that discomfited some and attracted others. *Don't fuck with Pam* had been a byword in Mulder House for years, and even Aura, who rarely had a kind word for anyone, admitted that many a would-be rapist had probably been deterred by fear of having his family jewels scattered to the four corners of the Earth by Pamela's knee.

Which was why it was especially horrifying to watch as the Fly threw her face-first through the side of the bar.

The violence of it—the *brutality*—literally took Rosealeen's breath away. One moment, Pam had been struggling with the Fly for control of the ax; the next, she'd smashed through those sturdy wooden planks like a human battering ram, her denim-clad legs going first rigid, then limp against the carpet, the sight all the more horrifying for the way the sudden hole in the die had swallowed her upper body like the mouth of some enormous monster. The Fly looked after this handiwork in evident satisfaction, then turned suddenly and kicked Daryl's still-writhing body across the room and into the coffee table, as if the carpet were a sheet of ice and his 230 lbs. no heavier than a hockey puck.

The strength. The sheer strength of him.

It wasn't human.

It wasn't *possible*.

But it's happening, she thought.

The Fly turned back to her once more, turning his free hand outward as if to say, *Now that we're alone....*

Something about that gesture penetrated the terror that held her muscles in its grip. It was familiar. An operative roll of hand in wrist, exposing the palm, the veins in the thick, powerful forearms. Familiar. She had seen it before. She *knew* this man. Knew him well. That tattoo—she could barely make it out beneath the blood beading all over his skin—but she thought she knew *it* too. And if she did, then this horror was even more impossible. It had to be a dream. It had to be a *nightmare*.

She glanced at the attic door. No more than ten feet away, and sturdy. Sturdier than the Wreck Room door anyway. It even had a bolt, if she remembered correctly; a big iron thing that looked as if it belonged in a dungeon. If she could make it....

The Fly beheld Rosealeen calmly from across the room. Its breath trilled asthmatically through its mask: *heeeeeeehh, heeeeeeehh, heeeeeeehh*. It seemed to be studying her. Then, it noticed the shift of her gaze and nodded slightly, even gestured with the dripping fore-blade of the ax. The message was plain.

Go on, try it!

Rosealeen tried. This was it—her life on the line, a line as thin as that of an electrocardiogram, measuring the beats of her heart. On one side of it was time—fifty or sixty more years. Marriage. Children. A career. A *future*. On the other—

She made two hard strides forward. Vaulted a couch as if gravity didn't apply. Landed with the smoothness of desperation and youth. Saw the dull gleam of the ax out of the corner of her eye and took a tenth of a second to glance at it. Promptly turned a foot against Daryl's outthrown leg and went down hard among the litter of splinters and broken glass on the carpet, just a single yard from the door.

Behind her, the Fly made a little huffing noise beneath its mask.

It sounded like laughter.

Yes, it's happening, her mind repeated, this time sadly.

And now it's going to happen to me.

22.

Marc felt the wind blowing through the door behind him. Heard the blare of the television in the living room beyond. Saw the leaves skidding across the dirty linoleum. Smelled—almost tasted—the crisp air of Pennsylvania fall. And closer to hand, a strange, hot, coppery scent, like pennies lying in the sun.

Blood.

There was a lot of it on the floor. A ruby lake, almost black in the

insufficient light of the single bulb that burned overhead.

It's on my shoes, he thought incoherently. *Blood on my shoes.*

Lizzie's blood.

He couldn't look at her again. One glimpse had been enough. Too much.

And yet he must.

Just to make sure it was real.

She lay on the floor, cloven-faced where something had split her head almost in two at the temple. Once he had joked to her that he'd like to see inside a woman's head, if only to determine if anything was there; now he had his answer.

There was a lot inside.

A whole hell of a lot.

Fat. Muscle. Bone. Sinus cavities as delicate and intricate as the cells of a honeycomb. A tongue that looked impossibly long, now that it had been freed from its mouth by a blow so powerful it had knocked a half dozen of her teeth from their sockets.

And brains.

Lizzie's mind, he thought.

The television continued its dirge. Something chilling and elegiac: the soundtrack to a horror movie. It seemed to touch cold and bony fingers to his lower back, spreading a creeping paralysis up his spine—

Rosealeen!

A single thought, but it was enough to move him like a cannonball. In an instant, he was in the living room, bathed in the sickly light of the television. Nothing—an empty recliner, an empty cooler, an overflowing trash can in the corner. Floor slippery, a soup. He half-slid into the foyer, turned, rounded the corner and started up the steps.

And met Freddy Wise.

What was left of him.

Freddy had been taken apart like a piñata. His blood was on the walls of the stairwell; it dripped almost hypnotically from the ceiling. Something—a yard of intestine?—had uncoiled out of the wreck of his guts over the steps in a steaming yellowish-purple rope. Marc recoiled for half a second; aghast at the carnage, but the lone thought

spurred him once more:

Rosealeen!

He took the steps three at a time.

23.

The killer watched Rosealeen pull frantically at the door. The bitch was on her knees, working the knob with all the force her little body could generate, but there was no overcoming the workmanship of the Pennsylvania Dutch. That door would hold against anything. Possibly even an ax.

"Vijay!" she screamed (and now he observed the cords and veins in her neck, rising up from the fuzzy line of her sweater to disappear in her pale blonde hair). *"Vijay, for God's sake, open the door!"*

The killer let the ax head slide to the floor with a thump, enjoying the smooth feel of the hickory handle against his fingers and palm. He thought of all the times he (*we?*) had hefted pics and shovels and hatchets at dig sites, all the sweat he had shed for people who didn't give a fuck about him, used him like a condom, laughed at him behind his back. So smug. So superior. So dead or dying or kneeling before a sturdy mahogany door, begging for it to open while he stood here. Watching.

I—

(we)

—am going to kill her but good.

The very thought gave him a thrill between his legs.

And yet....

There was pleasure in anticipation, was there not? Those Pennsylvania Dutch even had a word for it: *vorfreude*. The killer was enjoying some serious *vorfreude* now. Because this one was the worst of the bunch. At least Lizzie had probably *been* a virgin. And Pamela had never pretended to be anything more than a life-support system for a cunt. But *this* one....

She belonged to Hope.

Hope the Handsome. Hope the Rich. Hope the Perfect.

Too bad he wasn't here tonight. I—

(we)

—could have taught him a thing or two about perfection. But maybe this is just as good. Perhaps this is better.

“Vijay! Vijay, pleeeeeeease!”

Rosealeen’s hands on the doorknob—twisting, turning in pathetic futility. Her backward glance, showing adrenaline-swollen eyeballs with irises of cornflower blue. The killer could see himself in their reflection: a masked grotesquerie covered in blood.

Is that me? He thought, mildly startled.

That is us, the satiny voice replied.

“I’ll be damned,” the killer said through his mask.

And swung the ax one last time.

24.

Marc saw and did not see the atrocity that was the second-floor hallway. He heard and did not hear the piercing scream from within the Wreck Room.

Instead, he moved.

Marc had always been a mover. A doer. Others dreamed; others talked. He *did*. The mangled body that lay face-down in the doorway did not deter him, because the hyper-awareness of his fear had allowed him to recognize the jut of its shoulder blades as belonging to Steve Cho, and in this moment, Steve Cho did not matter any more than Lizzie Nackford or Freddy Wise had mattered.

Only Rosealeen mattered.

If he could save her—

There is no if, he thought, and barreled through the shattered door into the Wreck Room, one hundred and eighty-five pounds of rigid muscle and righteous rage, ready to fight, ready to seize whoever was responsible for this crude and vicious butchery and do to them what they had so cruelly done to his friends.

Ready to save Rosealeen, no matter what the cost.

The room was a flickering fever-dream of overturned lamps, burning candles, and still-swinging Halloween lights. Shards of wood and glass, splinters of porcelain, spatters of red. The once-sturdy bar, demolished with a body jutting from its remains like an arrow from a target. Another body tangled in the wreckage of the coffee table and an overturned couch. The radio playing:

Dear Mr. Ouija,

I want to know my future

Will I die of murder? Of bloody murder?

And movement behind the couch.

A man. Kneeling by the attic doorway, his body throwing a hulking shadow against the far wall. So soaked in blood that his T-shirt shifted against the muscles beneath it like mud over rocks. Something wrong with his head—bulbous and distended. Eyes like fishbowls full of carmine. A disgusting snout-like mouth, bristling with hair: a mask.

A fly.

The Fly.

He stood up.

Something swung from his hand.

Swung on pale blonde hair, knotted in his fist.

Rosealeen's head.

Marc's heart stopped. *Froze*, as if the bioelectric impulses which drove it had shorted out. For an instant, the whole world went gray at the edges, and all he could see was his girlfriend's face, staring wide-eyed at him from beneath its twisted rope of hair. Rosealeen's mouth was slack, a silent scream showing a half-circle of teeth in the lower jaw. Below the chin was a ragged lump of hacked-away flesh, jutting bone, dripping blood.

She seemed to be judging him.

Marc screamed. He may have intended it as a curse, but the sound roared out of him primal, inarticulate, savage. It jarred his heart into motion, and heedless of the ax gripped tight in the Fly's opposite hand,

he surged forward once more.

But the Fly was faster.

He struck, not with the ax, but the head. It described a short, semicircular arc that terminated on Marc's cheekbone like the world's largest fist.

Marc didn't even know he'd been hit until the wall stopped his momentum with a *thud* that knocked one of the photos adorning it free of its nail. The crash of its glass registered in his ears as if through masses of cotton. The world grayed again, a dirty gauze curtain blowing before his vision. Then, a boot stepped close to his face, crackling on the fragments. Through the haze, he recognized the brand.

Resurrection was a small school. The range of faces was limited and familiar. So were the styles of dress. And only one student that he knew of wore Timberland boots in blonde suede with that thick pale-yellow tread.

It can't be.

Rosealeen's head fell into the wreckage on the floor. Directly in front of him. Kissing distance. The blue eyes fixed on some point only she could see. Revulsion pushed him to hands and knees, a teakettle-like whine of horror emitting from his throat. He felt fingers snag in his hair. Felt himself lifted to his feet as if he had been no more than a child. The pain blew the gauze away; he saw the masked visage before him as clearly as if it were his own reflection in a mirror. Saw the way the overhead light glinted in each of the thousand tiny sequins that made up its compound eyes. The ax head, hot with blood and cold with steel, pressed hard against his chin, lifting his face as if for inspection.

Heeeeh, came the Fly's breath, damp and foul, through the bristling snout. *Heeeeh. Heeeeh. Heeeeh.*

Marc realized that he was about to die, and yet it was rage and not fear that tapped the root of strength he didn't know he possessed. His own fingers sank into the rubber mask, tearing at it, heedless of the crushing pressure at his throat.

I have to see.

The mask came away, revealing sweat-matted hair the color of ripened wheat, and a pale but ruddy-cheeked face, bleeding badly at

one nostril. It was an ordinary, clean-cut, All-American face, of the sort who could be trusted to carry groceries for old women, pledge allegiance to the flag with conviction, and scramble extra hard for that ground ball to center field.

Except for its eyes.

The eyes were gone.

Not cut or pulled out. Just white. Utterly, featurelessly white. Without iris. Without pupil. As blind as eyes could be.

Yet they saw.

Looked at Marc with familiarity. With contempt.

He looked back in disbelief. And recognition.

"Mason?"

The word spit forth from Marc's mouth like so much half-chewed gristle. But Mason Maguire just smiled, a disgusting parody of the aw-shucks grin that had lighted upon his bumpkin face for as long as Marc had known him, and withdrew the ax. *"Masoun, agus mar sin mòran nas."*

It was Mason's voice and not his voice. It submerged within and rose above something else. Something Marc couldn't identify. Something terrible. Something Other.

"B 'urrainn dbomb a mbarbhadh thu a-nis. Tha mi ag iarraidh a mbarbhadh thu a-ni. Ach gum biodh e ro thròcairich."

Behind them, the clock struck. That ridiculous cuckoo clock that Daryl had brought in this morning, ten or twelve hours ago when the world had made sense. Mason's head turned at the sound like a weathervane in a gust of wind. The flesh around the featureless eyes tightened; a tremor passed over his lips. Fear? Disappointment? Urgency? He turned back to Marc, and this time his grin had a quality at once sadistic and desperate.

"Oidhche eile, uair eile... Samhuinn eile. Tha mi a 'fàgail thu airson an eagale."

He tossed the ax aside. Slammed Marc into the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. Flung him across the room as if he were made of straw. And walked out of the room with Rosealeen's head in his hand.

Whistling.

25.

Security Officer Toliver was not a man in possession of many natural gifts. He was tall, dull-eyed, buck-toothed, and though physically strong, had a tendency toward flab. Some women found his glinting eyes and leering smile attractive, but gallipots of java and endless cigarettes had yellowed his teeth and given him a perpetual smell of tobacco, coffee-piss, and the wintergreen mints he used to disguise them. His Campus Security uniform, which had once fitted him as neatly as an envelope, now bulged in uncomfortable places, and in recent months he'd found himself in the sad position of having to buckle his equipment belt directly over his groin. He was not a man prone to introspection, but lately the lyrics to a certain Paul Simon song had been running through his head:

*Why am I getting soft in the middle
When the rest of my life is so hard?*

And it *had* seemed hard to Troy Thomas Toliver. Every year, the female students at Resurrection got better looking, and every year, he himself became more unattractive. The man who had once banged twenty girls in a single school year had now gone *eighteen goddamn months* without obtaining carnal knowledge of a woman—except for a few toothless, ruddy-cheeked hags that frequented the Majestic Taproom, who would bend over and grab ankle for a single can of malt liquor. Something was horribly wrong in Tolivertown, and he had begun—dimly—to grasp what it was.

I'm a fucking loser.

This epiphany would have struck many of the students who walked past him every morning as too obvious to bear commentary, much less repeating, for Campus Security was not a respected institution among the student body at Resurrection. Who could respect men whose duties amounted to nothing more than writing parking tickets and confiscating the occasional six-pack? And when you threw

in the dull eyes and the buck teeth and the button-straining belly, well, there was forty-year-old Troy Toliver, still trying to collect the phone numbers of women young enough to be his daughter, and marveling at his lack of results. What an asshole. What a *joke*.

There is a peculiar curse that hangs over every small town in America that does not let a man within its limits escape the memory of his former, younger self. Troy Toliver remembered that self as one who could work his way through the female population of a trailer park or dormitory on sheer crass, and he could not let it go. It remained in his palms like an overheated stone, sizzling and burning, and eventually the peculiar pain it caused—the pain of disappointment, of humiliation—produced a change in Troy himself. He recognized, after endless angry denials, that he had become a fucking loser; now, his thoughts turned to revenge.

If asked who he was revenging himself upon, Toliver would not have been able to answer, but his inability to supply one wouldn't have troubled him in the slightest. His mind worked along peculiar but well-defined lines, like the gutters of a bowling lane, and once he had acknowledged injury his immediate impulse—indeed, his only impulse—was to strike back at the catalyst of his epiphany, those now-unreachable student bodies.

Troy's method of revenge was much like his lovemaking technique: crude and extremely direct. Having spent years ignoring minor infractions—and serious ones, too, if the girl was hot enough—he suddenly became a stickler for the rules. More than a stickler, a fanatic. He wrote parking tickets until his hand cramped. He had cars booted and towed by the score. He confiscated endless bottles of beer, wine, and liquor and took pleasure in pouring them down nearby storm drains while their former owners cursed in impotent rage. He detained dozens for Possession of Drug Paraphernalia (§ 780-102) and for Possession of a Small Amount of Marijuana (§ 780-113), knowing convictions for either could lead to expulsion for the students in question. The males he punished because they were sleeping with the females; the females he punished because they weren't sleeping with *him*. He went home at the end of his shift with a sort of post-coital

afterglow radiating from deep within his belly. Revenge was not only sweet, it was oddly warm.

Troy surprised his duty sergeant by volunteering to work the midnight-to-eight shift on Halloween. It was a shift nobody wanted—running around all goddamn night in the rain, dealing with drunks and pranks and phony emergency calls, dodging eggs hurled from unlighted dormitory windows to the tune of “*Security blows!*” while trying to breathalyze the drooling dumb-ass who plowed his Honda into the university gate. Toliver, however, regarded it as a golden opportunity, a sort of Open Season on all collegiate shitheads. Especially the ones in costume. *Especially* the female ones. The ones dressed as Naughty Nurses or French Maids or Victoria’s Secret Angels. The ones who liked to tease. Liked to taunt. Liked to remind Troy that he was a flabby middle-aged campus cop who lived in a shitty walk-up studio on the edge of Penn Park and had no more chance of seeing them naked than he did getting elected to the fucking Papacy.

This was why he experienced a slight sting of disappointment when he’d seen the retard in the red-drenched clothing striding up University Way in the drizzle, swinging that cheap papier-mache head from his hand. Toliver had gone on duty only a half hour before; he hadn’t even had time to unscrew the thermos of coffee and bourbon he kept on the front seat of his patrol cart, and now he had to deal with *this* idiot. This *male* idiot, who couldn’t even offer him a blowjob in the narthex of the chapel in exchange for his looking the other way on a charge of public drunkenness.

Oh well, Toliver thought, reaching for the gear shift. *A college puke is a college puke.*

But then, as it so often did, the little devil on Toliver’s shoulder began murmuring in his ear. Why nail the puke for a lousy § 5505 now when the chances were he would do much worse, if left to his own devices for a few minutes?

Toliver removed his hand from the shifter and fished a pack of Marlboro Reds from his rain slicker. Shook one into his palm. Watched the puke approach the vaulted doors of the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose. Frowned. He’d been hoping for a break-

in. One of the administration buildings, perhaps; or the McKenna Center. Instead, the puke had chosen the one place on campus that was never locked.

There goes my criminal trespass, he thought in disgust. But there was always hope the puke would trash the place in a drunken rage. A § 3304 for institutional vandalism would have said puke on a fast track to expulsion. Then *he* could find out what the world was like when you didn't have a fancy-ass college degree.

The puke hesitated in the cone of security light before the doors. Not a big guy, but plenty of muscle on him. Breathing hard after the long climb—it was better than a quarter mile up from Springettsbury, and the hill was winding and steep. Pukeboy was drenched in fake blood, and the papier-mache head dangled obscenely from his fist. Toliver tucked the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and rested his thumb on the flint wheel of his lighter; he didn't want to blaze up until the puke went inside lest he give away his position, but the shithead was studying the inscription chiseled into the stone over the doors. Toliver reluctantly lifted his gaze to do the same.

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

Troy had been employed by Campus Security for twelve years, and in that time, it had never occurred to him to ask what those words meant—or for that matter, who the fuck St. Ambrose had been. Religion made about as much sense to him as non-alcoholic beer. Just a bunch of garbage designed to make you feel bad about all the shit that felt good. Like young, collegiate cunt. Plus, the priests were all faggots and pedos anyway. Like that Desiree. Anyone that vain *had* to be a faggot. As for Carnaghan—well, if he didn't have a bullwhip under his cassock, probably for use on the asses of his altar boys, then Troy Thomas Toliver was Martin Luther King.

The puke went inside at last. Toliver sighed with relief. Lighted his Marlboro. Unscrewed the cap of his thermos and took a grateful sip. What had begun as a dry, crisp night had become a cold, wet one; rain sparkled on the cart's windshield. It reminded him of the way his semen

had looked, trickling down the face of that nigger bitch he'd fucked a few years back, in the old nun's cemetery not a hundred yards from these very doors. Southern girl, from Memphis or Knoxville or some shit, up here on a scholarship to play volleyball or field hockey, and dumb enough to get caught with a fistful of ecstasy in her purse. Scholarship sluts were the easiest prey; they'd do anything to avoid a write-up. Literally *anything*. Pity he hadn't caught one lately. Luck had been against him. Life, the world, the universe—all against him. Well. Troy Thomas Toliver wasn't going to take that shit lying down. He'd give it five minutes and then have a look inside. With any luck, the puke would be jerking off in the sacristy.

It was then the radio began to crackle. Toliver had expected a noisy night, but this was different. The codes coming over the airwaves were shit he'd never heard in all the years he'd worked Campus Security. There was a lot of *all units, all units*, and *be on the lookout*-type stuff, but what really got his attention was the part about *multiple twenty-five-oh-ones*. Twenty-five-oh-one meant murder, and the suspect description sounded an awful goddamn lot like the puke that had just walked into the chapel.

Toliver listened, incredulous, then looked at back at the entrance. Saw the empty cone of light, the open door. Remembered the papier-mache head that had swung like a lantern from the puke's fist. Realized there was a very good chance it wasn't papier-mache at all and felt his just-swallowed mix of coffee and bourbon surge back into his mouth. Fear shot through him like an electric current. And never mind his nightstick and OC spray and stun gun. They were nothing but props. His real power had always come from his ticket book, and what the fuck good was that gonna do against a guy who walked around carrying a severed head?

He looked at the radio receiver on its hook. A thumb on the transmit switch a few words of coded jargon would bring the stampede—first his fellow Campus Security officers, then the Progress P.D., and finally every swinging dick in Yarmouth County who could carry a badge. He didn't even need to leave the cart. And yet there was a part of him—a *small* part, goddamn fractional, but it did exist—that

saw in this moment an opportunity to play the hero. The puke hadn't appeared to be armed; Toliver might be able to capture him single-handed. Hell, even if he just walked in the chapel and brained the bastard with his PR-24, there was probably a medal in the offing, and wouldn't that just change everything, friends and neighbors? A medal would get him a raise. A medal would make him famous. A medal would make him visible to the sloe-eyed collegiate bitches that presently swayed and strutted past him as if he didn't exist. For an instant, he was on the heels of doing it. Then, fear pushed him back into his seat—fear and the sure knowledge that his earlier epiphany had been correct.

He really *was* a fucking loser.

He reached for the radio.

26.

A cop could go his whole career without getting a call like this, Weston thought, looking at the blaze of emergency lights surrounding Mulder House. *I have. Stupid to think it was skill on my part. The truth is I've just been lucky.*

Until tonight.

He did not pause to reflect upon this fact. Sam Weston was not a man to pause. Nor was he one to hurry. He moved with deliberation, as he imagined his ancestors had, those Shawnee and Susquehannock tribesmen who had given the white man all that trouble in Colonial times—so much, in fact, that of the 12,787,289 people presently living in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Weston was possibly the only one who could still claim those bloodlines as his own.

Not a Mobican, but I'm the last.

It was half past one o'clock in the morning. A light rain, not much more than a mist, beaded on the windshield of his unmarked Crown Victoria, the droplets glittering like jewels as the dome lights of innumerable police cruisers, ambulances, and coroner's wagons revolved in endless patterns of blue-red and yellow-white light. Beyond

them, the harsher, more colorless glare of the press cameras; and beyond *them*, the feeble flicker of jack-o'-lanterns on the porches lining Jackson and Pershing Streets.

Weston didn't know which was worse: the macabre expressions carved into those lanterns or those on the faces of the onlookers crowding against the crime-scene tape. It was true he saw shock and horror on some of them, but in too many others, he recognized emotions much less forgivable.

Excitement, for one—the breakup of routine. Morbid curiosity—the same impulse that slowed cars passing accidents. Relief—that whatever had happened hadn't happened to *them*. And the last... was it satisfaction? He thought he saw it on some of the faces, the townspeople, *his* people, the ones he was sworn to serve and protect. Long-suffering retirees who had watched their property values sink year after year, decade after decade, as the college students at first infiltrated, then dominated, and finally destroyed their neighborhood. Blacks and Puerto Ricans from Penn Park, who resented well-to-do white kids flaunting wealth in their backyards. Even a few of his own officers, men tired of walking through puddled vomit to break up underage drinking parties every Friday night, tired of transplanted middle-class suburbanites calling them fascists, bacon, fuzz, pigs.

So much friction in this town—class friction, racial friction. Did something set it off tonight? What could cause this?

Time to find out.

The Chief of the Progress Police Department took one last sip of his gas-station coffee. Crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. Released the lock on his door. Stepped into the mist.

And took command.

Sam Weston was of ordinary height and build, but nothing else about his appearance was ordinary. Not the short coal-black hair gone gray at the temples. Not the dark, deep-pocketed eyes that peered beneath a shelf forehead. Not the tight slash of his mouth, the slightly pitted cheeks, or the militaristic jut of his jaw. Even his clothing, civilian though it was, somehow managed to fit like a uniform. Everything starched, knotted, and buttoned as if for inspection, despite the

ungodly hour. *Because* of the ungodly hour, since as far as he was concerned, no cop was *ever* off duty.

Least of all himself.

Big Jim Luckner approached, the brand-new detective's shield around his neck glittering the lights. A handsome, powerfully built man and a promising cop, but quick-triggered and prone to forcing situations that could have been handled with finesse. Weston had marked him as a man to watch, in both the positive and the negative sense.

"What's the final count?"

"Four dead, three injured." Luckner pushed a hand through his rain-dampened hair; from the looks of it, he had done that numerous times during the night. "And we found one more survivor hiding in the attic. Indian guy—um, not like you're Indian, Chief. An Indian from *India*."

With effort, Weston refrained from saying something cutting. "Perp?"

"I doubt it. He was curled up in a ball in the stairwell with his pants full of piss. No marks on him—and no blood. Not so much as a drop. Whoever pulled this off would be covered from head to toe, believe me."

"What's his story?"

"He's incoherent. Shock, the paramedics say. No shit, I say. He must have hid when the fun started and heard everything. I mean, he was right on the other side of the door."

"I.D.?"

"He didn't have a wallet or a cell phone on his person; we're still looking. He's on his way to the hospital for observation."

"Under guard, I take it."

Luckner smiled ever so faintly in the manner a pupil does when he has successfully anticipated the wishes of his teacher. "I've got two uniforms with him. Anyway, we're going through the house now trying to put names to faces, but...."

"But what?"

The detective's faint smile faded. "Some of the vics don't have

faces, Chief. One doesn't even have a fucking *head*."

Weston, who had learned to control his facial muscles long before he'd become a cop, thought: *What have I walked into here?* He studied Mulder House through the dancing patterns of light, the faint shimmer of the rain. He had always found its architecture grim, but now the exterior ugliness masked much worse horror within. He resolved to spend at least an hour inside: his men must be reminded that he never expected anything from them he wasn't prepared to demand of himself. "Tell me you've got identifications on the other survivors."

"So far, just him." Luckner jerked a thumb at one of the ambulances nearby. Its rear doors were open, spilling warm light onto the otherwise dismal-looking scene. Through a crowd of police officers and paramedics, he saw a figure slumped low, pressing one hand to an oxygen mask, his longish hair hanging in damp strings over a white, bloodstained face. "His name's Marcus Hope. He's a member of the doctoral—"

"I know who he is." In a town as small as Progress, anyone who drove a flashy muscle car was known to the police, especially if he had a fast-talking big city lawyer who could make his drunk-driving arrests disappear. "What the hell's he still doing here?"

"He won't go. Pretty sure he's got some busted facial bones, but he won't get in the bus. Keeps mumbling something about not leaving his girlfriend."

"Well, where is she?"

Luckner pointed at a body being wheeled out of the house in a zippered bag. "There, maybe. Or upstairs, minus her chapeau."

"Is there a reason you haven't had *him* do the IDs?"

"He was semiconscious when we found him, and the shit he's saying doesn't make any sense."

"Drugs?"

"Shock and concussion, you ask me."

"Get him to the hospital. We'll interview him there."

"He's refusing medical treatment, Chief."

"He can't make an informed refusal if he has a head injury. Take him in cuffs if you have to, but take him." Weston waited the ten

seconds it took for Luckner to relay this message to a passing patrol sergeant, then said, “Mulder House is owned by the university, but it’s maintained exclusively for postgraduate students of the Archaeology Department.”

“How do you—”

“It’s my job to know. Yours, too. Get in touch with the school’s emergency switchboard. Ask for Professor Van Winaker. He runs the department, and he can help with identifications. Now, take me through it. What do we know?”

Luckner opened his notebook. “Killer entered through the back door. Forced entry—the thing was hanging by one hinge. Took the first vic in the kitchen, the second on the stairs by the first-floor landing. Everyone else was found on the second floor. And all the dead seem to have been killed by the same weapon, most likely the fire ax we recovered in the second floor living room.”

“An *ax*?” Weston’s voice disappointed him by betraying surprise. “Not a gun? Not a knife? Somebody actually walked in there with an ax?”

Luckner raised an eyebrow. “Dispatch didn’t tell you?”

“Dispatch said multiple twenty-five-oh-ones.”

“Well, we can’t be sure until the coroner does his thing, but judging by what I saw—”

“An ax isn’t an easy thing to handle, especially against more than one person in close quarters. Too slow. Too clumsy. The weight alone—” Weston stopped, regretting the words as soon as he’d uttered them, for he could practically hear Luckner’s unspoken response: *You ought to know, Chief, you’re the fucking Indian!*

Instead, the detective merely shrugged and said, “It was easy enough for this guy. These bodies are *fucked*. Goddamn butcher shop in there.”

“Suspects?”

“We have statements from multiple witnesses who saw someone leaving the house covered in what they assumed was fake blood, carrying what they assumed was a fake head over his shoulder by its hair. Caucasian male, mid-late 20s, in a T-shirt, jeans, and heavy

boots—hiking boots or work boots. He left about five minutes before the first uniforms arrived. Walked this way,” Luckner jerked a thumb down Jackson Street, “and then started up Pershing to Springettsbury. There was a blood trail that led toward the edge of campus, but the rain washed it away.”

“The campus is locked down.” Weston’s tone made a statement of the question.

“Like a chastity belt. We’ve got our guys plus the Sheriffs and Campus Security combing it on foot. And the State boys are sending a chopper.”

Sure, Weston thought. First, they send the chopper. Professional courtesy. Then, a Mobile Crime Scene Unit. Professional courtesy. Then, some asshole in a Smokey the Bear hat to take over the investigation. Professional jealousy. Well, not this time. “Don’t just concentrate on the college. Put patrol units in *all* the surrounding neighborhoods, and make sure they’re visible. I don’t want us beating the bushes in the white neighborhoods only to have this asshole turn up in Penn Park or Little San Juan. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And tell the watch commander I said to keep at least three units north of the river at all times to handle our regular emergency calls.”

“We’ll have to call out the day shift for that.”

“Call out the whole goddamn department. This is an all-hands-on-deck situation. Let the Commissioner worry about the overtime.” Weston fell silent for a moment, listening to the crackle of police radios, the murmur of voices beyond the crime-scene tape, the faint hiss of the rain. “So, four dead and four living. I take it the other two survivors weren’t in shape to tell us anything, either.”

Luckner shook his head. “Both found unconscious. In surgery now.”

“They going to make it?”

“The male will, though he’s gonna have to learn how to jerk off left-handed. The female—they don’t know yet. Skull fracture. Possible broken neck.”

Weston watched the bagged body being loaded into the coroner’s wagon. “What’s your take on what happened here?”

“You want *my* opinion?”

“You’re a detective now. Detect.”

Luckner almost smiled. The cheerless glare of the streetlamp made him look more than ever like Hollywood’s idea of a plainclothes street cop: brown hair, blue eyes, bull neck, and six feet, two inches of gym-built muscle. “Well, my first thought was a drug deal gone south. I mean, these *are* college people, doctoral program or not. But dealers would have used guns, and they wouldn’t have left any witnesses. A psycho—well, I rang up Elysium, and all theirs are accounted for. Besides, they would have notified us if somebody had escaped.”

“Go on.”

An embarrassed look came over Luckner’s face, as precedes a shameful admission or a dubious theory. “Well... it *is* Halloween, Chief.”

“You’re thinking Satanists.”

“It makes about as much sense as anything else I can think of, but if there’s a group anywhere in Yarmouth County, it’s news to me. I’ve never heard a thing from Intelligence about a cult operating here.”

Weston squinted at the fairy rings of moisture surrounding the streetlamps. *How much of a cop’s life is spent this way, standing in the rain in the middle of the night, spinning theories about why somebody’s dead?* He recognized this thought for the weakness that it was and dismissed it with a shake of the head. This brought his attention to a familiar face looming above the crime-scene tape. *Too* damn familiar. And beneath that face, a clerical collar, showing a snow-white tab through layers of rain-dampened black.

Weston felt a tightening in his throat, a sudden pressure behind his eyeballs.

“Well,” he said. “Why don’t we go ask the expert?”

27.

It can’t be.

The thought had occurred so many times in the last hour that it formed a sort of drip-drip-drip within the priest’s mind.

It just can't be.

The ring of his bedside telephone had awakened him sometime after midnight. It was a brass-tooled antique with a ring that seemed to play directly on his slumbering nervous system like fingernails down a blackboard.

It's bad news, he'd thought instinctively. *Nobody calls in the middle of the night with the other kind.*

And he had been afraid, though of what he could not say. Stephanie was gone; who else was there left to lose?

The thought gave him cold courage. He'd taken the receiver off the cradle and said, as authoritatively as a voice clogged with sleep would allow, "Dean Desiree."

A nice touch, that: *Dean* Desiree. Not *Father* Desiree, though he remained an ordained diocesan priest. Dean. An impressive title. And a secular one.

Then he'd heard the words. Police at Mulder House. Ambulances. A coroner's wagon. Press trucks. The phones at the school were ringing off the hook, and there was no one to answer them. The president of the school was on vacation in Hawaii. But the *dean* lived only blocks away. Could he—?

Desiree had replaced the phone on its cradle and risen from his bed to go to the window, feeling every hour of his fifty-four years: eyes sticky, bladder full, joints creaking. Beyond the glass, the lights of campus burned like the stars that the clouds above refused to reveal. They looked misty and forbidding. He cast a blurry glance at the wall clock, and some part of his brain—the priest beneath the apostate—solemnly informed him that it had been All Saints' Day for exactly forty-seven minutes.

What happened out there?

Something that required a coroner's wagon.

It can't be.

Desiree voided his bladder. Took a slug of Listerine to kill the foul aftertaste of the Scotch that had eased him into sleep. Shrugged into his clothes, though his fingers trembled on the button of his clerical waistcoat. Walked out into wet, windblown night. Mulder House meant

Archaeology. He knew every Archaeology student by face. The graduate students he knew by name. And the doctoral candidates—some of them had dined here, in his very home. Drank his calvados and clucked over his vast collection of antiquities. He was popular with them. He understood the passion they had for digging in sand and soil, because he shared it. And now—

Someone dead? Foul play?

It can't be.

The engine of his Mercedes purred when he turned the key. Nearly everyone he knew frowned on this show of ostentation from a priest, but he'd earned it. Book sales in the hundreds of thousands yielded fat royalties, and he couldn't give it *all* to charity.

When Desiree had been at seminary, he'd heard an oft-repeated joke: *A man walks up to a Franciscan and a Jesuit and asks, "How many novenas must you say to get a Mercedes-Benz?" The Franciscan says, "What's a Mercedes-Benz?" The Jesuit says, "What's a novena?"*

And Desiree wasn't even a Jesuit. No vow of poverty for *him*.

Still, it seemed tawdry now. Vulgar. To think of his own comfort when one of the students, one of *his* students—

It can't be.

He was at Mulder House within minutes. In all the many years he'd lived in Progress, he had never seen Jackson Street like this—a solid wall of city vehicles, a conflagration of vary-colored light.

And people.

So many people.

They jammed the sidewalks, thrust their heads out of open windows, stood four and five deep in the street behind the gaudy yellow crime-scene tape. Many were young, undergraduates in Halloween costumes. The outfits of the girls were frequently scandalous: Desiree had seen bikinis that covered more flesh. The boys were no better: someone in sodden white Klan robes, another dressed as a giant phallus. As for the reek of alcohol and marijuana, it was overpowering despite the breeze.

And this is my flock.

A few hours ago, the thought would have amused him.

He double-parked the car and moved through the crowd, noting how it parted for him, how his name was whispered here and there until it took on a katydid chorus: *Desiree, Desiree, Desiree*.

Even at a moment like this, he was not entirely unaware of how imposing he looked with his iron-gray hair, statue-hard features, and neatly trimmed beard. It was the sort of face that looked good on dust jacket covers and in television interviews—intelligent but humane, austere yet handsome, masculine yet unobtainable. The policemen at the tape were correspondingly polite; most acknowledged him as a local celebrity, a few were regulars at Sunday services at the Church of the Sorrowing Angels. And even the non-Catholics respected the sobriety of his clothing, so very much like their own uniforms. These were men who understood discipline, if nothing else. They did not know of his weakness, did not know his discipline was only of an outward, external form. They didn't sense the corruption within, the corruption he himself was able to deny by light of day.

But still, they would not let him pass.

Desiree watched a body bag being manhandled off a gurney. The way the body sagged awkwardly within its sheath of gleaming plastic struck him as horribly unnatural. Almost as if it were a collection of pieces rather than a whole. As if someone had—

It can't be.

He saw Sam Weston approaching through a maze of uniforms. The chief's Easter Island face looked even grimmer than usual beneath its sharp-angled crewcut: the fathomless black eyes glinted at Desiree with what seemed like a kaleidoscope of emotions, all of them bad.

"Lucas," the chief said.

"Sam. Please tell your men to let me through."

"This is a crime scene. You've got no business here."

"I was told that students—"

"We're not on campus."

"Mulder House is university property. As you well know. There should be a representative present."

"I've sent for Van Winaker."

"Van Winaker's in Chicago. *I'm* the dean of students."

The muscles in Weston's jaw clenched and then, as if by conscious effort, slowly relaxed. His voice held a dangerous politeness. "I'd forgotten just how large your closet was."

"Closet?"

"All those hats you seem to wear."

"Are you going to let me in or not?"

Weston stared at him. Impassive except for the eyes. At last, wordlessly, he lifted the tape. The priest ducked beneath, and the two men began to walk side by side to the coroner's wagon. Desiree took the House in at a glance: a hulking shadow whose circular attic window glared yellow light like a single, unseeing eye. "What happened here, Sam?"

"Looks like they were having a party, and someone broke it up with an ax."

"My God."

"Nowhere in evidence. But we can use *you* to help ID the bodies—if you think you can stomach it."

Desiree ignored the contempt in the other man's voice. "How many?"

"Four dead, three injured."

It can't be, Desiree thought.

"We have absolutely no idea what could have motivated this," Weston said. "The most obvious explanations don't wash. But one of my detectives just suggested the possibility of a satanic cult."

Desiree had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could reply. "There's no evidence organized satanic activity exists in the United States—or ever has."

"I suppose you ought to know."

The assistant coroners—like twins with their cold-reddened cheeks, brown overalls, and heavy, corpse-handling gloves—stepped aside at Weston's behest. Desiree paused behind the wagon, feeling the rain prick the back of his neck, wondering vaguely if this were a nightmare and he would awaken in the comforting safety of his own bed. His gaze tracked Weston's hand as it reached for the zipper, and he felt a sickly sort of anticipation in his lower belly. If this *were* a nightmare, the

climax was approaching. He hunted for the subtle details which would betray the unreality of the moment, but all he could see was Weston's wedding band, a sullen glint behind a thrice-broken knuckle. Part of a matched pair worked from silver rather than gold, in a nod to Shawnee traditions. He could not make out the faint inscription in the metal, but he didn't need to. Stephanie's had borne the same words.

Live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart.

Desiree shivered beneath his Zegna trench coat. The steady patter of *It can't be* within his mind had stopped, replaced by one last drip of terrified thought:

It is.

Jim Luckner appeared—breathless, wet-haired, clutching a walkie-talkie in his fist. Desiree had a flash of him as a boy of twelve, arriving late to altar boy practice with precisely that same expression on his face. “Chief, we’ve got a twenty on our suspect from campus security. He’s in the chapel on campus.”

And Desiree thought: *The chapel?*

Weston's forefinger and thumb had just met at the zipper on the body bag. Now, his head jerked upward, the spider-black eyes narrowing to slits. “Tell security to seal off the area until we get there and not to approach him under any circumstances.”

“Should we call for SWAT?”

“Nearest unit's a half an hour out. You want to wait? We'll take him ourselves. Tell Barth and Nachtigall to follow me in, Code 2. You get Hope to the hospital.”

Luckner stared as if Weston had suggested he set himself on fire. “The *hospital?*”

“You heard me.”

“Chief, I'm lead on this case! You can't stick me with busing this rich prick up to YCH while *you* take the collar. Send a rookie.”

Weston's expression made Luckner recoil a half step. “This *rich prick's* family has enough money to bury this town in lawsuits 'til hell won't have it. He's also potentially our only real witness to the crime. I can't trust some probationary patrolman with him. Take him to the hospital and get his statement. Now.”

The chief's raincoat flared as he moved in a sudden blur toward his car. He had just turned over the engine when Desiree slipped into the seat beside him.

"What do you think—"

"It's my chapel, Sam. My campus."

Weston stared hard at him for one full second, then slammed the car into drive. "Just don't get in the goddamn way. This guy belongs to me."

He belongs to God, Desiree thought mechanically as the Crown Victoria rocketed forward, scattering the crowd like so many ninepins.

But he didn't really believe that.

28.

Jim Luckner found himself in a state of guilty exultation as his foot met the accelerator. The exaltation came from the feeling that this was *it*, the waiting was over, the One Big Case every cop dreams of catching had hurtled through the universe to slap into his outstretched palm like a fly ball. The guilt found its roots in teachings he had abandoned but not entirely forgotten, teachings imparted at a young age, by the very man he had seen climbing into Weston's car: Lucas Desiree. Or as Jim had known him, Father Lucas.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

When he'd stepped into Mulder House—into the swamp of blood and wine on that tacky old linoleum floor—and seen that long-legged young woman lying there, her head split open like a log, Luckner had felt only the usual trickle of adrenaline that accompanied his arrival at the scene of any homicide. By the time he had walked into the second floor living room, however, the trickle had become a flood. His face felt hot, his throat dry, his palms slippery; the destruction and slaughter before him registered in his whirling brain not as tragedy, but opportunity.

And excitement.

Progress averaged no more than a dozen criminal homicides a year—mostly domestics and drug deals gone bad—and Luckner, at the bottom of the seniority ladder, felt lucky if he got to handle the doughnut runs on a real murder case. No, the Boy Detective got the shit assignments instead. Messy shotgun suicides. Thefts from pharmacies. Smash-and-grab jewelry store burglaries carried out at three in the morning by drunks who thought the diamond necklace in the window would look good between their girlfriends' tits. Hell, the only reason he'd been alone in the squad room when the phone rang tonight was because of a gang-related shooting that had taken place in Gasoline Alley at half past ten. The dicks on duty had stubbed out their cigars, shrugged into their crumpled raincoats, and waved their fedoras at him as they trampled down the stairs to the parking lot like so many extras in a bad movie. *Stay here and man the fort, kid*, were the last words Lieutenant Sandoval had uttered on his way out the door. And now, by sheer chance, "the kid" had caught a *mass* murder—four definitely dead, maybe five if the bitch in surgery didn't pull through.

Five murders! What headlines! What luck!

He felt as if he'd won the goddamn lottery. On Halloween, no less. And when the Chief had barked, *We'll take him ourselves!* Luckner had felt a thrill so powerful it was nearly orgasmic in its intensity.

Then, Weston had changed his mind and sent him on a *real* doughnut run. Chauffeuring a rich prick to the goddamn hospital while the collar of a lifetime went down without him.

Luckner took it as a point of pride that he had never disobeyed an order. His concept of duty was crystal clear. Part of that ethos, he knew, had been adopted in conscious imitation of the Chief, who was perhaps the only person in the world other than his own father that he had ever admired. If Weston said it had to be this way, it was because the Chief felt it best for the case. He should accept that. There was only one problem.

He didn't *want* to.

Taking the turn at Pershing hard enough to make the tires scream, Luckner flicked a glance at the rear-view mirror to examine Hope in the back seat. He looked pale-faced and glassy-eyed and bloody, and

the fireman's reflective jacket draped loosely around his shoulders lent him an air of pathos. *Son of a bitch*. This poor fuck needed to be getting his head examined at the E.R., not having it rattled around further in the back of a cruiser en route to a showdown with the psycho who had gone *Psycho* on his lady love. Never mind civil liability; it was the decent thing to do. For an instant—somewhat less than an instant, actually, a splinter-second, the smallest possible fragment of time that the mind can acknowledge—Luckner heard his conscience bellowing, and this time, oddly enough, the voice sounded a lot like Lucas Desiree:

Turn left at Springettsbury. Go to the goddamn hospital and never mind the collar.

The cruiser's engine was powerful. It gobbled up the asphalt with astonishing speed. The decision was on him almost as fast as he acknowledged it had to be made.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist—

He swung right.

Hard.

29.

Sam Weston carried a .45 Lawman with a carbon steel frame, a tactical rear sight, and a magazine capacity of ten: all wadcutters. As Chief of Police, he did not have much of an opportunity to draw it from its holster anywhere but the firing range, and the cold steel grip felt strange yet welcoming in his hand as he stepped from the warmth of his Crown Victoria into the rain.

The chief was not fool enough to have used his siren during the seemingly endless approach up the hill from the campus gate, and he was pleased (though he would not have admitted it) that neither of the patrol cars following him had done so either, nor had they activated their dome lights. Rolling Code 2 was an act of discipline that many adrenaline-maddened policemen failed to master. He allowed himself a momentary feeling of satisfaction at this show of big-city professionalism from his small-town cops. Then, he shoved the feeling

aside. Satisfaction could come *after* they had the suspect in custody.

The Upper Campus of Resurrection University was an intimidating sight even in the daytime; its ascending rings of fortress-like buildings, the first of which had been constructed in 1885, had a weight and brooding solidity lacking in modern architecture, right down to the gargoyles spitting water from their rooftops. At night, the buildings did not seem to sit so much as *wait* somehow, and whenever Weston wondered just what in the hell they were waiting for, the answer was always the same:

Me. They're waiting for me.

It was a strange as well as a chilling thought. Police business seldom drew him to campus, and as for his personal life—well, Sam Weston no longer held any respect for priestly black. The mere presence of *Father* Desiree at his elbow would have been intolerable if a lifetime of carrying a badge hadn't left him with the ability to collapse his awareness onto one thing and one thing only—in this case, the object of his hunt.

The Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose occupied the highest point of Grace Hill; he'd once heard it described as the Star atop a Christmas tree, but the analogy didn't quite hold; the summit of the hill was not peaked but rather rounded, as if the gravity, the *authority*, of that House of the Lord had pushed it down. As he swung his Crown Vic to the curb and stepped out, Weston saw his headlights flash on the reflective panels of a Campus Security cart nearby, saw a half-shadowed figure standing beside it. The chief stood behind the opened driver's-side door, thankful for the Federal grant that had paid for the ballistic panel in its interior, which he knew would stop even armor-piercing bullets, and drew a bead on that strange, glistening shadow. He put six pounds of pressure on the trigger and used a voice that had been scaring the shit out of crooks and cops alike for more than thirty years, a cold, pavement-hard voice that came from the diaphragm and not the throat:

“POLICE OFFICER. COME FORWARD SLOWLY WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR, OR I *WILL* FIRE ON YOU.”

The shadow froze. Then, almost as if obeying a hypnotic

compulsion, it took several unwilling steps forward into the half glow that encircled the much brighter glare of the chapel's security light. Weston's trigger finger relaxed immediately. The shadow was a campus security guard. Tall and solid. Dull of eye and slightly bucked of tooth. Suggestion of mustache over his upper lip. Something subtly slovenly about his appearance—a look of carelessness on the uniform beneath the glistening plastic raincoat. He wore leather gloves so bulky he couldn't possibly have gotten his nightstick out of its ring despite the possible presence of a *bona fide* mass murderer only yards away.

Terrific, Weston thought. *It's amateur hour on the biggest night of my life.*

"You call this in?"

"Yeah. Yes. Yes, sir."

"Name."

"Toliver."

"He still in there?"

"He ain't come out."

"Describe him."

"White guy. I guess maybe blond hair. Wearing a T-shirt and jeans. *Covered* in blood. And he was carrying.. well, it looked like a head. By its hair, I mean. At first, I thought he was just pranking me, wandering around like that. But then the call come over the radio—"

"Is he armed?"

"Not that I could see."

"You didn't approach him?"

"Radio said not to."

"*Before* that."

"No."

"You had someone on campus looking like that and you didn't move on him?"

"No."

"Why?"

Toliver swallowed, licked his lips. "I make twelve bucks an hour."

Weston looked away in disgust. The two cruisers had rolled to a stop behind his, forming a neat, authoritative line in front of the chapel entrance. Two uniforms climbed out of the first car, the plastic

coverings over their caps gleaming in the light of the streetlamps. *Five minutes*, Weston thought. *We have maybe five minutes before every badge in the Commonwealth shows up here, sirens blasting, and turns this into a cluster fuck of a standoff.*

"We'll take him now," Weston said. "Barth, take the rear door. It's locked after dark, but I'm not taking any chances. Nachtigall, you're on backup with a shotgun. Toliver can stay with the priest. I—"

He stopped. The flesh around his eyes, finely wrinkled from years of squinting at evidence, tightened in a way that not only smoothed the creases but seemed to accentuate the piercing darkness of his pupils. It was a look every one of the ninety-eight sworn officers and eleven civilian employees of the Progress Police Department knew well.

And feared.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Luckner had emerged from the following car, hefting a tactical shotgun. That was bad. Marcus Hope sat in the back of the cruiser. That was worse. He looked like a drugged animal in a cage. The kid's hair fell in strings over the blood that had caked one of his eyebrows, and the left side of his face had taken on the swollen, mask-like aspect the chief had seen too many times in his career—on accident victims, battered wives, drunks who had picked fights with the wrong men.

Luckner licked his lips. "Chief, I'm sorry, but I just couldn't—"

"This man should be at the hospital."

The words came out flat and uninflected. Weston might have been reading from a cue card, and yet Luckner seemed to congeal at the sound. An amateur bodybuilder, with a lantern jaw and fists the size of ham hocks, he somehow managed to resemble a little boy watching his father take off his belt.

"Chief, I—"

"Save it." Weston started toward the doors. There was no time for recrimination now. *That'll come later, when the Hope family hits us with a lawsuit as thick as the Tokyo telephone directory.* He realized he gripped the butt of his .45 so hard that the metal dug into his palm.

This is what I get for patting myself on the back. He cast a glance at Desiree, sitting wide-eyed and clench-jawed in the Crown Vic, a pulse

working visibly in his temple. *I should've known better than to trust anyone or anything other than myself.*

Anger carried him into the place where he had been married, but Weston did not fear his anger. He'd spent years sharpening its edges, whetting and honing and polishing until the emotion had become not his master but his tool, a weapon against weakness, against fear. Anger had kept him awake on stakeouts in the chill watches of the night. Anger had given him strength when his muscles cramped with exhaustion. Anger had pierced fogs of lies and lent him the clarity needed to see the truth. And now he saw the chapel over the sight of his gun: vault-ceilinged, candle-lit, painted plaster Christ twisting on His cross in silent, eternal agony over the altar. Everything as he remembered it from his wedding day... except that it was deserted.

Almost.

A lone figure knelt before the altar, head bent, shoulders heaving. In the flickering golden-yellow glare of the votive candles, Weston could see the gleam of the blood that plastered shirt and jeans to body. He could *smell* it, like overheated wiring, cutting through the church smells of incense and wax and wood polish. A male, emitting a steady, whimpering mantra, like a half-articulated prayer: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

"POLICE OFFICER," Weston boomed again, placing his forward sight square between the man's shoulder blades. "PUT YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR—"

A glint of light from the altar froze his voice in his throat. A lumpen shape there, unnatural, out of place. The wavering candle glare played over it, catching glazed eyes that stared sightlessly over the rows of empty pews from beneath slack, lowering lids.

A human head.

Weston felt something lurch in his belly. Somewhere to his right, on the other side of the pews, he heard Luckner hiss: "*Jesus Christ....*"

The man on his knees paid them no heed whatever. He simply knelt there, abasing himself before the one he had murdered. Weston approached slowly in a fighting stance, square to the target with his knees slightly bent, his .45 in a two-handed grip. Out of the corner of

his eye, he saw Luckner approaching from the side, squinting down the ball sight of the shotgun, ready and perhaps eager to squeeze the trigger. It was only in that instant that Weston realized how much a part of him wanted to do the same.

It was a strange, unwelcome feeling—disorienting, like a glance into a funhouse mirror. Weston had no strain of vigilantism in his blood. The law was his religion, in letter as much as spirit; he was the sort who would risk his life to pull a murder suspect out of a burning car, and then, months later, ask the judge to hand down the death penalty on the very same person, with no sense of contradiction. He never allowed personal feelings to influence his behavior, prided himself that he *had* no personal feelings, not where the job was concerned. And yet the urge to shoot this son of a bitch was very strong.

Almost overpowering.

In his long-ago youth in Oklahoma, Weston had once attended a peyote ceremony. Pushing aside the flap of that wind-whipped tent and immersing himself in the warm fog of mescaline and marijuana that roiled within had been very much like this: a sudden transportation, not so much elsewhere or elsewhen but *elsewho*. A few inhalations had been enough to make him doubt who he was, or even *that* he was.

Are you real, Sam Weston? Are you you?

His confusion then had been frightening, but innocent, and the questions asked in his own voice. This was an inversion. A *perversion*. There were no questions, only answers and commands, whispered faintly by someone he had never met.

And they brimmed with malice.

You know who you are, the voice said. *Now be who you are and kill him. Kill him now!*

Weston tightened his finger on the trigger. Three more pounds of pressure would put a bullet through this freak's spine and decorate that embroidered white pulpit scarf in front of him with fresh spatter. This prick was wearing the blood of seven people; fitting if he left the world seeing some of his own....

A squeak behind him—poorly oiled hinges—and a gush of cold,

wet air, mingled with a too-familiar aftershave, announced a new entry into the chapel. Desiree. Somehow, the intrusion freed the thought trapped beneath the sudden weight of this terrifying anger:

You're a cop, not an executioner!

Weston glanced down at his gun hand as if it were a foreign object, saw the tension in the knuckles, the swell of a vein between them. He realized he was a single twitch away from committing murder and forced his index finger to relax. The whispering in his head had not ceased entirely, but it was receding, fading the way a dream fades; the distorted face in the funhouse mirror was settling back into its usual, unthreatening shape.

He was himself again.

The whole experience couldn't have lasted more than five seconds, yet it had felt like eternity.

What the hell was that?

With a shuddering breath, Weston pushed the Lawman back in its holster, popped the button on his handcuffs, felt the reassuring chill of high-tensile steel in his fingers. "I said to stay outside," he told Desiree, and pressed the sole of his brogan between the suspect's shoulder blades. A single push put the man on his face; in less than five seconds, the cuffs were locked in place over the blood-slick wrists. There was no resistance in the young body; the dense muscles were as pliant as clay. The only sound he made was that soft, sobbing mantra: *"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, so sorry...."*

"This is my church," Desiree said. The tone was sepulchral, but Weston heard the upset in it, the fear and dismay.

You old fraud, the chief thought. *You're no different than those kids out there—just another fool in a costume.*

But all he said was, "Come over here and take a look at him."

Hesitant footsteps on the red runner of carpet between the tightly packed little ranks of pews. Desiree entered Weston's peripheral vision at last, tight-lipped and pale, hands fisted at his sides. In all that black, he should have been intimidating. Instead, he merely looked horrified.

"He one of yours?"

The priest's eyes narrowed, then widened in a look of almost

comic surprise. "It's Mason Maguire." Desiree sounded as if he were choking on a piece of gristle. "He's a doctoral student in the Archaeology department... but he wouldn't... he couldn't... I *know* this man!"

"Not too goddamned well, I guess." Weston pulled a handkerchief from his coat and wiped the blood from his hands. "Unless *that's* the sort of thing you want on your collection plate."

Confusion shallowed in Desiree's dark eyes; then he followed Weston's gaze to the altar. The priest went rigid; a single grunt, as a man might emit when punched in the lower belly, escaped his lips. He would have fallen but for the saving grace of the pew. "Is that—"

"*Rosealeen!*"

The voice rolled through the enclosed space like the wrath of God. Weston whirled, his hand instinctively moving back to the butt of his pistol, and saw Marcus Hope staggering through the doorway, dragging Officer Nachtigall and that fucking idiot Toliver behind him as if they were cans tied to his feet.

Weston had seen much in his career. Soldiers so crazed with bloodlust they turned the red-hot muzzles of their weapons onto their own men; battered wives who had burned their abusive husbands alive as they slumbered in easy chairs; the grisly aftermaths of murder-suicides and hate crimes and drunk-driving accidents that had wiped out entire families. But he had never seen anything quite like the look in Hope's eyes as he struggled forward down that aisle. It was a mixture of lunacy and rabid rage—a fury borne of unbearable grief.

"*How the hell did he get in here?*" Weston roared.

"He kicked out the fuckin' *window!*" Nachtigall managed to exclaim before his fingers gave up their purchase on Hope's right leg and he face-planted into the carpet. Toliver, one arm flung around Hope's neck, fumbled desperately for something on his gun belt; Weston had just time enough to recognize what it was and form the word *stop* on his lips when a buzzing flash of blue light struck like lightning against Hope's half-exposed ribcage. The young man screamed in pain and collapsed to his knees, but incredibly, did not stop coming forward—whether to attack Maguire or get to the remains of this Rosealeen,

Weston could not say and did not care. He saw only Toliver striking again and again, jamming the stun gun into Hope's arm, his side, his hip: *zap! zap! zap!*

"*Stop it!*" Desiree shouted. "*Stop it, for God's sake!*"

In an instant, Weston took in the supine figure of Maguire, the shock-frozen features of Luckner, the naked terror on Desiree's face, and realized, not for the first time in his life, that it was up to him. He stepped forward and launched a kick directly at Toliver's wrist, thinking, with the odd clarity that tended to come at the most disastrous moments of a man's life: *So, this is how my career ends—at the hands of a fat rent-a-cop with bad teeth.*

30.

Agony.

The word had never held any real meaning to him before this moment.

It wasn't just the physical pain, the sizzling like a flash-fire wherever the metal prongs of the stun gun jammed against his body. In fact, the pain seemed almost petty inconvenience to Marcus Hope now—bird shit on his windshield, wet gloves on a winter night. A hundred thousand volts were nothing but a distraction from the cause of his true torment.

Rosealeen's dead!

And not just dead. Murdered. *Beheaded.* By a guy he had known for six years. A guy he knew as well as he knew himself. Mason Maguire. Dull, docile Mason, with his weightlifter's physique and weakling brain, who had chosen Archaeology as a major because *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was his favorite movie and he'd always been content with the middle seat on an airplane.

Mason had done *this*.

Rosealeen's eyes glinted at him from across the chapel. There was no longer accusation in them. There was *nothing* in them. She was dead. As dead as dead got. And on the floor, face-down with his hands

manacled behind his back, lay her murderer.

Marc had no memory of the ride up from Mulder House. No memory of kicking out the patrol car's window. At that moment, he had no memories at all. His life had begun the moment he had dragged himself through the chapel doors and seen his girlfriend's head adorning the pulpit. And it would end when he sank his thumbs into Mason Maguire's windpipe. One sweet crack would make everything right. As right as it could be, in a world without Rosealeen.

If only the campus cop would stop shocking him.

He was down on the red runner of carpet between the pews. Hands and knees. Knees and elbows. Struggling forward despite the blue-white explosions of pain that surged through his body with every jab of the cop's hand. Ahead of him, he saw blurred figures, the shapeless glare of a hundred lighted candles, the crucified body of Christ. And Maguire. Fucking Maguire, quiescent before the pulpit.

Just let me get to the bastard—

A blur of movement; a puff of air, and a dull *crack* as shoe met flesh and bone. The stabbing pain in Marc's side ceased. Something—was it the stun gun?—struck marble a few yards away. The security guard who had been atop him rolled away, howling in pain. Marc felt a black joy in his breast; surely, he could get to Maguire *now*. But his body would not respond. There was nothing left. He lay where he had fallen in the aisle, felt the dull throb of cracked bone beneath his facial muscles, a merciful dimming of consciousness behind his eyes. Part of him was aware that he was in the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose in the Upper Campus. Another part was down in the city below, in Mulder House, and he realized that he was experiencing a memory from before he had forced open the doors of this now-unholy place. In the memory, he heard Daryl's clock striking away the last quarter hour before midnight, the insipid voice of the deejay over the radio, the faint sounds of merrymaking on the street. Somewhere, close to hand yet muffled as by a closed door, he'd heard, or thought he heard, the sound of weeping.

With the very last of his strength, he'd lifted his head from the floor. He remembered this, clearly. The Wreck Room had now lived up

to its name—nearly everything broken or overturned, bodies sprawled everywhere. Only the framed picture over the bar remained intact, speckled as it was by fresh blood. A class picture of sorts. People Marc had known since he was eighteen or twenty years old. Fellow students. Friends.

Freddy. Lizzie. Steve. Daryl. Pamela. Vijay. Aura. And Rosealeen. Sweet Rosealeen, whose only sin had been to love—

Me!

Marc was still screaming when they took him to the hospital.

Book Two: When Evil Walks the Earth

Since you would save none of me, I bury some of you.

1.

The outermost gates of His Majesty's Prison at Grampian were new enough not to rattle when they opened. MacDonald, waiting impatiently in the cruel salt-scented wind, found this mildly insulting. Scotland was supposed to be a land of traditions, where old things were venerated, or at least respected; yet the handsome old Aberdeen prison, which had stood stolidly since the end of the nineteenth century, had been callously demolished to make way for *this* gleaming heap of cinderblock and razor wire. Not refitted to become an administration building in the Scottish Prison Service or turned into a museum, fucking *demolished*, as if the powers that be wanted to destroy not merely the place but its memory. Watching the new gates draw apart almost as smoothly as a stage curtain, MacDonald thought it damned impudent of them not to rattle a bit: by their very silence they seemed to be mocking his age, his infirmity... his growing sense that he, too, was marked for the wrecking ball. He forced the grim slash of his mouth into a sour half-smile and thought:

Guess my bones are rattlin' enough for both of us.

Three men approached on a narrow concrete path that lay like a drawbridge over a moat of pallid gravel: two black-uniformed warders escorting a taller fellow who walked between them, head upright, shoulders square, as if trying to give the impression that he, rather than they, who was in charge of the situation. MacDonald nodded; it was for this quality more than any other that Brodie had been chosen for the task that now awaited him.

Prison had aged the lad, to be sure; Brodie looked thinner and much older than his thirty-one years. The once-faint lines around his eyes and mouth had become creases, the well-fitted suit he'd worn at his sentencing now bagged on a winnowed frame, and when the two

men embraced, MacDonald could feel the jut of the younger man's bones through the fabric. Neither spoke until the shadow of the prison had fallen away and they walked in cloud-filtered sunlight through the parking lot.

"A year, Mac. A whole bloody *year*."

"We did the best we could to get ya out before now," MacDonald replied.

"Weren't good enough."

"Nobody told ya to get caught."

"Least I fackin' gave it a go!"

"We all gave it a go, best we could. We're *luchd-cùraim*, not fackin' MI-6. None of us never had to try our hand at this type of shyte before."

"Of course not. Bloody meeting society is what we are. Bloody sewing circle. We went soft with the waiting."

"Four hundred years is a long time to wait, lad."

"How far along is the thing now?"

"Far enough I cannae sleep nights."

"How could you let it out of the country?"

"We didn't bloody *let* it," MacDonald barked, temper flashing. He took a deep breath and said, in a more casual tone, "Anyway, what's done is done. It's on the other side of the pond now. I'd say good riddance, but—"

"The murders."

MacDonald looked at him in surprise. "How much do ye know?"

"Only what Adair told me afore I got took down to CSC for stabbin' that poof who tried to bugger me. He said a bunch of Yanks got the chop."

"Aye. I knew as soon as I heard, t'was the Màiri's work."

"It happened just like my Nan said it would... there's been nothing since then?"

"That we know of. But the time's almost nigh. Be Samhuinn again afore long. And *this* time, the killin' may not stop afterwards. This time—"

"I know. I know, damn it. What of the *tràillean*?"

"There was only one. Maguire is his name. They locked him in a

bloody bampot bin, the poor fool. Sure to be a *real* nutter by now.”

“How is it nobody followed the Màiri to the States in all this time?”

“Who’d ye have liked to go? Adair’s seventy-one. Ives is a bloody drunk. As for me,” he hefted his cane so that the silver handle shone briefly in the sun, “I can barely walk to the fackin’ loo without fallin’ on my face.”

“Christ! Is the *luchd-cùraim* a care home for daft old numptys now?”

“Don’t rage on me, mate. You know there ain’t but a few of us left and none so young as ya, unless ya want me to send little Mia. She’ll be eighteen next month, you know.”

Brodie’s colorless face flushed pink. He remained silent until they were sitting in MacDonald’s battered old Corsa, listening to the motor rumble.

“That was a cunty thing to say, Mac.”

“Well, yer actin’ like a prize cunt, aint’ ya? We both know yer the man for it—ye or nobody.”

Brodie shut his eyes. Filled his lungs and let them go. When he spoke again, his voice was hardened and calm. “You made the arrangements?”

“Flight’s booked.”

“My passport?”

“Got it right here.”

“Money?”

“A thousand quid.”

“That’s not enough.”

“Yer fackin’ brief emptied our fackin’ wallets, mate. Barristers don’t work cheap.”

“We got anyone in the States?”

MacDonald hesitated, his frown exaggerating the deeply scored wrinkles around his lips, making flowing rivers of them. “Not so they’d know it, if you get my meaning. Ya *might* want to play that card, lad, if things get desperate, but then again, ya might not. These Americans don’t know the story, and it may or may not be in our interest to tell ‘em. I cannae advise ya there, except to say ya’d best go in actin’ there’s no cavalry comin’.”

Brodie took off his cap and ran a hand through his prison haircut. "Story of my fackin' life. Where you takin' me, anyway?"

"Pub. Figgered yer due a few pints and some vindaloo. And a woman, if we can find ya one."

"The boozer can wait. So can the girl. Take me to the Bay."

"The *Bay*?"

"I gotta get the smell of that bloody filthy prison out of my nose."

MacDonald took South Road to the A982 and then made the long, chugging loop around the Scottish Maritime Academy. Sometimes, the sun dazzled; at other moments, the clouds darkened the landscape. Once, there was a spatter of rain. The old man was reminded of an old saying: *You don't like the weather in Scotland, wait five minutes*. As he drove, he studied Brodie's face out of the corner of his eye, saw the evidence of motion sickness upon it, noted the expression of mild relief when at last they rolled to a stop in a car park near Royal Princess Jetty. *Guess that's what a year in the slammer does to you*, he thought. *Pity the boy won't have no real time to enjoy himself before he leaves. Especially since he may not be coming back*.

Brodie stood on the edge of the jetty for some time in silence, staring into the dark blue horizon with his hands buried deep in the pockets of his raincoat. The wind blew in hard, rippling the waves as they broke against the pilings, lifting the spray over the iron rail. A few gulls rode the cold currents above, calling out to each other in voices appropriately mournful to the scene. MacDonald felt reluctant to break in on the younger man's thoughts; he passed the time by wetting the tip of his cane in a rain puddle and drawing a symbol on the concrete beneath him:

Υ

At last, the old man, longing for the warmth of whiskey in throat and belly, grew tired of waiting. "Were it very rough in the slammer, Brodie?"

The boy did not turn around when he spoke. "Rougher where I'm goin', I think."

“Can’t be helped. You’re *luchd-cùrainn*.”

“Aye.” The word came out of Brodie’s mouth full of bitterness, so MacDonald was startled when the younger man followed it with a snort of laughter.

“What’s the joke?”

“I’se thinkin’ of somethin’ my nan used to say. ‘What’s afore ye’ll no go past ye.’”

“I heard her say that meself. Fack does it mean?”

“Whatever’s meant to happen to ya, will happen.”

MacDonald drew the pattern beneath his feet one last time, then, almost angrily, obliterated it with a few quick hard slashes of his cane.

“For all our sakes, Brodie, I hope not.”

2.

Gina Kolibri woke bolt upright and gasping. For a long moment, the dream seemed to ripple around her like disturbed water; then at last, reality began to assert itself, as rocks might through a receding tide. Details of her bedroom began to emerge in her vision. Heavy, dusty drapes, showing sickly dawn light through a careless gap. A streaked mirror over a secondhand bureau. Bookshelves bowed beneath their weight of bleak-looking old volumes. She took a deep, trembling breath, filling her lungs with cigarette-stale air, heard the rhythmic drip of the leaky bathroom faucet.

Home, she thought, with a sense of relief that had become pathetically familiar. *I’m home. 101 Market Street. Progress, Pennsylvania.*

The clock radio by the bedside read 6:59 a.m. It had switched itself on fourteen minutes before, but the dream—the *nightmare*—had not released its grip on her slumbering brain. It never did. Evidently, nothing could make it do that. Not even the Prazosin or the tricyclic antidepressants that stood like mute sentinels in their bottles on the nightstand. No, the nightmare had to show her every frame of the horror, like a sadistic editor cranking a snuff film before her eyes one gritty, red-splattered frame at a time.

Gina, conscious that she was sweating despite the coolness of her studio apartment, flung the blankets away, revealing the bare legs that had enticed so many boys from the age of thirteen onward. There had been a time when the sight of her own body had triggered a warm glow of self-satisfaction deep within her, almost a lust, but that seemed another age now. The gymnast's muscles were still there, of course, but the alluring suntan that had once gloved them year-round was gone, leaving a whiteness so stark, the bluish tracery of veins showed faintly through the skin.

I look like a vampire, she thought. She who flees from the sun.

She fumbled for the first cigarette of the morning. It seemed inconceivable now that smoking had once repulsed her—as drinking had and the idea of taking pills to sleep. She knew how she'd once been regarded: Gina the health nut. Gina the fitness freak. Gina, last and finest of the Kolibri sisters, who had graduated high school with a nickname fitting to the gifts heredity and athletics had bestowed upon her: *Kolibri Body*. A pity the family's ardent Catholicism had rendered it off limits—even to her own hands.

Gina, of the perpetual virginity.

Her brain, still fogged by sleep, gradually became aware that the deejay had stopped his insipid banter and finally played a record. She didn't recognize the tune. Gina liked dance music, pop; hip-hop if it wasn't too salacious. Metal, especially the dark variety, left her cold. Even after the accident. And this was some very cold shit indeed:

*You don't know my face
And you'll never hear me coming
I've got a private darkness, girl
I want to share with you*

She tucked a sweat-dampened lock of hair behind her ear, watched the smoke curl slowly in the light slanting through that damnable crack in the drapes. The music seemed to feed the fear that still drove her heart at a too-rapid pace, but she didn't want to switch it off. Sign of weakness, and Gina was not weak, merely damaged.

Or so she told herself a hundred times a day.

She took a deep drag, sucking in the candy-cane sweetness of the menthol. *There goes another minute of my life.* And yet, if things continued this way, maybe shaving minutes from that life wasn't such a bad idea.

Stop this loser thinking!

The thought was automatic; it came down like a gate, barring the self-pity that threatened to overwhelm her. Clenching her teeth, she forced herself to listen to the lyrics:

Got a place inside me

So cold it gives me chills, girl

Whispered secret

I'll show you something new

She lengthened her focus to the opposing wall. No pictures there, no posters, no framed photographs of family she didn't want to speak to or friends she no longer had. Just newspaper clippings, printouts, photographs, and drawings executed in crude, angry strokes of charcoal by her very own hand. Some of them were recent; others already beginning to yellow with age. Sometimes, when she switched on the ceiling fan, they rustled faintly where the Scotch tape had dried up and fallen away. There was no rustle now; the headlines of the clippings stood stark and still in her sharpening vision. Familiar without being reassuring, like a cemetery opposite your front-porch swing. The legitimate newspapers showed some restraint, but the tabloid headings were deliberately lurid.

“HACKER” SLAYS 4, INJURES 3 IN HALLOWEEN
MASSACRE

D.A.: “NO APPARENT MOTIVE” IN HACKER SLAYINGS

SURVIVOR'S LEAKED STATEMENT TO POLICE CAUSES
ONLINE FUROR

“HACKER” DEFENSE ATTY: COMPETENCY HEARINGS
ONGOING

LEGAL EXPERTS: M'NAUGHTEN RULE MAY SAVE
HACKER FROM LETHAL INJECTION

STATE PSYCHIATRIC REPORT SAYS HACKER IS
“AKINETIC, CATATONIC”

HACKER NOT COMPETENT TO STAND TRIAL

HACKER COMMITTED TO ELYSIUM STATE HOSPITAL

Hacker. *Christ!* The most notorious killer to come down the pike in generations and they couldn't even give him a decent nickname.

Gina had her own name for him, of course. A private one she could not fully explain, even to herself.

Janus.

Not much better than The Halloween Hacker, but more fitting somehow. She knew that much without being able to explain why.

There was so *much* she couldn't explain.

And yet.

Her gaze fell once more to the nightstand. To the tape recorder there. An old hand-held model, not much bigger than her pack of Marlboros. A memento of her late father, who had been a reporter for the Catholic News Agency and had recorded many an interview on it back in the days before cell phones and MP3s. Archaic, really, almost antique. But also something that—pardon the pun—could never be hacked. With a sigh that was more resignation than reluctance, she crushed the half-smoked cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and picked up the recorder. The button made its usual oily little *click* when it depressed beneath her thumb.

“Tuesday...” Her voice sounded clogged. An old woman. A drunk. A failure. *I'm twenty-five years old!* She cleared it, coughed, glanced at the desk calendar by the lamp. “Tuesday. October first. Same dream. No

new details but everything's getting more and more vivid. I could hear the gears turning in that scary-ass clock. I could feel the weight of the ax in my hands. I could smell—”

She hesitated again, reluctant to summon horrors that had banished themselves from her consciousness only moments before. Finally, quelling a pang of nausea that tightened her throat, took another breath and said, as calmly as she could manage:

“I could smell the blood.”

3.

It wasn't real pain, Pamela knew, just the remembered kind. But remembered pain was bad enough.

She'd felt it more of late, now that she was on campus again. A literal pain in the neck, which was not surprising, considering that it had been just under a year ago it had been broken. Two fractures of the cervical spine, to be precise: C-3 and C-4. Not to mention a hefty crack in the frontal bone of the skull with attendant swelling of the brain. Nobody had expected her to live, much less to be up and about, however stiffly, in that goddamned neck brace just five weeks later; but then nobody had ever really understood how tough Pamela Bachmann *was*. Even she hadn't truly known until those first, agonizing days in rehab, when she'd realized just how much suffering she was going to have to endure if she ever wanted to be *normal* again.

That's me, she thought, watching sorority girls drape orange and black bunting over the campus gate. *Little miss normal*.

It was almost nine in the morning, and the air was still sharp against her skin; she felt grateful for her scarf and suede jacket, though she would probably want to discard both by the time she reached Campbell Hall. The sadistic fucks that had designed this school had made sure to do so in a vertical fashion; the dormitories, intramural fields, gymnasium, and concert hall of Lower Campus had been built into the base of Grace Hill, but the Upper Campus, which housed the administration and other school buildings, required goddamned

mountaineering equipment. After all those endless months in rehab, Pamela was only just now getting used to full mobility again; the long climb up University Way both daunted and challenged her.

Which was why you parked down here in the first place, dumbass. Now get moving or you'll be late.

She moved, brushing breeze-blown hair out of her eyes, but cast a last glance at the girls as they strung the billowing crepe over the great arch of wrought iron, obscuring the words she knew to be there:

FORMATIA TRANS SICERE EDUCATORUM

That's me, she thought. I guess....

It was funny—not funny ha-ha—how she thought of those sorority girls as *girls*. And, in fact, they did look disconcertingly young to her, though she reckoned she had no more than seven or eight years on them. But age was more than a sum of years, more than how you looked, even. It was how you felt inside. She felt old, and it was little wonder.

There were no young survivors.

She had put this exact thought into the journal Dr. Kapelos had urged her to keep: *No matter what form the trauma—rape, cancer, the premature death of a parent—the end result is the same: acceleration of awareness. And the more awareness one has, the older one feels. Youth isn't a biological number: it's the sum of your ignorance of the harsh realities of life. The less the sum, the greater the feeling of age. And who is less ignorant of harsh realities than I am?*

Pamela experienced no difficulty admitting the value, even the necessity, of seeing a counselor after *What Had Happened* (alternate title within her mind: *That Night*). Her willingness to seek therapy had surprised everyone who knew her, but only because they did not know her well enough. It was true that Pamela had always been a hellion with an ego as big as all outdoors, but it was precisely *because* she had taken so much pride in her abilities that she knew their exact limits. Hence, the good doctor and the little notebook she kept in the inside pocket of her jacket at all times, a well-chewed No. 2 pencil jammed into its spiral spine like a rocket into a launch tube. She never knew, now, when

the urge to scribble within it would strike; she did know the action brought relief.

Morphine for the soul.

In her more contemplative moments, in the evenings when the fire crackled in the grate and the booze flowed freely, she admitted that the fact she could scarcely remember the details of That Night had contributed much to the speed of her emotional recovery. It turned out that getting your head used as a wrecking ball had its compensations, for the doctors had made it clear that thanks to the nature of her concussion, the memories of the actual attack were almost certainly lost forever. No, the real pain—worse than the phantom one that came and went in her neck—was the pain of *absence*.

This pain had a number of forms. Sometimes it took the shape of a thief in the night, stealing upon her in bed just as she was drifting off to sleep. At others, it was a strong-arm robber, assaulting her suddenly in unguarded moments—driving, shopping, crossing the street. Sometimes—perhaps worst of all—it was a booby trap, waiting for a specific impulse, sensation, or memory to trigger an explosion. Take last night, for example. She had assumed her usual position by the fireplace in her little rental house on Grantley, with the usual tumbler of Black Velvet in her hand, when the urge had come upon her to call Rosealeen and tell her about the episode of *Joy of Painting* flickering on her television. Rosealeen *loved* Bob Ross, and little wonder; they were both so goddamned gentle, you got the distinct feeling the two of them could have played catch with an egg for a week and never cracked the fucking shell. Well, good old Bob, fussing over his brushes, had been particularly quotable that evening: *There's nothing wrong with having a tree as a friend*, he'd said, and Pamela, smiling, had actually been halfway to reaching for her phone when she'd remembered, with a feeling like walking into a sheet of cold glass, that Rosealeen was dead.

Long dead.

The realization—though was it really a realization if you had it several times a week?—had sent grief flowing through the pages of her notebook. At least it started as grief. Anger inevitably followed, and the tears that had smeared her words soon yielded to the spiky

handwriting that a too-tight grip on the pencil produced. At last, the tip broke, leaving a jagged scar across the paper. Pamela, emotionally spent, had shut the notebook and swallowed two ounces of booze, realizing that fully an hour had passed, and a horror movie had replaced Bob Ross on the television. Well, of course it had. It was now October. Halloween was coming round once again, like a red-painted number on a roulette wheel, and the airwaves were as full of horror movies as the store shelves were of candy and costumes. The villain of the piece, an unshaven, blade-thin actor with glowering eyes, had told the trembling heroine, *I used to tell myself that. Used to try and pretend I was dreaming all the pain. But don't you kid yourself. Some things have to be endured.*

Pamela, now striding along the sidewalk that wandered amiably beside the tree-lined way, had found an odd comfort in those harshly grated words. Well, perhaps not comfort, perhaps merely truth. Pain, like orgasm, got to the heart of things, but unlike orgasm, it was inescapable, and when it arrived, it blew away all your sturdy pretenses like so many pencil shavings. And the truth was, you did not endure because you *wanted* to; you endured because you must. Pamela had not wanted to be a cripple, so she had endured six months of painful, often humiliating, physical therapy. She had not wanted to see this town or this campus ever again, but she would not run, so she stayed and endured the memories of her dead friends. She did not want to experience another Halloween—ever—but there was no avoiding the wretched spectacle, and so she must endure that too.

Having arrived at the inner ring of the Upper Campus, she paused for a moment to catch her breath and watch the leaves falling in the breeze. The display, common enough for Pennsylvania in the fall, was nevertheless breathtaking: a shower of gold, copper, and wine-red swirling over the sidewalk. She remembered an afternoon like this a few years past, when she and Rosealeen had blown off a lecture to sample the Beaujolais Nouveau at the Hawk and the Dove and emerged into the late-afternoon sunlight giggling like schoolgirls and scarcely able to walk a straight line. The two of them had weaved arm in arm together back through the campus amid a similar rain of color, singing the refrain of “*J’aurais toujours faim de toi*” over and over again until

Father Carnaghan had cranked open the second-floor window of his presbytery and yelled at them to shut the hell up.

The memory stung; almost instinctively, Pamela reached for the notebook in her pocket, then let her hand fall back to her side. There would be time to visit the familiar landscape of mourning later. Right now, she had somewhere to be. Yet, as she passed the e'er-splashing fountain in front of Campbell Hall, its cone of water shimmering in the sunshine, she thought: *335 days since I've heard your voice, Rose. Three hundred thirty-five goddamn days. When the hell will I stop counting?*

4.

Daryl Stebbing sat alone in the back row of Campbell Hall, gripping the exercise ball in his left hand and staring over the heads of the undergraduates at the dusty chalkboard behind the lectern. He was not always conscious of the ball or the effort he expended in squeezing it; it faded in and out of his awareness as background noise might in a diner. Deliberate awareness he reserved for the *appearance* of his hand; he never looked directly at the fucking thing if it could be avoided, and he discouraged others from doing so wherever possible, sometimes with violence. But the anger that preceded violence seldom gripped him during daylight hours. While the sun shone, he regarded the scar (*mutilation* was the proper word) with something akin to scientific interest. He had been—he *was*, goddammit!—a scientist, and the essence of science was curiosity. So, by day he was often curious about his injury. He had spent many an hour alone in his dismal little room at the end of Gasoline Alley, leafing through the oddly festive pink and yellow paper the hospital had used to catalog what had been done to him: *Severe cut laceration of the right hand between the third and fourth digits (deep penetration of the midpalmar space with severe damage to the flexor tendons and lumbrical muscles, extending to the common flexor sheath), slight damage to the superficial palmar branch of the radial artery and the recurrent branch of the median nerve to the thenar muscles....*

The nerd in him—it would take a helluva lot more than an ax to

cut *that* out of Daryl Stebbing—found a certain fascination with the words. *Flexor* sounded like a sci-fi weapon, *thenar* the name of a planet, and *midpalmar space*, an uncharted region of the galaxy. He could imagine Captain Kirk saying, *Energize the flexor, Mr. Sulu! Mr. Chekov, set course for Thenar!* Whereupon Spock would intone, with dour urgency: *Captain, that course will take us through the heart of Midpalmar Space!*

Daryl, briefly conscious of the ball in his hand, became aware of the strain in his wrist and lower forearm, and, fearing a cramp, let the muscles relax. As he did so, the awareness of his injury also faded. The scientist within him (there were a lot of personalities crowded into Daryl Stebbing) was pleased by this. To brood over what could not be changed was, as Spock would have said, illogical. The doctors had told him the hand would always be swollen and scarred and somewhat stiff, and that he would have to adjust to this stark, unyielding fact. And so, he did.

So long as the sun burned overhead.

Night told a different story.

He didn't quite understand why, but when darkness filled his windowpane, anger filled his heart with blazing coals. Sometimes, drinking could put out the flames; others, the beer merely fueled them. This anger had a strange, feverish heat that made clear-headed thinking impossible. His work—the research he was supposed to be doing toward his doctoral thesis—would lay on his desk in a neglected heap, and sooner or later, the urge to shrug into his coat and stalk the streets would overmaster him. He was never sure precisely what he sought on these midnight walks. Confrontation, perhaps, but when confrontations came—with drunken fratboys, college-hating townies, or would-be muggers—they brought little in the way of relief.

Maybe that's why I'm here, he thought. Certainly, it was why Pamela was coming. The track that both of them had been on since they were pimply teenagers had started in this very lecture hall, with the man who had just emerged from the wings amid a rustle of curtains—the handsome, distinguished-looking priest with the romantic sobriquet, Lucas Desiree.

Daryl was a confirmed heterosexual, but he was not *so* straight that

he failed to appreciate the aesthetic gifts that the good father had been bestowed by God or nature. Desiree's hair was iron and silver, except for the brows, which were coal-black to match the penetrating gaze of his eyes. His weathered features were hard, almost severe, with a nose that appeared all the more aquiline thanks to flat cheekbones. Even the pointed beard had a military look—albeit a military that wore iron breastplates and boiled leather and spoke in Latin. The mouth, however, was at once sensual and ironic; it seemed to be suppressing a smile of coarse appetite and subversive cynicism. As for the clothes, who else could wear all that rusty black with such panache? Desiree's shoes gleamed like a drill sergeant's, and when he knelt to retrieve a paper that had slipped out of his hand, his collar flashed a white that scalded Daryl's retinas. Smoothing the paper on the lectern, the priest seemed to be aware of the salutary effect his presence had on the crowd—heads jerking up from cell phones, conversations cut short. A gentle tap on the microphone, a theatrical clearing of the throat—*ahem!*—and the silence was complete. The part of Daryl that had nearly chosen sociology over archaeology was, as always, impressed. The man knew how to handle fractious youngsters without letting them know they were being handled.

"And so," the priest intoned, in his deep baritone so reminiscent of Christopher Lee, "October having arrived once again, our minds turn naturally to the subject of... evil."

He pronounced the word in the British way: *eee-ville*. A few chuckles sounded from among the crowd. Desiree strode to the board and wrote four letters there with hard, deliberate strokes:

E V I L

He let the chalk drop to the tray, returned to the lectern, gripping its sides so that the ring he wore on his left hand dazzled in the glare of the overhead lights. "What is it, anyway? We hear the word every day; we read it in books and religious texts; we use it as an adjective to describe everything from the gulags of Stalin to the motivations of our teachers." Desiree abruptly slammed the ringed fist on the lectern and,

imitating a young voice, shrieked in mock outrage, “Two *chapters by Wednesday? That evil son of a bitch!*”

Laughter from the startled students. Desiree arched an eyebrow and permitted the faintest of smiles to shallow in one corner of his mouth. “But what is it, this evil of which we speak so glibly? Wickedness? Malevolence? Destructiveness? Selfishness pursued to the *nth* degree? Is it something that lurks in a dark corner of every human heart, a sort of impulse, like the impulse to love, except most of us attempt to suppress it? Is it a vestige of Original Sin? Or is it an active force, a tool of some monolithic supernatural antagonist—Satan, for example? What, ladies and gentlemen, *is* evil?”

Daryl found himself squeezing the exercise ball so tightly that pain rolled all the way to his elbow. Almost sheepishly, he forced the muscles once more into resting position. *Oh, you’re good, Dean. But then again, you always were.*

“Some say that ‘evil’ is just a word, that everything moral is relative, and one man’s evil is another man’s good. Others—the Church, for example—tell us that evil is a fixed concept, that it is a product of sin, and that its particulars are independent of culture and never change. But does this answer the actual purpose of evil, if it does, in fact, exist? ‘The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.’ So God tells us in Isaiah 45:7. Is God, therefore, telling us that *He* is the source of all evil? Job must certainly have thought so! ‘*The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing.*’ Well, why would He? In the Bible, God does not merely permit evil, he encourages it. Job is the most upright man in the land of Uz—*blameless*, the Old Testament says—yet God gives Satan *carte blanche* to test his loyalty. And what a test! Job is robbed of his wealth. His home is destroyed. His children are slaughtered. He is afflicted with painful boils, deserted by his wife, and given false counsel by his friends. And God stands by and lets it happen, simply to prove a point, which—if we accept the explanation of most theologians—is simply that Job’s faith can endure any crisis. But isn’t it possible there is a deeper motive in God’s actions? Isn’t it possible that God, who created the world and

everything in it, *needed* to create evil as well? And this brings up larger questions still. Is it even possible for the concept of *good* to exist if there is no evil to counterbalance it? Musn't yin have its yang, up its down, chocolate its vanilla, Fox News its NPR?"

The quality of the silence had changed. Become tense, rapt, expectant. It was an effect Daryl had seen at rock concerts sometimes, just before the first chord was played, or at comic cons when some hitherto reclusive icon of science fiction walked into the spotlight. *Genius! Preaching without preaching. Religion as a tool of secular instruction.*

"All of you are in this class for two reasons," Desiree continued. "First, you need it to graduate. Second, you are young and inquisitive, and desire answers to some of the fundamental questions of existence. What is evil and why does it exist are two of the most fundamental you will ever encounter. Whether or not you will find answers to those questions will determine many things... including your grades on next week's exam."

More laughter, louder laughter, carrying notes of both release and excitement. Young minds beginning to kindle under the expert ministrations of a skillful teacher. It was the sort of thing that would have touched Daryl deeply a year ago; now, it was simply a fact within the sphere of his intelligence—something he could admire the way he could admire a well-cut stone, sincerely but without passion. His emotions were always too close or too far away these days—boiling fury or cool indifference, polite interest or sleepless obsession. No happy mediums need apply.

He felt cool air puff a lock of hair off his forehead, saw Pamela move into his peripheral vision. She was still too thin—almost bony—and there was a workworn look around her eyes, the imprint of old agony; but she had color in her face again, and her step had regained some of its old confidence. She took the empty seat next to him, slouching in such a way that their legs touched. It was a friendly intimacy, not sexual, but reassuring, and Daryl thought of the rhyme Pamela sometimes chanted under her breath:

One survivor, two survivor, three survivor, four—

He had never been able to make out the rest, but he didn't really need to. That was how she saw herself, and Daryl, studying her out of the corner of his eye, thought:

I guess that makes one of us.

5.

There were many concerns in Lucas Desiree's life, but his ever-eroding sense of Catholic Guilt was not one of them. The applause that greeted the end of his lecture—applause, from freshmen taking a compulsory course—crashed over him like a wave, and like a wave seemed to lift him momentarily off his feet.

Putty in my hands, he thought. *All of you!*

It was a feeling that never grew stale. Indeed, it seemed to sweeten further with each passing year... and yet, as the wave crested, another thought, a mental reflex of sorts, sounded in his head:

The LORD detests the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

Desiree felt his feet settle back on the earth—partially chastened, partially annoyed, but mostly relieved that these thoughts were so feeble an echo of his once-thundering religious conscience. The Book of Proverbs had been his personal goad for years; now, he regarded it as a mere shibboleth, a bag of worn-out old beliefs best hurled into the nearest garbage bin.

"That will conclude us for the day," he said, enjoying the amplification of his voice afforded by the microphone. "Please read chapters five and six from the text for our next session, and," he could not resist this last remark, indeed he had been waiting to use it for days, "try to forgive me if I was in a long-winded humor when I wrote them."

The audience broke up in a genial, almost boisterous humor. Desiree shuffled the papers on the lectern, dropped them into his leather briefcase. He felt reluctant to leave, to abandon his sense of abandon. His office, grand as it was, did not provide him with an

audience, much less one as attentive as this had been.

When did I develop this hunger for the admiration of strangers? he wondered. The question was rhetorical, but his mind supplied an answer nonetheless:

The moment I lost my hunger for Christ.

Someone approached. Desiree's vision was excellent, but he had developed astigmatism in his forties, and the figure had to walk through diminishing layers of blurriness before he could identify it. A girl of about twenty-five years. Tallish and familiar looking. Movements of an athlete and a body to match. Brown hair, piled carelessly atop her head. Eyes as clear and pale blue as the water off Grand Bahama. Cheeks hollow. Lips unpainted, the lower showing the imprint of tooth marks. She wore a small gold cross at the neck and a rough shirt of dull plaid, misbuttoned so that an inviting gap revealed bare white flesh beneath. Overlarge breasts, clearly unholstered, yet so firm looking that—

Stop.

This thought, like the last, was reflexive; but unlike the other, it had some force. There was Stephanie to remember. Stephanie to mourn. Stephanie to regret. He drove all salacious thoughts from his mind as with a pitchfork and forced a fatherly smile to his lips. "Good morning, Miss Kolibri. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Father—uh, professor. Dean."

A lovely voice. Clear and feminine, but oddly unsure of itself.

"Miss Kolibri, you can call me either *Father* or *Professor* or *Dean*. You don't have to call me all three."

"Uh, yes, sir, Professor. Father."

Desiree sighed. "Let me guess. You want to look at my books again."

"Yes, sir. The library's," she indicated its general direction with a nod of the head, "got nothing on *your* library."

"Well, there's not much demand on this campus for works on Gaelic burial rites, written in Medieval Latin."

"I guess not."

"A riveting subject, burial rites—in the sense that you need to have your eyes riveted open to stay awake while you read."

He expected a chuckle or at least a polite smile. She just stared. He could see the pulse working in her throat. It was the sort of throat you could imagine resting your face against after—

Stop.

“You’re new to Professor Van Winaker’s team, are you not?” he said, a little more roughly than he would have liked. “Don’t answer that. I know you are. I’m the Dean of Students. I signed your transfer papers myself.”

“I just started here in September. He’s still trying to fill the vacancies after... what happened last year.”

What happened last year. Interesting the way that phrase had taken hold on campus. Never, *the murders* or *the massacre*. Just *what happened last year*. It reminded him of the *Lesser Key of Solomon*—the list of seventy-two demons who could not be named. Now, there were seventy-three. No one in Progress spoke Mason Maguire’s name aloud any more than they mentioned his victims or the disgusting orgy of media attention that had been their public wake. All of it came under the heading of *what happened last year*. The whole bloody incident had been sealed off behind those bland undescriptive words, never again to see the light of day.

“Yes, of course,” he said briskly, trying once more for levity. “You do know that some of the books you want are almost a thousand years old and rather delicate. You cannot, for example, eat Kentucky Fried Chicken before you thumb through them.”

“I’m a vegan, sir.”

“My condolences to your taste buds.”

“So, I can take a look then?”

You and I, alone in my home again? The thought was frightening. Despite the coolness of her manner and the cross winking chastely from her neck, this Gina Kolibri had a sluttish scent to her—a scent of cigarettes and cheap liquor and pent-up desire that Desiree could not help but find exciting. The last time she had been to his house that scent had lingered in the air for what seemed like days, a subtle torment. Because there was Stephanie to remember. Stephanie to mourn. Stephanie to regret. “Some other time, perhaps. I’m afraid I see the

dread specter of my agent behind you, and he won't be put off, as I've neither a cross nor holy water to keep him at bay. An ironic dilemma for a priest, *nicht wahr?*"

Gina, oddly enough, did not follow Desiree's gaze to the place in the curtains where Asher Weissenstein had just emerged, resettling a yarmulke on his combover. She simply nodded once, eyes curiously blank and faraway, and swept out of the room. It was the right word. Something about that girl suggested urgency—or perhaps not urgency, but a focus so single-minded she was scarcely aware of her surroundings. Certainly, she wasn't keen on her appearance, which was a minor tragedy, considering—

Stop!

Weissenstein approached with a grin. He was a shortish, softly built fellow of about fifty years, but because of his intense stare, excess of nervous energy, and rapid-fire speech patterns, he tended to come across as somewhat larger than life, an effect enhanced by the fact that both his yarmulke and his tie bore the silver-green logo of the New York Jets.

"Who was *that?*"

"Who do you think? A student, of course."

"That is not the ass of a freshman, Lucas."

"She's a *graduate* student, Asher, and you shouldn't be staring after her like that. You're old enough to be her father."

"But not so old I can't appreciate what God, in his infinite wisdom, has seen fit to endow upon her."

Desiree snapped his briefcase shut and made for the exit, forcing the smaller man to scamper after him so that his unbuttoned suit jacket flapped. "How long have you been lurking in the wings, ogling my students?"

"You just beat me here."

"So, you heard it all."

"Every platitude. What impressed me most was your timing. You finished right on the dot. Now, if only you could be so punctual with a goddamned deadline."

"Don't blaspheme."

“You were supposed to have me the sample chapters a month ago. Instead, I get an e-mail wishing me a ‘happy equinox.’ Is that some kind of Catholic in-joke? Because if it is... hello, Jewish.”

Desiree pushed open the fire door everyone knew was not connected to any alarm and stepped into a flood of cool morning sunshine. “Asher, how long have you been my agent?”

“Nine years.”

“And in that time, how many books have I published?”

“Four.”

“And how many copies have they sold?”

“Roundabout two million, I suppose.”

“And what is your cut of my royalties?”

“A very modest twelve and a half percent.”

“And you’re telling me, after all that time and all that money, that you still don’t know what the goddamned fall equinox is?”

“What was that you just said about blasphemy?”

“On certain occasions it’s warranted.”

“Odd how those occasions coincide with my appearance.”

“Decidedly.”

Asher glared at him. “Look, never mind the equinox or Passover or Charlie Brown’s Spirit of fucking Christmas, for that matter. I know what a *deadline* is, and so do your publishers. They’re getting nervous. I am too.”

“Why? Do they think I’m running out of ghost stories?”

“Are you?”

Desiree wanted to enjoy the odd combination of warm sun and cool wind, to relish the somehow spicy spell of the falling leaves and the play of passing faces—white and pink and almond and carob, a tremendous diversity of flesh color that he had once credited to God. And yet there was Asher beside him, tapping an unlighted cigarette into his palm as he walked, oblivious to all of it. Blinded. Focused on a single objective. Just like that Kolibri girl. So limiting. So narrow-minded.

So why am I envious?

“What I don’t understand,” the priest said at last, “is why they

weren't interested in my proposal."

"I'm surprised you're surprised. 'The effect of archaeological discovery on modern occult ritual?' It bores me just *saying* it. And don't look at me like that! That's a subject for an academic journal or a scholarly paper, not a mass-market paperback, and you of all people should know it. Christ, half your sales are from e-book downloads, and the only way to make real money on those things is to crank 'em out like Lincoln Logs. Whoever heard of an *academic* Lincoln Log?"

"I'm frequently appalled by the low regard you have for the intellect of my readership."

"I'm realistic. I know who your audience is."

"People who believe that the truth doesn't end where science does."

"People who believe in any fucking thing *except* science. People who don't vaccinate their kids, who think jet contrails are full of mind-control gas, who see images of Jesus in potato chips."

"I have never seen Jesus in a potato chip. I *have* seen a tamale which strongly resembled Pius XII. Do you want me to write a book about that?"

"I'm serious, Lucas."

"So am I."

"About the tamale?"

"About my audience!"

"You want to keep them, give them what they want."

They had entered the great shadow of the Administration Building, the second-highest structure on campus and the only one that lacked an eponym—and perhaps justly so. It was a towering fastness of ivy-covered brick whose mullioned windows glared out at the world like ancient archery slits. The grinning stone gargoyles arrayed along its rooftop didn't lend much in the way of charm, either. And while the building's interior had undergone several modernizations in the last century, it remained gloomy and imposing, a feeling unleavened by the huge oil paintings that rowed the corridors, each depicting a different scene from the Crusades. As they arrived at the elevator—Asher's cigarette-enfeebled lungs couldn't tolerate the stairs—Desiree said, in a low, uncarrying tone, "Maybe I'm tired of writing about ghosts."

Weissenstein removed a pocket square and patted his glistening forehead with it. "In Texas they have a saying, Lucas: Leave with the one that brung ya."

"You've been to Texas?"

"I've flown over it. My point is that you sold those two million books writing on a certain topic because you have an expertise in that topic that can't be matched anywhere in the Western world."

"That's book jacket propaganda."

"Damn right. The best money can buy."

"But it's not *true*."

"Who gives a shit?"

"How can you ask that of a scholar with a straight face?"

The sweat-dampened silk returned to Asher's breast pocket, and the kindness left his tone. "Because you're not a goddamned scholar. You're a *brand*." He assumed the voice of a carnival barker. "*Father Lucas Desiree, Ph.D., the Vatican's top gun on occult phenomenon, demonic possession, exorcism, haunting, satanism, and things that go bump in the night!*"

"Coming at you live and in stereo."

"Surround-sound, baby, and high definition where available."

"You make it sound so sleazy. So sensational."

"It *is* sleazy. It *is* sensational. That's what people want when they open one of your books. Sensation! *The Exorcist*, but with Regan McNeil played by an eighteen-year-old blonde with tits bigger than the Grand Pitons. Though now that I think about it, that girl back there—"

"Now you're just being vulgar. Again."

"We made an image of you. Now you have to live up to it."

"Do I? And here I was, thinking my only vows were to the Church."

"Don't get self-righteous on me."

"I wasn't aware that professional integrity counted as self-righteousness."

Weissenstein turned to glare at him again. He rose only to Desiree's chin, yet his expression made him almost physically intimidating. "Hey, when I said *we* made the image, Lucas—I didn't mean me and the publisher. I meant *me* and *you*. You went into this with eyes open... and mouth watering."

The elevator arrived with a soft thump to the top floor—"the aerie" the campus priests called it, or, more cynically, "The Apostolic Palace." Here, the opening doors revealed a cruciform hallway, carpeted rather than marbled, and bathed in sunlight that streamed in through vaulted windows that gave onto views of the surrounding countryside. Desiree, conscious of his dignity, said, "It's just that I would like to be taken more seriously by my peers."

"Your peers don't drive Mercedes, Lucas. They don't wear custom-made shoes or live in fancy houses jammed full of antiques."

"Antiquities."

"Whatever. Look, just write another book, exactly like the last one, because, at the risk of conforming to an ugly cultural stereotype created by guys who dress just like you, I miss those big fat commission checks."

Desiree hesitated before the door to his outer office, then walked to the north-facing window underlooking the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose: a clear-cut shape that stood alone on the crest of the hill. From this distance, he could see the intricacy of the proudwork in the stone, the jewel-like gleam of the small stained-glass windows rowed beneath the eaves. A tiny thing, really; not much larger than a two-story home, it was nonetheless far more impressive than many full-blown churches.

No wonder Stephanie wanted to get married there. Pity we have to keep it locked at night now to keep out the ghouls and souvenir-hunters. Damn that Maguire anyway.

"I'm bored with it, Asher. And it's all rubbish anyway. Like you said."

A sound of rustling fabric: Weissenstein shifting around uncomfortably in his suit. A bright-brained fellow, Asher, but despite of that—or more likely, because of it—he disliked introspection. Too dangerous to go looking inside yourself with a lantern; you never knew what the hell you'd find. Or what hell you'd find.

"I never *said* it was rubbish, Lucas. I said it didn't attract the smartest audience. But so fucking what? There's an astrology column in every newspaper in the United States. The house where they shot *The Amityville Horror* is a goddamned shrine. My own sister practices

Kabbalah, for God's sake. People *like* this shit. Same as I like Turkish Gold and the Jets. Liking things that are bad for us is what makes us *human*."

"So, you admit I'm simply feeding the beast. Stoking the fires of ignorance. Pushing pseudoscience and mysticism on a credulous public."

"Why not? Isn't that what *religions* do?"

"Don't be insulting."

Asher rested a hand on the priest's shoulder. When Desiree turned, he was mildly surprised to see a confessional look had come over his agent's face.

"Look, you've heard of Cafeteria Catholics. Well, I'm a twice-a-year Jew, okay? I go to temple on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. I wear this fucking solar panel on my head to please my mother and cover my bald spot, and for no other reason. Far as I'm concerned, a ghost story is a ghost story until a few million people believe it; then, we call it a religion. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, it's all the same bullshit mumbo-jumbo; the only difference is the label. So, if you wanna feel bad about hustling ghost stories, Lucas, don't bother; you've been doing it ever since you put on that collar. Only difference now is that you *charge*."

6.

You can do this, Marcus Hope thought. *Sure, you can*.

He had been all right during the drive in from the airport.

A nice airport, Pittsburgh. Well-lighted. Spacious. Clean. Historical exhibits in the lobby. No painful memories, either. The girl behind the rental counter had grown tongue-tied at his approach and been only too happy to rent him the Mustang that had been reserved for someone else. A year ago, this would have flattered Marc's ego; now, he regarded the effect he had on women as nothing more than a nuisance, albeit an occasionally useful one. He'd returned to Pennsylvania feeling he'd be needing a fast car.

If only to get away.

Progress looked the same to him from the highway—a rough-hewn triangle of shingle and brick, smokestack and spire, bounded by a trio of green hills. A sore and a bore, the college kids called it, and it was; the charming little market town founded in 1741 had long since been swallowed up by factories, rowhouses, fast food joints, and shabby, depressive little strip malls; the enterprising genius who'd come up with the bumper sticker HAPPINESS IS PROGRESS IN A BOMBSIGHT had done a brisk trade indeed. Resurrection was the last place on earth a trust-fund jockey like himself should have chosen to pursue a higher education he didn't need—and that, he supposed, was half the reason he'd opted to go there in the first place. Fuck Harvard. Fuck Stanford. Fuck Brown and Princeton and Georgetown. Fuck walking the old trails trampled flat by generations of Hopes, a seemingly endless Progression of *juris doctors* and MBAs who rode in limousines to Wall Street or Madison Avenue to wring yet more millions into the family's already overflowing coffers—or worse yet, presided over charitable organizations they'd founded to ease their consciences about the rapacity of their own greed. Marc had wanted to plunge his fingers into the dirt, feel the sun on the back of his neck, to drink cold beer by campfires in the Montana Badlands beneath a blue blaze of stars. To do something where merit and not money mattered. He'd wanted to be *different*.

And now he was.

He'd taken the coward's path into campus, of course; the dusty, tree-shadowed lane called Grotto Way that ran up through the woods at the northern base of Grace Hill, past the old nun's cemetery to the Chapel. It was a half-forgotten road, unpaved and seldom used except by the groundskeepers; few students troubled with it, but Marc had wanted to avoid the main entrance. To use that would have meant approaching through the college-colonized area of town, where, he'd been told, Mulder House still stood like an abandoned abattoir. And he couldn't face that just yet. Not until he talked to Desiree.

Yet, as he climbed out of his car and saw the Chapel drowsing in the late-morning sun, he realized what a fool he'd been, for the memory of what had happened in the one was not more horrific than the

memory of what had happened in the other, and the inscription over the Chapel doors, AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM, now struck him as nothing but a cruel mockery chiseled into stone.

For the greater glory of God? he thought. *Where was God when Mason—*

But he did not allow the thought to complete itself. Instead, he just stood there, listening to the Mustang's engine cool, watching that familiar sun-warmed pile of stone as if it might lurch off its foundations and attack him. He could feel the sweat on his upper lip, the dull thud of his heart within its cage of ribs, and for a moment, he felt an impulse—nearly overmastering—to simply slip back behind the driver's seat and blast out of this place. Throttle open, hammer down. Watch Progress disappear in his rearview mirror. Only one thought prevented it:

There's nowhere left to run.

He eased past the Chapel on the far side of the street, not looking at it, not allowing his feet to step within its shadow, and followed the slope of the hill downward, into the Upper Campus. The safe, *familiar* Upper Campus, which held no vile memories, no lurking terrors. After a minute or two his throat loosened, and some firmness came back into his joints. He no longer felt as if Maguire were going to burst out of the bushes, fly-masked and plastered in blood, his fireman's ax dripping runners of gore onto the sidewalk. He was safe from Maguire, now and for all time.

Safe.

So why didn't he feel that way?

There were few people about, the somnolence of a small school when classes were in session. A groundskeeper in soiled khakis strolled past with long-handled gardening shears braced over his shoulder like a rifle, whistling *Oh, Susanna*. Two girls in workout clothes, red-faced with exertion, climbed the steps up from the tennis courts, jabbering with the idiot intensity of undergraduates. A plain-faced woman in a faded sport coat and no-nonsense shoes—it had to be one of the Sisters—ate carrots from a plastic container while turning the pages of a magazine as she sat at a picnic table near the doors to Sicilian Hall. (Marc wondered whether it was *Christian Order* or *The Word Among Us*;

surely, it was not a back issue of *Playgirl*.) It all looked so normal. Very nearly idyllic. As if nobody had ever heard of Mason Maguire, did not know the very concrete beneath their feet had once been speckled with the blood of his victims.

People move on, I guess. The thought seemed to touch two emotions at once. The first was resentment. The second, hope. He entered the Administration Building only half-feeling as if he'd need a quart of Irish whiskey to settle his nerves when he left; which, when he reflected briefly on this in the elevator, seemed to constitute something like progress.

I can do this. Sure, I can.

A secretary he didn't recognize admitted him to the inner office of the Dean of Students with a smile of disapproval. Marc had left his suede blazer in the car, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled back over the elbows, exposing intricately tattooed forearms. *Not the sort who normally pays His Holiness a social call*, he thought; it was the last one he had before he stepped into the glare of Lucas Desiree's presence.

The glare, in this case, was entirely literal: the priest stood behind his desk with his back to the great vaulted window overlooking campus; sunlight poured through it with the reckless abandon of a summer afternoon.

"I don't think that lady likes me," Marc said.

"Perhaps it's your appearance."

"Jesus ate with the lepers."

"He's a tough act to follow."

They smiled at each other. Desiree's said: *I should have been your father.* Marc's replied: *I wish you were.*

"How long has it been, Marc? Eight months? Nine?"

"Longer. I left town right after—"

"Maguire was committed." Desiree spoke the name with a sort of brusque difficulty, as if he had forgotten how to say it and didn't want to remember. "Well... come closer and let me look at you. Older, and very much more inked. You got those in Japan, I take it?"

"How did you know that?"

"Only a true *horimono* master could get that iridescent coloring

right.”

Marc's smile turned rueful. “Is there anything you don't know?”

“Where you've been these last months.”

“I lost touch with everyone,” Marc said, hearing a note of apology in his tone. “I've been traveling a lot. I was in Key West for a while. Then....” He stopped when he realized how little of his travels he could actually remember. A dive bar in Haiti, where ceiling fans turned sluggishly in smoke-laden air; a brick-walled hash parlor in Marrakesch, operated by a slat-thin Arab with a gold front tooth; a sluttish room in Hong Kong, where an elderly practitioner of *jincan* grinned over a simmering potion she promised would... what? *I don't even remember*. “I sort of went everywhere. It's like my father says: Money opens doors.”

“Even the forbidden ones, I imagine.”

“Just following in your footsteps.”

“Not necessarily the wisest of choices.”

Marc shrugged. He was used to the priest's self-deprecating humors. “I was looking for answers.”

“And did you find any?”

Marc thought again of that overheated, foul-smelling room in Hong Kong, with its scabrous walls and dust-caked blinds admitting chinks of fierce noonday sunlight. The ancient woman with her riverbeds of wrinkles, crumbling incense into a simmering pot, and incanting in a low, chuckling words he did not understand. Had he drank from that fucking thing? He couldn't remember. Maybe he didn't want to.

“No,” he said at last.

Desiree took a seat behind his desk, gestured Marc to the chair opposite. “I don't mean to be conceited, but after what you went through, if I were in your shoes, I think I'd have seen a priest, not a travel agent.”

“With all due respect, Father, you can't imagine what it's *like* in my shoes.”

“Does that disqualify me from giving a damn?”

Marc lowered his gaze.

“Perhaps it would help to talk,” Desiree said. “We've never really

discussed what happened.”

“The last time I talked about it, they tried to put me in the psycho ward right next to Maguire.”

“That’s an exaggeration. After what you said, they were understandably—”

“I try not to think about it anymore.”

The priest swiveled a few degrees in his hair. A small movement, and yet it changed both the angle of his face and the tone of his voice; it became harsher, sharper, more interrogatory. “You *try* not to think about it, and yet you’re traveling the world, going to a *Who’s Who* of occult hotspots. Weren’t you thinking about it then?”

Marc said nothing. He had long ago learned that silence was his best, perhaps his only, weapon against the sharpened and polished intellect that now sat before him, clothed in black. The priest, eyes narrowing, steepled his fingers together, stared speculatively over the buffed tips.

“Let me ask you straight: Do you still believe that what happened, what Maguire did, had a supernatural basis?”

“I saw what I saw.”

The words were uttered in a defensive mumble. Desiree leaned forward, smiling faintly.

“Marc, I think you’ll grant I have some expertise in this field. I’ve devoted my life to it. And with the weight of all that experience behind me, I can tell you this with absolute certainty: Whatever you saw that night, it was *not* supernatural.”

“You weren’t there.”

“I don’t have to see a shooting star to know it wasn’t a falling angel. What is, *is*—and what can’t be, isn’t.”

A bitter noise, not laughter but its inversion, escaped Marc’s mouth. “You, a priest, are gonna tell me that?”

“What I’m going to tell you is that there are no answers. At least not where you’re looking. And if you go down that path, you may not come back.”

“I would have thought you of all people—”

“Would tell you what? That God works in mysterious ways, His

wonders to perform? That there is more in heaven and earth than is dream't of in your philosophy? I'm a scientist, Marc, despite the collar. And you're a scientist, despite the tattoos. Approach this thing scientifically."

"Don't you think I've tried? What it comes down to is that what happened, happened."

Desiree fell silent, examining the rosary ring on his left hand as if he were alone. At last, he said, "Do you remember why I became interested in archaeology? Why I play patron saint to the Department?"

Marc hesitated, as he always did when he could not understand where the priest's argument was heading. "You said archaeology and occult studies complement each other."

"Yes, and there are times, if I may quote my agent, that I'm so full of shit that mushrooms spring from my arse." He smiled again, exposing perfectly even teeth somewhat whiter than they should have been for a coffee-drinker in his late fifties. "The real reason is simple. I admire archaeology because it yields tangible results." He clenched his fist in the air between them as if grasping something. "Its end product is something I can see, something I can touch. You see that dagger over there? I can open that case and put my hand on it. It's real! It has substance! *Substance*, Marc. Something I never once found in all those decades of chasing ghosts. Or God, for that matter."

Marc looked at him in disbelief. "So, you don't believe in *any* of it anymore? Nothing at all?"

Desiree stood up and leaned forward with his palms flat upon the desk. His pupils were narrow and black, his mouth tight, his famous basso voice pitched to its lowest, most persuasive register. "Marc, listen to me very carefully. The only ghosts in the world are in people's minds. The only haunted places in the world are in human hearts. God is just another word for truth, and seeking a supernatural explanation of a tragedy is just another way of *avoiding* the truth."

"Which is?"

"That you will never know why your friend murdered your girlfriend and three other people. Only when you accept that can you possibly move on."

Marc's voice rose almost to a shout. "How can *you* accept that? You recruited Mason into this school; you knew him as well as I did. He didn't use drugs. He had no history of mental illness. He wasn't in a fucking cult, like those numbnut newspapers tried to say, and he had no beef with anybody in the house. The people he butchered were his friends—his *best friends*! And I'm supposed to believe he just up and killed them one night, for the hell of it, and move on with my life?"

"If you want peace, yes."

The coldness in Desiree's voice was like a slap, and indeed, Marc glowered at him as if he had been physically struck. After a long silence, he said, "You really know how to roll out the welcome wagon, Padre."

"I didn't mean to brace you so hard," Desiree said gently, resuming his seat. "It's just that I think you needed to hear it. And something else as well. Readmitting you to this school—well, frankly, it's presenting me with serious difficulties."

"Why? You're the Dean of Students. Just stamp the form."

"I'm not talking about difficulties with paperwork. I'm talking about the potential consequences to the Archaeology Department."

"What consequences could there be?"

Desiree was silent a moment, as if weighing his response. His ring finger tapped an unconscious Morse pattern on the desk. "You know that Professor Van Winaker has never been very popular with the administration here."

"He's a brilliant archaeologist."

"And a difficult man—arrogant, ill-tempered, obsessive. Not the sort to win friends and admirers within the Administration or among his colleagues. Funding his digs and operating that fancy lab is incredibly expensive, and the trouble we had in Scotland last summer at the excavation site made things worse. The President of the University was getting phone calls from the State Department, for God's sake."

"None of that was our fault. The locals—"

"I know what happened. I'm simply telling you that the episode in Scotland further weakened the Professor's already tenuous position with the Board of Governors, and the long delays in analyzing the

Cipher have put additional strain between the school and Customs Enforcement over just how long it has remained in our care. I don't need to go into all the details now, but the 'breathtaking revelations' Winaker promised have not come to pass, and the Scottish government wants it back. The thing has become a tangle of red tape and bad press. If it weren't for my defense of him, and frankly, the money I earn in royalties which I donate to the school, I believe the President would have killed his program already."

"I didn't know that." Marc said and thought: *Of course, you didn't. You haven't exactly kept in touch, have you?* He fisted his hands, rolled them over, then opened them and studied the palms. "I'm sorry to hear it. But I don't understand what it has to do with my readmission here."

"I think you do. You left... how do I say this? Under a cloud. Your story—"

"It's not a *story*."

"I'm not trying to imply that you were lying."

"Just that I'm crazy."

"You must admit that what you said sounds fantastic."

"That's why I don't fucking want to talk about it!"

"*You* may not," Desiree said sharply. "But the Board does. There are those who blame you for some of the more sensational things that appeared in the press after the murders."

"I didn't *talk* to the press."

"Of course, you didn't. Someone high up at Police Headquarters did, probably for a fat fee. Leaked your entire statement to Weston. It made for some horrendous publicity, as I'm sure you know. Then there was your mother's lawsuit against the city. This school, this *town*, was on the front page of every tabloid in America. Admissions suffered. Donations suffered. Expansion plans were canceled. It was a disaster."

"And they're laying all that on me?"

"Enough that the idea of readmitting you is giving some of them hives."

"The suit," Marc said, realizing how weak and helpless what he was about to say would sound, "was my mother's idea."

"I know. *They* don't care."

"I'm the one that convinced her to drop it!"

"The damage was done, Marc."

"But they left the decision in your hands all the same."

"So long as Professor Van Winaker and I vouched for your behavior. But I'm afraid that placed both of us in a very vulnerable position. If anything you say or do should cause the school any embarrassment—"

"They'll kill the Department."

"I believe so."

"I would never do anything to hurt you or the program."

"I believe that you mean that, but I'm not sure you realize what you're taking on in returning here." Desiree turned his chair and pointed out the window to Mercy Hill, a green shimmer in the distance. "You see that? *That's* where Mason Maguire is at this very moment, not three miles from you. Can you tell me honestly that you'll be able to function normally knowing you're breathing the same air as the man who murdered Rosealeen? Can you drive past the house where it all happened every day? Can you endure the whispers and the stares and the scrutiny you'll face on campus and in town? The reporters that will knock on your door and ask for interviews? Worse, can you stomach friends of yours being asked—or harassed—to do the same? Or the fact that some of them may yield to temptation and do so? *That* is why I needed to see you before I signed your readmission papers, Marc. It's not enough for me to think you can handle it here. I have to *know*."

"What if *I* don't know?"

"Marc, you have a top-class intellect. Some of the papers you turned in as a graduate student were better than anything I've ever read in the professional journals. But what I am asking for you to do now is something I would never ask from the boy I knew. It's something I could only ask from a *man*."

"And that is?"

"To give me your word. Your bond that no matter what happens, you won't embarrass me or the program."

Marc shut his eyes. Up here on the top of the hill, you didn't hear traffic noises or the drone of aircraft or even the gabble of students

down in the shadowed canyons between the buildings. The office itself seemed unnaturally silent. Books slumbering on shelves, artifacts gathering dust beneath polished glass. Desiree even insisted on using manual typewriters; it was one of the eccentricities that had added to his legend, but the lack of a computer only added to the silence. And silence was one of the things that Marc had most come to fear.

In silence we think. In silence we remember. In silence we relive.

"I don't suppose," he said, opening his eyes and smiling faintly, "that I could ask you to take it on faith?"

Desiree looked at him so long and so sadly Marc began to feel uncomfortable.

"If only," the priest said.

7.

The organization to which Father Daniel Carnaghan had pledged his life and soul, The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, maintained in its Code of Canon Law a provision called 275.5, which urged clerics "to approach the sacrament of penance frequently." In practical terms, this meant that every Thursday evening, the balding, blue-eyed, hook-nosed old priest slipped his purple-and-white stole around his shoulders, wrapped a rosary around his left hand, and walked wearily from his presbytery to the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose to hear the confessions of his fellow clerics. This annoyed him greatly. Many things did.

Carnaghan, of course, did not resent hearing confessions as such. It was his plain duty, and in all matters of duty, the good father was as scrupulous as a soldier. However, he often found hearing the confessions of the religious sisters and of the priests who worked as teachers on campus to be infuriating and depressing. They either confessed too little or too much. Either their sins were so venial as to be almost unworthy of confession, in which case the sacrament of penance was in his mind being trivialized and debased, or they were of such appallingly mortal character that he wondered how these people

ever received their sacraments of holy orders in the first place. He saw in these outpourings of apostasy, lust, and covetousness a telling crack extending from the much larger fault that ran through society at large: the decline not merely of religious faith but in the quality of the clergy itself. This thought, which wove itself into the pattern of his thoughts a dozen, even a hundred times a day, had become his own special bugbear, a sort of personal devil that followed him about, poking and prodding as if with a pitchfork.

The priest was a well-educated and intelligent man—intelligent enough to understand that he was regarded as a fanatic, not merely by the sin-sodden students of this campus but by many of his fellow clergy. They drank whiskey, watched sporting events, told questionable jokes. He did none of these things; his grim, slash-mouthed features were never softened by a smile, and he carried with him that special air of icy gloom and disapproval that can cause a room full of people to fall silent, as if at the approach of a mortician. He was aware of this, and proud of it, proud to be the sole oil in a world of weak, washed-out watercolors; but there were particular days when his isolation weighed upon him like a hair shirt, when the shortcomings of others chafed and irritated him almost to the point of dementia. On these days—on this particular Friday evening—he needed Thessalonians 1:4-5 more than ever before:

Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

Indeed, he was. Suffering through Sister Marygay's confession that she had the most *intense* carnal desires for the *lovely* Father Christopher. Suffering through the *lovely* Father Christopher's confession that he felt his admiration of Notre Dame football bordered on idolatry. Suffering through Father Amadeo's confession that he had nothing to confess and suspected himself of the sin of pride. Carnaghan watched them all through the screen of the confessional booth, watched their grim shadowy faces, their downcast eyes, the reluctant—sometimes boastful!—movement of their lips and wondered if he wasn't a

variation on the Omega Man: the last true priest on earth.

There was, however, one particular penitent who outraged him more than all the others combined.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” Lucas Desiree said, making the sign of the cross as if pressing keys on some delicate piece of machinery. “It has been one week since my last confession.”

Carnaghan looked through the wooden filigree that separated them and experienced once more the feeling of physical inferiority that Desiree’s presence always engendered in him. It took a great effort of will to suppress the sin of envy, and when he did so, it left him little energy to conceal the sin of wrath, which was kindling fast in his breast. With some effort, he unclenched his teeth and said, as solemnly as he could manage, “Proceed, my son.”

“I am guilty of a fraud,” the other priest intoned, in that beautiful radio voice of his. “A fraud I perpetrate every time I put on this collar; I fraud I commit every time I permit others to call me a priest. I am guilty of faithlessness, of apostasy, and guilty of lacking the courage to admit it to the world.”

“You have admitted it to *me*, my son.”

“You are not of the world, Father.”

Carnaghan shut his eyes so tight he could feel pain along the lines of the wrinkles surrounding them. Quite involuntarily, he began to speak in a harsh, rapid-fire monotone, as if he were a bored and unhappy Customs official:

“Do you wish to leave the priesthood?”

“No.”

“What steps have you taken to restore your faith?”

“None.”

“Do you believe it *can* be restored?”

“No.”

“Have you acted upon the counsel I have previously given on this matter?”

“No.”

“Will you do so today?”

“No.”

Carnaghan exploded. “Dammit, Lucas! I’ve been hearing your confession for four years now, and every week it’s the same *shit!*”

Carnaghan couldn’t quite make out the shape of Desiree’s mouth among the shadows, but he thought he heard a smile in his tone.

“Am I boring you, Daniel?”

“You’re pissing me off!”

“I may be mistaken, but I do believe it’s your job to hear my confession.”

“And it’s your job to act on my counsel! Confession without repentance is worthless!”

“Haven’t you been listening? I don’t *want* to repent. I’m too comfortable with my status as a fraud.”

“Then why come in here at all?” Carnaghan demanded bitterly. “Why force me to listen to your whining every week?”

“Because it makes me feel better.”

And how do you think it makes me feel? Carnaghan thought but did not say, because he hated self-pity even more than he hated wrath. He took another deep breath, filling his nostrils with the familiar scents of wood polish and candle wax; this did nothing to soothe his anger, but it did allow him to regain control of his tone. “You know who you remind me of, Lucas? The kids that come in here every day, looking for me to tell them it’s okay that they’re drunken, backsliding, fornicating idolaters. I’m not here to make anyone *feel* better. I’m Christ’s representative on Earth! I’m here to save souls! And I’m failing, Lucas. I’m failing. Do you know that last week I caught two students trying to have sex in this very chapel?”

Desiree’s shadow made a show of looking around the confessional booth. “Not in *here*, I hope.”

Carnaghan imagined his fist shattering the barrier between them and making violent contact with Desiree’s jaw.

“Why did you even become a priest, anyway? Figured it would help your book sales?”

“I assure you I was as sincere as you are. Possibly more.”

“Then what the devil happened?”

“You ask me that every week.”

“And you never answer.”

“The answer won’t help either one of us.”

“Suppose you let me be the judge of that!”

Desiree fell silent for so long, Carnaghan didn’t think he was going to respond. At last, he said, “All right. I suppose I owe you that much after four years of listening to my *whining*.”

“The truth!”

“The truth is that I’ve been lying to you all this time. It’s not that I lost my faith. It’s that I never had any real faith to begin with. Not in the way you understand it.”

“You just said—”

“What is my area of expertise?”

“Occult science.”

“Which is?”

“A study of the supernatural.”

“A study of the *control* of the supernatural, Daniel. It’s an important distinction. Tell me, do you understand the difference between prayer and magic? I don’t mean *illusion*. I mean magic as the pagans understood the concept?”

“A prayer is an entreaty to God. It comes in the form of a request. pagan or satanic rites come in the form of an exchange. Or a demand.”

“Exactly. A demand. And if I could, say, wave a wand and turn water into wine, what would the implications be? Beyond the obvious, I mean?”

“I still don’t follow.”

“I think you do. You’re a priest; you believe in God, you believe that Jesus of Nazareth was His Son, the Christ, and that He died for our sins. That He was crucified and died on the cross and rose and ascended to Heaven, and that He will return one day. You take all of this on faith. Without evidence, as every Catholic is tasked to. But occult power, if it existed, *does not require faith* any more than electrical engineering does. That is why I was never content just to study the Bible or Canon Law, why I never wanted a diocese or joined a monastery. The supernatural, if it existed, if one were able to scientifically quantify it, to obtain physical evidence of it, would be

proof of God, would it not? At very least, it would be proof of *some* god, some force greater than mankind and existing outside his laws, the physical laws that govern the universe. Occultists claim they can summon supernatural energies. That they can direct and control them. That kind of power, if it existed, would not require faith. It would be *evidence*.”

Carnaghan was staggered in spite of himself. “Are you telling me you became a priest to try to prove the existence of God?”

Desiree started laughing—but the sound of it was mirthless and bitter. “Oh, it’s much worse than that, Daniel. My sin goes beyond mere hubris. I didn’t become a priest to prove something I already believed in. I became a priest to *find* the belief I wanted to have. And it didn’t work. God help me, it didn’t *work*.”

“Then you don’t believe—”

“In the occult? No more than I do in God.”

Carnaghan had seldom spoken in his life without knowing precisely what he was going to say. Now he heard himself talk in tones of astonishment. “You really *are* a fraud.”

The shadow of Desiree nodded its agreement. “The biggest.”

8.

If the city of Progress had maintained a roughly triangular shape during the 276 years of its existence, it was not due to the aesthetic pretensions of some long-dead town planner but simply to geography. A trio of hills known as the Three Sisters, almost perfectly equidistant from one another, had determined the rough limit of the city’s growth long before the first tent peg had been driven. Within the triangular valley formed by these hills, Progress had spread like a bloodstain—slowly, unevenly, and without any particular controlling intelligence until, sometime between the reign of King George II and the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the flow ceased and the contours of the town hardened. The population of farmers in Yarmouth County had stabilized, an event that effectively checked the growth of the town

and, therefore, the town markets where they sold their goods. The census of 1860 plainly revealed that the number of townsfolk (8,216 souls) was not significantly higher in that year than it had been in 1850... or 1840, for that matter. Despite its name, Progress seemed to exist in a kind of homeostasis, neither expanding nor contracting nor changing any aspect of its picayune character, but content to remain exactly as it was, possibly until the end of days. The armory, the tavern, the meeting house, the central market, the bridge over the river, the old stone church—all stood unchanged through seasons and years and administrations, through wars and economic recessions and panics on Wall Street. Harvests were sewn and reaped and sold; fortunes were made and lost and regained again; people were born and lived and died and were buried in the church yards beneath marble headstones whose inscriptions gradually eroded into illegibility. A modern railway station (complete with telegraph office) was erected with great fanfare in 1844, destroyed by fire in 1846, and rebuilt quietly—lest God punish hubris a second time—in 1847. Three years later, a Quaker named Homer Harrison established Progress as a stop on the Underground Railroad; he was perhaps not the most punctilious fellow in regards to the Quaker policy of nonviolence, for in 1856 he shot a Virginian slave-catcher named Peter Ambliss outside the Hawk and the Dove tavern, an act for which he was never tried or even arrested, much to the outrage of newspapers throughout the South. And during all that and more, the hills surrounding the town, known respectively as Mercy, Charity, and Grace, were never built upon, for the simple reason that no one wanted to do so.

All of that changed in 1861. In April of that year, a fire-breathing secessionist named Edmund Ruffin put flame to fuse and fired the first shot of the American Civil War. Within days, the United States government began to issue massive purchasing orders for military equipment of every sort, and Progress became home to a series of hastily erected factories, which in turn were surrounded by rapidly growing shanties jammed to their tarpaper roofs with Irish immigrant workers. One of those immigrants was a nondescript young fellow from Adare named Eamonn Broye, who was easily identified by the St.

Christopher medal worn on his watch chain. It was typical of Broye's belief that one must dress for success that he possessed the chain but not the watch; a skipping stone lent deceptive bulk to his vest pocket. There was, however, nothing deceptive about the religious faith the medal represented. Broye was a Catholic to the core of his bones, and though virtually penniless, he resolved that, when he had made his fortune, he would demonstrate his devotion to God by establishing the first Catholic church in Progress—indeed, in the whole of Yarmouth County.

In most men, such a resolution would have been as meaningful as a promise of fidelity made to a tavern wench, but Eamonn Broye was not most men. Meticulous in paying his debts, he had heeded Abraham Lincoln's call for 90,000 volunteers at the outbreak of hostilities, thinking that a few hours on the field of battle would square his account with his adoptive homeland. He put on the blue uniform of the 4th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment, composed of ninety-day volunteers drawn from all over the county, and spent eighty-nine of those days learning how to be a soldier. The ninetieth he spent near a creek called Bull Run in Manassas, Virginia, dodging shot and shell and the thrashing hooves of dying horses. Broye was confused and thoroughly terrified; what with the explosions flinging huge columns of dirt into the air, the roiling clouds of smoke that stung his eyes and made his nose run, and the deafening roar of cannon that robbed him of most of his reason, there were times when he did not even know at whom he was shooting. Yet, when he limped back across the Cub Run bridge that afternoon, hatless and shoeless, bleeding from one eye and carrying a fragment of Minie ball in the muscles of his right thigh, he did so in the knowledge that, while the army he served may have been whipped, he himself had done his duty.

Broye's enlistment expired at midnight on July 21, 1861. He left his musket in the B & P railway station in Washington, D.C. and bought a third-class ticket back to Progress, still clad in his muddy, bloodstained uniform and soggy cardboard shoes. For a year, he worked in the gunpowder factory at the end of the muddy track called Queen Street, slowly amassing the capital necessary to start his own business. When

the factory exploded, on August 8, 1862, killing thirty-six people and blowing out every window in town, his first reaction was to thank God for the bilious fever that had prevented him from working that day. His second was to note that every glazier and undertaker in town did a lively business in the days and weeks that followed, a lesson that was not lost upon him. Broye realized that the time had come for him to strike out on his own. He started very small, with a shack he rented from a blacksmith and just two teenage assistants, but by the time the sounds of the Battle of Gettysburg rumbled in the distance a year later, he had his own factory and a staff of forty employees, including four of his brothers and a dozen cousins and in-laws, and he kept his men at work even as Confederate raiders clattered through the streets, hurling Ketchum grenades through windows. By 1864, he was one of the wealthiest men in town. By 1865, he was the wealthiest man in the county. It was true that the goods he sold the government were shoddy in the extreme—maggoty pork, itchy undershirts, and shoes that fell apart in the rain—but that was no concern of his, or of the government's. They always went for the lowest bid, and he always offered it.

In 1869, Broye made good upon his promise to God and completed construction of a nunnery on the military crest of Grace Hill. It was followed in 1876 by a small Catholic girls' school called Loyola-Progress, and finally, in 1885, by the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose, built from imported granite, on the Grace summit, which was the highest point in Yarmouth County. At the same time, he broke ground on an enormous Gothic mansion at the crest of Mercy Hill, called Adare, which took many years to complete and utilized so much stone it could have withstood a siege. Some speculated that the real reason for its imposing design was to keep out his numerous relations, who pestered him ceaselessly for money. If so, the plan was largely successful. Broye became increasingly reclusive in later life, selling the last of his many businesses in 1898, after which he never left the grounds of his estate and was, in fact, buried there, next to his wife and one of their stillborn daughters, in a private cemetery overlooking the town. His final testament ceded the

mansion and all his land, including the land he had bought on Charity Hill to prevent Negroes from settling on it, to the City of Progress. In 1903, the city fathers began Adare's conversion into a private asylum, for they had learned a great deal from their principal benefactor, and the foremost of these lessons was that there was a great deal of profit in tragedy—especially the lingering tragedy of insanity. The name they chose for this institution was Elysium, and when Troy Tom Toliver began his first shift there, almost exactly 120 years later, it was perhaps the oldest continuously operating mental hospital in the United States. Being a native of Progress, Troy actually knew this, though admittedly he didn't give a shit.

Toliver didn't give a shit about much of anything these days. How was it even possible when your new uniform was a pair of white pajamas? A year ago, he had *enjoyed* the ritual of suiting up for work. Fastening the Velcro straps of his soft body armor. Buttoning the uniform shirt. Buckling the equipment belt into place. Tipping two ounces of Irish whiskey into his coffee thermos, and most importantly, double-checking the expiration dates on the condoms he kept in his ammunition pouch, just in case some college whore wanted to fuck her way out of a ticket. He might have had buck teeth and a gut, but he'd been a *somebody*. What the fuck was he now?

"Babysitter to a bunch of fucking crazies," Toliver said aloud as he stared up at the towering mass of grim, flood-lighted stone that was to be his place of employment from this night onward. "To schizos and kleptos and firebugs and flashers. To paranoids in tinfoil hats. To motherfuckers in straitjackets who pick crayons out of the box with their toes so they can write threatening letters to the prez."

It was enough to make a man weep.

The interior of Elysium more or less conformed to his lowest expectations. The place was cold in both temperature and appearance. Barred windows, locked doors. Hard floors and long hallways. A faint medicinal smell mingled with the underscent of warmed-over coffee, Lysol, and bad plumbing. Everyone dressed in white—doctors, nurses, orderlies, patients. Even the noises were institutional.

Keys jangled, shoes squeaked. From somewhere deep within the

building, voices raised in screams, laughs, accusations that no one deigned to notice. Toliver filled out the last of his new employee paperwork at a nurse's station, wondering why the fuck real-life nurses never looked like the ones in porno movies. He was staring dully at a sign that read REMEMBER TO REPORT BITES TO THE SUPERVISOR SO YOU CAN SCHEDULE HIV AND HEPATITIS TESTING! when said supervisor ambled into the room. Joe Pleasance was big, black, and seemed easygoing enough, but Troy Tom Toliver was not fooled. Beneath this nigger's aw-shucks teddy bear routine was a core of pain-in-the-ass professionalism that would make working here about as much fun as a nightly prostate exam.

He got the grand tour, and it took some time. The original Adare mansion, vast though it was, served only as an administration building now: the actual asylum consisted of two prison-like wings extending outward from it on either side, and Pleasance showed him every inch of both, from stairwells to bedpans to fire escapes. He even unlocked a janitorial cubby to show Toliver the slop buckets. "You the new guy, that means when one of these fine individuals loses control of they tummy or they bowels, you get to clean it up."

"Don't you have a fuckin' janitor?"

"Sure, but he only works days. You on the *night* shift. On the night shift, we fend for ourselves."

"You mean I fend for *you*."

"You the new guy," Pleasance repeated, pleasantly... but there was nothing pleasant in his eyes. "That's about all there is to see, I guess, except for maximum security."

"Some industrial-strength psychos in there, huh?"

"You bet your sweet ass."

An unsmiling nurse buzzed them through a sliding gate, and suddenly the scenery changed. An orderly, hulking and shaven-headed, scowled at a bank of security monitors from behind what appeared to be an inch of grimy security glass. The hallway beyond him brought the word *unclean*—not dirty, not dingy, but *unclean*—to mind, and one of the overhead fluorescents buzzed and flickered in a way that made Toliver distinctly uneasy. The doors lining the corridor looked to be

solid steel, with round observation windows of wire-reinforced glass. Screams, cursing, raving, and pounding sounded from behind those doors, like the cries of passengers trapped in the hold of a sinking ship.

“Holy shit,” he muttered.

“Nothing holy about this place, man. These muthas are about as far from God as your abs is from a six-pack.” He stopped at one of the windows, marked with a number but no name. “See this fool here? He burned down four churches. The last one had the congregation inside. And this one? She got picked up on a traffic violation. When the cops emptied out her purse at the station, her boyfriend’s you-know-what fell out along with her tampons. The medical examiner said she’d been carrying it there for a month.”

They kept walking. Pleasance nodded to the last cell at the end of the hall, even darker-lit and more foreboding than the others. He had been smiling slightly all through the tour, but he was not smiling now.

“That ain’t the worst of it, though. Guess who’s in here.”

My grandad who hung niggers from trees? Toliver thought.

“Mason Maguire. The Halloween Hacker.”

Toliver’s legs seemed to grow roots. For just a moment, the only sound in his ears was the beating of his heart. He had a mental image of a man striding up University Way in the rain—bareheaded, red-drenched, carrying a severed head by its hair, as casually as you might swing a grocery bag. But it was not that scene that had haunted his dreams in the year since he had first witnessed it. It was something else—the memory of the way his guts had seemed to congeal within his belly when he’d realized just who he’d been looking at. The memory of how he’d cowered in the shadows, waiting for the real cops to arrive. The memory of how the nervous tension inside of him had finally released itself when he’d seen that Hope kid bust out the cruiser’s window and climb into the street in front of the chapel. He’d done everything wrong that night, everything. Twelve years on the job, and in the one decisive moment of his career, of his *life*, he’d frozen and fucked up.

Froze and fucked up. Froze and fucked up. Froze and—

Toliver’s paralysis broke. He stalked forward and peered through

the dirty observation window into an equally grubby-looking padded cell. The lighting in the cell was poor, but Toliver could see torn padded walls and a shaggy figure huddling in the corner. The overhead bulb gleamed dully on the chrome buckles of a straitjacket, and the slight movement of those buckles was the only indication that Maguire was breathing.

“Hey there, buddy,” Toliver said quietly, his breath fogging the glass. “Remember me?”

“Should he?” Pleasance sounded amused.

“It ain’t the first time we’ve met.”

“Bullshit.”

“Bullshit, bullshit. I’m the one caught this motherfucker.”

“Po-lice caught this motherfucker, as I recall.”

“I’m the one called it in. Me.”

The big orderly snorted. “Then why you workin’ here? Why ain’t you sittin’ on top a pile o’ reward money? Come to think of it, why ain’t *you* the Chief of police, ‘stead of that fuckin’ Indian?”

“Because—” Toliver’s throat closed with rage, as it always did when he thought about the events that had cost him his job. He had to swallow hard before he could resume speaking. “Because never mind, that’s why.” He narrowed his eyes and studied Maguire like a jeweler examining a stone. “Don’t he move?”

“Not much. Psychosocial stupor and all that. Mutism too. He don’t say a thing. Been that way since the night they brought him in here. The straitjacket is only because he sometimes tries to hurt himself. We take it off when he’s in the dayroom.”

“Guess he don’t look so bad without an ax in his hand.”

“He’s plenty bad all right. You know anybody else killed four people?”

But Toliver didn’t give a fuck about those Maguire had slaughtered. Four or forty, what was that to him? The thing that mattered was that *this* piece of shit was the reason he’d lost the only decent gig he’d ever worked, along with his pension and his ability to extort sex from undergraduates. Nothing like getting served with a lawsuit the same day you got your pink slip. Nothing like going on welfare like a dirty Puerto

Rican because you didn't qualify for unemployment. Nothing like working minimum wage at gas stations and supermarkets because nobody else would take your sorry ass. For a year. A whole fucking year.

All because of you.

"What this kid needs is a taste of his own medicine," Toliver said softly. "If it were up to me, I'd play kick-the-can with his balls every fuckin' night."

"Ain't your job, my friend." Pleasance's voice had a ring of iron in it. "We don't catch balls on the rebound here. This a tight ship. I know 'cause I run it. These people ain't convicts, they *patients*. And we don't work over our patients. They get out of line, we got ways of handlin' 'em. Restraints, drugs. Sometimes all it takes is a talking down. I'll teach you; you'll learn."

"Can't hardly wait."

"Like it or not, you'll learn."

Toliver said nothing. This wasn't a battle he was interested in fighting now. Not on his first night. Later, perhaps, after he'd taken this jigaboo's measure. But not now. For now, there were bigger fish to fry.

"Besides," Pleasance said. "He never caused no trouble yet. He don't hardly even move. Just sits there staring at the wall all day. All you got to do with this fool is feed him and wash him."

"Wash him? *Him?*"

"Sure. What you think, we just let 'em wallow in their own filth? This is a hospital. We got to take care of him same as any other patient."

Pleasance turned and started shambling back toward the gate. Toliver hesitated for a moment, then followed, thinking, *Oh, I'm gonna take care of him all right, niggerboy, don't you worry. I'm gonna take care of Mason Maguire just fine.*

9.

Big Jim Luckner sat behind the wheel of his unmarked police cruiser, brooding. He was four hours into a sixteen-hour shift and already his ass felt numb and his patience short. Running license plates

was not fit work for a cop of his caliber, but Chief Weston did not forgive easily. Nor did he forgive all at once. The last year had been a harsh education in what it was like to regain the trust of a man who took professional disappointment as personal betrayal.

It's like dealing with a wild dog. Step on his tail once, and he's back in the trees.

He wondered a little about that thought. Racist, perhaps. The Chief was terribly sensitive about being a Native American—positively the only sensitivity he seemed to possess, and it was pointless. Nobody made fun of him about his heritage, not even behind his back. He inspired too much respect for that. And not just respect: fear. Everyone in the Department and most everyone in City Hall, including the mayor, was scared of him. The man ate rusty scrap iron and shit sixteen-penny nails, and he never, ever seemed to make a mistake—not in the field, not in court, not even in his paperwork. His arrest reports—yes, the Chief still made arrests, far more than he should have—looked like something copied out of an academy textbook. Concise. Accurate. Professional. Every period driven in place as if by a hammer. In short, soulless. It was impossible to imagine him engaging in any normal, human behavior, like watching a ball game or grocery shopping or making love to a woman. Some of the guys in the department claimed, only half in jest, that he slept in a coffin.

If he sleeps at all. More than one officer in the Progress Police Department had discovered to his bitter sorrow that there was no detail, no part of town, no time of day or night in which it was safe to assume the Chief would not appear. Luckner himself had come to this painful awareness his probationary year, when Weston had caught him cowering in a shop doorway during a sleet-storm instead of making his appointed rounds. Christ, what an ass-chewing Weston had given him, right there on the street at half past midnight on a godless Tuesday morning! *So, you think this is a shit detail, do you, Officer Luckner? Too shitty to merit your full attention? Allow me to tell you that there are much shittier details than this, and you are going to pull every one of them. A month from now, you'll be begging to be back on this beat!*

The Wooden Indian had been right, of course. Directing traffic

was worse. Hosing blood off accident scenes was worse. Driving the meter-maid cart was *infinitely* worse. When his punishment had come to an end, he'd returned to pounding pavement with something like relief. But that would be nothing compared to the relief he'd feel when Weston finally put him back in Homicide. Then, maybe he could start being a cop again, instead of trying to clear the system of shitty old traffic warrants.

Luckner had a fast hand on the dashboard computer. He could run a hundred plates an hour through County Control, and it was almost amusing what you could turn up if you kept yourself busy—not just warrants for unpaid tickets but parole warrants, FTAs, even the occasional hot car. Most of it, however, was bullshit, the sort the district justices didn't even want brought before them: unpaid citations, bounced checks, deadbeat dads four months outstanding on their child support. People who weren't even criminals, just unfortunates who didn't have the cash to get right with the system. Luckner had grown up with folks like that. He was related to folks like that. In a very real way, they were *his* folks. He didn't like hassling them.

The college kids were a different story.

Luckner had grown up in Progress, the son of a man who wore grease-stiffened overalls to work, and he'd learned to hate the college kids almost as soon as he could focus. Every September, they rolled into town like tourists into a summer resort, sporting new clothes and the sort of million-watt smiles that take years of expensive dentistry to produce, and they threw their money around with careless contempt and treated the townsfolk like something that had stuck to the bottom of their shoes. As a teenager, Luckner hadn't minded it so badly for himself, but when he'd seen the way they treated his waitress mother—the shitty tips, the leering propositions, the condescending remarks tinged with pity for the downtrodden white trash with the pencil tucked behind her ear—he'd felt like killing the lot of them. Just picking up the nearest sharp object and going to work until he was ankle deep in guts.

And if he were honest with himself, there were times when he still felt that way.

Spoiled, obnoxious little brats!

He knew he shouldn't spend too much time prowling the streets around campus. The brats would scream harassment, and before you knew it, the dean would be on the phone to the mayor, who would be on the phone with the commissioner, who would rap on Weston's door, whereupon shit would hit the fan and hard, because Resurrection University was the lifeblood of the town. The school employed over a hundred locals, and directly or indirectly supported perhaps two thousand more by keeping liquor stores, beer distributors, bars, diners, pizza joints, barber shops, tattoo parlors, tanning salons, and even local strip malls in business. Every time one of the little snotnoses got arrested, it was bad public relations, which hurt enrollment, which hurt the local economy. Weston wouldn't give two shits about *that*, of course, but he'd flip his otherwise tightly screwed-on lid at even the smallest suggestion that the Police Department was enforcing the law with anything but blind impartiality. And as Jim Luckner knew too well, you didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when that lid came crashing back down. It might cushion its impact with your ass.

Still. A few minutes nosing around wouldn't hurt.

He made a grid search of the streets on the edge of campus: Cottage, Jackson, Manor, Pershing, Jessop, running every third tag he saw. Once, he stepped out and wrote a citation for an expired registration. A few minutes later, he called the boot squad when he discovered a shitty old Sirocco whose owner had twelve unpaid parking tickets. But by and large, the checks came back negative, and he didn't know whether to be annoyed or relieved. Too many hits would foul up his entire night with paperwork. Too few slowed the time, made the shift seem endless.

Luckner finished his sweep and pulled over in front of a fire hydrant on Springettsbury Avenue, not far from the campus gate, drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, trying to will the city's criminals into action. Surely, someone must be planning to murder their spouse, shoot up a rival drug dealer's home, or rob a bank? God knew the one on George Street had been robbed enough since they'd built the fucking thing; why not now?

Because it's closed, you moron. Which would make it a burglary and not a robbery. And nobody burglarizes banks anymore. Takes too much imagination. Too much planning, patience, skill. The only crooks you see like that anymore are in Michael Mann movies.

He stared at the radio on his dash, softly crackling the coded jargon of his trade. No robberies going down. No burglaries, either. Just routine. Routine, routine, routine. Not for the first time, he questioned his decision to hang his police hat in the town where he'd been born and raised. Not the Progress didn't have more than its share of crime: there was a lively traffic in crack and crystal meth, perpetual if low-intensity street gang warfare, an above-average number of hate crimes, and levels of domestic violence and sex assault far above the national average for a city this size. But nothing could change the fact that Progress was a small pond, and Luckner knew—not believed, *knew*—that he had the potential to be a very big fish indeed. Pittsburgh big. Philadelphia big.

New York *City* big.

If only he could master patience.

It didn't come naturally. Luckner was the restless type. Always pacing the sidelines. *Put me in, Coach*, had been his mantra all through high school. In the Army, he'd volunteered for everything. As a cop, he'd been gunning for glory since the day he graduated from the Academy. And where had it landed him? In this shitty old unmarked car that smelled vaguely like Lysol and burning oil, hunting for traffic scofflaws. Patience? He'd need a lot more of it if he were to get back to working homicide cases again.

Luckner studied the trees along the avenue, rustling gently in the night wind. A few leaves swirled in the air, caught in the glare of the streetlamps like circling bats, and through his open window, he could hear the crepe rustling on the WELCOME banner strung over the gate's stone archway. Of course, that WELCOME was not exactly all-inclusive. Townies were not encouraged to set foot on campus. There was nothing to prevent them, of course, but the college had ways of making outsiders feel uncomfortable. One incident in particular still rankled. It had been a late-summer night very much like this one, and

Jimmy Luckner, then seventeen years old and throbbing with adolescent lust, had combed his hair, shrugged into his windbreaker, and taken a stroll through the archway, trying his very best to look like he belonged. God knew he didn't look his age: the brown hair, blue eyes, and broad shoulders were those of a twenty-year-old. Certainly, he'd gotten his share of appreciative glances from the co-eds as he'd wandered the Lower Campus. But he'd been outed nonetheless—just outside the Schmidt Library, whose enormous glass doors, suffused with light from within, reminded him of an old-fashioned lantern. In that soft yellow lantern glow, he'd struck up a conversation with two very beautiful sorority girls, as alike as clones with their long, fragrant hair, satin jackets, and skintight jeans. For half an hour, he'd faked his way confidently through conversation about classes, teachers, and the doings of the baseball team, until at last, one of the girls had swung hair off her shoulder, leaned in kissing-distance close, and said, in a low, sexually charged voice, *Do you mind if I ask you a question?*

Shoot.

It's kind of personal.

Go ahead, babe. I'm not shy.

Good. Do you mind telling me (and here she had rested a delicate hand on his forearm)... *telling* us... (and here she had hesitated, as if too embarrassed to continue, but licked her lips, as if too excited *not* to)... *where... where....*

Where what, babe?

WHERE THE FUCK YOU GOT THOSE CHEAPSHIT SHOES!

Luckner could remember the piercing, gleeful quality of their laughter as if it had happened this morning. The way they'd almost fallen down the library steps in their hysteria. The way his gaze had fallen treasonously to his shoes—his shabby, worn-out sneakers, purchased at Payless a year before, now held together mainly by dirt and force of will—and the blood had rushed in a hot, humiliating flood to his cheeks. The way he'd turned around and all but ran from the sound of their joyous contempt. The way he'd fled through the gate beneath a crepe banner very much like this one, mocking him with its

offer of WELCOME.

Once, years later, lying in bed in a slant of moonlight, he had confessed this incident to one of his many lovers. She had listened in silence, tracing her fingertips over the hard ridges of his abdominal muscles while he spoke, and then said, *You want to work the streets in this town, you're gonna have to let that go, Jim. You having issues with college kids here is like a zookeeper having issues with handling the goddamn elephants.* It had been good advice, and there had been times when he had followed it, but the anger was always there, like a rusty nail within his memory, needing only for his thoughts to pass by so it could tear at them once more.

He still brooded over this when he saw the Mustang slip out through the archway onto Springettsbury. A brand-new model, funeral black and gleaming. Luckner didn't mind rich people driving rich-people cars—the doctor in his Mercedes, the lawyer in his Beamer, the country-club fuckwad in his twelve-cylinder Jag. They were rich, let 'em *drive* rich. What he hated, what burned like a lighted cigarette jammed against his balls, was when they drove poor—rumbled around in tricked-out Corvettes or souped-up Camaros or glittering muscle cars with chrome-gilt supercharges bulking out of their hoods like enormous steel boils. Those were *working-class* cars, the sort you earned after ten or twelve years of sweating grease and battery acid in a fucking factory. No doctor, no lawyer, no country club cunt in plaid pants and golf shoes deserved to have his oversized ass touch their leather.

And that went double for their kids.

Luckner dropped his hand to the gear shift, meaning to follow this entitled prick for a mile or two, just to give him the sweats, when the Mustang rolled past him. The driver was fumbling with the dome-light, evidently looking for the shutoff, and in the instant before he found it, the man's face was as distinct as the profile of a newly minted coin. It disappeared in darkness, and after a few moments, so did the Mustang. For perhaps thirty seconds, Luckner sat motionless behind the wheel, his face an almost comic mask of surprise and chagrin. Then, he uttered the only words he could think of—which, as it happened, were entirely appropriate:

“Son of a *bitch*.”

10.

August Van Winaker pulled his tie away from his collar, freshened his water with a large dose of Scotch, and lighted his fortieth cigarette of the day. The blue-gray smoke curled in comic counterpoint to the NO SMOKING sign that hung over the lab, but there was no humor in the professor's expression, nor in his eyes—only an intensity that never seemed to slacken. Had he a companion in his bed at night, they would have been able to confirm the fact that even at rest, he bore the look of a man possessed, driven by some especially ferocious inner passion or torment; but there was no one. The professor was a man apart, alone among his fellows.

He wouldn't have had it any other way.

Once there had been a wife, children, insipid cocktail parties in the faculty garden. He had done his best to fake interest in all of it, but Matilde had not been fooled, and now she was gone and the boys with her, and no one invited him to parties anymore.

They called him the Mad Conductor, and thought he didn't know, but even he had to admit that the nickname was appropriate. His hair was a stiff, premature white that billowed away from a narrow skull; the forehead below showed bare and heavily furrowed. The brows were a wild tangle below eyes so deep-set they glittered from within their sockets like recessed flames, and his cheeks, though clean-shaven, were as wind-weathered as his brow. The mouth had a clamped look, as if perpetually repressing violent outbursts, and a small scar, remnant of an encounter with a brown recluse spider at an excavation in Kentucky, stood out on the corner of his chin like a wart. It was a face, someone had once remarked, that belonged to the eighteenth century, and if the truth be told, the description had pleased him. The modern era held no charms for August Van Winaker. He belonged to the past.

“The problem,” he said aloud, his voice echoing in the cold, steely, shadowy silence of the lab. “Is that the past does not necessarily belong

to *me*.”

For a time, he simply sat there, watching the lighted tip of his cigarette. Inconceivable to smoke in here; he had kicked graduate students out of the Archaeology program for less. The temperature in the lab was regulated, the air washed through a complicated system of filters. Particulate ash could do God knew what kind of damage to some of the artifacts, some of which had been excavated by his own battered hands. But tonight, it didn't seem to matter.

“Inequality in relationships is the principal factor in their demise,” he continued. “Relationships—any relationships—are structural in nature. And structures must have balance, must adhere to basic architectural principles. *Firmatis, utilitas, venustatis*. Durability, utility, and beauty. My relationships have never been in accordance with those principles. Witness my marriage. Neither durable nor of any real utility. Certainly not beautiful. My professional relationships are no better. And my relationship with time is the worst of all.”

He waited. Heard only the hum of the computers, the whisper of the overhead ventilator. Watching the smoke swirl into that hole held his attention. The image seemed appropriate to his mood. “Witness you,” he told the smoke. “You pour your energy into a hole. And yet when your energy is expended, the hole will remain, whereas you will be gone without a trace, having accomplished nothing. So it is with me. I pour my energy into the past. Decades and decades of energy. A whole life, really. What did it achieve?”

There was no answer from the lab or its inhabitants. The skulls did not speak, the mummified bodies did not lift themselves on their elbows to listen, the ancient statuary did not unlock from its stone repose to pay homage. Not that it all made much of an audience anyway. Most of the inventory had been returned to the universities, national parks, and museums that had lent them, some in manners so peremptory they resembled midnight repossessions, or banks calling in their loans on a dying business. The Cipher would be the next to go. The National Museum of Scotland had made that quite plain. They had only loaned the damned thing in the first place because Van Winaker's team had discovered it, and now they wanted it back.

Champing at the bit to be the ones who cracked its secrets. Foaming at the mouth to do what the Yanks could not seem to do.

Unctuous little bastards.

“For my relationship with time, with the past, with my own profession to make any sense, there has to be a return on the investment of energy, yes? Otherwise, the structure falls apart. Half an arch won’t stand and all that. Some would say, ‘But you *discovered* the Cipher.’ I would have to reply, ‘So what? Any fool of a gardener could have done the same by accident.’ What matters is understanding how it came to be there in the first place. Discovery is the *beginning* of the mystery, not its end.”

Van Winaker took a pull of his drink. My God, had he imbibed a lot of Scotch in his life. It was all they ever seemed to serve at those endless conferences, those interminable symposiums held in cold cavernous downtown hotels all over the Western Hemisphere, where aging academics indulged in ferocious quarrels over things like whether zircon or apatite was more effective for radiometric dating. Fools, the lot, and cowards in the bargain. The whole profession was nothing but a circle jerk of conformity, each man more eager than the last to reach for his academic dagger when a new discovery wobbled the pedestal upon which they sat. In the entirety of his career, the true visionaries, the ones not afraid to take a battering ram to cherished theories, he could have counted on the one hand. The rest were worthless. The Mad Conductor drank with them, yes; he ate with them, true; he listened to their sniveling and their boasts and read their plodding, lifeless journal pieces with an expression of intensity those who did not know him mistook for interest; but he did it only because it was what the program had demanded. What it had needed to survive. What *he* needed. Because only through the program would he be able to achieve his destiny.

“Men have needs. Different men, different needs. Mine is to be remembered. To take a *place* in history rather than to merely catalog and record it. And how does an archaeologist do this? The answer is paradoxical, really. To be a good archaeologist, you must dig up ruins. To be a *great* archaeologist, you must *build* on those ruins; you must

complete the arch. Your own personal arch. Something that will stand after you're gone." He paused, felt his shoulders slump beneath their clichéd sheath of academic tweed. "After *I'm* gone."

August Van Winaker was not expecting a comment from within that cool, humming silence, but he got one—a clear voice, firm, flat, like brand-new pavement.

"Did you say something, Professor?"

It would have startled almost anyone else, but in his present frame of mind, a burglar or a vandal would have been an almost welcome intrusion.

"No. Yes. Talking to myself. I thought I was alone. Is that you, Desai?"

A shadow formed, took on dimensions, and finally, in the half-light of the EXIT sign, became a proper shape: tall and angular, with the lush, ink-black hair and earthy skin tones so common to Indo-Aryans. Handsome face, superb bone structure, but solemn, joyless. Something off about the posture too: stiff and square-shouldered, yet conveying a sense of quiet defeat, like a professional soldier recently surrendered.

"I didn't know you were here," the professor said.

"I was in back, fixing the Aircscribe."

"Is it broken again?"

"It's always broken."

"Not enough money in the budget to get a new one."

"I know."

"They aren't inclined to sign off a box of pencils right now, not where this department is concerned."

"I know."

"They were happy enough when we dragged that thing," he pointed a finger into the shadows where the Cipher reposed in mocking silence, "out of the bog. Archaeological coup of the century, they said. More significant than Lindow Man, they said. Laurels all around, they said."

"Times change."

"Indeed. People are fickle. Academics more than most. Bunch of frontrunners. No spine. No *substance*. All they care about is their tenure

and their reputations. You know that by now, don't you, Desai?"

"Yes, sir."

"Regret the decision to throw in your lot with me?"

"No."

"That's refreshingly decisive. They may very well pull the plug on this program before you can get your doctorate, you know."

"Then I'll go down with the ship."

"Should I admire your courage or be touched by your sentiment?"

"Neither. I've got nowhere else to go."

"Not a very inspiring answer."

"Nobody ever mistook me for Tony Robbins."

"I don't know who that is." Van Winaker crushed the cigarette in a stainless-steel bowl that had never been intended as an ashtray and studied the young man's expressionless face. "Desai, Desai. Interesting surname. You told me once it means 'lord and master' in Hindi, did you not?"

"Those who own things,' would probably be a better translation."

"Do you?"

"What?"

"Own things."

"No."

"Once upon a time, I suppose."

"Once upon a time."

"You sound like wind over an empty bottle these days, young man. You need to stop mourning the past."

"I'm not mourning the past." A hint of sharpness there, but it subsided as quickly as it had surfaced. "I'm mourning the people."

"Sophistry. The people you're mourning are *in* the past. You exist here and now, in the present. That is where your focus should be."

Vijay held up oil-blackened fingers. "That is where it *is*, sir."

"You are a hard worker these days. I admit that. You remind me of Mason in that way."

"I hope to hell not."

Van Winaker sighed scotch fumes into the air. "I meant that he was a workhorse. Before he lost his mind, I mean. You've *become* a

workhorse. It's Friday night and yet you're in here, alone, fiddling with a piece of machinery that would be best taken out back and shot. I don't remember you that way before the... what happened. Rather lazy, if memory serves. Too proud to get your hands dirty."

"I've found a certain peace in keeping them that way these days, Professor."

"Interesting phrase. 'A certain peace' is all most men can hope for."

"And more than some ever get."

Van Winaker frowned. The mature bitterness of the boy—the young *man*—was not new; it had set in after the shock of last year's massacre had worn off, but the professor had largely ignored it. Of course, the murders had affected Desai: he'd been present for them, the only one in the whole accursed house to escape unscathed. Perhaps he harbored guilt over that. Or perhaps his earlier attitude of shallow arrogance had simply deepened. That would be in keeping with the professor's view on human nature. *Trauma does not change us. It makes us more completely what we were before.*

"Is the Aircscribe fixed, Desai?"

"For the moment."

"Then go home."

"Sir—"

"You're young. *Be* young."

Desai hesitated. Van Winaker heard him swallow. When he spoke, there was a trace of fear in his tone. "All right. Good night, professor."

"Good night."

Footfalls. The hiss of pressure change as the door opened. The sigh of the pneumatics as it closed. A harsh *click* as the lock fell back into place. Alone once more, Van Winaker studied the empty space where Desai had stood. Why the reluctance? What had the boy to be afraid of at home? *The pillow, perhaps. His dreams.* A sad smile touched one corner of the Mad Conductor's mouth. *He might be right at that. Sometimes it can be a mistake to dream.*

The Driftwood Motel lay on the far north side of town, not far from the exit to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. It was a bleak, almost sinister-looking quadrangle of brick with a row of security lights that circled the uppermost story like a crown of thorns, and the wind made the grommets on the tattered American flag over the entrance tap out a restless, incomprehensible Morse. For a moment, Marc stood there in that wind, looking up at the familiar spike of the radio tower on Charity Hill; then, he locked the Mustang and went inside.

The listless, sour-mouthed night clerk at the front desk didn't know or care who Marcus Hope was; he simply confirmed the reservation on his computer, handed over a pair of key cards, and went back to his dog-eared issue of *Hustler*, all without looking up. That suited Marc just fine. Rightly or wrongly, he'd spent the day feeling as if he were crawling under a microscope; to be treated as if he didn't exist was almost pleasurable in comparison.

His room was as dull and depressing as he'd expected. Dung-colored walls. Cheap carpeting. A single, ugly watercolor in a tarnished frame, and a window that looked out over gravel and an air shaft. Even the television was older than he was. Yet the squalor fit neatly into his mood. He shrugged off his jacket, kicked away his shoes, and lay down on the hard cold bed, wondering what in God's name had caused him to return to this place. He had looks. He had money. He had connections. Yet here he lay, in a sleazy hotel in a dead-end town, fingers laced behind his head, studying the crack patterns in the ceiling.

Why here, when you could go anywhere?

Because he had *been* everywhere, and it hadn't worked. His memories followed him, dogged in their pursuit. And so, like an escaped convict who decides he prefers the clockwork regimens of prison to the uncertainty of a life on the run, he'd turned himself in. And really, what had changed? Certainly not the campus or its inhabitants. Perhaps the massacre had left scars beneath its surface, but as far as Marc had been able to see, it was simply old news. A fading echo. *The ones who stayed here moved on. I moved on and stayed in place.*

Desiree had given him a list, forwarded to him by Van Winaker, of

those still enrolled in the Archaeology Program. It made for short reading. Aurelia had continued in her studies as if nothing had happened—no surprise there. So, too, had Vijay. Again, no surprise; in a race to see which was more selfish and heartless, you couldn't pick a winner. Daryl had taken a health-related leave of absence and returned as a part-time student, but it was anyone's guess if he'd ever take his exams. Pamela was on an indefinite leave that closely resembled dropping out, but she still lived in town—had rented a small house on Grantley, actually, and still hung about the campus; *haunted* was the word Desiree had used. The rest of the names were unfamiliar or unwelcome. Graduate students who had risen up to fill the gaps left by Mason Maguire's ax. Replacements.

What did you expect, stupid? The world doesn't stop spinning because people die. Not even people you love.

Anger propelled him off the bed. He slung his suitcase onto the bureau, opened it, dug out his workout clothes. Changed swiftly. Grabbed the key card and hunted down the hotel gym. Found it every bit as shitty as the room he'd just left: overhead lights flickering, half the equipment broken, the mirror over the weight rack streaked and dirty. But it had a functioning treadmill, and a heavy bag, albeit much mended with electrical tape and hanging from a rusty chain, and that was all he needed.

Marc ran in place. Staring straight ahead at his own dirty reflection. A quarter mile. A half. A full mile, then another, and another after that. It was cold in the gym, the air heavy and stale and tinged with the odors of old sweat and older disinfectant, but his body soon warmed up, and the sweat began to flow. Nowadays, it was only in these moments—heart pumping, lungs working like a bellows, sweat streaming down face and body—that he ever approached a feeling of peace. No drug, no quantity of alcohol, no womanly embrace could take him there. Only this daily ritual of self-flagellation. Exercise to the point of total exhaustion, and then, perhaps, beyond that point. And yet tonight it wasn't working. He was back in Progress, entombed within Progress, a criminal returning to the scene of a crime. The fourth mile came and went and still he saw the images, like spatters of fresh blood crawling

down the interior walls of his mind. The fifth mile approached, and he still heard the voices, Desiree's strongest among them:

Can you tell me honestly that you'll be able to function normally knowing you're breathing the same air as the man who murdered your girlfriend? Can you drive past the house where it all happened every day? Can you endure the whispers and the stares and the scrutiny you'll face on campus and in town? The reporters that will knock on your door and ask for interviews? Worse, can you stomach friends of yours being asked—or harassed—to do the same?

He staggered to a stop after six miles. Plenty of gas left in the tank, but no relief in sight. His sweat-stung gaze fell to the heavy bag. *Gloves? We don't need no stinking gloves.* Marc attacked it as if it had done him some terrible personal wrong. Fists. Elbows. Knees. Shins. He could feel the flesh over his knuckles reddening, swelling, beginning to tear, but the pain had a distant, somehow unimportant quality, as if it were happening to someone else. Freddy Wise, high as a kite on Blue Hawaiian weed, had once muttered that he always felt that way—disconnected, floating, unable to touch the surface of life, of emotion. But Freddy was dead, a year in his grave, and what he had felt or didn't feel no longer mattered. One way or another, he was beyond it all now. Like Lizzie Nackford. Like Steve Cho.

Like Rosealeen.

The impact of his fists sent shockwaves through his entire body. The noise in the enclosed room seemed punishingly loud. He could see little smears of his blood along the battered vinyl skin of the heavy bag now, glittering the fluorescent light. A human body held between a gallon and a gallon and a half of the stuff. That made a good five gallons he'd waded through that night—more if you counted the carmine that had spilled from Daryl's hand. So much fucking blood. Marc had never once realized blood could have a smell. A taste, certainly. Everyone knew the taste. It was like placing a penny in your mouth—metallic, coppery. But if you poured enough of the stuff out, it had a smell too. Like overheated wiring. Mulder House had smelled like that. When he'd first stepped into the kitchen, the only thing in his nose was the wind blowing in behind him—crisp, cold, spiced with the underscent of fallen leaves. Then, Lizzie's blood had run around his

boot like a slack-tide wave, and the stench had hit him. It got worse the deeper he moved into the house, and by the time he'd burst through what was left of the Wreck Room door, it had been suffocating. The stench of a battlefield hospital. Or a slaughterhouse.

Marc felt as if his hands were being held into a fire, but he could not relent. His shoulders quivered with fatigue, his shins were numb, and something warm and slippery was dampening the athletic sock on his right foot. *Vampire wine*, Freddy used to call the stuff. Freddy watched a lot of horror movies. Claimed he was looking for one that scared him, so that he'd know what it was like to *be* scared. Marc had smirked it off as bravado, but perhaps ol' Fred had been telling the truth. You never saw him startled or anxious. Never saw him lose his cool. In a war movie, he'd be the hard-eyed hero, slaughtering Nazis or Japs or Viet Cong with a belt-fed machine gun, never troubling to remove the cigarette from between his calm and indifferent lips; the guy who ends the flick waist-deep in enemy bodies without so much as a scratch on him. But life wasn't a fucking war movie, and Freddy had died a heap of carrion splattered between the doorway and the steps. Had he been afraid *then*?

The chain suspending the heavy bag creaked and groaned like the deck of a storm-tossed galleon. Flakes of its rust had settled amid the puddle of sweat that gleamed on the floor. Marc thought the chain might soon give way and didn't care. He summoned the stolid-looking face of Mason Maguire upon the leather and butted his forehead into it until stars glittered across his vision. Was it possible that what he remembered was real? The blank eyes, the ethereal voice spitting out words in some long-forgotten language? Science said no. Common sense said no. Everyone he'd confided in said no—even Desiree, who'd spent his life researching the occult. It was false memory. Hallucination brought on by shock and cranial trauma.

And something else, perhaps.

Guilt.

Where were you when Mason was making his merry way toward Mulder House?

The answer was something he had never confided in anyone,

something that had never come out even in the exhaustive investigation that had followed the murders. On the whole of the earth, only one other sane soul possessed the knowledge: Aurelia Sakara, and as far as he knew, she had kept the information sealed behind her perfectly shaped lips. Oh, they knew his *location*, those cops and investigative journalists; but they didn't know who he'd been with. What he'd been doing.

Who he'd been doing.

But you do, don't you, boy?

He remembered coming home from the hospital two days after the slaughter, to the spacious apartment he'd kept on Duke Street, just a stone's throw from the Old Courthouse. Seeing Rosealeen's silver-framed picture by the bedside through vision still slightly blurred from his concussion. Inhaling her scent that still lingered on the sheets. Not perfume, not shampoo; the woman-scent itself. Something light and flowery. Something entirely feminine and entirely real. Standing there, looking into the shyly smiling image of his dead love, it had been impossible to *believe* she was dead. A decapitated corpse cooling on a stainless-steel slab somewhere across town. A lump of evidence for forensic pathologists. Images had come to his mind then, memories of bone fragments in sand, of weathered skulls grinning their in-joke grins from laboratory shelves, of the Cipher itself, as it was disinterred from the cold, mist-shrouded slime of a Scottish peat bog. Not once in any of those recollections had Marc ever experienced or witnessed any emotion other than professional excitement at the appearance of human remains. They too were just evidence, just material. At what point did the physical remnants of death lose their power to inflict pain and grief upon the living? Was it a decade? A generation? A lifetime? Weren't there people whose ends inspired sorrow for centuries to come? If so, shouldn't Rosealeen be such a person?

He struck again, and this time the chain gave way. The bag half flew, half swung through the air before hitting the worn-out linoleum like a lifeless body. Broken links scattered over the floor. Marc stood there, chest heaving, his lacerated hands atremble before him. Then, with a walk that was half stagger, he started toward the bleak privacy

of his room once more. It wouldn't do for anyone to see him weep.

12.

Sunday morning flooded sunshine through the windows of Chief Weston's office in City Hall, but he had mulishly refused to turn on the overhead lights, leaving him seated in dappled shadow. The brooding effect this produced was calculated; he didn't want either of his visitors to get comfortable.

"You're sure," the mayor said for the third time.

"Dean Yeager confirmed it himself to me last night after I phoned him. Marcus Hope is back at Resurrection, starting tomorrow."

"They *let* him, after everything he did to that school. To this *town*."

"Technically speaking, he never left—the school, I mean. Just took an indefinite leave of absence."

The mayor stepped forward into a bar of light: a balding, bull-necked man with whiskey blooms on his cheeks, wearing a suit at once too flashy for his salary and too tight for his barrel chest. The brawling appearance was deceptive, however; or at least conditional. John Broye Simpson only picked fights he thought he could win. "And all those child-fucking masterminds couldn't find a technicality to keep the bastard out?"

Weston briefly wondered what Stephanie would have said to hearing the acolytes of her religion described as *child-fucking masterminds*. "A technicality might suffice for the ordinary student. But the school is afraid of his lawyers. For that matter, so is the city."

"We have reason to be," Paul Kerns said. The Police Commissioner of Progress sat opposite Weston, his pale eyes narrowed to hostile slits behind his rimless glasses. He had twenty years of prior service with the Philadelphia PD, but Weston knew from the police grapevine what sort of cop he'd been, and their relationship had never been good.

"You know what the Hope family's net worth is, Weston? What type of sharks they can afford?"

"No, and I don't care."

“Very brave of you,” Kerns’s voice matched the expression on his face: a sneer. “But those of us who have to go budget-begging in front of the City Council have *cause* to care. We’re still paying legal fees from that lawsuit for negligence. *Your* officer’s negligence, I might add.”

“Odd how he’s *my* officer after a mistake.” Weston re-arranged a shooting trophy on his desk whose corner was slightly out of alignment with the others. “Especially when I seem to remember you calling him one of your best eighteen months ago, when he busted those jewel thieves working Market Street.”

“I never said that.”

“The press clipping is in his personnel file. Would you care to see it, Commissioner?”

Kerns forced a smirk. “Unless you plan on taking early retirement, Sam, you’d best watch your step *and* your ass when you speak to me. Otherwise—”

“Otherwise, what? You’ll leak information about me to the press? Tell me, Paul—if I were to subpoena your bank records from last year, would I find a large deposit, courtesy of TMZ, for services rendered? I never did find out who gave them Hope’s statement at the hospital.”

Kerns flushed to the roots of hair so thoroughly sprayed with Aquanet that it looked as if it would deflect a bullet. “Don’t you ever threaten me, you redskin son of a—”

“Can it.” The mayor slapped a beefy red hand on the corner of Weston’s desk. “I didn’t come in on a Sunday to watch you two fight like dogs over a goddamn soup bone. I want to know what can be *done* about this.”

Weston finished with the trophy and leaned back in his chair. “Legally? Nothing. Hope has every right to be here.”

“I don’t give two shits about his rights! He’s a media circus waiting to happen, and at the exact moment this town was finally sliding *out* of the goddamned limelight. Christ, do you really want all those reporters here again, parked out front every day, hassling everyone, making this town look like a thousand pounds of shit stuffed into a goddamn thimble?”

“I don’t take it as a given that will happen.”

“It’ll happen because the little shit *wants* it to happen. He likes the fucking attention. It’s not enough to be rich. He wants to be famous. Why the hell else would he have told that fucking campfire tale about Maguire and gotten the tabloids all stirred up?”

“I have no love for Marcus Hope,” Weston said. “He’s an irresponsible, arrogant, selfish little shit. I busted him myself once for drunk driving. But if he wants to complete his education here—hell, if he wants to make Progress his legal residence—there’s nothing we can do about it. Our only hope on that front is that he screws up somehow. The Dean made it very clear to me that they didn’t want him back and won’t be giving him any leeway at all. One fuck-up and he’s gone.”

“Hollow threat,” Kerns snapped. “You said yourself they’re as scared of his lawyers as we are.”

“Yeager told me they’re willing to ice the whole Archaeology program—what’s left of it, anyway—if Hope so much as half-steps out of line. That way they’d be immune from lawsuits. No way to prove retaliation.”

“Best news I’ve heard all morning,” the Mayor said. “But not good enough. This city’s reputation is in the toilet, Weston, and we’re nuts-deep in debt. You know Crosscoe Pharmaceuticals is going out of business, and Dodd Industries is moving its plant to Korea next year. The university is about all we have left, and no parent in their right mind is going to send their child here as long as Hope keeps the Halloween Hacker in the headlines.”

“The Halloween Hacker is locked in a padded cell.”

“But his *memory* is on the loose, and that’s what scares people. Shit, you know how many folks wanted to *cancel* Halloween this year—the parade, trick-or-treating, all of it, on the off-chance some copycat would get ax-happy in the middle of Market Street? No, Chief, we can’t afford to play a waiting game. If this Hope kid is on thin ice, we’d best find a way to help it break.”

The sun made its presence felt everywhere that morning. It shone on the tarnished copper dome of the Old Courthouse on Market Street and on the stained glass windows in the bell tower of the Church of the Sorrowing Angels, a half-mile away; it sparkled on the fast-running waters of Cogan's Creek as they bubbled and chuckled their way through town toward Big River and brought smiles to the faces of those dining *al fresco* on the patio of the Right Bank, the town's most expensive restaurant, which overlooked same. It gleamed on the row of freshly washed, freshly waxed police cruisers parked not far from Chief Weston's office in City Hall, and in the never-ending cascades of water that spouted rhythmically from the fountain on the Resurrection University Campus. In Cherry Lane Court, a brick-floored courtyard full of pigeons and tourists outside the venerable Farmer's Market, it brought out the colors of the murals depicting important scenes from the town's history, as well as some graffiti left the night before by the Gasoline Avenue Boys, a local street gang. It blazed merrily and unoffensively through the windows of rowhouses and townhouses, developments and slums, grandiose old Victorians and the more stolid Four Bay homes executed in the German style, which made up most of Progress. It reached everywhere. It reached everyone.

Almost.

There was one place in Progress over which the sun held no dominion. It stood on Mercy Hill, and its windows admitted only such light as the sane required. The vast majority of its great, castle-like bulk presented blank brick to the rest of the world. Such light as shone within its walls was fluorescent, harsh and cheerless and unnatural. And in the cell assigned to one Mason Maguire, it did not work at all. The sole illumination came through the wire-reinforced observation window, and it was feeble and flickering, as sickly-looking as Maguire himself.

His former friends—those he had left alive—would scarcely have recognized him. With his thick, wheat-colored hair, clear blue eyes, and wide, aw-shucks grin, he'd once resembled the classic All-American of yesteryear; at a glance, strangers had sized him up, correctly, as friendly, athletic, hard-working, and none too bright, the sort of person who

overcomes obstacles by sheer grit rather than native intelligence. Now, that hair, growing low on his forehead, fell over his face in snarls and tangled, greasy strings; the eyes were sheened by madness and the drugs used to mask its symptoms; and his mouth had long since unraveled into something resembling a silent scream. He huddled silent and motionless in the corner of his cell, to all appearances in a state of catalepsy; yet within his mind there existed a certain awareness. This awareness had manifested within the catatonic void of his mind like a light rising slowly out of a fathomless black ocean—at first a mere ghostly luminescence beneath the waves. Since his institutionalization, Maguire had only the dimmest sensation of the passage of time, but it seemed to him that this awareness had been going on for days or even weeks, always coming but never arriving. Yet now he sensed that the arrival was imminent, that the light had grown in intensity and was close to breaching the surface. A physical excitement took hold of his long-slackened muscles, twitching one eyelid, trembling his lower lip. He had seen this light before. The first glimpse, a year ago, had intrigued and bewitched him, like the appearance of a shooting star. But as it had approached, it had taken on a jewel-red aspect, like irradiated flame, which struck a chord of terror deep within his heart. It was not mere phenomenon. He sensed a controlling intelligence in that bloody gleam; a conscious purpose that had soon become *his* purpose.

An image came to Maguire's fevered mind: a glass-faced steel box set against a wall of pale gray cinderblock. Within it reposed an ax, double-bitted and ash-handled, the steel painted fire-engine red. The words TO BE USED IN CASE OF FIRE were stenciled over the glass, and within it shimmered a reflection. His reflection.

What's wrong with my face?

He remembered the thought, the fear and wonder that drove it. For within the dull familiarity of his features had lain something new, something he had never seen before nor imagined possible. Where his irises had been, there was nothing, just a glazed and empty whiteness staring back at him.

Oh my God.

His thought, in his voice. But there had been another thought that

answered, and that voice belonged to someone else. *Something* else. It was simultaneously the worst thing he had ever heard and the most appealing; the ugliest and the most beautiful. It spoke in a language he did not understand, yet understood all too well.

Yes, Mason. I'm here. On the other side of the glass. All the God you'll ever need.

He remembered the way his fist had clenched—hard enough that he felt the tendons creak, the veins stand out along his forearms. He wanted to destroy the glass. He wanted to take God in his hands. He wanted to *be* God. To be one with that voice that was so much stronger than he. At the same time, the desire to run was nearly overwhelming. The warmth that suffused him had a febrile, gangrenous quality. Nothing godly about it at all. It was the temperature of hell.

I'm a scientist, he thought almost desperately. I don't believe in hell.

Ah, but hell believes in you, Mason baby, and that's all that matters.

He'd looked down at his hand. The palm glistened with sweat—the sweat of excitement. *No, no, I'm not doing this. This is insane!*

Look at the world, my friend, and show me the pleasures of sanity.

The glass shattered. He had no memory of breaking it, and he felt no pain. Only power. And clarity. A rage intoxicating, a hatred ecstatic. The ax fitted into his palms as if it had been built for them.

It's beautiful, he thought in a kind of quiet, sudden ecstasy. You're beautiful!

Yes, came the reply, a seductive hiss. Yes, we are. And together we'll do beautiful things.

But now, trembling in the corner of his cell, he remembered what he—what *they*—had done, and the memories were anything but beautiful.

Dear Lord, what have I—

Oh, but he knew what he had done. He remembered everything clearly now. Remembered how he had enjoyed it... and would enjoy it again, when that great red glare filled his mind a second time. Even now it was strengthening in intensity, becoming brighter beneath those imaginary waves, the Beast of Revelation about to burst from the sea and claim him. He couldn't hear its voice yet, but he could sense its

presence, somewhere beyond the walls of this cell, the walls of this asylum, somewhere in the confines of this godforsaken town. A beacon, pulsing with hatred and lust. Calling to him.

I won't answer! The thought was a child-like shriek. *I won't, I won't, I won't!*

But he would. He knew he would. There was no resisting it.

Maguire keened—a long, hopeless moan that might have escaped from the deepest cells of perdition. And somewhere within his tormented mind, he wondered if, at any point in this vast and impersonal building, there existed, along with various smoke detectors, carbon monoxide alarms, and coils of fire hose, at least one large rectangular glass case marked TO BE USED IN CASE OF FIRE.

That would certainly be convenient.

14.

The weather in Pennsylvania is as fickle as a cat. The sun, after blazing a merry and imperious course over the heavens from dawn until noonday, soon found itself enveloped in clouds, which, as the afternoon wore on, began to lower and to darken. The gentle breeze now sharpened into a wind that contained the first inklings of the autumn yet to come, and those who passed by the Old Courthouse, if they stopped a moment to listen, could hear the flags whipping hard enough to tear the fabric. Cherry Lane was soon empty of humans and pigeons both, the diners at the Right Bank came in from their patio seating, and the awnings over the newsstands on Duke Street were rapidly unfurled by their operators, who knew the harbingers of a storm when they saw them. On Grace Hill, and in the student-colonized streets surrounding it the way a pedestal surrounds the feet of a monolith, female students pulled sweatshirts over their bikini tops and tucked previously bare feet into their sneakers, while their male companions muttered curses and began to gather their Frisbees and pack up their coolers. Those unfortunate enough to have begun barbecues watched sourly as their coals began to smoke in the drizzle.

Standing in the doorway of his campus presbytery, Father Daniel Carnaghan watched the half-dressed crowds on the intramural field disperse from his open window and thought, *My, my, how the flood washes the lust away*. A half a mile distant, at his home on Lark Circle, Father Lucas Desiree, staring moodily at his garden through the mullioned windows of his study, found himself reminded of long-lost Stephanie's fondness for walks in the rain. Troy Tom Tolliver, whose windows were not mullioned but rather cracked by last year's frost, and so filthy they were nearly opaque, had to interrupt his viewing of a piece of cinematic excellence called *Snuff Film Sluts* to shut them, less a puddle form on the cracked tiles of his bathroom floor. (He didn't give a shit about the puddle, but if it leaked through his landlord's ceiling again, he was likely to find an eviction notice slipped beneath his door before *Snuff Film Sluts* reached its exciting climax.) On the opposite end of town, in his room at the end of Club Alley, Daryl Stebbing woke from a thin, beer-sodden sleep, farted so violently he wondered if he hadn't torn his anus, and then lay on his back, exhaling Pabst fumes and staring at the patterns of old water damage on his ceiling. To Daryl, they resembled Rorschach blots, and this thought made him wonder if he shouldn't see a psychiatrist the way Pamela was doing. Then, he lifted his swollen, scarred, stiff-fingered hand from his chest and thought, *There's no shrink in the world can fix this*.

The rain, like the sun before it, got to nearly everyone. Pamela Bachmann had to leave the outdoor gun range in the woods near the Turnpike having fired only fifty rounds, and having thus failed to fully discharge her anxiety, decided not to wash her hands or change her clothes before attending, since she found the smell of gunpowder soothing. Jim Luckner, who had just sent over a hundred million sperm coursing down the throat of a twenty-year-old exotic dancer named Serena Barstow, pulled up his boxer shorts and shot a glance at the stove clock in Serena's kitchen; his watch began at zero hundred hours, and if it were still raining, then it meant shit duty for sure, namely scraping drunks off telephone poles until the break of dawn. Aurelia Sakara, driving at precisely double the speed limit in her fire-engine red Del Sol, corkscrewed down the exit ramp of Interstate 83 and onto

George Street, and, narrowly missing one of those telephone poles, shouted at the voice-controlled digital assistant in her dashboard to play songs about rain. She remembered the time she had snorted a line of cocaine off a Chippendale's cock and abruptly changed her mind and demanded songs about men. The assistant compromised and began playing "It's Raining Men."

Gina Kolibri, knowing nothing of any of this, shut the book she'd been reading on parapsychology, knuckled the strain out of her eyes, and wondered if she ought to shower and run a comb through her hair before the meeting. After all, *he* would be there. She rose from the Lotus position she'd occupied on the floor, cracked her spine, and went to the clippings that infested the far wall like a rash. Studied the acres of blurry print, the 24-point headlines—some dignified, some breathless—and the badly printed images. So much hell contained in so little paper: the sordid details of lives and the even more sordid details of their endings. Weeping parents, candlelight vigils, a leering tabloid photo of a smiling Aurelia wearing a wet T-shirt and a pair of Daisy Dukes, evidently taken when the bitch was on Spring Break as an undergraduate. It was all here: grief and hypocrisy, prurience and purity. Everything you needed to know about last year's murders except that one little, nagging question: *Why were they committed?*

It was this question, more than the murders themselves, which had made the tragedy national news and intoxicating fodder for any number of internet-based conspiracy theorists. Homicide detectives, clinical psychologists, retired FBI profilers, investigative journalists, and private investigators hired by the more aggressive tabloids had examined the life of Mason Maguire in granular detail, from the moment of his birth to the night he had been taken into custody, and not one of them had discovered anything that even suggested an explanation as to his motive. Gina knew that on the whole of the earth, there was probably no one closer to providing an answer than herself. She was so close... and yet so terribly far away, like a woman who had walked a thousand miles to find her destination barred and gated. And Hope held the key. If anyone did. Yet had there ever been a more loathsome example of the XY chromosome—so full of selfishness, of animal lust, of rich-boy

arrogance that he might have stepped whole and breathing from one of those detestable bodice-ripping novels Gina's mother had furtively collected for years? Marcus Hope was, in a sense, a kind of amalgamation of everything she hated about men. And yet, she needed him, and for a greater reason than the solution of a puzzle. Would it hurt to play the game for once—to flirt, to submerge her intelligence to flatter his ego, to allow herself to be used, if only because she would also be using *him*?

Damn right it would.

Gina went to the window, pulled back the dusty drapes, looked at the rain crawling down the glass. It gave the world outside a wavering, mirage-like appearance and muted the riotous color of the trees drowsing over Market Street. Far from depressing her, however, the imagery only fed her resolve, her sense of defiance. Hers was a grisly, nightmarish business, and empty streets and leaf-choked, rain-drowned gutters fit the scene perfectly. She shrugged into a hooded sweatshirt, jammed a baseball cap down low on her head, not bothering to tuck away the stray tendrils of hair that spilled down her face, and gave the hallway mirror an approving scowl.

“Gotta go,” she said to her reflection. “Time to meet the man of my dreams.”

15.

“Fuck,” Marcus Hope said.

He sat behind the wheel of his rented Mustang, watching the lighted windows of the Donut Hole cast their familiar yellow glow onto the wet pavement, and tried without success to view it simply as a meeting place, with no history attached to it, as bland and impersonal as his hotel. It was no use. He had spent entirely too much time there over the years, slurping burnt-tasting coffee and working his way through plates of greasy hash browns and runny eggs while frowning over books with catchy titles like *A History of Archaeological Thought*. The Hole was the oldest of all the student hangouts that ringed the campus;

it had changed owners so many times over the years that nobody could even remember when it had been built, and eating there was as much a part of the Resurrection University experience as climbing Grace Hill or being called a dolt by Father Carngahan. There had been so many all-nighters there, so many bull sessions, so many “study groups” that never opened their books. If Mulder House had been his base of operations as an archaeology student, The Hole had been his field headquarters. He wanted to be happy to see it again.

Yeah, he thought. And if wants were dreams, wishes would fly.

Marc climbed out of the car and tasted the Pennsylvania rain. In the past year, he had tasted a lot of the stuff—European, Middle Eastern, Asiatic—but there was nothing quite like good old PA sky; it was half Mother Nature, half industrial waste. Locals called it “smokestack flavor.” This was appropriate; he felt as if he were stepping off the rim of one.

Right into the fire.

He pushed his way into the Hole. The front door opened into a vestibule papered from floor to ceiling in photographs of customers, some crystal-sharp, others so old they had faded into sepia tones, all sitting behind a dirty film of protective plastic. An ancient payphone clung to the wall on his left, the nicks in its chrome-faced coin slot looking as old and worn as Martian canals, and a short, hard-backed bench jutted out on his right at knee-height. He had spent a lot of time on that bench in his last year here, waiting for Rosealeen; she’d never been very punctual, and Mason Maguire had ensured she’d never become more timely.

Mason made sure of a lot of things.

The inner door opened with a squeak into a miasma of frying grease and old tobacco. Sounds of cutlery and Johnny Cash. In the kitchen, a cook was singing *Pagliacci* in the style of Caruso, which made quite a contrast. And at the booth in the middle of the diner...

Faces familiar.

And not.

“Fuck,” he said again, under his breath, and started toward them.

16.

Aurelia Sakara did not give a damn about archaeology. Actually, the list of things she actually gave a damn about, had it been written down, could have fit neatly upon one side of a napkin with room to spare; and such space as was used would have been dominated by three simple words: ME, MYSELF, and I. Yet it is wrong to presuppose, as some do, that selfish people are not aware of their selfishness. Aura was extremely conscious of it, and not only conscious, proud: in addition to the BOSS BITCH tattoo on her ribs, the word BRAT had been inked on the inside of her left wrist. She might have gotten more tattoos, but her vanity prevented it. Skin such as hers required very little in the way of ornamentation, and she had never been one to gild the lily.

If it is wrong to assume that the selfish live in unawareness of their condition, it is also wrong to assume that they are necessarily shallow. Aura was, in fact, remarkably complex—complex enough to see herself, accurately, as a multi-faceted diamond at whose heart lay a single, crippling flaw. Proof of this complexity could be found in the fact that one of the most frequent questions posed to her by strangers—*Are you a model?*—did not, in fact, flatter her ego. Rather, it irritated her. Sometimes to the point of fury.

The Sakaras were descended from Italian nobility that had been degenerating for centuries before one too many playboys spent the last of the family fortune and washed up in America. Her mother's people, the Darbonnes, were Creoles—French, Spanish, African, and Bayou-Lacombe Choctaw; genetically blessed but quite touchy about their origins, which could be traced back to a certain whorehouse in the Storyville district of New Orleans. Aura grew up surrounded by time-dulled relics of better days; she possessed the attitude of aristocracy without the money to back it up. To get what she wanted, she had to rely on her looks. Less intricately built souls might have grown comfortable with this at a young age, but Aurelia had a brain as well as a body, and part of her was in a perpetual stew over why everyone she met seemed to be interested in one but not the other. In time, she came

to a conclusion: the dirt of the past does not come off. Once a whore, always a whore. Or, as her oldest sister put it, *If you've got a great ass, nobody cares if you have a soul.*

The realization hardened her. She had always been an exceptional student, but this exceptionalism stemmed from passion, a genuine desire to learn; now it cooled, congealed, became a means to an end, and the end was not wealth. Wealth was only a pleasurable by-product: what she truly desired was *respectability*. Exploiting her ass for money would not achieve this. Education might.

Aura went to school—first community college, then Tulane. When you could check FEMALE, AFRICAN-AMERICAN and NATIVE AMERICAN all on the same form, you were bound to get where you wanted to go. So people said, anyway, and this infuriated her too: if it wasn't her looks, it was her skin pigmentation. Always there was a reason why she had been admitted, why she had advanced, that had nothing to do with talent or intelligence. When she made Dean's List three years running, when she pegged the needle on her graduate record exams, when she was accepted to Resurrection University's Master's program in Anthropology, all anyone could say was, *You know she sucked her way there.*

It is a cruel fact of life that people tend, in the long run, to conform to the molds in which they are unwillingly thrust. If Aura were to be judged and condemned for things others thought she was doing, then by God she would do those things, in the spirit of, *I'm doing the time, I may as well do the crime.*

This epiphany had a bitter taste, but it was liberating nonetheless: she was now free to do as she pleased. If she saw something she wanted, she took it. If something got in her way, she broke it. The reputation this gave her became a weapon in itself. Girls clutched their boyfriends tighter when she walked into a room; professors swallowed and tried to think about baseball to avoid erections in mid-lecture; the police who routinely pulled her over for speeding fumbled with and then dropped their ticket books while trying to sound angry. She both loved and hated the attention men gave her, both laughed and raged over the jealousy she inspired in women. And yet, at the core of her being, she held on

to her idea of respectability. She knew one day her looks would fade, and the magnetic effect she had upon all gazes would begin to lose its power. With no money to fall back upon, the world would be an even crueler place than usual, unless she had *status*. Unless she had *respectability*. And who was more respectable than a doctor of philosophy?

When she'd first set eyes on Marcus Hope, she'd been wavering between anthropology and sociology as a choice of career; one look at him was enough to decide her on archaeology. That boy was *fine*, and what's more—what was much more—rich. Oh, so very rich.

It wasn't that Aura was materialistic *per se*; rather, she was shrewd enough to understand the linkage between wealth and that ever-elusive chimera, respectability. The Hope family had both, and if Marcus was a bit of a bad boy as scions went, well, that only added spice to the dish. Aura felt totally confident of her ability to seduce him. It was merely a question of prying him away from that shy-eyed wallflower of a girlfriend. From there... well, anything was possible.

Or should have been.

That night a year before, when she had thrust her nearly naked hips up against his denim-clad ones on the dance floor at the Paradox Club, the stiffness she'd felt there had told her everything she needed to know about her effect on The Great White Hope. Not that she'd doubted it; some of the glances he'd leveled at her over the years had been hot enough to burn the clothes off her body. Aurelia, however, had not wanted to rush things. Give it up too easily and you were just another conquest. Hold out too long, and fantasies grew stale. She knew, or thought she knew, precisely when to strike, and Halloween had been her moment of choice. No straight man, and few gay ones, could have resisted the sight of Aurelia Sakara in red lingerie masquerading as a devil costume, and Hope proved no different. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, she'd had victory—and something else—firmly in hand.

Then, like that—just like *that*—he'd changed his mind.

At first, of course, she'd thought he was playing a game. That was fine—Aura liked games. But only if she won. And this time—for the first time—she realized she was going to lose.

The ability to withstand the blows of fate is largely a process acquired through repeated ass-kickings. Like alcoholic tolerance, it only forms over time. Aurelia had no experience with, and therefore no tolerance for, rejection. She went straight from shock to almost murderous fury. The microscope she hurled at Hope might just as easily have been a knife. Indeed, in her heart, she knew that if a knife had indeed been present, she almost certainly would have buried it in his guts.

Or someplace lower.

This knowledge frightened and slightly sickened her. She was a bitch, and she knew it; she was not, in her own mind, truly evil. And when the news had reached her, around four o'clock the next morning, that someone had massacred the occupants of Mulder House, there had been, within her beautiful breast, a moment of genuine horror—not so much because people she'd known for years were dead, but because she'd wondered if her rage hadn't somehow precipitated their deaths. Because, in that instant when she'd grasped that Hope was turning away from her, she had not just wished *him* writhing on the end of her imaginary blade; she'd wanted Rosealeen dead too. And in the first confusing hours after the murders, she'd thought both of them were.

And been glad of it.

Aurelia hailed from New Orleans; her grandmother had owned an occult apothecary in Tremé.

Scientist though she was, her soul was tinged with superstitious belief. When you wished someone dead, and they died—*snap!*—just like that, you had to wonder. The suspicion evaporated quickly, but it left a sour aftertaste, as most negative self-discoveries do.

Maybe I really am evil, she thought, as she'd stood behind the crime-scene tape in the rain, watching the sheeted corpses roll out of the house like products on some hideous assembly line. *Only someone evil could be happy over something like this.*

Marc, of course, had survived after all. It made sense. He was not the type to be a victim. Steve Cho, sure. Lizzie Nackford, certainly. Even Miss Priss herself. But not Marcus Hope. That walking font of

misery Vijay had been spot-on about that: *If I left that bastard in the Mojave bare-ass naked with no water, he'd drive out a week later in a Ferrari, with Miss Universe on his lap.* Well, in a sense, Marc *had* been dropped in the Mojave; he'd lost his girlfriend and been beaten unconscious by her killer. It would have shattered most men, driven them into permanent exile—if not in another city, then certainly to the bottom of a bottle. Yet now, a year later, here he was again, pushing into the steamy interior of the Dive as if no time had passed at all, as if he owned the place. And he looked good.

Very good.

Harder, to be sure. The eyes were colder, the cheeks hollower. His jetty hair was longish now, and careless, but it was a carefully crafted carelessness, a look that only pretended indifference to looks. His shoulders drew the gleaming leather fabric of his blazer tight enough to pop a stitch, and he retained that easy, elegant grace of movement—half thoroughbred, half tiger—that had always caused her toes to tingle.

The Boy Who Lived, she thought, watching him from the booth where she sat with the others.

The guy who lettered in abs and ass. Back in Progress. Back where I can get him.

But what did she want him for? Satisfaction of an old lust, or revenge?

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe, in this case, they're the same thing.

17.

Vijay Desai had come to think of his alcoholism as a poltergeist: both raging and invisible. It was with him every moment of the day, yet no one around him seemed to suspect it existed. He had studied this phenomenon scientifically and believed there were two reasons for it. Outwardly, his appearance and behavior were normal. He had always been vain, and he remained so: hair neatly combed, face cleanly shaven, clothing freshly ironed and laundered. He had always been fit, and he remained so; he walked to and from campus every day, a distance of

some miles, and often used the university gym, especially the sauna, to sweat out last night's poisons. His studies had not suffered even slightly—in fact, they had improved, and when he wasn't reading or working on his portfolio he was doing assistant work for Van Winaker: grading papers, teaching undergraduate classes, performing tedious research in the Schmidt Library. His driving, even after half a bottle of Bushmills, was as precise as if he were being followed at all times by a police prowler, and when he cooked for himself, in his small anonymous-looking apartment on Country Club Road, he never burned anything. These things and others constituted the first reason.

The second, he was sure, was that no one cared enough to help.

This thought came without an iota of self-pity. Vijay did not believe he had the right to self-pity. Self-hatred and self-loathing, yes, but not self-pity. It was impossible to feel sorry for yourself when you had done what he had done. It was just as impossible for a man of his intelligence to ignore the evidence that nobody gave a shit that he was killing himself by inches.

There were times when he thought *someone* must, if only his neighbors, if only the garbage men who came every Tuesday morning. Christ knew his recycle bin was a veritable graveyard of whiskey bottles. Christ also knew that he had lost eleven pounds in the last year, which was no small feat when you considered he had never been fat to begin with. And Christ, who, rumor had it, could tell you the precise count of the hairs on your head, knew as well that there were times when even a fistful of Altoids wasn't enough to mask the scent of said Bushmills on his breath. He knew he was exhibiting all the signs of a functioning alcoholic. They were plain enough to anyone. The only conclusion he could reach was that they knew, all of them, and they *wanted* him to be that way. That was okay. Most days he wanted to be that way as well.

It was terribly ironic, this vague desire for death. It had been fear of death, after all, that had driven the iron bolt of the attic door home, thus saving him from the ax while condemning him to the terrible, festering shame of the coward. And even now, it was fear that prevented him from simply sticking his head in the gas oven or driving

down to Dick's Sporting Goods and buying the revolver he'd need to blow the back of his head all over the ecru-colored walls of his sterile, soulless little studio. Fear was the barrier that prevented him from doing the thing he most wanted to do. Fear of death, and fear of hell.

Vijay was not Catholic. He wasn't a Hindu or a Sikh, either. He had no religion but science, no catechism but the empirical method; yet his years at Resurrection had left a mark upon him, the existence of which he had only recently discovered. Everywhere he looked he saw stained glass saints and carved-stone martyrs, rosary beads and crucifixes, dead and bloody Christs and sorrowing images of the Blessed Virgin. The halls of the fucking Administration Building featured rows of huge oil paintings depicting the *Crusades*, for God's sake; Vijay had never passed them by but wondering why the Inquisition and the Witch Trials hadn't been thrown in for good measure. It was almost Orwellian, this omnipresent reminder of the faith and its consequences, and somehow all the cant and nonsense, the ritual and superstition, had seeped between the cracks of Vijay's atheistic armor. He still could not believe in God, but damned if he didn't believe in hell. How could he not? He lived in its foretaste. And residing there, it struck him as little surprise that Marcus Hope should walk back into his life. Hell, he reasoned, must be full of people like Hope; handsome devils who always got the better of you.

Through the mist that five whiskey-and-waters had cast over his vision, he observed his once-and-future nemesis approach but found considerably more interest in the expressions of those sitting with him. Aura gazed at Hope with the look of a cat stalking a bird that was tantalizingly close but not quite within reach. Pam, who stank of gunpowder, seemed to be fighting tears. Daryl, looking as if he'd rolled out of bed and walked to the diner all the way from Club Alley *sans* umbrella, appeared sullen, but Daryl *always* appeared sullen nowadays. As for the new girl, Gina Kolibri, Vijay saw nothing in those pale blue eyes that he could recognize. She was a mystery, but not one he cared to solve. Why bother? Hope was back, and he would solve the puzzle soon enough. Probably this very night. It was his style. The guy cracked hymens like Raffles cracked cribs, and there was nothing he liked more

than going from handshake to orgasm in the space of a single evening. The Kolibri girl would go along with it; they all did. Even Rosealeen.

Especially Rosealeen, he thought.

Marc stopped at the edge of the table. A muscle in his cheek twitched, and he swallowed audibly. Had Vijay been less intoxicated he would have been impressed at these signs of nervousness. They were the first he had ever seen Hope display.

"Hey," Marc said.

The monosyllable seemed to hang in the air. Such a stupid sound. So uniquely American in its simplicity. So appropriate for this vacuous pretty boy whose idea of rebellion was getting a doctorate in a field guaranteed never to make him any money. Some rebellion. He would inherit everything anyway, and if the rumors were to be believed, "everything" meant about fifty-five million dollars.

"Well," Daryl's voice was loud but toneless, and he looked as if he couldn't decide whether to drink the rest of his beer or meet Marc's gaze. He chose the former, emptying the twenty-two-ounce mug in five enormous swallows. The belch that followed was so loud, it momentarily quieted the entire diner. "Here for the fattened calf?"

"Huh?"

"You being the prodigal and all."

Vijay almost smiled when he saw the sweat, fine as pinpoints but still visible, break out on Marc's upper lip. Meanwhile, Hope, noticing at last that there was no room in the booth for him to sit down, cleared his throat and said, "Wrong parable. I'm the lost sheep."

"Come home to repent?"

"Come home, anyway."

Daryl leaned back against the cracked red vinyl, drummed dirty fingernails on the table. His gaze through the horn-rimmed glasses was bloodshot but penetrating. "One is tempted to ask why we should care."

"Daryl—" Pamela said.

"I got this." Daryl said. "You see, Marc, since you left, the rest of us here have had time to work a lot of things out. Well, maybe not so much work *out* as work *over*. There's been a lot of hugging and crying and learning and growing, just like an old *ABC Afterschool Special*, if you

get me. I mean, after what happened, we were plenty fucked-up.” He held up his damaged hand. “Still are. And being fucked-up, we had to hold on to each other pretty tight. See, you may not know this, but when a guy walks into a house and chops his friends all to pieces on Halloween night for no discernible goddamn reason, people tend to notice. Cops. Tabloids. Hollywood. It was a positive shitstorm. The only way we got through it was by sticking together.”

“I understand,” Marc said.

“You understand. Cool. But you weren’t *part* of it.”

“I had some things to work out too.”

“Splendid.” Daryl waved for another beer. “You needed to go to Timbuktu or Tibet or Titticaca and get your head right. That’s only fair. Rose was your girl, and you got busted up pretty bad. But you saw fit to roll out of here like a goddamn sneak-thief before the ink on Mason’s commitment was dry. Not a word, not a note, nothing. And you *didn’t* see fit to stay in touch with any of us after you left. In fact, until yesterday, when Father D. rang us up, we didn’t even know if you were still alive. So, you gotta understand that there isn’t an *us* in this situation, so much as a *we* and *you*. And you can’t just swing back here after a year of radio silence and play the Big Man On Campus anymore. It won’t wash.”

“I don’t want to do anything like that.”

“What Daryl is saying,” Pamela said, “is that we’re happy you’re back—”

The hell we are, Vijay thought.

“—but things have changed. *We’ve* all changed. And it’s gonna take some time for you to fit back into this situation. I mean, if that’s what you want to do.” She paused and said, “Is that what you’re looking to do?”

“Right now, I’m not looking for anything,” Marc made a helpless gesture, “but a goddamn chair.”

Pamela uttered a short laugh that seemed mostly relief. Aura laughed too, somewhat louder, though. Vijay thought the laugh was about as mechanical as the smile she’d been wearing since Hope walked into the room. Even Daryl grunted as if mollified. But the Kolibri girl

just stared, coolly and dispassionately, as if Hope were nothing but a specimen in a bottle—even when Hope pulled up a chair from a vacant table and sat directly opposite her.

Moving in already, Vijay thought in wonderment. *And he hasn't even finished groveling yet.* It was enough to drive a man... home, where he could drink in private, lest the world suspect the immensity of his pain.

"Look," Hope said with what he probably thought sounded like sincerity. "I understand that if I stay here, I'll be starting from scratch with everything, including all of you."

"If?" Aura spoke for the first time. Her voice was dulcet; she could have narrated for Victoria's Secret. Vijay noted she hadn't taken off her red plastic overcoat, the one that made her look like Little Red Riding Hood as depicted by Hugh Hefner, and that she had tied her ink-black hair into fishtail braids that lay over the coat's lapels as if to remind Hope that the world's best breasts were hiding underneath. The combination of virginal innocence and blatant sexual allure was devastating. "You mean you might *not* stay?"

Marc glanced at her so briefly it seemed as if he were afraid his gaze might become ensnared and linger. "I haven't decided yet. Coming back here... seeing this place... seeing all of you... it's a little... shit, it's a *lot* overwhelming. Everything's the same, except—"

"Rosealeen's dead." Daryl's voice lowered to something just above a whisper. "And Freddy, and Lizzie, and Steve. I know. I keep looking for them."

"Every day," Pamela said quietly. "Every goddamned day."

"We all miss them," Aura said with an earnestness Vijay thought was every bit as genuine as a three-dollar bill.

"Anyway," Marc said roughly, still refusing to look at her. "I told Father D. I could handle it. Van Winaker too. But sitting here, now, in this place... I'm not sure I can."

"It takes time," Pamela said.

"According to Father D., the program may not have much time."

"I think that's a slight exaggeration." Gina looked up from the reflection in her coffee and spoke clear sharp words that startled everyone at the table, as if she were a statue suddenly come to life.

“The Board of Trustees can’t defund the program until we release the Cipher back to the National Museum of Scotland. That’s not scheduled for another six weeks. If we were to make a significant discovery in regards to its origin before then, the publicity would make it impossible for them to get rid of us.”

Marc stared at her, offered a weak smile. “We haven’t been introduced. I’m—”

“I know who you are.”

“Then you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Indeed I do.”

A moment of silence followed, which rendered everyone uncomfortable except for Vijay and the woman who had uttered it.

“This is Gina Kolibri,” Daryl said. “She’s new. Transferred here from the University of Michigan graduate program.”

Marc’s eyebrows rose. “You transferred *here* from U of M?”

“You have a problem with that?”

Again, the clear, sharp words; the clear, sharp stare. No hint of politeness. No warmth. *Like a scalpel*, Vijay thought. Marc looked uncertain, said: “It’s just that they’re a top-ten archaeology school.”

“Top five.”

“And we’re not quite in that league. So why—”

“The Cipher. I wanted a crack at it.”

“Who doesn’t?” Daryl mused. “If you give a shit about archaeology. Which I still do... sometimes.”

“We all still do,” Pamela said, turning her coffee mug back and forth in her palms. “We’ve all invested huge parts of our lives into this discipline, into this program. I don’t think any of us want to see it go down the drain.”

“Especially without our doctorates,” Aura said.

Daryl saluted her with his ruined hand. “Spoken like a true mercenary, babe.”

“I’m not your babe, Flipper,” Aura snapped, and then she turned her sloe-eyed gaze to Marc. “And it’s not mercenary to want to finish what you started.”

Vijay couldn’t help but notice the effect these words had on the

Great White Hope. His face flushed, and the muscle in his cheek twitched again. He really did look remarkably older; still handsome, of course—guys like Hope would look like underwear models even in their caskets—but markedly and definitely older, as if the last year had exacted a decade's worth of vengeance on him. Studying the others, Vijay saw—*thought* he saw—the faintest trace of a smile on Gina Calbri's face, as if Marc's obvious discomfiture amused her.

"There's a lot of talent at this table," Marc said at last. "If we put our heads together and really broke our asses in the lab, maybe we could turn something up. Something big enough to take the program off the chopping block. From what I understand, not much work has been done since... well, *since*."

"That's true enough," Pamela said. "Van Winaker's been trying to run the program with half a staff."

"A third of a staff," Daryl said. "Admit it, Pam, you and I are basically students in name only."

"We have cause."

"I'm not passing judgment," Marc said hastily. "Not at all. We've all had other priorities. But it's like you said, Pam. We've shed—" He paused, and Vijay realized he'd been about to say *blood, sweat, and tears*. "—a lot of sweat over that goddamn Cipher. I think maybe we owe it to ourselves to crack the case."

"To ourselves," Pam said. "And maybe to the others."

"If she's in, I'm in," Daryl said.

"Me too," Aura said.

"I was never out," Gina Kolibri said.

Marc regarded her for a moment, seemingly baffled by her tone, then turned to Vijay, meeting his gaze for the first time. "What about you, Veej? You haven't said shit since I got here. Are you with us?"

Vijay said nothing for so long that the silence became tense, expectant. He stood up. Dug a pair of dollar bills from his pocket and tucked them beneath his coffee cup. His hatred of Marc, which had lain upon him so long that it had become as comfortable as an old leather jacket, suddenly constricted, making it difficult for him to breathe. He had an image of lifting the cup and smashing it over Hope's

skull, of throttling him, of cracking the back of his handsome head into the linoleum floor until it came apart like a rotten watermelon. *Something I should have done a long time ago*, he thought, and then: *But you know what they say. Better late than never.*

“You know me, Marc,” he said, smiling for the first time since he had listened to Rosealeen die. “I hate to leave anything half-finished.”

18.

Boulevard of broken dreams, Luckner thought.

That was what The Dive looked like to him, anyway; a yellow-lit fishtank full of damned souls, with the exception that the water was all on the outside. The rain wasn't hard, but it was steady and sure; what his old man would have called a Farmer's Delight. But the old man had never pounded a beat, nor driven one, either, and there was nothing whatsoever delightful about rain when you were a fucking cop.

Luckner had hit roll call sure that some shit detail awaited him, and he hadn't been disappointed. *See what the Hope kid is up to* had been the private directive sent by Chief Weston through the four-to-midnight watch commander's mouth. Luckner had graduated, in short, from running license plates to playing third-rate private eye. No, worse than that: chaperon to a spoiled brat.

I never should have told the chief he was back in town, he thought, watching the rain crawl down his windshield. *Should have kept my mouth shut. When did volunteering information ever get me anything except in garbage up to my nuts?*

Still, he had to admit the assignment hadn't been as bad as he'd feared.

Not yet, anyway.

Hope had been relatively easy to find. Luckner already had his plate number and the color, make, and model of his car, not to mention a list of his known associates and former hangouts; if you couldn't locate a guy with *that* information in a town as small as Progress, you weren't much of a fucking detective. And once he'd found the prick, tailing him

here while he met with his college buddies had been a cinch.

It proved to be a short meeting. The Desai kid—Luckner thought of all college pukes as kids, even grad students pushing thirty—was the first to go. An easy mark, that one. Only Indian in Progress (aside from the Chief, who was a different sort of Indian entirely), and the only person who'd been present in Mulder House to escape physical injury the night of the massacre. Luckner had often wondered about *that*, but his own semi-disgrace following the murders had prevented him from looking any deeper into the guy's story. Desai stood for a moment in the rain with his hands thrust in his pockets, casting a brooding stare back through the big picture windows at the booth from which he'd risen; then, he drifted off like a wraith.

Next came the Odd Couple: Bachmann and Stebbing. A very strange pair. The girl was cute enough, he supposed, if you had fond memories of the Dixie Chicks, but the guy was a dirty, disgusting slob: oyster-eyed, overweight, and carrying around that mutilated hand that looked a size and a half too big for his wrist. What's more, he'd been arrested three times in the last year, twice for public intoxication and once for "mutual affray," a third-degree misdemeanor which had been kicked down to disorderly conduct by a supposedly sympathetic assistant district attorney, who, in Luckner's estimation, didn't want to rouse public ire by prosecuting one of the town's most famous victims. A real dumpster fire of a human being, this Stebbing, the type a brainy bitch like Bachmann ought to steer well clear of; yet Luckner had seen them together around town so often that he naturally concluded they were getting it on, and the thought literally made him shake his head.

Women. Who can understand 'em?

Next was the Sakara slut. Her red raincoat gleamed in the darkness like an invitation. Luckner had never met her, but she'd been interviewed by some of the other detectives during the investigation following the massacre, and her statements had been curious in the extreme: no grief for her dead colleagues, nothing in the way of survivor's guilt, and only the shallowest curiosity as to Maguire's motives. The main emotions she'd carried away from the experience seemed to be relief that she had escaped harm and a curiosity as to

whether the local TV stations would pay for the information she had about the victims. A vain, selfish cunt. Even now, alone on the street, making her way to her scarlet coupe, she seemed to be putting on a performance: sneering, swinging her hips. Probably a vamp in the sack. Too bad he'd never find out. Women like *that* didn't fuck cops.

Not small-town ones, anyway.

Now only Hope and another girl remained. Luckner had no idea who *she* was, and the windows were too steamy to make out her face. Never mind; he'd get an eyeful when she left the Hole. Probably with Hope on her arm. He was that type. Luckner knew this because *he* was that type, but it didn't improve his opinion of Mr. Trust Fund by one iota. On the contrary, the idea that he had anything in common with a wealthy college puke made the detective want to beat the shit out of somebody.

The door to the diner opened once again, and Luckner felt a small jolt of surprise when he realized the girl was leaving alone. She moved swiftly to a little sedan parked at the curb, not bothering to raise her hood on the way, and he got a decent glimpse of her face in the brief glare of the dome light before the door swung shut. *Too pale* was his only observation. The way the tires slurred on the wet asphalt as she pulled out made him wonder if she and Moneybags had been fighting.

At last, Hope emerged. Backlighting by the flashing blue neon signs on the diner's windows, he struck a pose right out of a fucking movie. Something about his posture communicated confusion or uncertainty, as if maybe the feisty bitch in the sedan had rattled his cage. At any rate, he stood there for at least a full minute, watching the girl's taillights recede up Market Street. Then, he too climbed into his car and drove away in the opposite direction.

Luckner felt no impulse to follow. He'd seen enough of nothing for one evening and would report to the Chief at the end of watch all the nothing he had seen. He was just putting the Crown Victoria into gear when he saw the firefly glow of a cigarette in a darkened doorway down the street. It startled Luckner not only because it so precisely fit the gumshoe motif of this entire miserable night, but because in that flickering instant when the cigarette had glowed its brightest before it

had been extinguished on the pavement, he had realized that whoever was lurking there in the shadows had been conducting a stakeout of his own. Of the college pukes....

Or of me.

Luckner did what any surprised and slightly annoyed cop would have done in that instant. He reached for the handle on his utility spotlight, and with a flick of his trigger finger, unleashed almost a quarter-million candlepower of light into the doorway.

It may as well have been gunfire for the way his target reacted. For the briefest fragment of a second, Luckner saw a startled white face, half obscured by some kind of hat or cap, and then the figure was moving, twisting, leaping out of the light; before the second could complete itself, it had disappeared down the alleyway in a flare of long coattails and a sudden slap of running feet.

Luckner was a good cop, but not a perfect one; in the same instant he'd realized using the light before closing with the lurker had been a mistake, and he compounded that mistake by noticing too late that he'd allowed himself to get parked in like a dumb-ass rookie while conducting his surveillance. It would take a good fifteen more seconds to wrench his way out of the trap, more if he called in a 10-70 to Dispatch.

Forget it, he thought. Probably a homeless junkie looking for a soft touch to beg for change. Not worth your time.

But a second thought followed it, seemingly at the speed of light: *Nobody runs from the cops for the hell of it; he's either got a weapon or a warrant.*

Luckner hadn't made a good collar in what seemed like ages. And he was decidedly tired of watching colleagues not fit to polish his badge filling their personnel files with collars that could have been, that *should* have been, his.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist—

Cursing himself as much as the runner, he flung open the door and propelled himself into the street.

The technical term for running from the police was "fleeing and eluding," but in the ten years he'd carried a badge for the Progress Police Department, very few people who had fled Officer (now

Detective, goddamn it) Jim Luckner had successfully eluded him. As one resident of African descent and criminal disposition had half-ruefully, half-admiringly observed whilst in handcuffs, that white boy could *move*. And he moved now, with all the speed adrenaline, superior genetics, and a tough fitness regimen could produce.

Across the street and down the alley.

Luckner hated alleys. A lot of good cops had died in them. And on an ink-black, rainy night like this, with no flashlight, no backup, and no Kevlar vest beneath his jacket—the whole thing was a recipe for disaster.

Especially if this fucker is armed. Maybe he was gonna rob the Hole and has a sawed-off underneath his coat!

Luckner couldn't see the man he pursued, but he could hear him somewhere in the blackness ahead, panting, pounding along. And he was fast, astonishingly fast; he ran like a man possessed. Luckner belatedly bellowed, "*Police officer! Stop!*" But the words had no effect. The alleyway emptied into another, larger alley, the nameless side street that connected Market Street to East Philadelphia. It was nothing but battered dumpsters and gushing gutter spouts; a security light glared without giving much illumination. Luckner emerged into it, skidded to a stop; one hand fell to the pistol holstered on his hip. But there was nothing else to see, no movement.

Not even the flit of a shadow.

Then, the sound came: a body, crashing at full speed into a chain-link fence. Luckner turned and sprinted after it. He had dragged a helluva a lot of men, and not a few women, off such fences in his time; very few people could scamper over one quickly and efficiently, and if they were high enough, the dumb bastards who climbed them nearly always hesitated when they realized how far they'd have to jump to reach the ground on the other side.

And that was precisely what was happening now.

A scarecrow-like figure, hatted and clad in a glistening raincoat, perched near the top of the still-shivering fence, one foot dangling as he tried to nerve himself to swing his leg over the wet rail above his head. Luckner didn't give him the time to find his courage. With the

sort of athleticism that had made him the best running back in the history of Eammon Broye High School, he leaped at the scarecrow and seized him by the ankle; one hard pull was all it took to bring the sonofabitch back to earth.

It was a hard fall onto pavement—*oof!*—and as the hat rolled away from the scarecrow's head, its brim cutting into the puddles like the blade of an ice skate, Luckner had time to make out the details: a strip of fiery red hair, cut into a Mohawk; flesh so pale it seemed to gleam with its own, interior radiance; and features twisted into something that was equal parts desperation and fury. Luckner had seen that look before, knew the bastard wasn't out of fight, and had the cold satisfaction of seeing his insta-prediction come true when the scarecrow's hand vanished into his pocket and then emerged, an instant later, with a knife.

Luckner had been going for his handcuffs, and in the instant it took to change the course of his hand from the leather case that held them to the butt of his nine-millimeter, the scarecrow had risen into a crouch. The deductive portion of Luckner's brain, which was larger and more agile than most people gave him credit for, noted dryly that this asshole was probably a jailbird: very few people who *hadn't* been to prison knew how to handle a knife in combat. The rest of Luckner felt such a surge of adrenaline that he didn't even feel the impact of the kick he landed in the scarecrow's face; he simply witnessed the man go down a second time, his knife clattering on the wet cobblestones, blood bubbling from his smashed lips. He made one last, futile effort to rise, and then slackened into unconsciousness.

Luckner circled around the sprawled body, muscles tense, heart controlled thunder, and picked up the knife with the hand not occupied with the butt of his Sig-Sauer. An unusual weapon. Not a knife at all, but a three-inch push dagger with overmold handles. Not the sort of hardware the ordinary street hood would carry, and well beyond the orbit of any junkie. There was a story here, but probably not one Luckner was going to be permitted to discover for himself. No, the Chief would hand the follow-up to someone else, and Luckless Jim Luckner would resume his never-ending penitence for last year's mistake.

For just a moment, rage overtook his soul, and he felt tempted to kick the ever-loving shit out of the unconscious form gurgling unpleasantly beneath him. There were no witnesses, and since there was a knife in play, nobody would question Luckner's version of events. Back in the day, such a punishment would have been standard for anyone dumb enough to run away from the police—especially one who pulled a knife when he got cornered. The old warhorses in the Department called this “paying the tax.” Luckner had never gone in for that sort of shit, but maybe just this once—

He shook his head suddenly, as if to drive the unwanted thought from his mind. He wasn't that kind of cop. He had *never* been that kind of cop. He was only too well aware of the core of anger within him, and the different ways in which it attempted to manifest itself—misogyny, race prejudice, class resentment. Father Desiree had been instrumental in getting him to understand that about himself, and Luckner had never forgotten his advice: *Everyone harbors these evils within themselves, Jim. Everyone. The problem is not that we have them, it's that we deny their existence. We tell ourselves 'we're better than this.' We're not. And so long as you keep that fact in the forefront of your mind, your evil can't hurt you... or anyone else.*

“Well,” Luckner said aloud, freeing his cuffs from their case with a *snap*. “Here's to self-control.”

19.

The inmates of Elysium Hospital for the Criminally Insane did not like the sound of thunder. This was the first of the Five New Facts with which Troy Tom Toliver was making swift acquaintance.

New Fact No. 2: His chief supervisor, Pleasance, should have jammed an *un-* before his name; actually, he should have jammed an *un-* right up his ass. For sure, the Big Nig knew his business: He had the Maximum Security Wing humming smoother than a toothless blowjob. But he was an A-1 ballbuster all the same. A real stickler for rules and regulations and paperwork and determined to make sure orderlies did

not take liberties of any kind with the inmates.

New Fact No. 3: Pleasance had a wife and four children, which meant he seldom lingered after the clock struck midnight. Not even to keep an eye on the new man, Orderly Toliver, whom he plainly did not trust.

New Fact No. 4: The boss of the graveyard shift was a pliable, dull-eyed old burnout named King, who spent a lot of time staring vacantly at the security monitors when he wasn't sawing wood with his hands laced over his considerable belly.

All of these facts in concert led to New Fact No. 5, to wit: If Toliver *did* wish to take liberties with the inmates, he could do it pretty goddamn easily once Black Elvis had left the building. On a rainy night like this, when every boom of thunder had half the wards screaming like a tween with a cock in her ass, King wouldn't hear a thing even if he happened to be awake.

Tom was no genius, but he possessed considerable cunning all the same. Since early childhood, he had known by a species of instinct how and when he could bend, break, or shatter rules, depending on his needs: the principal factor in deciding for him a course of action was the strength of the man enforcing them. Pleasance was strong; therefore, in his presence, the rules could only be bent, and that furtively. King, on the other hand, was weak; where he was concerned, to break a rule would be easy. The only question was whether he would also sleep through a good, old-fashioned rule *shattering*, and it was a question Toliver planned on answering tonight.

He knew that in any relationship, be it with work or a woman, it was necessary to find out where the boundaries were right away and then give 'em a good kick, even if it meant destroying the relationship. After all, it wasn't the relationship that mattered; it was what you wanted out of it, and in Tom's experience, what you wanted was generally more than they wanted to give.

So fucking be it.

When he arrived at Elysium, the day's rain had worked itself into a good old-fashioned night storm, complete with electrical fireworks: enormous bullwhips of energy that cracked purple-white across a

formless black sky. Tom's old Omni, exhausted from the climb up Mercy Hill, shuddered in its parking space for a good half minute after he switched off the engine. It reminded him of the way the really young sluts would tremble when they saw what God had put between his legs, but he pushed that thought from his mind. Tonight wasn't about feeding his sex addiction. It was about feeding the other goddess that ruled his life.

Vengeance.

Like most predators, Tom possessed considerable patience. Upon entering the grounds, he betrayed absolutely no sign of what he was about to do. In the locker room, he toweled his abundant if careless brown hair; hung his shitty blue acrylic windbreaker from the overhead heating pipe so that it would dry during his shift; stowed his battered lunchbox and equally scuffed thermos in the noisy break room refrigerator; and punched his timecard into the clock at midnight sharp. When Pleasance, changing into his street clothes, pointed out an error he'd made in some new employee paperwork, Tom responded with his glassiest, most unfocused look; it was not by appearances defiant, merely impenetrably stupid. "Like a sheep starin' at a fuckin' UFO," was how Pleasance had characterized it in disgust. But he had that wife and those four kids, so he went home, and Orderly Toliver was free to feed the goddess, bitch that she was. Whore and slut and cunt that she was.

It was all he had left in life.

Now, he waited. For the night crew to settle into its routine. For King to settle in behind the big bank of security monitors and get nice and comfortable—and sleepy—while he listened to an analysis of the Steelers game on the radio. For the storm to settle in and drive the loonies jammed in their one-man (or one-woman) cells into fits of screaming, begging, sobbing, and laughter.

Then he went and visited Mason Maguire.

He was careful to make the visit part of his normal rounds. Every fifteen minutes, he had to peer within the dimly lighted cells and make sure no one was dangling from a steam pipe or had gotten hold of a razor blade; Maguire was the last stop on his route, at the terminus of

a dead-end corridor whose overhead lighting was like a weak suggestion nobody had taken. Even if King were awake and alert, all he would see on that particular monitor were grainy black-and-white shadows, presented with all the clarity of an ultrasound.

Time to feed the goddess.

Tom unlocked the cell with a key that swung from his belt and stepped inside. The air felt heavy and hot; Maguire sat huddled in the corner, motionless as a scarecrow, staring at nothing through a wild, matted tangle of hair. He did not react to the intrusion. Not a whimper, not a twitch. Yet as Tom edged closer, he could not help but notice moisture glistening on the murderer's cheeks.

"Well, I be go to hell," Tom said, grinning. "World gotcha down, Mason? Havin' yourself a good cry? Don't be embarrassed. I know how you feel." He moved closer, cautious but not frightened; on the contrary, he was excited. He could see how the once-powerful muscles on Maguire's body had softened and grown shapeless with disuse, how submissive and cringing the psycho's posture was.

Just the way I like 'em.

"A year ago, I had a job. A year ago, I had a *life*. Eight more years and I coulda retired. Coulda put my size twelves up and spent my days drinking cold brew at the Majestic and my nights picking up hookers in Gasoline Alley." Tom slipped a hand into his pocket; when it emerged, it held eight inches of brand-new radiator hose. "But you had other plans, didn'tcha? Wanted to unfriend a few people with a fucking ax. Goody for you, I got no beef with *that*—you could have done the whole fucking college for all I care. But not on my watch, Mase. Not on my motherfucking *watch!*"

He hit Maguire once, very hard, across the side of the ribcage: the sound of the impact reminded Tom of the time he'd dropped a cut of cheap meat on his kitchenette floor. The Halloween Hacker crumpled into a ball of writhing, soundless agony: his eyes shone through the dirty curtain of his hair, wide and seemingly uncomprehending. Breathing hard, Tom began to speak, perhaps unconsciously, in the same tones his mother had once used when lecturing him between strokes of a belt.

“Do you know the shit I had to do when I lost that job? I had to bag *groceries*.” He struck Maguire in the shoulder. “I had to stock *shelves*.” He struck Maguire over the hip. “I had to stand on the motherfucking unemployment line and beg for *handouts* like a fucking *nigger*.” He struck Maguire over the back, and when the shitheel rolled over, over the buttocks. “This job, here, is the best thing I’ve had since. Wearing pajamas and scraping crazy men’s puke out of the grouts at three in the motherfucking morning. I guess maybe you think that’s funny?” He hesitated a moment, panting now, his vision throbbing in time with his heart, his cock stiffening slightly in excitement. The grin on his face looked as if it were being cut in place by an invisible knife, and he was conscious, though not at all ashamed, of the fact that saliva ran freely down his chin. “But the problem, Mase—your problem—is that my watch just started up again. Only this time I get to watch *you*. I get to take care of *you*. That’s my job. That’s why they pay me ten bucks an hour. *Taking care of Mason Maguire.*”

He thrashed Maguire again, once for every word, knowing that the welts left on this slobbering fuckhead’s body would fade quickly into little pink smudges before his shift was over. It was not for nothing the cops had once carried rubber hoses along with guns and handcuffs; they had even called it “the ole polygraph” for its ability to extract the truth from reluctant suspects. But Troy Tom Toliver wasn’t looking for the truth; what he was looking for he had already found. Straightening himself, he shoved the tubing back in his pocket, smoothed back his hair with his palms, and regarded the lunatic at his feet with that same savage grin. “I got to go now, Mase. Gotta finish my rounds. But I wanna leave you with a thought. Two, actually. The first is that you’re in here for life. The bad news is that because of you, I got another twenty years to go before I get my gold watch. *Twenty years*, Mase. That’s a whole shitpot of days. And guess who I’m gonna spend ‘em with?”

“I don’t understand people,” Gina said.

"That is not a sin," Father Carnaghan replied.

"But I *need* to understand."

"You are familiar with the rite of confession," the priest said with a sigh. "You're here to enumerate your sins, to repent and ask for absolution, counsel, and penance. Not to seek advice on worldly matters."

"It's not a worldly matter." A sharp, mirthless laugh escaped Gina's lips. "I can't stress how much it's not a worldly matter. I need to *know*, Father."

"What?"

"Why people do the things they do."

"You are one of Father Desiree's students, no? He lectures quite frequently on the nature of evil."

"I'm not talking about evil. I'm talking about myself."

Father Carnaghan fell silent for a moment. Gina heard the rustle of his vestments through the confessional screen. "The sin of Eve taints every human soul."

"I'm not talking about sin, either. Not really. Not *exactly*."

"You're not making any sense, child," Carnaghan said, his tone plainly adding, *And you'd better start, because I am fast running out of patience.*

Gina steepled her fingers together as if in prayer, pressed them to her lips. It was a characteristic gesture, but unconscious; a psychiatrist would have had a field day with the symbolism. At last, speaking through her hands, she said, "I had an opportunity tonight... a chance I've been waiting for. To meet someone. To tell someone something, something very important. To get help that I need very much. And I didn't take it."

"Because you were afraid."

"Because I didn't *want* to. Because I don't like... this person. I don't want to rely on him. I don't want to need him."

Disgust crept into the priest's tone. "If you are referring to some romantic matter—"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"Come to the *point*, child."

"Father, if I tell you something—"

“The sanctity of the confessional is absolute.”

“It’s not sanctity I’m worried about.” Gina took a deep breath. The womb-like confessional booth, which had always given her such comfort, now suddenly seemed as claustrophobic as a coffin, and she found the words congealing on her tongue. “It’s blasphemy.”

Again, Gina heard the rustle of fabric through the screen, saw the dappled shadow of Carngehan’s face tighten, the blue eyes take on an interested, almost predatory gleam. “Go on.”

But instead of replying, Gina found herself remembering what had happened just hours before, after Vijay, Pamela, and Daryl had left the diner. Marc had been pulled aside briefly by Aurelia. The two had exchanged words Gina couldn’t hear; after Sakara sashayed out the door, swinging her ass like a Market Street whore trying to drum up trade, Hope had returned to the table, where Gina now sat alone, his face ghastly white beneath his fashionable five o’clock shadow. After a moment’s awkward silence, he’d said, “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

Staring at him expressionlessly, Gina had held up her brimming mug.

“Would you like to buy *me* a cup of coffee?”

Gina waved for the waitress. Marc sat back down opposite her. A stray tendril of ink-black hair had fallen over one of his eyes, and he flipped it away. He really was a beautiful specimen, she thought, with those eyebrows, those cheekbones, and that perfectly formed chin. Grow out the locks a little, put a ring through an earlobe, and loosen the collar, and he might have been a rock star sitting down for an interview after a hard night’s partying.

It made her hate him all the more.

He said, “You don’t talk much, do you?”

“They say silence speaks volumes.”

“I know why Daryl and Pam are mad at me,” Marc said with that same weak, uncertain grin he’d worn when first entering the Dive. “And I can guess why Vijay is mad at me. Can you tell me why you are?”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“But you don’t like me.”

“I know too much to like you.”

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"I only believe what I can see."

Marc stared at her expectantly, but she said nothing more. "All right. I'll bite. What the hell does that mean?"

She had realized then, with all the shock of running blind into a brick wall, that she couldn't tell him now. It was too soon. It might *always* be too soon. All she could think to say was, "You wouldn't understand. And you probably never will."

Marc waited. Somewhere in the kitchen, the cook dropped a dish. It broke with a tinkling little crash; there was a curse in Italian, then laughter. When he realized she wasn't going to add anything, he'd said, "That's it? That's all I get?"

"What, did you think I was going to jump into your lap? You want some of that, go chase down your friend Aura. She looks willing."

Marc's face, ghostly white a moment before, flushed a deep, humiliated pink. "To hell with Aura. I thought maybe we could talk." When Gina remained silent, Marc added: "I could use someone to talk *to*, and we have... something in common."

"What's that?"

"We're both survivors."

Gina felt her own face redden, was helpless to stop it, felt rage at her helplessness. "What did Desiree tell you?"

"That you were in an accident. A bad one."

"I guess you could say that." Gina could not keep the bitterness from her tone. "Everyone else in the car was killed."

"Friends of yours?"

"My two best." It took an effort to add: "And my older sister."

"Jesus. I'm sorry."

"Don't say that."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't mean anything. And it doesn't help."

"No, I guess it doesn't at that." A waitress arrived and set coffee down before Marc. He picked it up and rolled the mug slowly between his palms as if trying to warm them, though the diner itself had felt steamy. His face had turned somber, his gaze inward. "I'm still sorry,

though.”

“Like the woman says: Everyone’s sorry for something.”

“Truer words. I know that after what happened at Mulder, I—”

“Look,” Gina had snapped, not quite understanding the intensity of her own anger. “If you think we’re going to bond over this, don’t. I don’t cry on shoulders. I don’t do cathartic romps in bed, either. So, if you were looking to play on my survivor’s guilt to get in my pants, don’t bother. Because I don’t *have* any guilt.”

Marc seemed to be studying her face, trying once again to find the source of her hostility. “But you think I do?”

“Like I said. I only believe what I can see.”

And with that, she had stormed out of the diner into the rain. Raced through a string of red lights to her apartment and never mind if she got a fucking ticket. Rested her head against the steering wheel and wept a little out of sheer frustration. *Why couldn’t I say it?* But she knew the answer. All plans sound good in your head, and the longer you keep them there, the better they sound. Then the day comes you have to let them out of your mouth, and they won’t budge, just sit there shivering in their cowardly mediocrity. Gina had looked up through tear-blurred eyes to see the light burning in her window, but the thought of returning to her airless little flat, with its smell of stale cigarette smoke and its cold unmade bed, seemed intolerable. So, she had slammed the car into gear once more and driven up Grace Hill to the Chapel of the Consecration of St. Ambrose, where she knew Father Carnaghan heard confessions every weeknight. Since she’d been a little girl, nothing had given her so much satisfaction as the ritual purge of confession: You went in cluttered and dirty and came out empty and clean. But now, she found even this comfort was denied her. She knew what she had to say, but once again, found herself powerless to say it.

“I’m waiting, child.” Carnaghan’s voice cracked like a whip and cut like one too. Gina sat bolt upright, swallowed, and thought, *Damned if I’ll play the coward twice in one night.*

“Father, do you believe in clairvoyance?”

“What?”

“Clairvoyance. The second sight. The ability to—”

“I know what clairvoyance is.” The whip cracked again, and harder.

“Child, are you dabbling in something you should not be?”

“Please answer my question.”

“The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifically mentions the phenomena of clairvoyance as part of its definition of magic.”

“But I always thought magic was a *deliberate* practice of the occult. Like, you make a salt circle and say the Lord’s Prayer backwards and try to summon Lucifer with goat’s blood or something. Clairvoyance was something you were born with... or cursed with. Are you saying there’s no difference?”

In a schoolmasterish tone, tinged with a sort of sour relish for quoting dogma, the priest said, “The *Catechism* defines magic as ‘*the art of performing actions beyond the power of man with the aid of powers other than the Divine.*’ It mentions recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to unveil the future. It says that consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, recourse to mediums, and the phenomena of clairvoyance conceal a desire for power over time, history, and other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden forces.” Carnaghan fell silent for a moment and then said, in a more menacing mien, “The *Catechism* adds that they contradict the loving fear that we owe to God alone. Now, I repeat, do you harbor such desires?”

“I don’t have any desires. I’m asking... if a Catholic, if a *believer*, were to find herself having visions she didn’t ask for, couldn’t control—”

“God does not speak to believers in such a fashion.” Carnaghan’s voice had changed once again; it now sounded like a blade being slowly withdrawn from a scabbard. “When I spoke of hidden forces, what forces do you suppose I meant? *God* does not hide! But there is one who does, and it’s from him that any ‘visions’ would come.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“You say you are a believer. Do you believe in the existence of Satan?”

“Yes.”

"Believe in him as you believe in me, in yourself, in this confessional booth?" The priest rapped hard knuckles against the wood. "Do you believe he's *real*, not a metaphor, not a parable, but an entity? As real as the Lord God?"

"I don't know."

"Then you are no believer. So why fear blasphemy?"

"I *am* a believer. I'm a Catholic. I was baptized. I receive communion. I attend—"

"I'm not interested in your *resume*." The last word came out as a snarl. "Anyone can go through the motions of faith. It's only when faith is tested that we discover its strength—or its weakness. You're like everyone else who comes to me. You don't want to repent or to seek penance, you simply want to be told you are blameless." Carnaghan made a dry snuffling sound that might have been contemptuous laughter. "As it happens, I think it far more likely that you are suffering from some form of mental illness than clairvoyance. If it's the former, I suggest you seek treatment. If it's the latter, then I tell you as your priest that your immortal soul is in jeopardy."

"But I didn't *ask* for this!"

"Are you sure of that? Do you know your own heart? If there is nothing wrong with you *here*," the shadow of Carnaghan tapped its bare forehead, "then the problem must lie *here*." The shadow dropped a hand to its breast. "Within you."

"What is it—what do you want me to do? What *can* I do?"

"The devil cannot come in but that we invite him. To begin, you must ask yourself why you've extended the invitation."

21.

At some point in the night, the rain had stopped, but—Professor Van Winaker noted this as a scientist should, with interest but no emotion—the damage had been done. The trees in Progress had been half stripped of their freight of leaves and now lifted bare and dripping branches to the morning sun. *The best part of fall is already over*, he thought. *And October has barely started*. Nudging his midnight-blue Saab into a parking space in the faculty lot, he wondered how his ex-wife would feel about that. Matilde had loved the fall, and especially the way the campus looked in the midst of it; the creeping ivy, the yellow leaves, the crepe banners billowing in the sharpening breeze. She'd been somewhat less sanguine about overflowing gutters and flooded basements and days when the mercury stood stubbornly at forty-five.

Typical of the woman, he thought. *She never understood that we pay for everything. You can't have beauty without ugliness. You can't have pleasure without pain.*

He walked past the always-locked rear entrance of Schmidt Library to the gleaming monstrosity that was the McKenna Center—architecturally an abomination, but useful in that it possessed enormous conference rooms that were so seldom used that their lozenge-shaped blonde-wood tables still retained their showroom shine. Dean Yeager loved to lavish money on appearances. He'd spent a fortune building that ridiculous fountain in front of Campbell Hall, which belonged in front of a Vegas casino and used enough water to irrigate the Gobi Desert, but would he fork over even a penny for a new Aircscribe? Of course not. The public couldn't *see* an Aircscribe. It couldn't see the Archaeology Lab, either. It was buried a floor below ground, sealed like a Pharaoh's tomb, and as far as Yeager was concerned, out of sight meant out of mind. And out of mind meant, in a few short months, out of business.

Unless we can make a breakthrough.

It was that thought that spurred him into the conference room, clutching his briefcase in one admittedly damp hand. Van Winaker was

far from a nervous fellow; he seldom saw a problem as anything but a series of interlocking components that a well-guided hand could easily disassemble. But this one had so far defeated him, and the clock was ticking ever louder in his ears. He knew—as a scientist—that he'd been drinking too much, smoking too much, *fiddling* too much, while his beloved department burned. The phone call from Marcus Hope had been the turning point. Much as the professor had disapproved of the young man—he had brilliance but no discipline, energy but no focus—there was no doubting the galvanizing effect he'd had on the department. Those who liked him worked hard so as not to be left behind, and those who hated him worked even harder to show him up. The professor had come to see Hope as the driving force behind the other candidates, the de facto leader; in Van Winaker's cold-blooded estimation, Hope's departure had hurt the program worse than all the murders combined. Now, he had returned, and by the mere fact of that return had evidently ushered two of the lost sheep—Stebbing and Bachmann—back into the fold. Van Winaker did not believe in miracles or even in luck, but he saw here an opportunity created by random chance that must not be wasted.

He found them seated around the table in the room he had reserved—oddly still, oddly silent, as if they were tableaux in a wax museum. He noted that Desai's eyes were quite bloodshot despite his neat appearance and that Bachmann had a heap of dog-eared papers before her, while Sakara opted to use one of those soulless electronic tablets that the professor abominated. Despite the room's cool temperature, Stebbing's forehead beaded with sweat: doubtless his liver trying to push last night's toxins out through his pores. Kolibri had pointedly taken a seat on the very end, with empty chairs on either side of her, and seemed to be preoccupied with a chip in one of her unpainted nails (the professor noted—scientifically—that she had traded her normal plain gold cross for a more elaborate St. Benedict crucifix, which gleamed within her cleavage like forbidden treasure). Hope held a paper cup of coffee in his hand; the steam that rose from its surface seemed the only motion in the room. Van Winaker knew these people had met the previous night and wondered briefly what

they had discussed and if they had argued. Then, he shrugged the thought away. It didn't matter. *They* didn't matter. Neither did he.

Only the program.

"All right," he said by way of greeting, placing his briefcase on the table. It was an affectation, a demonstration of his seriousness; there was nothing inside except his lunch. "I see you are all present and accounted for. I suppose I ought to say something touching and inspiring about getting the band back together, but I don't want to, and you shouldn't need to hear it. All of you know the situation we're in. There's no time or need to recap. The Archaeology Department is hanging by a thread, and the only people that can save it are in this room." He sank into a chair and scanned their faces one at a time, seeing little expectancy in them. *They look like poker players*, he thought, surprised that the realization pleased him. "Pretend I'm Dean Yeager. I know nothing of archaeology and could care even less. In a rare moment of intellectual curiosity, probably provoked by a blow to the head, I ask you to tell me everything you know about the troublesome corpse you refer to as The Cipher. I want each of you to contribute information based on your own specialty within the field. Be fast. Be concise. Be accurate." He pointed a finger at Bachmann. "Be first."

"We discovered—" she began, her voice a cackle. She had to take a gulp of water before she could continue, and Van Winaker noted that her hand shook slightly. "We discovered the Cipher fourteen months ago while conducting a routine excavation of the peat bogs around the ruins of an old kirk not far from Aberdeen. It—"

"I am Dean Yeager," the professor said. "A sclerotic idiot with no notion of geography. Tell me where Aberdeen is. Then me what the hell a *kirk* is, without making a *Star Trek* reference he would also fail to understand."

"Aberdeen," Pamela said, with a mixture of irritation and nervousness, "is the third largest city in Scotland, on the North Sea coast. The area's been settled for at least 8,000 years, which is why it's the subject of so much archaeological excavation. It's why *we* were there. We—the Resurrection archaeological team—were invited by the National Museum of Scotland to have a look at the ruins of a kirk—

‘kirk’ is Lowland Scots for ‘church’—in Glasmara, a local village. This particular kirk, St. Bartholomew’s, was originally constructed during the reign of King James III, probably in 1482 or 1483; but in the late sixteenth century it was converted into a so-called witches prison. We know this because it was used to host a trial during the Great Scottish Witch Hunt of 1597. The kirk was largely destroyed in 1598, just after the conclusion of the Trials, which is why our records of the event are incomplete.”

“*How* was it destroyed?”

“No one knows. That’s why we were there.”

“I’m Dean Yeager. I paid for the excavation, and I want answers.”

Pamela bit her lip, the professor thought, as if she bore it a grudge.

“The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a time of extreme political and religious strife in Scotland, and there are a number of possible culprits: Scottish nationalists, English soldiers, even a local insurrection caused by plague or crop failure—the region was experiencing both at that time. There’s also some anecdotal evidence that an outbreak of ergotism—that’s a fungus with psychoactive as well as poisonous properties—in the wheat crop caused mass hallucinations as well as many deaths. So, the historical record is conflicted and full of holes and fantastical statements that can be ascribed to ergot poisoning and religious hysteria as much as anything else. *‘The devil a-walked the countryside incarnate, claiming many a soul for his infernal kingdom.’* That sort of thing.”

Van Winaker turned to Sakara, who’d been staring dreamily at Hope throughout this entire monologue, and said, “The Dean doesn’t want theories. He wants facts. What do we *know*, Sakara?”

Auerlia turned to look him in the eyes. If she was disconcerted, she didn’t show it.

“Twenty-six women were held in the kirk on charges of ‘diabolism and sorcery’ that year, all of whom were convicted and presumably put to death. And we discovered large numbers of charred bone fragments in the surrounding peat bog, some of which we were able to prove conclusively were of female origin. This is consistent with the known practices involved in disposing of the remains of those executed for

witchcraft—they were burned and then scattered on unconsecrated ground. It was during our collection of the fragments that we discovered the CIPHER.”

“Very good,” Van Winaker said. “I do believe even the Dean will be able to understand that. Desai, tell us what the CIPHER *is*.”

In an absolutely robotic voice, without inflection or emotion, Vijay said, “The CIPHER is a female cadaver of Scotch Gaelic origin, preserved almost intact by the humic acid contained in the peat.”

“In other words, a mummy.”

“Yes and no. Most mummies are either desiccated, like the kind you find in Egypt, or freeze-dried, like the ones we’ve encountered in the Andes. Peat mummies—‘bog bodies’ is the usual term—are a different breed altogether. A strange combination of factors makes peat the perfect preservative, not only the humic acid, but the naturally cool temperatures and the anoxic environment.”

“I am Dean Yeager,” Van Winaker said. “Technical terminology frightens me. Speak to me as if I were a fool.”

“Peat bogs contain almost no oxygen,” Vijay said. “Lack of oxygen inhibits decomposition. So does the cold. The mean temperature in Scotland, even in summer, is fifty-nine degrees.”

“Better. Continue.”

Desai reached for the pitcher of water in front of Bachmann and poured himself a glass. “Forensic analysis places her between twenty-seven and thirty years of age at her time of death, and we estimate via radiocarbon dating that she was buried about four hundred years ago—in other words, right around the time the kirk was destroyed. But unlike most bog bodies, the CIPHER isn’t just a bag of loose flesh and hair. Her bones haven’t decalcified. She’s completely intact.”

The professor turned to Kolibri. “Explain the significance of that to a very stupid man.”

“Maybe you ought to ask someone who was part of the actual excavation.”

“I’m asking *you*.”

“Sure,” Kolibri said. She had a voice that reminded Van Winaker of bright sharp steel, and eyes to match. He thought—scientifically—

that in her own way she was as beautiful as Sakara, who in turn reminded him—scientifically—of a scorpion drowning in honey.

“Peat bogs, as Vijay said, are full of humic acid, and humic acid usually leaches all the calcium sulphate—that’s the stuff our bones are made of, for the *stupid* among us—out of a body over time. What’s left is just a bag of skin. But the usual decalcification didn’t happen here, and we don’t know why. Not only the bones but the teeth are in superb condition, and the state of her nails is also very good. From them we were able to deduce she did some, but very little, manual labor while she was alive, which would almost certainly place her high in the social order of the time. She was not put directly into the earth like most bog bodies but interred in a plain wood casket filled with flowers. Hundreds and hundreds of thistles, all similarly preserved: they were still bright purple, as you can see from the photographs.”

“I am Dean Yeager,” Van Winaker said. “My house is paid for by the University, and the grounds crew mows my lawn and tends my garden for me. I don’t know the difference between a dandelion and a day lily. I certainly do not understand the significance of a thistle at a Scottish funeral.”

“Thistles are the national flower of Scotland and were commonly used in sigils and coats-of-arms for its nobility. And before that, in pagan burial rites.”

“So, their presence could have any of several meanings, political or religious.”

“Correct.”

Van Winaker was not easily impressed by anything, and to hide the pleasure her tone of all-knowing, casually bitchy confidence inspired in him, he turned to Stebbing and said sharply, “Is it normal for bog bodies to be found in caskets or sarcophagi?”

“It’s unheard of,” Daryl said, coughing. “In the vast majority of cases, bog bodies were victims of either ritual sacrifice or ordinary murder—a bog’s a goddamned good place to hide a corpse in *any* century, just ask the Mafia. But the Cipher’s casket had long since been crushed by the pressure of the bog, and when we excavated, we not only had to cut through the peat, which was a bitch, we had to remove

the fragments of wood and the flowers before we could even see the body itself. When we did, we found out that her hands and feet were bound with manacles and chain, and her mouth was gagged with an iron device known as a scold's bridle... or a witch's bridle, which is of pretty obvious significance given her proximity to the prison. The purpose of the bridle was as much to humiliate the victim as to prevent her from speaking; but—and this is a big *but*—the shackles and bindings seem to have been put in place *after* death, as there are only ligature marks, and no bruising, on the flesh of her wrists or ankles.”

“Which would seem to indicate,” Van Winaker said, “that their presence was symbolic. Very good. Those are the circumstances. Now, Hope, tell me about the woman *herself*.”

Marcus traced his middle finger around the rim of his cup. He had neither notes nor a tablet in front of him, but when he spoke, he sounded as if he might have been reading from one or the other.

“As Vijay said, the Cipher's a Gaelic female, right down to her long red hair—which is really beautiful, by the way, and done up in these very elaborate Scottish braids. Her length is exactly two-point-two-five meters—seven feet, three inches. That's unheard of in a Caucasian female *today*, freakish for a woman of the time period. *All* of her bones have undergone some sort of distortion, an unnatural lengthening process. At first, we supposed this was caused by external pressures which built up over the centuries since her burial, but the distortion is too proportional and uniform to have been caused by the weight of the bog on the body. Her appearance could possibly be the result of a mutation, but it doesn't precisely correspond to any known genetic disorder or disease, such as gigantism or acromegaly.

“She's well-nourished, with good muscular development, but with significant scarring on the pelvic bones, showing evidence of past childbearing. That much was visible by CT scan, since we were forbidden by the Scottish government to do an autopsy.”

“Why?”

“The excavation wasn't popular with the locals in Glasmara. The area around the old kirk is considered by some to be sacred—or haunted, we never could get that straight since none of them would

talk to us.”

“Unless it was to say, ‘*Go piss up my kilt, you fekkng yanks!*’” Daryl muttered.

“The townsfolk wanted us to treat the body as a *body* and not as an archaeological discovery,” Marc said. “They didn’t want the grave disturbed, and they made a hell of a fuss about it, even to the point of vandalizing some of our equipment. Things got pretty nasty. Steve Cho got beaten up—”

Van Winaker, conscious of the empty chairs in the room, did not want anyone else brooding on them. “Come to the point.”

“The only way we got permission to take custody of the Cipher was by promising it would not be desecrated. That was the word they used—‘desecrated.’”

“All right. Continue.”

“Her face had been completely flayed before her death, denoting the sort of ritualistic murder we generally find in bog bodies, and it’s likely she died of shock from the mutilation, but the truth is, without an autopsy, we don’t actually know what killed her. There are none of the ligature markings around the neck or cervical displacements which accompany hanging or manual strangulation, no penetrating wounds of the body, and no sign of cutaneous diseases. Nor do we know why she was buried in full battle regalia—a quilted gambeson and plate armor, with a big-ass dagger in her boot and a Lochaber ax in her hands.”

“I am Dean Yeager. I have never done manual labor and barely know what an ax is, much less a *Lochaber*.”

“Military hardware is Daryl’s department.”

“A Lochaber is a kind of hybrid weapon,” Daryl said, wiping sweat off his upper lip. “Somewhere between a battle ax and a pike. They varied in length, but this one was five feet exactly. Iron and wood. Eleven and one-half pounds, which is pretty heavy for something you’ve got to wave around in a battle. It would’ve taken a lot of strength to use effectively. The dagger is not a dagger at all. It’s a type of very sharp knife with a rolled edge, known as a flensing or flaying knife, used for skinning animals... or people, I suppose. It was an expensive

one, too, with a sigil worked in silver on the handle.”

“What sigil?”

“We haven’t been able to identify it. It doesn’t correspond with any known Scottish heraldry or with the Royal Arms of Scotland. We’re still sifting through English heraldry, but there are fucking *millions* of coats-of-arms to go through, dating back a thousand years or more, to the Plantagenet kings.”

“Interesting,” Van Winaker said. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, what are your conclusions?”

“We don’t have any,” Bachmann said, almost angrily. A lock of her ash-blonde hair had fallen over one eye, giving her a combative appearance. “None of this makes sense in historical context. A woman—a giantess—in *armor*? Suffering from a terrible mutilation but no other injuries? Holding a weapon taller than most people were in those days? Gagged by a witch’s bridle and discovered in close proximity to a church which contained a witches’ prison?”

“I am Dean Yeager. And while I might be submoronic, even I can make the deduction that she was executed for witchcraft.”

“The official punishment for witchcraft in Scotland was *strangulation*,” Hope said. “After which the bodies were to be burned and the remains, like Aura said, scattered on unconsecrated ground. The Cipher wasn’t strangled, and she wasn’t burned, and she sure as hell wouldn’t have been formally buried in a peat bog, much less wearing a man’s armor and carrying a man’s weapons, if she’d been convicted of sorcery.”

“The burial itself is a contradiction,” Kolibri said, toying with her crucifix. “The casket and the thistles, as well as the presence of the weapons and armor, seem to be gestures of respect. The bridle and the chains indicate precisely the opposite—ritual humiliation or a superstitious desire to prevent the body from rising again.”

“As you say,” Van Winaker held up an open hand, “she’s a complete anomaly, hence the nickname: Cipher. And the more we study her, the less we understand. Yet we have to understand everything, and understand it damn fast, if we want this program to survive.”

Stebbing blew out an exasperated breath that smelled distinctly like

last night's beer. "Goddamned dead-language mystery. We can't even *read* the clues, much less solve the puzzle."

No one answered him, and the silence lengthened. Sakara picked up her tablet and began to swipe through pictures of the Cipher, but the indifferent way she went about it indicated to Van Winaker that she was simply staring at her own reflection in the glass. At last Hope cleared his throat and said, "My suggestion would be a formal autopsy."

Van Winaker lifted an eyebrow. "Cut her?"

"It'll damage the body," Bachmann said.

"It'll piss off the Scots," Daryl said.

"But it may give us some answers," Marc replied. "There are things a forensic pathologist could learn from an autopsy that the three-dimensional CT scans haven't told us."

"I think we ought to try cracking the DNA again," Sakara said.

"Waste of time." Marc did not look at her when he spoke. "The protein strands are too degraded by the acid. At best, her DNA *might* explain why she's malformed, assuming the abnormality is genetic. But that won't help us understand who she really was or how she ended up in that damn bog, dressed for battle and missing her face."

"We don't have time to go the DNA route anyway," Van Winaker said. "Since we don't have the funds to expedite an analysis." He looked at Marc with slightly narrowed eyes. "While you were away, Dr. Ito left us for sunny California: he's become a technical adviser for one of those forensic television shows. And Dr. Asten has retired. If we *do* conduct an autopsy—"

"You're the man to do it," Marc said.

"I'm hardly a leader in that field."

"You're a qualified forensic pathologist, and begging your pardon, Professor, you're the only one we have."

Van Winaker seldom smiled. When he did, he was entirely conscious of the fact that it reminded people of a madman coming at them with a corkscrew. He showed a bit of that smile now.

"And while I'm cutting her, and endangering my tenure here, and possibly provoking an international incident, what, pray tell, will *you* be doing?"

Hope leaned back in his chair and rested his chin on his fist. The pose, which was reminiscent of Father Desiree, lent Hope an air of maturity the professor had never before seen him display. Van Winaker noted as well the crow's feet etched faintly around his eyes, the faint shadows beneath them. Hope had gotten rid of the jewelry too: no earring, no heavy-linked bracelets, no vulgar silver rings. The flashy, callow *wunderkind* was evidently becoming a man.

Pity it took the death of his woman to do it, the professor thought, and then once again made that mental shrug that caused all human considerations to slide off his shoulders. If Hope had to suffer a tragedy to realize his potential, then the tragedy was a blessing. As Bismarck had said: *There can be no birth without blood*.

"Pam reminded me that most of the records of the Great Witch Trials were destroyed with the kirk itself," Marc said.

"It's true."

"But those would be the *local* records."

"Of course. Witch trials were almost always conducted by local courts."

"Under the supervision of royal commissions."

Kolibri sat bolt upright in her chair. The cool, haughty expression on her face had vanished. "Who documented everything for the central authorities?"

"But we *checked* with the central authorities," Desai protested, now sounding very much un-robot-like. "I went to Edinburgh myself."

"Exactly," Hope said. "To Edinburgh. Not to London."

Desai's dark face flushed two shades darker. "Why the hell would I have done that?"

"Because James VI was king of Scotland from 1567, but in 1603 he also became king of *England*. And after the Union of the Crowns, he made his seat London and almost never returned to Edinburgh." He turned to Van Winaker before Desai could speak again. "We know that James VI was exceedingly interested in witchcraft. In 1591, he personally presided over the North Berwick Witch Trials and wrote a monograph about them. In 1597—which is the same year the kirk was destroyed, by the way—he published *Daemonologie*, which was a three-

volume dissertation on black magic, sorcery, and demonic possession. Is it that much of a stretch to imagine a man as obsessed as that might have had records of witch trials archived in *London*, where he could get at them?"

Van Winaker felt the smile bleed from his mouth, the color from his face. "I confess the thought literally never occurred to me."

"To any of us, evidently," Daryl said with some bitterness. "I can't fucking believe it."

Buchanan shook her head in disgust. "Neither can I. I've been turning this thing around in my mind for so *long*."

"Relax, guys. It didn't occur to me either until...." Hope's voice trailed off, and Van Winaker saw his dark-eyed gaze turn inward. For a moment, he just sat there, staring vacantly, seeming to have forgotten there was anyone else in the room. Then, he blinked and sat up straight. "About three-thirty this morning. I don't sleep so well nowadays."

Van Winaker stood up before the awkward silence that followed this remark could deepen. "That's quite all right, Hope. Thanks to you, for the next few weeks, I don't think any of us will be sleeping."

22.

And no one did. Not really.

What struck Marc the most was the speed with which he was incorporated back into his old life—the semblance of it, anyway. He had returned to Progress unsure if he would stay the day; now the days were blurring past. He not only remained but found himself putting down tentative roots.

He stayed at the Driftwood Motel for less than a week before the depressive atmosphere got the better of him. One windy afternoon, finishing up a long tedious day of looking at an abstract titled, "An outline of both the desirable and acceptable storage and display conditions for human remains," he drove through downtown Progress past what had been, a year before, a dilapidated opera house dating from the early 1900s, crumbling slowly into the Susquehanna River.

Now, a sign proclaimed it offered SPACIOUS LOFT APARTMENTS FOR RENT: MONTH-TO-MONTH LEASES AVAILABLE. Marc took one look at the restored brick facade with its vaulted windows and decided he never wanted to see the Driftwood Motel again. He found the Realtor's office, fronted enough money to cover an entire semester, and had the keys in hand before the close of business. It was clean, high-ceilinged, hard-floored, and most importantly, located much closer to Resurrection but nowhere near any of his old collegiate haunts. There were no memories associated with it or the immediate neighborhood. Clean slate.

There was little time to even attempt to furnish the place. The British Museum had, at Van Winaker's urgent request, electronically supplied thousands of scanned documents pertaining to the Great Witch Trials of 1597; all of them had to be downloaded, printed, cataloged, and cross-referenced—no easy task considering they had been written in a mix of Latin and Early Modern English and included sentences like the following:

And as to the diuelles foretelling of things to come, it is true that he knowes part, the Tragickall event of this historie declares it (which the wit of woman could never haue fore-spoken), not that he hath any prescience, which is only proper to God; or yet knowes any thing by looking vpon God; as in a mirrour (as the good Angels doe) he being for euer debarred from the fauorable presence & countenance of his creator, but only by one of these two meanes, either as being worldlie wise, and taught by an continuall experience, ever since the creation, judges by likelie-hood of things to come, according to the like that hath passed before, and the naturall causes, in respect of the vicissitude of all things worldy; or else by God employing him in a turne, and so foreseeene thereof; as appears to haue bin in this; whereof we find the verie like in Micheas propheticque discourse to King Achab.

It's like William Faulkner on acid, was Daryl's comment, but it came without the goofy, hey-everybody-make-fun-of-me smile that had once been a near-permanent fixture on his face. Indeed, Marc had yet to see Daryl smile at all; and despite his girth and his shabby clothing, always too heavy for the weather and perpetually smelling like a hangover, he

projected an air of restless ill temper that Marc found impossible to reconcile with the old Daryl. Once, losing patience with a bad internet connection, he hurled a tablet across the conference room, shattering its screen, and stalked out, only to return a few minutes later, retrieve the device, and resume reading through the cracks as if nothing had happened. And indeed, no one present seemed to take much notice of the incident; evidently, this had become normal behavior for the man who had once been regarded nothing more than the class clown.

Marc noticed changes in the others as well. Pamela had lost much of her old rollicking, thick-skinned self-confidence; she was quieter now, softer-spoken, and given to scribbling mysteriously into a little spiral notebook she kept in the breast pocket of her jean jacket. She worked like a yeoman in the lab, existing on coffee and snacks purchased from campus vending machines, and often carried with her the distinct scent of gunpowder. Once, when she shrugged out of her jacket, Marc had seen the imprint of a holstered revolver through the threadbare, tie-dyed T-shirt she wore above it. Catching his glance, she regarded him with those cool gray eyes, as if to say, *I'll never be a victim again*. But Marc thought the expression as much of a plea as a declaration.

Vijay too worked hard—harder, in fact, than anyone else, which surprised Marc, who had always regarded him as brilliant but lazy. He had changed in other ways too. The arrogance was gone, and his penchant for brooding, which would have impressed Lord Byron, had gone with it. Yet robbed of these characteristics he seemed diminished somehow, almost hollow: a chisel-jawed drone in a sweater and button-down shirt. And yet Marc sensed *something* cooking there beneath that stagnant surface; some emotion that gnawed gently yet insistently from within. It made Marc uneasy, and he could not say why.

Aurelia—shit. She was the only one who *hadn't* changed, and he couldn't even glance at her without thinking about their encounter in the Hole. He had managed—he thought—to keep it out of earshot of Gina Kolibri, but he couldn't help but reflect on it himself. Mainly on the way her lips looked when she said, *It's good to see you again*.

Sorry I can't say the same.

Is that any way to talk to an old friend?

We were never friends, Aura.

No, friends like to chat. You were never much interested in... talking.

I'm not now, either.

Wonderful. Your place or mine?

Not interested.

Since when?

Since I learned that making a mistake is bad, but repeating it's worse.

Until that moment, she'd been assuming one of her favorite guises: sex kitten. But he well knew the kitten had claws, and at this remark, out they had come.

Same old Marc. Blame everyone but yourself. Well, here's a life lesson for you, asshole: It takes two to tango, and your dance card has more holes in it than a goddamn colander. Think about that the next time you get all high and mighty on me—and try not to look at my ass while I walk out the door.

He *had* tried... and failed. But the girl was poison, and there was something beyond that—an ugliness that had more to do with himself than her, a truth he didn't want to confront that would explode in his face if he gave in to the wishes of his body and took her to bed. So, he stayed as far away as he could, spoke to her only when necessary, and saw to it they were never alone.

As for Kolibri, she was, to Marc, as enigmatic as the Cipher itself. The others in the group respected her intelligence, but no one professed real friendship with her, and it was easy to see why. She was tactless and impatient with other people's mistakes and had a faint air of religious self-righteousness mingled with blatant, hard-bodied sexual allure that Marc found extremely irritating.

Except for that one moment in the conference room when she'd seemed surprised by his insight, she regarded him with a vague contempt that seemed to have no obvious cause. More than once, chasing his headlights through the darkened streets of Progress on his way back to the Opera House, he'd tried to decipher the remark she'd made in the Hole that night: *I only believe what I can see.* He thought understanding that might be the key to understanding her, which begged another question: Why did he even care?

In the meantime, Van Winaker was busy dealing with the innumerable details regarding the Cipher that had to be attended to before he could even consider the autopsy. The trickiest aspect was avoiding the destruction of the body, which of course had been a concern since the moment it had been excavated. Any cadaver that had been preserved for so long a time was bound to suffer from accelerated decomposition when exposed to the air, especially at normal temperatures; but methods of preservation varied and were the subject of much argument. Ultimately a solution of polyethylene glycol and water was chosen; this had been followed by deep freezing and finally by ice vaporization to prevent shrinkage. For purposes of transport and storage, a special temperature-controlled chamber with mechanical conditioning units to maintain humidity had already been provided by the National Museum of Scotland; the Cipher always reposed within this chamber when not under physical inspection. Any autopsy would have to take place in conditions that mimicked those of the chamber, and for this purpose Van Winaker was supervising costly and time-consuming modifications to the Archaeology Lab, which Marc suspected were bankrupting the department's already meager budget, with scarcely three months left in the fiscal year.

He's gambling it all on this one, Pam remarked one night as they all trudged slowly through October drizzle to their cars. *But I'm not sure we're doing anything more than kicking up a lot of dust. Some mysteries weren't meant to be solved.*

It seemed like a strange thing for a scientist to say, particularly an archaeologist; but Marc let it pass in silence. He knew that his status within the group was tentative at best, and aside from Aura's feral flirtations, Pamela was the only person who had expressed any warmth toward him at all since his return. He didn't want to jeopardize that, and this realization triggered another: His idea of starting over with a clean slate was fantasy. He could resolutely avoid every one of his old haunts in town, down to the gas stations and grocery stores, but the campus itself was a continuous trigger of memories. Memories of how an undergraduate Lizzie Nackford used to take off her sandals and wade into the fountain in front of Campbell Hall on hot summer nights,

singing “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” Memories of how, as a graduate student, Freddy Wise would get drunk and wander the alleys of Jackson Street looking to steal furniture for Mulder House. Memories of the party they’d thrown for Steve Cho at the Hawk and the Dove when he’d gotten published in *Archaeology Magazine* just a few months before the trip to Scotland. So much of his life had passed in this place, and the happiest of those times had been with Rosealeen, whose memory he could scarcely avoid and scarcely endure. Sometimes, in the watches of the night, when he lay supine on the bare mattress on his apartment floor, listening to the rain against his windows, he would stare into the ceiling as if it were a mirror and ask, *What are you doing here, Marc?*

A lot of comforting answers to that one.

To finish what I started. To move on with my life. To show my parents you can make it on talent, without their goddamned money.

Very comforting indeed. And purebred bullshit too.

To see if I can make peace with Rosealeen’s ghost?

Somewhat closer to the truth. But a lie nonetheless. He didn’t really *want* peace. Not when guilt was so much more satisfying.

All right. I missed my friends.

And he did. The dead ones and the living. Sometimes it seemed remarkable that he had simply walked away—without a word, without a note, without so much as a text message. More remarkable still that he had never called, never written, not to any of them, in all his months of travel. Not even to Desiree, the man who should have been his father. Drug- and alcohol- and grief-fueled delirium could account for only so much of that silence; the real motive must lie deeper. The only thing more mysterious than the question was the fact it needed to be asked.

I wonder—does anyone really know themselves? I thought I did before Rosealeen died. Now, I haven’t a clue who I am. I’m here because I have nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, and my friends are here. Such as they are. But Mason Maguire was my friend too. And look what he did. Nobody knows why. Maybe not even him.

In the silence of his cavernous, empty apartment, he heard

Desiree's voice within his head: *There are no answers. Can you live with that?*

"No," Marc whispered into that silence. "I can't."

23.

"He's putting me to sleep, Chief," Luckner said.

"Keep on him," Weston replied.

"He hasn't run a red light. He hasn't made an illegal U-turn. He hasn't spit on the fucking *sidewalk*, for God's sake. He spends almost all his time on campus and the rest holed up in that apartment by the river."

"Keep on him."

"I don't question orders, you know that, but—"

"These are straight from the Commissioner."

"It could be considered harassment. I could wind up on the end of a lawsuit. *Another* lawsuit. How would the Commissioner feel about that?"

"It's only harassment if Hope *knows* he's under surveillance. Has he made you?"

"Of course not."

"Then it isn't harassment. And you can't be sued for the lawful performance of your duty."

"*Is* it lawful?"

"You think I'd order you to do something otherwise?"

"Kerns would."

"Never mind Kerns. I wouldn't sign off on—"

"You *didn't* sign off. There's been no paper on this case. No written orders. I report verbally. The duty log has me on 'special assignment.' That could mean anything. I'm out there twisting in the wind."

"Don't be melodramatic. It's a tour like any other."

"It isn't a good use of my time, either, Chief, and you know it."

Weston looked up from the paperwork scattered before him. There was a sharpness in the young detective's tone, almost a hostility, that surprised the chief, who prided himself that he was never surprised by anything. He responded harshly. "Don't tell me what I know. You think

this is my preferred way of using manpower?”

“No. The action is off the charts the last few weeks. We’ve got more assaults, more domestics, more vandalism, more everything, than we should have at this time of year, and it’s not even Halloween yet. *Those* are the cases I ought to be working. Not babysitter to a boring brat. Hell, the only decent collar I’ve made lately was that crazy Scotsman in the alley, and *that* was a fucking accident. Tell me what’s *really* going on here, Chief. It isn’t like you to knuckle under to that shithead Kerns.”

Weston felt the blood rush to his face, a muscle in his cheek twitch. He stood up slowly, hands fisted on his desk blotter, and stared into Luckner’s pale blue eyes. “*That shithead* is my superior officer. I am *your* superior officer. You’ll continue with the surveillance on Hope until I tell you otherwise. If you don’t like it, you can leave your gun and badge on my desk on the way to your locker. Is that understood?”

Luckner walked out of the room. Didn’t even close the door, just left it half-open behind him like an untucked shirttail. It was, Weston thought, worse than if he’d slammed the fucking thing. Luckner had a temper—Weston had never met a cop who didn’t—but even when he lost it with the chief, it had always been a *respectful* anger. After a moment, conscious of his dignity, the chief resumed his seat, willing his pulse back to its normal beat of seventy-two. He had to admit that Luckner had only been voicing his, Weston’s, own thoughts. The assignment *was* a waste of time, the action *was* inexplicably off the charts, and worst of all, most of that action was concentrated in a half-mile radius around campus, the so-called “Green Zone” where the Commissioner always wanted things quiet and safe. Couldn’t have little Johnny and Jenny Co-Ed getting mugged! Otherwise, their parents might yank them from school and send their disposable income and high-limit credit cards elsewhere. It was the sort of political bullshit that Weston hated the most, in no small measure because he had no means to resist it; but this time, he had to admit, the Commissioner’s anxieties were well-founded. The Green Zone was turning red.

Frowning, Weston turned to his desktop computer and punched up the crime statistics for the last ten years. Slipping on the half-glasses

Stephanie had bought him, which he seldom donned in front of his men, he studied the graphs, then the interactive city map with each crime pinned by type, location, and date. There was no question about it. Every year reported crimes in Progress spiked at roughly the same times—the Fourth of July, Halloween, and New Year’s Eve. No surprises there. But last year, the needle had begun to rise steadily about two weeks *before* Halloween, culminating with the massacre at Mulder House on October 31, and more than half those calls had been concentrated in the Green Zone, which held less than a fifth of the town’s population. This year, with October still newly minted, the number of complaints and emergency calls on and around Grace Hill had already risen well past the average. If the trend continued, it would break all existing records by Devil’s Night.

Why?

Weston knew better than most men living the instability of the individual human animal, his infinite capacity for stupidity and mischief. Yet he also understood that the reverse tended to obtain for groups. A *person* might do anything, but a thousand people—or, in the case of Progress, forty-three thousand—would generally behave within fairly predictable parameters, and what was past was generally prologue. You knew, for example, that every year there would be about a dozen homicides in the city limits. Sometimes, the figure would be a little lower, and other times—last year, for example, because of the massacre—it would be a little higher. But a dozen was the average, and the average usually held, no matter how different the circumstances were. Now, however, the average looked to be changing. Crime was increasing, but in a curiously concentrated way, at a curiously specific time. It made Weston apprehensive. Perhaps Luckner was right. Perhaps he ought to be back on the street where he was needed. And yet Weston was surprised—again—to discover that he *wanted* Hope under surveillance. The kid’s story about that night had never made any fucking sense. *Nothing* that had happened that night made any sense, and while the case was officially closed, real answers remained in short supply. He was half-convinced Hope knew more than he was telling.

Someone had to.

Weston tried to return to his paperwork but for once found himself unable to concentrate. An old cop axiom was running through his mind: *You never get the truth all at once. You get it in bits and pieces. You have to push. No push, no pieces. But if you push too hard, the pieces can break.*

He thought about that. He'd worked cases that had taken years to crack, and even when the perp was in custody, answers could be scarce, motives obscure. Some men took their secrets all the way to the execution chamber. Maguire had taken *his* to the asylum. Theoretically, it didn't matter.

But it matters to me, he thought. *It matters enough that I'll keep Luckner where he is. Pushing. Until I get to the truth. Or someone gets broken.*

24.

Luckner laid thirty feet of rubber leaving City Hall. He did not know what else to do. The anger inside him demanded release, and stepping on the accelerator seemed preferable to kicking out the windows. Or Chief Weston's dimply Injun ass.

But not by much.

His radio had been crackling for days now without pause. Officers were returning from the midnight-to-eight shift so tired they could barely unbutton their uniform shirts in the locker room, and the detective squad, which under ordinary circumstances spent two or three hours of each shift watching reruns of *The Shield* because there was nothing else for them to do, were up to their eyeballs in cases and collars. Serena Barstow had even told him that her stepmother, a police dispatcher, was taking meals at her microphone. It was like a full moon in high summer, except the moon was a waxing rind and the temperature, even at noonday, was a damp and sluggish sixty-eight.

Luckner loved being a cop. He loved it so much he spent much of his off-duty time in cop bars, talking shop with state troopers, deputy sheriffs, and county constables over flat, lukewarm beers he scarcely touched. With the exception of women like Serena, whom he regarded as little more than glory holes, he had no distractions from his work.

He lived for times like this, when fingers all over the city stabbed 911; and here he was, spending twelve hours a day playing shadow to that rich prick, Hope. All his working life he had poked rude fun at swivel-chair soldiers and desk-jockey cops, and now here he was, with his own once-muscular ass slowly assuming the shape of his car seat.

How much do I have to pay for one mistake?

The anger kept rising. It brought the sweat out on his forehead in beads as big as matchsticks. It struck a maddening itch in the small of his back. And the worst part was that sometimes it seemed to have a voice, a voice he had heard before... the night he had destroyed his career.

Never mind the hospital. The action's at the CHAPEL.

That one spur-of-the-moment decision, made in the heat of—
(*ambition*)

—had ruined him, and it wasn't fair.

Goddamn it, it wasn't *fair*.

Never mind Hope. The action's on the STREETS.

He tried to remember his discipline. It was the same discipline that regulated his caloric intake, measured out his morning push-ups, drove him to hit the X-ring ten times out of ten when on the firing range. His detail was Hope. He should obey orders and shadow the motherfucker. Sit outside McKenna Hall for endless hours until the cock-knocker emerged, follow him home, and then stare up at the vaults of light that were his apartment windows until end of watch. All because that fat fuck of a mayor, that greasy-palmed commissioner, and that doddering old mummy of a dean were too scared of what Hope might do to see what a feckless faggot he really was.

Grown men—allegedly—afraid of a prettyboy faggot!

Their fear stank like cunt. Yeast-infected, syphilitic snatch, squirming with yesterday's maggots. And the worst part was that stench had infected Weston, old Easter Island Face himself, Rocky Gibraltar, the man Luckner most admired in the whole world, even if he *was* a cast-iron sonofabitch. Perhaps *because* he was a cast-iron sonofabitch. But in the end, ol' Sam was proving no better than the trio of nutless wonders that really ran this town. The disappointment hit Luckner hard.

It seemed to pump nitrous oxide into the already maxed-out engine of his anger.

He found himself driving not toward campus but through downtown, where the city government workers were just beginning to knock off for the day. They moved in joyless shoals across George and Market Streets to the big parking garage opposite the Old Courthouse: prosecutors, public defenders, stenographers, deputy sheriffs, tipstiffs, secretaries, court clerks, office drones—every one of them silently counting down the seconds until retirement. A few might stop in the bar of the Hemingway Hotel for a quick beer or a glass of wine, but by five o'clock, these streets would be as desolate as those of an Old West ghost town. Nobody lingered in downtown Progress after dark. Nobody with good intentions, anyway.

He rolled down Duke Street, watching the facades of the buildings grow more scabrous, the windows dirtier, the faces darker. The Puerto Rican section of town was small but crowded; brown-faced children swarmed over the cracked pavements like a species of vermin. Strange cooking smells assailed his nostrils; the air was full of Spanish. Ordinarily Luckner enjoyed prowling this part of town. The people called him *pote 'e leche* or *jincho* or sometimes, jokingly, *blanquito*, but even the insults were generally good-humored and the women often very flirtatious. They liked his pale skin and blue eyes and athletic bearing, they liked that he actually paid for his food at the streetcorner *bodegas*, and they especially liked that he never arrested a working man if he could possibly avoid it. Today, however, the whole place disgusted him. Accelerating, he continued over the aptly named Boundary Avenue into the fringes of Penn Park, where almost every face was black. At once, his anger boiled over into rage. At least the PRs worked; they were always in painters overalls or carpenters jeans or mechanics overalls, always filthy with the grease and dust and dirt of a hard-day's labor, just like his father had been. It wasn't like that with the

(*niggers*)

blacks. They sat around on their stoops all goddamned day drinking malt liquor and collecting welfare or disability for injuries they didn't have, getting into fights, screwing anything that moved—their

own kind, slumming Latinas, fat white girls with fried blonde hair who couldn't get laid anywhere else. Not one of them was worth a goddamned thing. And how they hated the police! There were hot summer nights when it was worth your life to cruise down these streets even in a prowler, and nobody ever went in on foot unless they had a partner. Even then there were incidents. Catcalls, taunts, threats. Sometimes they threw things. Luckner vividly remembered an incident from his rookie year. An old lady had been stabbed in the leg during a robbery, and he had been first on the scene, trying desperately to staunch the severed artery. His reward? The

(*niggers*)

people in the third-story windows along the street had started throwing things at him—trash, mostly, but after a few moments, heavier objects. While he'd squatted there, sweating and desperate, his eardrums ringing from the old lady's screams, trying to fumble a tourniquet into place, a potted plant had crashed not a yard from him, spraying dirt and shards of cheap pottery like shrapnel. A potted plant! It had been nothing less than attempted murder! On a police officer performing the most selfless duty imaginable! Looking back, he wished he'd unlimbered his service weapon and let them have it. Just lit up the whole goddamn row of windows one after the other. Burst all their heads like

(*water*)

melons. The dirty

(*niggers*)

bastards deserved it.

Luckner swung his cruiser down Gasoline Alley. The actual name of this crumbling tract was unknown to him, though doubtless it had some official sobriquet in the City Planning Office. So far as he knew, it had been called Gasoline Alley for a hundred years, and it deserved the handle. This was the poorest part of the entire town; shitty old rowhouses, sagging like the asses of old hookers, presented their weed-infested backyards, glittering with broken glass, on either side of a shattered streak of blacktop that dwindled to a point in the distance. Luckner knew that if he were to step from his car, the soles of his

shoes would crackle on a drift of shattered crack pipes and spent, flattened shell casings. The same year he'd ducked the potted plant that had damn near opened his skull, he'd cruised down this alleyway with his field training officer on a scorching summer afternoon. The FTO, a quiet, bitter, thrice-divorced fellow named Stossfuss, had observed some diaper-clad black kids playing in one of the yards amid the decomposing tires and rusted hulks of old car engines, and said, "All that's missing is Sally Struthers." It was true. The whole neighborhood ought to be flattened. Just burned absolutely flat and planted with seed corn come the spring. Then, maybe something *useful* would come out of it.

He spied movement ahead. The light was getting sullen, the October breeze insistent, and the figure seemed to emerge from a swirl of dead leaves, dust, and grit like an apparition. A black kid. Twelve or thirteen years old. Chubby and very dark-skinned—so black he was almost blue. Hi-top fade haircut—were they coming back in style? He wore a hideous creamsicle-colored shirt that fell in wrinkles and folds almost to his knees. Probably his older brother's. *One* of his older brother's. Never met one of these goddamned jungle bunnies who didn't have eight or ten siblings, by eight or ten dads. The Manhattan Tunnel had less traffic than the birth canals of some of the bitches around here.

Luckner observed the kid closely. He had a bookbag of some type or other slung carelessly over his shoulder and bulky headphones over his ears. His mouth was moving silently, rhythmic bursts of unspoken words; lip syncing rap, no doubt. He sure as fuck wasn't listening to "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Luckner slowed the cruiser. The

(*niglet*)

kid had finally noticed him. Their gazes met. The kid looked away, licked his lips, then stared resolutely ahead, as if Luckner were not there. Determined not to be intimidated, but didn't want to look guilty of anything, either. Didn't want to get stopped and hassled by The Man. Of *course* he didn't. Because somewhere in that bookbag was a crack rock or a blunt packed with the devil's weed. Shit, maybe he even had

a weapon. Lots of the young ones were packing nowadays. Shitty little Saturday Night Specials tucked between the schoolbooks they never opened because they couldn't fucking read. Well, a Saturday Night Special could still kill you. A little punk kid with no training could still kill you. *Unless you killed him first.*

Luckner stopped the car and put it in park. His adrenaline was flowing as if he'd just rolled up on a robbery-in-progress, but underneath the adrenaline, pushing it along, holding its throttles open, was the anger that had driven him out of the parking lot at such reckless speed. It was outsized, enormous; it seemed as if his body couldn't hold it. He had to let it out.

He had to let it out *now*.

The black kid was ten yards away now. Luckner released the door lock and readied himself to jump out of the car, thinking, *Make a move. Run. Do something. Do anything. Give me an excuse to—*

A buzzing on his hip distracted him. The cell phone in his pocket. Taking his hand from the butt of his service weapon, he pulled the phone free and glanced at the screen. A text message had come through from Serena Barstow. It read simply:

♥ YOU BABY ♥

He stared at it stupidly, hatefully, uncomprehendingly... and then the actual meaning hit him, and it was like getting slapped awake: shock, panic, disorientation. One moment he had been like a fist about to strike, and now—

What the fuck was I doing? What the fuck was I thinking?

The kid walked past the car. He looked tense; Luckner saw him swallow, saw him lick his lips a second time, tighten the grip on his bookbag, as if he knew what was coming. As if he expected it. That hit Luckner almost as hard as the text. *You shouldn't be a afraid of me*, he thought, almost desperately. *I'm here to keep you safe!*

The boy moved on. Sweat stung Luckner's eyes. His heart pounded hard enough to distort his vision. Not anger now: horror, horror for the thing he had almost done, and confusion because he did not know

why he had almost done it. He could hear the echo of those hateful thoughts within his mind—fading, fading, gone.

Gone so completely it was as if they had never occurred.

And yet they had.

Vile, unforgivable thoughts that ran so hard against the grain of his principles that he felt as if he had been cut to the core of his being. And because of them, he had come within a second of—

Luckner threw himself back into the cruiser and slammed the door as if by so doing he could cut the very thought in half. Took a deep, shuddering breath. Then, he turned around and started toward the university at a speed just short of reckless.

25.

Bladder fatigue, Marc thought.

He was on his fifth cup of vending-machine coffee and tired of making the trip to the restroom. Even more tired of seeing his slitted, bloodshot eyes in the streaky mirror there. It was past midnight, and the fluorescent lights in the conference room felt like corkscrews being driven slowly into each of his corneas.

I should go home and go to sleep.

Indeed, he should. The sheaves of printouts spread before him like the world's largest Tarot cards no longer made any sense to his fogged brain, and he had ceased accomplishing anything at least two hours ago; but the thought of another night of staring at the ceiling in the curtain-filtered darkness of his bedroom left him cold. If the easy camaraderie of the old days was gone forever, the proximity of fellow humans was still preferable to *that*.

He gazed across the blonde-wood table at Daryl, who snored noisily into the crook of his arm, his heavy brown hair falling over his face in a greasy curtain. He looked cherubic in slumber: a dirty-faced angel. But there was nothing whatever angelic about the appearance of his right hand; it resembled a Little League catcher's mitt that had been torn apart and crudely sewn back together, and even in sleep it was

fisted, as if its owner wanted to hide its mutilation from the world.

Poor bastard. It isn't just your hand. You think it is, but it's not. You could learn to live with the injury. What you can't live is not knowing why it happened.

Marc stood up, drank down the last coldish dregs of his coffee, and fired the empty cup into the wastepaper basket in the corner. He found himself in that strange state yet so common to doctoral candidates, a feeling of utter exhaustion tinged with a restlessness that made sleep impossible. But there was something else at work in him too.

He had been in a foul temper all day.

Part of it, he knew, stemmed from his frustration at the slow pace of his research. The British Museum had complied to Van Winaker's request for information a little too thoroughly for Marc's taste. He had wasted much time skimming through morbid accounts of witch trials in Slains, Fife, Perthshire, Glasgow, and Stirlingshire before finally coming upon those pertaining to Aberdeen. And perhaps that was at the core of his mood. The reports took a kind of lascivious pleasure in recounting the grisly physical and psychological tortures the accused had endured at the hands of their inquisitors—fingernails wrenched out, flesh branded, skin flayed, eyeballs punctured, bones broken. One thirteen-year-old girl had been forced to dance in the still-warm ashes of her just-executed mother before being sealed inside a cask and drowned. The parade of horrors reminded Marc of the accounts he'd read of Hitler's concentration camps or Stalin's gulags and produced the same effects in him: depression, disgust, and an impotent desire to exact vengeance on perpetrators long dead.

He went to the windows overlooking the fountain that stood before Campbell Hall. It looked like a chalice of light—shimmering and beautiful. The entire campus was beautiful, the execution of one pious man's vision, a celebration of the Christian faith in brick and bronze. Par for the course: Christianity had produced some of the most beautiful art and architecture the world had ever known—the Sistine Chapel, the Hagia Sophia, the *Pietà*. But what was it that was really being celebrated? Faith, or at least the excuse of faith, had provided the justification for the grisly farce that had ended in the judicial murder

of twenty-six people in St. Bartholomew's kirk. And those twenty-six represented only a tenth of the number executed in Scotland in the year 1597 alone. Marc had argued with Father Carnaghan about it earlier in the day. The priest had airily pointed out that the prosecuting agency in the Great Scottish Witch Hunt had been the *Anglican* Church. When Marc had replied that the Inquisition and the Crusades were the product of Catholicism, the old man's face had gone as sour as a crabapple, and he had glided out of the lab in silent wrath. Marc had been reminded of the words of the Dutch humorist Christian Morganstern:

Thus, in his considered view, what did not suit, could not be true.

He wandered through the late-night desolation of Campbell Hall. The familiarity of the hallways did not make them more comfortable; a deserted school building at night always carried with it a feeling of unease, even menace, and that feeling seemed particularly acute now, with the imaginary screams of long-dead women ringing in his ears. The glass cases full of dusty canine skulls and preserved insects, sitting outside the science hall, didn't do much to improve the atmosphere.

Perhaps by accident, perhaps by design, he eventually found himself outside of the steel door of the Archaeology Lab. On this very spot, almost exactly a year ago, he had watched Aurelia Sakara unbuckle his belt with crimson fingernails. That was what he had been doing when Maguire had been making his way down Jackson Street with a fire ax cocked over his shoulder: trying to find an illicit home for his erection.

As usual.

If I had been where I was supposed to be—

Marc punched in the access code before the thought could complete itself and descended into the darkened, humming silence of the laboratory. A sudden need to behold the Cipher had overtaken him. He had noticed this urge coming over him more and more often of late and wondered if he was inheriting Van Winaker's obsession. The Mad Conductor had set up heavy medical curtains outside the

operating theater; he had to push past them to find the old girl, reposing in within her huge, temperature-controlled chamber as if she were asleep.

Sleeping Beauty without a face, he thought.

In preparation for the autopsy, the professor had painstakingly removed her chains, bridle, heavy plate armor, and the quilted gambeson she had worn beneath the iron. The body was naked and not less spectacular for its grotesque length and sinister hue. In life, the Cipher had been a shapely woman for all of her great size: heavy breasts, a tapered waist, well-shaped hips, endless legs that reminded him rather sadly of Lizzie Nackford's. Even the horrible appearance of the face—fleshless, with sunken, staring eyes and rows of grinning white teeth—did not detract from its peculiar charisma.

Who were you? Why won't you tell me? What is it you don't want me to know?

Marc stood over the stainless-steel-and-glass sarcophagus for some time, hands shoved in pockets, trying to will the secrets forth from the cold, still form. At last, he heard the hiss and click of the pressure doors, footsteps on linoleum, caught the faint scent of cigarettes and wine he had come to associate with Gina Kolibri. As usual, she offered no greeting, simply said, "Is there something wrong with the chamber?"

"No."

"Temperature and humidity okay?"

"Yes."

"The backup conditioning unit on the blink?"

"Lights are all in the green."

"Then what are you doing down here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"I asked first."

Marc felt his hands clench within his pockets. When he spoke, his voice sounded strange in his own ears: harsh, grating, angry. "I dug this body out of the ground, Gina, with my own hands, a long time before you ever showed up. If I want to stand here all goddamn night, all week, all year, I will. I don't need a permission slip from anyone—least of all you."

Gina was silent for five seconds. When she spoke, she sounded

more startled than offended. “It’s just that Van Winaker’s got everything ready. He’ll flip his lid if you so much as move an instrument.”

“I’m not some dumbass intern. I think I can avoid destroying the lab. You’re so damned concerned, tell Van Winaker to stop conducting tours. I’m pretty sure everyone in the fucking administration and staff has been through here in the last week. The Board of Trustees too. I found fingerprints on the glass.”

“He can’t keep them out. They’re his bosses, remember?”

Marc said nothing. He expected Gina to leave. He *wanted* Gina to leave. Instead, she cleared her throat and said, in a tone half-pleasant, half-facetious, “You’re in quite the mood tonight. Maybe we ought to start this conversation over.”

I don’t want any fucking conversation, Marc thought, but forced himself to say, “Fine.”

“Fine squared.” He heard a shift in her stance. Possibly she was performing a curtsy; certainly, she was affecting an accent when she said, “Would you please, m’lord, condescend to satisfy my curiosity as to why you are here at this hour of the night?”

Marc took a deep breath and let it go, hoping his ill humor would depart with it. All he lost was carbon dioxide. “I was just thinking about our friend here, that’s all.”

“You and everyone else.”

“I don’t mean as a scientific problem. I mean as a person. A human being. A woman.”

“I don’t follow.”

Marc turned around and beheld Gina for the first time since she’d entered the room. She looked the same as always—rumpled, insolent, damnably attractive. The virgin goddess. Unfucked and loving it. “Come here.”

She came, looking faintly if sarcastically amused. “Well?”

“Look at her, Gina. Really *look*. What do you see?”

Gina leaned over the glass. A tendril of brown hair fell between her pale blue eyes, which took on a jewel-like sparkle as they caught the interior light of the chamber. She was silent for several breaths,

studying the body. Then, with the air of making a great pronouncement, said, “A very large corpse minus its face.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s what I see.”

“What do you *feel*?”

“What do you want me to feel? She’s dead. She’s been dead for four hundred years. It’s a bit late for sack cloth and ashes.”

“You’d never know it. Her skin’s in perfect condition—do you know we could take her fingerprints if we wanted? Her nails look like mirrors. And look at that beautiful red hair. It must have taken hours to do up those braids. This is a woman that cared about her appearance.”

“Maybe that’s why they cut off her face,” Gina said, tucking the rogue strand of hair behind her ear. “Patriarchal societies tend to favor humiliating and degrading punishments for women. It’s how they *maintain* their patriarchy. The motive behind the persecution of witches has always been more misogynistic than theological, when you think about it, though there was also a very strong financial motive. Even wealthy men—”

“God, you sound like Van Winaker.”

“How else am I supposed to sound? This is a cadaver that should have turned to dust centuries before we were born. A fluke of nature preserved it, which is why you’re sentimentalizing. But in a sense, even her corpse is on borrowed time. If we turned off the conditioners, she’d decompose so fast you’d swear you were watching a vampire burn up in the sun.”

Marc rested a hand on the ice-cold glass, wishing he could push through it, touch that glistening, exotic flesh. “She was alive once, Gina.”

“So was King Tut. Are you going to get all misty-eyed about him too?”

“King Tut is a mummy. A crumbling pile of leather. This is a *body*. It could be yours.”

“If someone cut off my face and buried me in a peat bog.”

Now there’s an idea, Marc thought with a glee he found slightly disconcerting. “She’s just a specimen—is that the way you look at it?”

“That’s the professional way to look at it.”

"The Scots asked us to treat her like a human being."

"They also asked us not to do an autopsy."

"I see. You don't approve."

Gina bit her lip. He had come to recognize the gesture as one that accompanied some kind of internal, mental audit. "Actually, I do. It was the right decision."

"It was Van Winaker's decision. But *my* idea."

She smirked as if he had confirmed, by this admission, the dismal opinion she held of his character. "You need credit?"

"You don't seem to think very much of me. It would be nice if you acknowledged that I have something to contribute to this fucking project."

"I never said I thought you were a bad *scientist*."

"Just a lousy human being?"

"I didn't say that, either."

"You didn't have to. For the record, what is it about me you can't stand? Not that I care."

"If you don't care, why do you ask?"

It was Marc's turn to conduct an audit. At last, he blurted angrily, "I don't know."

"Now there's a surprisingly honest answer."

"Why surprising?"

"Because you're talking to a woman. I guess I just expect you to lie."

Marc's hand twitched; if it hadn't been securely in his pocket, it might have flown directly into Gina's face. "You don't know me, honey. You don't want to. So do us both a favor and leave. One dead bitch in a basement is enough, don't you think?"

26.

Troy Tom Toliver was in fine fettle. That was what his grandmother had said whenever the old bitch found herself in a good mood: *I'm in fine fettle today*. Theoretically, "fine fettle" meant Troy would

not be getting the strap for tracking mud into the house or picking his nose or bringing home a shitty report card. Instead, he'd get his cheek pinched, get called a "scamp," and allowed to eat cookies for dinner. In reality, "fine fettle" only lasted as long as the vodka did, whereupon the strap would once again make its appearance, usually right across Tom's corduroy-clad ass.

Still, it was always fun while it lasted.

Tom's fettle was in such a sterling state because of a discovery he'd made while wandering down Market Street a few hours before his shift began. With Halloween approaching, the usual pop-up costume shops had sprung up all over downtown Progress like sores around a whore's asshole. He'd been ambling past one of these fine establishments, peaceably digesting the pizza and beer he'd consumed for dinner, when he'd glimpsed it through a dusty windowpane.

A mask.

The mask.

A hideous, bulbous-eyed, hairy-mouthed fly mask, like the one in the old horror movie about the dumbass scientist whose teleportation experiment ends with Vincent Price smashing him with a rock. Sitting on a display of crushed velvet with a dozen other overpriced, foam-latex nightmares. The light from the overhead bulb glimmered in each one of the hundreds of red sequins that composed its eyes.

Tom knew all about this mask. Maguire had worn one the night he'd hacked his way into the history books. He'd even seen the original—the *Progress Daily Record* had printed photographs during Maguire's legal proceedings, and the photos had gone viral. There had been a long, and to Tom, very amusing, public wrangle about the morality of the manufacturer continuing to sell them in the wake of the massacre, but Tom suspected that what really pissed off the local literati was the fact that the sales had been so damned good. Every punk kid, asshole fratboy, and middle-aged adolescent in Pennsylvania seemed to think it was *the* thing to wear for Halloween, and never mind the shrieks of protest from the victims' families. In Progress *itself*, of course, to purchase such a thing would have been the height of bad taste, and Tom was surprised the proprietor of this pop-up had the

balls to keep it in stock, much less put it in his display window.

He bought it on the spot.

Ordinarily, Tom disliked the ritual of preparing for work, but this night he took positive pleasure in it. When he made his lunch—or whatever the fuck you called the meal you ate at four in the morning, when you and your fellow nightshift jerkoffs finally got your break—he found himself humming the tune of his favorite rape-rock song, the one whose lyrics included the line *your face is my toilet paper*. But his dinner bucket (Troy Tom Toliver was far too manly to admit to using something as faggoty as a lunchbox) didn't just contain a triple-decker Steak-umm sandwich, a Mars bar, and a can of Red Bull. On this particular night, it also contained the mask.

It was a clear, sharp night, with a few stars glimmering around an ice-white rind of moon and a lot of leaves on the wind. The Omni struggled as always going up Mercy Hill, but Tom didn't mind; his fettle sustained him. He parked in his usual spot, whistled as he passed beneath the clanking flagpoles outside the asylum, even offered a yellowed smile to Pleasance as he passed the dirty jigaboo in the locker room. Tom was not a man oversupplied with virtue even by his own estimate, but one he did possess in abundance was patience. He could wait until Pleasance left. He could wait until King's heavy-lidded eyes shut completely. He could wait until the looniest of the loonies in B-wing shouted themselves into exhaustion and fell into drug-addled stupors. At last, around two in the morning, when Elysium was as silent as a hospital for the criminally insane was likely to get, he judged the moment had come to pay his respects to Mason Maguire.

Tom found the Hacker in his usual position, huddled miserably into one corner of the dingy-walled cell, shivering like a wet puppy. He had taken to doing that, lately: trembling and muttering unintelligible drivel. *And Pleasance said he was mute!* Showed what Mr. Nightfighter knew. Of course, Toliver was under strict orders to report any changes in Maguire's condition to the physician on duty... but then again, he was also under strict orders not to beat the patients.

He did not draw the rubber hose. Tom was beginning to grasp the idea that there were many different ways to exact the debt Maguire

owed him, and thrashing the bastard was only one.

“Hiya, shitheel,” Tom said, grinning. “Howya doin’ tonight? Still crazy? Still wanna find the nearest ax? You got a few friends left in this burg; wanna hunt ‘em down? There’s only five doors between you and the outside world. You realize that? *Five doors*. And this one is unlocked. I step aside and hit the fuse box, you’re just about home free. Hell, King wouldn’t even know you’d got past him ‘til he read the morning paper.” Tom bent down, elbows on knees, and leered into Maguire’s unfocused eyes. “Mason—can I *call* you Mason?—I know you don’t got a calendar in here, but it’s almost Halloween, so I figured you might be feeling a little nost—”

Maguire looked up at him.

For a moment, Tom felt as if he’d got a handful of dry oatmeal in his mouth (one of his grandmother’s favorite punishments: Chew on *that*, Troy Tom Toliver!). In all the weeks he’d been making social calls on this mental defective, Maguire had never once looked him in the eye. He was like those autistic kids Tom had liked to prank back in school: He’d stare in any direction except yours. But now, without warning, the ash-gray gaze lifted from its glassy stupor to stare directly into Tom’s own.

“*Tìghinn*,” Maguire whispered.

“What?”

“*Tha i a ‘tìghinn... she is... adventum! You understand? Adventum! Coming.*” When Tom said nothing, Maguire broke into sobs, clutched at his hair. “Don’t you—you can’t see? You can’t feel?” His voice rose to a cracking scream. “*Seo mar a thòisich e!*”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“*Bratan Sasannach! Na tha thu air a dhèanamh dhòmbhsa nì mi thu ceud ceud a bharrachd!*”

Tom’s left hand slid into his pocket and touched the hose as if of its own accord, as if to make sure it were still there, and *he* was still safe. “You shut the fuck up right now or I’ll knock your teeth out your asshole.”

Tears overslipped the lower arcs of Maguire’s eyelids, made haste through the blond stubble prickling his cheeks. To Troy Tom Toliver,

who was quite an expert on such things, they looked more like tears of frustration than of fear, and that didn't sit well with him, not at all. It was almost as if Maguire didn't give a shit that he was in the room. As if, on the seismograph within his own tortured mind, the presence of Orderly Toliver scarcely moved the needle.

A cold fury, different in character from any anger he had ever experienced, seemed to settle over his bones like frost. Tom drew the hose like a whip and struck Maguire over the head, crumpling him to the floor; in the same instant, he drove his sneaker-clad foot into the lunatic's chest, pinning him as flat as an insect in a display case. Heart hammering, he flung the hose aside and tore open the paper bag crumpled in his right fist. Out came the shapeless blob of black rubber he had purchased only hours before.

"I was just gonna *play* with you tonight, motherfucker," Tom said, detesting the way rage made his breath come short, his voice tremble. "Just gonna have myself a little fun in honor of the season. But now you gone and pissed me *off*. So what we're gonna do right here," He pulled the mask over his face and leered down at Maguire, "is take a walk down Memory Lane. You remember this? You remember *this*, you—"

Toliver was six-two and weighed 232 pounds. He had felt entirely sure he could keep Maguire beneath his heel all goddamn night if he so chose. He was wrong, and he discovered this fact when he slammed into the padded wall of the cell.

On the opposite side of the room.

The impact drove every last oxygen molecule from his lungs. Now, it was his turn to crumple to the floor, his eyes bulging with shock beneath their grotesque baubles, his bladder letting go in a warm, coffee-scented jet down the front of his white orderly trousers. He heard Maguire scream, a primal scream of terror and hate. And in that moment, the enormous folly of what he had done struck him even harder than the wall.

He had come alone into a room with a murderous lunatic, *and no one knew he was here*.

Tom tried to get up. If he could make the door, he could call for

help. If he could make the door, he could live to see another sunrise. If he could make the door—

Tom made the door. He made it when Maguire knotted his hands in the loose fabric of his jacket and hurled him into it head-first.

The foam-latex mask was more than half an inch thick and padded on the inside. This padding saved Tom's life, but not his face. In a single blinding flash, he felt everything go—nose, eye socket, cheekbone. For an instant, his consciousness seemed to plummet away from him as if falling down a dark hole.

Then, he landed on the floor, and everything rushed back, including the pain. Including the fear. Including the blood that was pouring out of his nostrils and mouth. *I'm gonna drown in it*, he thought, only half-coherently, but then Maguire tore the mask off his head. Tom did not have to look up to know the crazy man was pulling it over his own.

Of course he was.

It was *his* mask... and Halloween was his time.

Tom thought of King dozing away at his desk not twenty yards away, the images on the closed-circuit TV cameras reflecting in the lenses of his half-glasses. He thought of Pleasance, by now snoring peaceably in his bed next to his wife. He thought of the other orderlies on the other floors, going through their appointed rounds with dull disinterested faces, oblivious to what was happening in this sound-proofed cell. But mostly he thought of the glassed case in the Adare mansion. The one by the left-hand stairwell as you entered the main building. The one that read TO BE USED IN CASE OF FIRE.

No one was troubled by its presence or what it contained. Why would they be? No patients were allowed in Adare, and once they had been admitted into the hospital wings, even employees could only gain access to it with special keys.

Like the ones on Tom's belt.

Only five doors between him and the outside. And this one is open.

Maguire picked up the hose, stared at it, raised it over his head. Tom managed to get one of his arms up, which protected his head, but sacrificed his elbow. The agony was indescribable, monstrous; he felt

as if his entire body were made of solid glass and someone had just struck it with a framing hammer. The shards of pain seemed to go on and on, filling the universe with their sharp, silvery glitter.

He could hear Maguire now, breathing hard through the latex: *bubbbb, bubbbb, bubbbb*. He waggled the hose in an almost playful manner, then raised it a second time, making a horrid silhouette against the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling. Tom tried to scream, but his throat had constricted against the blood that trickled in a copper-tasting flood down his nasal passages, and all he could do was stare with bulging eyes at the horrid spectacle of the insectoid face leering down at him.

"You don't gotta," Tom sobbed through smashed lips, through broken teeth. "You don't gotta! It's unlocked. Love of God, it's *unlocked*."

From within the black depths of the mask, Maguire's voice sounded: muffled, rusty with disuse, but all too clear. It spoke two words, two words that resounded like a death sentence in the ears of Troy Tom Toliver:

"I know."

28.

The moon grinned over Progress, bathing half the town in silvery-white light and burying the rest in shadow. On Grace Hill, which wore the crown of nineteenth-century architecture known as Resurrection University, the effect was alternatively sinister and startling. Jack Cerrani, who knew every inch of the campus after spending four and a half years there as an undermotivated undergraduate, had counted on this effect to heighten his companion's arousal. A moonlight cemetery, he reasoned, was the perfect place for a seduction.

So far, it wasn't working.

"Not here," Molly said.

"Why not?"

"It's boring."

"A nun's cemetery on Devil's Night, that's boring?"

"It's cliché. Why didn't you just ask me to put on a witch costume?"

"I wish I *had* asked you to put on a witch costume."

"If I had the broomstick, I wouldn't need you. Come *on*, Jack. You're supposed to be *bad*."

"I *am* bad."

"This isn't bad. This is PG-13. This is mischief. Kid's stuff."

"What do you want?"

Her teeth flashed in the frosty light. "Sin."

They had met at some dumb-ass fraternity party on Jackson Street. A sultry night in September: humid, breathless. Through the fog of cigarette and marijuana smoke, he had spied Molly standing alone against the basement's rock wall, her dark eyes regarding the room with amusement and contempt. He liked the look of her. Reckless black hair. Skin as white as chalk. A trim, hard body clad in as little as the law allowed and untouched by sweat. When she lifted her beer to her lips, he caught the glint of a ring in her tongue. It made him wonder if there were other rings and where they might be.

He found out soon enough. It wasn't his fraternity letters or the banalities he'd uttered but rather his motorcycle boots that did the trick. She had watched them rather than him as he'd made his approach, and before five minutes had passed, they were roaring together down Jackson Street on his Harley-Davidson Fatboy—and from there, out to US-30, where he broke numerous laws and his own personal speed record. He broke another speed record some minutes later in the woods by the side of the Turnpike, when everything in his balls had coursed over her bare breasts in a pallid, pearly gush.

That had been the start of their race. Not relationship: *race*. Molly was twenty and determined to smash every taboo she could find before she hit twenty-one. *If* she hit twenty-one. Her appetite for sex was exceeded only by her appetite for adrenaline; indeed, it was the latter that fueled the former. And as Jack was discovering, if she didn't get the former, *he* wasn't getting the latter and would soon occupy an uncomfortable place on the heap of older guys she had casually discarded out of disappointment and boredom. He knew all about these men, because she talked about them incessantly. Jerry the drummer. Eric the boxer. Vox the deejay. They had all let her down.

Gotten addicted to her pussy and forgotten what had gotten them inside of it in the first place.

Jack Cerrani was no genius, but neither was he a fool. He knew a threat when he heard one, and he heard one now, as they lay among the tombstones on a blanket still warm from the heat of the Fatboy's engine. Molly, resting on her elbows, her hair falling over her cleavage, stared at him with the moon in her eyes, a steely glint that struck him as slightly frightening. She wanted a better idea. A sexier idea. A more dangerous idea. Right now. Or the only thing he'd be fucking tonight would be his hand.

"I've got it."

Her tongue described a curve around her lower lip. It was not a provocation, merely a demonstration of sexual power, and a very effective one at that. "Well?"

He turned and pointed to the Chapel, a moon-gilded silhouette against the rusted sky.

"We tried that once before, remember?" she said. "It's locked all the time now."

"We'll break in."

She smiled thinly.

"We'll break in and light the candles and do it right in the aisle."

"And record it?"

He took a deep breath and tried to forget he'd been baptized.

"I'll put the camera on the *altar*."

She leaned in and kissed him, and it wasn't lust he tasted. It wasn't passion. It was hunger.

I'm a genius, he thought.

The killer liked the shadows too.

Liked them because their secret was known.

Shadows were not simply the absence of light, as the killer had once been taught: they were the darkness itself. They had substance, weight, strength. They were like water that way. It was possible to

navigate around them or move through them; so long as your own soul was pure, they posed no danger. They could, in fact, be of use.

If one wished to remain unseen, they were a positive blessing.

The killer drifted through the empty Administration Building as if *composed* of shadows: a patch of moving darkness in the long marble halls. The way was straight, the journey swift, the possibility of being discovered slim. Since that fool Toliver had brought a lawsuit down on the school with his reckless actions, the budget for security had ironically been slashed by way of economic necessity; the few guards still employed by the University were largely for show, and their movements as predictable as those of a clock.

The killer had privacy for the endeavor about to be undertaken.

In the muted emergency light of the rotunda, the display of glassed-in artifacts carried a subtle, almost dreamlike gleam. The killer paused to read the banner hanging over them:

**IT'S HARVESTTIME!
RESURRECTION UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS OF
ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY PRESENT: *SICKLES
THROUGHOUT THE AGES!***

The killer's lip wrinkled beneath the fabric that covered it. The banner was bedecked with leaves and sheaves of hay and bundled ears of Native American corn, which some witless fool undoubtedly thought was a gesture of respect to the season. Only the killer understood the unconscious blasphemy being perpetrated. Catholics did not worship the harvest or any other process of nature. But it was like that with everything nowadays, was it not? They had taken the *Saint* out of Valentine's Day and turned it into a celebration of carnal lust. They had reduced Easter into an animist ritual and an excuse for gluttony. They had even perverted Christmas into little more than materialism and greed. But the worst was what was happening now, this disgusting, week-long orgy of candy-eating and costume-wearing, washing over All Saints Day like a filthy tide. After only two thousand years in the bosom of Truth, man, that sinful and wicked creature, was

sliding gleefully back into his pagan ways.

The ingratitude of it!

The arrogance!

Christ had died for their sins—betrayed, denied, scourged, nailed to a cross—and *this* was how they repaid Him. By turning His suffering into a dodge, a hustle, an angle for making money. By patiently sanding down the hard edges of belief, of *faith*, until religion itself was nothing but an amorphous blob of empty, meaningless rituals.

It filled the killer with fire undying, a hatred unrelenting.

Perhaps this is what the LORD feels like when He contemplates the devil.

Moving silently among the displays, the killer peered at the information cards mounted over each display. Here was a Sumerian harvesting sickle, circa 3,000 B.C. A clumsy-looking thing, like a boomerang made of stone. There was a Neolithic sickle, fashioned from wood and what appeared to be animal teeth held in place with tar: crude and primitive. Over there were flint sickles from the Epipaleolithic area, supposedly 10,000 years old, recovered from modern-day Israel; a bronze sickle called a *Knopfsichel*, from ancient Germany; and a small iron sickle from ancient Greece, on loan from the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum of Athens.

The killer's breath caught from within the mask.

A placard over a sub-display read:

GRIM HARVEST: THE SICKLE IN WAR

The shadow crossed the room in a whisper of black movement. Under glass, a row of vicious-looking Congolese sickles called *Trumbash* reposed on felt.

Not bad.

And here, here in its own case due to its size, was an Ethiopian sickle-sword known as a *shotel*—according to its placard, a devastating weapon when employed against mounted cavalry.

Better.

At last, the killer's gaze fell on the *kusarigama*. A Japanese weapon from something called the Muromachi period. The name translated to

“chain-sickle.”

It was an accurate description. It looked a cross between a hatchet and a tomahawk, except the single blade was curved downward like a raven's beak, and at the base of the shaft was fixed a long length of chain, itself fixed to a studded iron weight, rather like a European morningstar. One could slice or smash, hack or bludgeon. It was horrible. It was vicious. It was designed only for murder and mayhem. It was....

Perfect.

The glass over the *kusarigama* was a quarter of an inch thick. It shattered as easily under the killer's fist as a scrim of ice. The killer hefted it, tested its weight, delighted in the *clink* of the heavy iron links as the iron ball fell and swung like a hanged man.

The killer recalled the Bible. Habakkuk 2:3. *For the revelation waits an appointed time, it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and not delay.*

The killer smiled.

It would be a grim harvest indeed.

Hands clasped, Jack and Molly made their way through the maze of marble crosses, feet soft upon the damp grass. Jack felt immensely alive; each breath drew in the scent of leaves and wind and Molly. She squeezed his fingers awfully tight. Not affection: excitement. Well, so fucking be it. It wasn't her heart he was after.

Jack had not gotten his reputation as *bad* by accident. He had broken into a variety of buildings and businesses in his short life and was confident he could pick the lock on the Chapel's imposing front door in short order. It proved to be unnecessary. The thing was a piece of shit and rusted in the bargain. A few taps from the ball-peen hammer he carried in his saddlebags were sufficient to send it clattering into the darkness.

They moved inside. The air was heavy and cold, and in the wavering yellow glow of his cigarette lighter, the interior of the chapel

looked distorted and eerie. Jack's hand trembled as he guided the flame to the votive candles on the bye-altars and before the altar cross. As more and more of the wicks caught, the great naked bloody Christ behind the altar began to take shape: Jack could see the glint of the light in His suffering eyes. All at once his resolve wavered; it was as if he could taste a lifetime's worth of Eucharists on his tongue, endless drafts of sacramental wine.

Then, he heard a zipper go down.

Molly liked zippers. The longer and noisier the better. This one growled like a randy tigress. It was followed a moment later by the rustle of clothing. The sound drained Jack's mind of the blood necessary for guilt or good judgment. He placed the now-hot lighter on the altar rail and turned around.

Molly stood in the red-carpeted crossing as naked as a jaybird. Her unruly black hair tumbled down the perfect whiteness of her shoulders like spilled ink. Her youth-sculpted body seemed to shimmer in the candlelight, her piercings glinting at him from her nose, her half-exposed tongue, her nipples, her clitoris.

Like a crown of thorns, he thought. *A crown of thorns for the unvirgin Mary.*

Jack forgot about the camera. He forgot about his Catholic upbringing. He forgot about everything except what was in front of him. Tugging clumsily at his belt, he moved in for the kill.

The killer moved outside, flitting through bars of moonlight, casting a shadow like a caricature of Death. The air was damp and cool, the wind gusting: all the easier, then, to divine the unclean heat.

The campus was rife with it all year round—that pulsating, throbbing, animal heat, the heat of adolescence, the heat of thousands of young bodies ripening into adulthood, full of the juices of iniquity, the juices of sin, the juices of lust. They seemed to run from the walls here, to glisten in the ivy, to puddle on the stones. This university, meant as a monument to faith, had become a temple consecrated to Bacchus.

Or Astaroth.

Or Satan.

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies....

The killer would stand it no longer.

From up here, the Lower Campus formed a scattered ring of light: the dormitories that had once been all male and then gone co-ed and now, finally, were co-ed in the *same building*. Boys and girls living on the *same floor*. Sharing the *same showers*. And before long, the same *beds*. That was the direction this society was headed: straight down, straight to hell. License everywhere. Licentiousness everywhere. Sin like a fog you choked on.

No more.

Tonight, the killer would give them something to consider. Tonight, the killer would teach them the first in a series of lessons. Harsh lessons, to be sure, but the Lord was fond of harsh lessons. Just ask Adam. Or the people of Gomorrah. Or—

A sound whirled the killer about.

The sound of laughter.

Faint and indistinct, but definite, and coming from *above*. From up the hill. But there was nothing up there except—

The Chapel!

The killer's hate-sharpened vision pierced the night as easily as the killer's fist had broken the glass. In that vision, the Chapel loomed like a cameo against the star-flecked sky. The doors were faintly ajar, and through the crack, a dim line of light flickered.

Someone was inside. In spite of the orders, in spite of the signs, in spite of the lock. They were inside God's house... and not to pray.

The killer lifted the *kusarigama*. The moon, just above the horizon now, threw the last of its rays along the razor-sharp blade; the light cascaded upon the steel like water.

It was a sign.

The lesson would begin here.

"*Fuck me!*" Molly screamed.

She lay on the altar, white legs high in the air, breasts heaving, hair a black veil over her face. Jack, his hands clasped firmly around her ankles, his jeans in a heap around his motorcycle boots, his cock blurring in and out of her like a piston, found himself experiencing two opposing emotional states simultaneously.

On the one hand, he knew what he was doing was profanity, blasphemy, obscenity. The lapsed Catholic inside of him, the altar boy in alb and surplice, who had once swung a censer at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Sparta, New Jersey, seemed to watch from within, wide-eyed with dismay and horror.

On the other, he had never been so turned on in his whole fucking life.

Why is it always like this? He thought, keeping his gaze on Molly's face so he would not have to endure the disappointed stare of Jesus. *Why is what's bad for us always what we want the most?*

But now was not the time for philosophical musings. Molly was screaming her head off, her breasts jolting with every impact, her mouth hanging open in a startled gasp that seemed to glint as the candlelight reflected on the tongue-stud within it. The sight aroused him even further. His thrusts became violent, the impact of his hips on her taut little ass as loud as gunshots. Molly shrieked that she was coming, coming, coming again, and he knew his own orgasm, when it finally came, would be Hiroshima in miniature.

I'll remember this on my deathbed, he thought.

The killer pushed the on the door until the crack of light became a passage big enough to slip through. The movement was unnaturally silent, unnaturally fast, like the shadow of some great bird of prey skimming over a dusky landscape.

The sight on the altar was enough to bring the killer's simmering

anger to a sudden and murderous boil. But it wasn't just the confusion of limbs, of gleaming naked flesh, that gave offense: where before there had been only the odors of candle wax and wood polish, now a heavy musky scent, the scent of sex, intruded the killer's nostrils. As for the sounds of illicit passion echoing off the marble walls—gasps, grunts, curses, commands—they were simply gratuitous, like the testimony of a third witness.

The sinners had *already* been judged.

The killer moved down the aisle with a great whispering stride, raising the sickle high overhead, eyes blazing like white opals.

Molly McGuinness was having a night to remember.

And those weren't easy to come by.

Not lately, anyway.

She'd been bored since birth, and the twenty years which had followed had been defined entirely by her struggle against that boredom. The quest had begun in earnest at Thomas W. Pyle Junior High in Bethesda, Maryland, when she'd lost her virginity—willingly, if illegally—to a teacher who later became county superintendent. At Walt Whitman High School, she had run the cramped gamut of teenage debauchery with astonishing swiftness, from fucking to fortified wine, from shitty East Coast weed to Ecstasy. She screwed her teachers, her juvenile probation officer, and her stepbrother too, and she did all of this and maintained a solid *B* average. She had brains; it just so happened the brains were entombed in a thick armor of disinterest, which only excitement could penetrate.

And tonight? *Very* exciting.

This Jack guy was proving useful. He might look like the sort of cartoon bad boy you'd see in a rerun of *Melrose Place*, but he knew how to handle his horses on the highway, and he was so desperate to keep fucking her that he'd have agreed to have sex on his mother's deathbed if he thought it would please Miss Molly McGuinness. *All* the men she took to bed succumbed to that addiction sooner or later became bores

had to be kicked to the curb. The thrill was in *getting* them addicted. Seeing how low she could get them to go.

And this was pretty damned low indeed.

Molly felt another orgasm coming, a comet of pleasure, a rocket that would burst behind her eyelids like fireworks. But she didn't want to come with her eyes shut. She wanted them open. She wanted to look at Jack looking at *her* as she gushed all over his cock.

When she did, she saw that Jack was not alone.

Death stood behind him.

Jack saw the expression on Molly's face and a sensation of power thundered in his veins. This hot little slut, who every guy on campus wanted to bend over and pound like an anvil, was gazing at him with almost religious awe, her eyes widening so comically they seemed to match the circumference of her stretched-out mouth. The scream she offered—his name!—actually hurt his ears. But it was good pain. Oh, it was very good pain indeed—

"Jack!"

—it was pain worth killing for—

"*Jack!*"

—it was pain worth dying for, it was—

"*Jaaaaaaaaack, fortheluvachrist, there's someone behind you!*"

The killer heard the little harlot's cry and felt a joy, joy, joy, joy down in the heart

— slash!

down in the heart

— slash!

down in the heart.

And went from there.

As killers do.

Jack's head did not come off all at once. It took three whole blows.

The first hit sliced through his neck to the spine. The second, flashing through a welter of bright blood, went through the spine but snagged in the cartilage and vein work on the opposite side of the neck. It was the last which did the trick, but in the three seconds the process took, Jack had enough time to form a final, coherent thought. It was:

GOD

LET ME

PULL UP MY PANTS!

Through a rain of hot, coppery-tasting blood, Molly watched the figure in the pointed black hood cleave her lover's head from its shoulders.

The figure had come from nowhere. A shadow from the shadows. Clad in black from grotesquely pointed cap to robe-covered toes, only the eyes were exposed, and to Molly, they looked like headlights, like searchlights, probing through the candle-scented darkness to discover her in all her guilty nakedness and sin.

Because Molly *did* believe in sin. She lived for the special sense of guilt that only sinning produced. Her orgasms were all the more powerful when mired in shame and self-loathing, and she had one now, looking up at the headless corpse whose hands still gripped her ankles, whose death-hard erection was still buried inside her.

Her scream was as much ecstasy as terror.

Her *first* scream.

Jack's head hit the red-carpeted marble of the crossing, and the full horror, the full *reality*, of what had just happened seized her.

"*Harlot!*" screamed the shadow. "*Abomination! Whore!*"

Its voice was like nothing Molly had ever heard. It sounded like *two* voices, roaring at full volume: one masculine and one feminine, one old

and one young, one dark....

And one darkest.

The blade, a bloody steel question mark, swung back over the shadow's head, poised to strike.

"And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast who was full of blasphemous names—"

Molly hadn't survived to the ripe old age of twenty without acquiring some healthy street smarts. They took over now. Wrenching her feet free of Jack's nerveless grip, she planted them in his sweat-dampened stomach and kicked his body away from her, driving it backward into the shadow-figure, cutting it off in mid-bellow. And as she rolled off the altar, as naked as the day she'd been born, running with Jack Cerrani's still-hot blood, she heard the gratifying clatter of the shadow's weapon on the stone.

The Chapel was small, the aisle no more than ten yards long, and one of the doors stood halfway open, showing a parallelogram of night.

Molly made for that rectangle at a full sprint.

Oh God, let me make it let me make it let me—

She made it. Into the darkness. Into the cool clean air, bare feet against concrete, against asphalt, against grass and then asphalt again. Pounding downhill and never mind the pain. Screaming. Fleeing the shadow, the white-eyed nightmare made flesh.

But it was behind her now and gaining.

Somehow gaining.

She could hear its footfalls, the rustle of its robes, the rattle of its chains. She heard its vile insults, shrilling and bellowing in Latin and English and something else, some gibberish she didn't understand, a chorus of angry tongues rising from a single hate-filled throat:

Bitch! Slut! Filth!

The Upper Campus seemed horribly deserted. Empty. Forlorn. Not a security guard or a student in sight. Stillness and silence, wind rippling orange and black crepe. The Administration Building loomed like an unlighted prison, its hideous gargoyle faces leering at her plight. Beyond that, the fountain lights of Campbell Hall shone like a crystal chandelier. It was her best chance. It was her *only* chance. She took it.

Screaming.

Gina heard the scream just as she turned the key in the lock of her car door. She looked up sharply, more annoyed than alarmed; it was, after all, Devil's Night on a college campus. Doubtless, the undergraduates were raising hell, but she was in no mood for it. Dealing with Hope had upset her badly. It wasn't just his hostility; she had earned that, perhaps even courted it. What bothered her was the sound of his voice.

She thought she'd heard that voice before.

In her dreams.

In the last few weeks, it had been easy to forget her real purpose here. The work never seemed to cease, and the urgency that drove it was real. She didn't particularly like Van Winaker, but she was fond of Father Desiree and knew how much he'd invested, financially and emotionally, into the Archaeology program. She didn't want to see it dismantled. At the same time, if the department, or even the whole university, tipped into the pit of hell and were burnt to a cinder, that really wasn't her problem.

I have a head full of ghosts in need of an exorcism. That's my problem.

But it really wasn't.

My problem is that I'm a coward. I maneuvered hard to get here—abandoned friends, alienated family, put my career on the block before it's even started. Yet I'm no closer to what I need than the night Hope walked into the Hole. I may even be further away. And I think time is running out. If I don't say something—

And yet the thought of going back inside and confronting him left her cold.

Something different about him tonight. Almost scary. He didn't sound like himself at all. He sounded like—

Another scream pierced the air. Louder. Closer. Distinctively female. It didn't sound like a cry of mischief or pleasure. It sounded like someone in mortal terror.

Gina withdrew her key and slipped it between the knuckles of her

middle and ring fingers, ready to lay open a cheekbone or puncture an eyeball if necessary, wondering if some drug-demented madman wasn't going to burst from the bushes and run at her with dick dangling.

"Not *this* girl, jackass," she said, trying to put annoyed contempt into a tone that shook slightly with fear. "I'm a purple belt in jiu-jitsu. I'll choke you into next—"

The world went white.

A blinding luminance, like being at the center of a star. There was no substance, no surface, no tangibility, nothing but light.

Light itself.

A verse from the Bible sounded within her mind as if read aloud. John 1:5: *God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*

For a moment—a glorious, rapturous moment—she thought herself chosen, elected, favored to be in His presence at last. The culmination of a thousand increasingly desperate prayers.

But then the light began to fade, and Gina saw the world out of different eyes.

A killer's eyes.

Molly McGuinness ran.

Drenched in blood, breath coming hot, feet burning like twin torches, she sprinted down the path through the last of the Upper Campus toward the Student Union, listening to her own pleas for help echo between the mighty brick buildings. The moon had gone down at last, drenching the whole university in lamp-lighted darkness, but surely someone would hear. Surely, someone would answer.

Love of God, *answer*.

But the chase went on, a lung-scouring, cramp-inducing nightmare, and she saw no one. Heard nothing except her panicked breathing and the slap of her bloody bare feet on the path.

Molly was renowned throughout campus for her gymnast-like body, and she put it to work in earnest now, running hard enough to break bones, drawing all the speed and agility that youth and

desperation could muster. If she had to spend a month in a wheelchair because of it, fine. Better to sit in a chair for thirty days than lie in a box forever.

But the killer was close.

Molly's life did not flash before her eyes, but there was some part of her that wondered if the black specter behind her wasn't a devil set free from hell to collect on her many sins. As a child, Molly's mother, when she'd been sober enough to speak, had often threatened her with such a fate. Molly had laughed.

I'll just show him my ass, she'd said.

Now she did. She ran for her life.

She ran to beat the devil.

She lost.

I have the joy, joy, joy, joy

(cut)

Down in my heart

(cut)

Down in my heart

(cut)

Down in my heart

(smash)

I have the joy, joy, joy, joy

Down in my heart

(smash)

Down in my heart to stay.

The head rolled down the path, leaving a long snail trail of blood and spinal fluid on the smooth blacktop. The force of the final blow, and the rather steep grade of Grace Hill, were sufficient to keep it rolling across Grotto Way until it tumbled, wide-eyed and gape-

mouthed, onto the grass-and-concrete lawn of the Student Union. There it came to rest. For Molly McGuinness, the journey had been one of light and dark, light and dark, light and dark, as the falling blood pressure within her brain arrived at zero. Then the journey ended and darkness had dominion.

Minutes passed in stillness and silence. Then, the wind freshened again, lifting the hair from Molly's scalp, rustling the leaves on the plane tree in front of the Union, and whipping the enormous banner of black-and-orange over the Union's front doors.

HAPPY HALLOWEEN, it read.

SOMETHING EVIL

Volume II: Books 3 & 4

Coming Halloween 2026

SNEAK PREVIEW

After the fetid stink of the interrogation room, with its lingering underscents of hangovers and Lysol, the rain-drowned air behind City Hall tasted pretty good to Marc. He stood beneath the eaves of the old building, whose cornerstone had been laid when his family name had still been Höppner, and breathed deep. It cleared his nose but did nothing whatever to assuage the shock or the searing anger that lay beneath it.

Maguire is loose.

It was like waking up into a nightmare—his own recurring nightmare. How many times had it chased him, panting and sweating, out of sleep in the last year? Maguire in his fly mask and blood-sloppy T-shirt, a fireman's ax in one hand, and dangling from the other—

“Marc.”

It was Gina. She looked as bad as he felt: hair careless, eyes sunken, flesh a sickly, fish-belly white, huddled beside the doorway with her hands shoved into the pockets of her jeans. The sight startled him so much that for a moment he forgot his dislike of her and felt a twinge of pity. That goose-stepping brute Luckner had told him she'd found one of the bodies not five minutes after leaving his side. He allowed himself to imagine the horror she'd felt—alone in the night, stumbling on such an atrocity. Then, he remembered *he* had seen worse, and he

felt his resolve harden once more. Without a word, he moved down the stairs, into the rain, through the almost deserted lot, toward his Mustang.

She followed. "Marc—Marc, would you talk to me? Please?"

"What the hell do you want?"

"For starters, to know where you're going."

"Gee, I dunno, Gina, I figured I'd get in some crochet, maybe do my nails, catch a rerun of *I Love Lucy*. What the fuck do you think? I'm going to Pam's and getting a fucking *gun*. God knows she's got 'em to spare."

"You're gonna try to hunt him down yourself?"

"Who knows? Pam's a mean shot nowadays. I could drive, and she could ride shotgun. Literally."

"This isn't funny."

"Does it look like I'm joking?"

"You're not a cop."

"From what I saw in there, neither are they."

"Listen, you're upset—"

He turned and shouted full in her face: "You *think*?"

Her lip quivered. It was the first vulnerability he had ever seen her face display, but her body did not follow; she did not recoil. "Hey, I'm not exactly on top of the world right now myself! It could have been me. I was right there. I found," Gina's throat convulsed, "her head."

Again, Marc felt the twinge of pity, as if someone were plucking heartstrings within him. It only made him angrier. "Yeah—well, at least you still *have* a head."

"And you still have yours. Why don't you try using it?"

"Gina, what I do is none of your fucking business."

"Yes, it is."

"Why?"

"Because you're on the wrong scent. Mason Maguire's not the one you're looking for."

"Oh, so you think it's a *coincidence* that he busts out of Elysium and three more people end up dead?"

"Nothing that's happening is a coincidence. Look, this is all very

complicated—”

“Not, it’s not. I find Maguire. I shoot Maguire. Maguire dies. That fat fuck Simpson offers me the Key to the City. I tell him to stick it up his ass. Problem solved.”

They were at his car. It glistened in the moistened light like a hearse. He dug into his pocket for his keys.

“I’m telling you he didn’t *do* this,” she said, half-pleading, half-insisting. “Even last year, it didn’t go down like you think.”

“How the hell would you know? You weren’t there that night. You don’t know what he’s capable of. You didn’t see what he *did*.”

“You’re wrong. I’ve had—” She stopped, swallowed so hard her throat worked as if blocked. Then, at last, she spat out a single word like a clot of gristle: “Dreams.”

Marc began to laugh—shrill, almost hysterical laughter he could not control. “Oh, you’ve had *dreams*, have you, pretty lady? You want to talk dreams? How about the one I have every night, where I see Mason Maguire holding my girlfriend’s *severed fucking head*!”

She took him by the shoulders. He felt the strength of her hands, wondered, through a fog of confusion and rage and weariness, if it were compassion of her own or simply an attempt to keep him from his car. “I know what you went through. I’m sorry.”

“So am I. And you know what? I’m *tired* of feeling that way. I think it’s time someone else felt sorry for a fucking change.”

“I can’t let you do this.”

“Try and stop me.”

She looked into his eyes. Her own were that pale, depthless blue that reminded him so much of the waters off Antigua.

“I guess I’ll have to,” she said.

She kissed him—a hard, aggressive, sexless kiss; impudent, almost assaultive. For a moment, Marc was too stunned to react; then, just as he reached up to push her away, she forced open his mouth and her tongue thrust against his. The effect of the contact was like a severed power line falling into a bathtub. A great painless shock filled his skull, blinding him, and like a blind man he tripped.

Into a maelstrom.

It was within his own head, and it wasn't. It was happening now, and it wasn't. It was real... and it was terrifying.

He heard a woman screaming, felt a shiver of steel against bone, saw the reflection of torchlight in puddles of mud. The clink and rattle of chains. Hoofbeats and voices in Latin, something that sounded like English but wasn't, not quite. Incantations in a dust-dead language. The call of a raven. A cold, heavy, earthy scent of peat. Thistles so purple their colors seemed to bleed into the wet steely air. He felt—he knew—he was in Scotland again, but not the Scotland he knew. This was older. *Much* older. This was—

Body imitating mind, Marc stumbled and fell hard to his knees. The pain jolted him out of—whatever this had been: reverie, fantasy, delusion. He opened his eyes, saw Gina standing over him, defiant, almost angry-looking, wiping the heel of her hand over her mouth as if to rid the taste of him from it. In a breathless voice, she said in perfectly accented Scots Gaelic, “*Oidhche eile, uair eile... Samhuinn eile*. Do you remember that?”

“What the *fuck*? What did you just--”

“*Answer the goddamned question!*”

Her voice was a cracking scream, her clear pale eyes now the harsh blue of madness. Marc realized he was afraid of her, physically afraid, in a way he had never been of any *man* save Maguire himself. Swallowing, he stammered, “It’s what Mason said to me the night he—”

“What does it *mean*?”

“‘*Another night, another time, another Samhain.*’ Gina, what did you *do* to me?”

“It’s a long story. Now get up and get in your car. We need to talk.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The whole tradition of cinema is dominated, really, by films about good guys versus bad guys, good versus evil. But we have very few films about the nature of evil itself.

—Joshua Oppenheimer

1.

Ah, horror. That thing we avoid at all costs... except when we line up to pay for it. I experienced this paradox even as a child, when I was irresistibly drawn to movies I knew would scare the ever-loving shit out of me, rob me of my sleep, and leave me jumpy as a cat for days, weeks, or even months afterwards. I can still remember the almost paralyzing sense of terror that would creep over my limbs when I encountered Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, or even *The Shining's* Jack Torrance on television back in the early-mid 80s, or the way my pulse shot up to dangerous levels when I read F. Paul Wilson's *The Keep* or Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* for the first time. Mr. King has already examined this weird phenomenon, this love of being frightened, in his masterful examination of the genre, *Danse Macabre*,¹ so I'll limit myself to the obvious: As a grown man, with different and more complex fears than those I held in childhood or even as a hormonal teen, I remain the moth who returns to this particular flame over and over again to be joyously and righteously burnt. I have stopped, if indeed I ever started, questioning my own motives. But this time, I fly into the fire with a different agenda.

If you happen to be familiar with my work, you already know that *Something Evil* is not my first venture into horror. I have previously published the dark anthology *Devils You Know* (2016), which became a Hoffer Award Finalist; a short and nasty homage to Joseph Conrad called "The Brute" (2021); and the novella *Wolf Weather* (2023), my

¹ Everest House, 1981.

hard spin on the werewolf trope. But *Something Evil* is intended to be, well, something *else*. Something other. Something deeper. Something that cuts through almost the entirety of half my life.

You may not believe this, but I wrote Book One of *Something Evil* in 1995. That is to say, I wrote something remarkably similar to Book One at that time, on a Mac computer in the sunporch of my parents' home in Maryland, while on hiatus from college. And for the next twelve years, I kept it in a drawer, having no idea what the hell to do with it. Try as I might, I could not couple an actual *story* to the massacre I had so vividly described. I could not find a reason for the carnage that would make sense of it and turn a description of events into a tale. Like the events of *Halloween*, it hung suspended as a thing-in-itself, an effect without a cause. Then, in 2007, I moved to Los Angeles, and shortly thereafter reunited with Will Hooke, who grew up in the same neighborhood I did, attended Syracuse University's film school with my older brother, and had made something of himself in the entertainment industry. At the time, I was a struggling industry wannabe living from temp job to temp job, desperate to find a creative project that would place me on the Hollywood map and pay my rent. I knew Will was looking to return to the world of screenplay writing, in which he'd already enjoyed some success back in the 90s, and I pitched him a number of ideas, the last of which was *Something Evil*. His expression of polite disinterest transformed into a gleam of genuine enthusiasm, and for the next six years—the process was extended enormously by our radically differing schedules—we toiled away on Final Draft, turning the “massacre sequence” I'd penned in the sunporch years before into a full-blown story. Characters were created, tried out, rejected, and replaced. Mythologies were researched, considered, abandoned, and then rediscovered. A screenplay was finished, considered, judged insufficient, and started again from scratch. By 2014, we had at last crossed the finish line, and for a brief moment, we were in that heady space where things like actors, budgets, shooting locations, novelization rights, sequel ideas, and so forth were in serious discussion; and then, with a single phone call, it all went away.

The mechanics of Hollywood are well beyond the scope of this

note, so I will suffice to say that the screenplay for *Something Evil* was judged, among other things, to be far too much idea crammed into far too little space. We had come up with a story that spanned five centuries and involved, in essence, three complete casts of characters: how the fuck were we going to fit that into a 95-minute horror movie? There was a brief wrangle about switch-hitting the concept into an “event series” where we would have X number of episodes to give us that kind of creative elbow room, but in Tinseltown, any loss of enthusiasm is usually fatal, and whatever chance we had of seeing our work on screen, silver or otherwise, evaporated.

I am nothing if not stubborn, so I took the various versions of *Something Evil* and threw them back into a drawer, figuring that what did not work as a screenplay might very well work as a novel,² and indeed, two years later, I decided the time had come to sit down and do just exactly that. Little did I know on that sunny June day in Burbank, California, that I was embarking on a journey that would last another six and a half years. Little did I know that what I’d intended as a mere horror story was going to grow into something considerably darker and more ambitious. Something that traced the bloody events of Book One to their spiritual roots.

2.

David Cronenberg was once asked what scared him. He replied that it was the same sort of stuff that scared everybody else, but noted:

I don't really think about fear all that much. I mean, when I'm making a movie, it's not like I'm thinking, What is the essence of fear? How will I make people afraid? Which I think ultimately is one of the reasons that I never thought that I was doing the same thing as directors like John Carpenter or George Romero, or even, at times, Hitchcock, even though I was compared with those other guys. I

² There were three at that point. The original 1995 version; the version I wrote largely by myself, in periodic consultation with Will, roughly between 2008–2009; and the version Will and I co-wrote together between 2010–2014.

always thought we were doing different things, we were after different game.

If you stick with me on this three-volume journey, you will see that I, too, am after different game. Scares for the sake of scares are just fine—dandy in fact!—but I wanted *these* books to cut deeper. I wanted to talk about evil in both of its forms—the external one, the monster lurking outside the light of our campfire with drool running down its fangs, hungrily biding its time; and the internal one, the beast that lives within the darkest corners of our own hearts.³ Although Book 1 certainly starts things off that way, I was not interested in presenting evil as a *fait accompli*, and then letting run amok, as I did in “The Brute;” nor was it enough to raise the question of whether the protagonist or antagonist in the story was the bad guy, as I tried to do in *Wolf Weather*. No, this was to be a vivisection of evil itself. Not so much an attempt to answer why it exists as a study in the different ways it appeals to different people and the different forms in which it manifests, from the commonplace to the supernatural. But even more than that, I wanted to tell a horror story in which the idea of *victimhood* frequently took center stage. The reasons for this are complex and developed over many, many years, but suffice to say that it began with a morbid curiosity about trauma, which I define as the *endurance* of horror, the stamina with which it persists long after the horrifying deed itself is completed; and it ended with a deep contempt for those in the cinematic and literary world who always seemed to identify solely with violence and never with its consequences. Many works of horror, both literary and cinematic, touch upon the aftermaths of vicious crimes, but few linger there. The bad guy comes out of the dark, does his bloody business, and is vanquished or recedes back into the night from whence he came: those who survive are often visibly traumatized (can anyone forget the expression on Sally Hardesty’s blood-smeared face at the end of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre?*), but we very rarely see how that trauma plays out, how it effects the rest of their lives—their work,

³ This happens to be John Carpenter’s definition, one I very much agree with.

their relationships, their dreams. Long before I became an advocate for victims of crime, I was curious about this, and as some of my readers (and some of my critics) have noted, this question often plays out in different ways in my fiction. In fact, I am continually reminded of, and haunted by, this passage from Carly Rheilan's novel *Asylum*:

*Cabdi knew that after the world finishes, there are those for whom time goes on—beyond the moment of catastrophe, into the jagged shadowland that follows, where thin flames burn across chaos and emptiness, revealing nothing except that everything is lost. And he knew that for some there was even a time beyond that—a time when the world reforms itself, into another thinner life, composed of fragments all wrongly put together, with moments of unexpected pleasure and satisfaction, as in a dream—though at every step, the breaking of the world remained in the heart, like an arrowhead that can never be removed.*⁴

Let's face it. We are, all of us, knocked in directions we don't want to go by unpleasant experiences, but unpleasantries are one thing, catastrophes quite another. The protagonists of *Something Evil* live in those jagged shadowlands, that broken world, to which Rheilan alludes. Physically, they have survived (for now), but mentally, emotionally, spiritually, they have changed so far out of recognition, even unto themselves, they may as well be dead. These characters are struggling toward a sense of normalcy, a return to innocence, which seems cruelly elusive even before the evil of Book One returns with a greater vengeance at the end of Book Two. And this, to me, is horror at its least understood point, if only because the track to it is scarcely beaten, the land around it scarcely explored. In the upcoming volumes of this series, we will be taking our torches (and if we are wise, our pitchforks and shotguns) into this shadowland, this place where we deal not only with evil... but with *aftermath*.

I should note that when I started *Something Evil*, I did so with the conscious intention of writing a single horror novel, *not* a three-volume

⁴ 2019, copyright Carly Rheilan.

series. But the story got away from me, sprawling over centuries, and so too, did the characters, who sprawled in a different way. *Something Evil* is, or at any rate attempts to be, a character study, in part because horror (even if we reject the label, as Mr. Cronenberg does), tends to fall down in this regard, and supply us with two-dimensional sketches of human beings rather than the genuine articles that are required for us to make an emotional investment in them. If I have done my job, people like Marcus Hope, Gina Kolibri, and Sam Weston—hell, even Aurelia Sakara—may come to grow on you a little. If not, you may very well have the satisfaction of reading about their demise. When we examine evil, we have to proceed from the notion that it can land on anyone, that neither the righteous nor the wicked are safe.

3.

Now, maybe you think all of this is all bullshit. A pseudo-philosophical justification for unleashing three volumes—six novels' worth!—of bloody mayhem. And you may be right. Somewhere in every writer there is a patch of dark and brooding woods, and in those woods is a dilapidated cabin, and in that cabin is a gleeful maniac, humming a nursery rhyme as he presses the edge of his axe to his pedal-driven grindstone and watches the sparks fly. A crazy bastard who simply cannot *wait* to get at those hapless camp counselors, those stranded tourists, those backpackers who got themselves hopelessly lost in his woods. It's not that he bears them any particular grudge: he's just a bloodthirsty loon, and well, it *is* a full moon tonight, and besides, what the hell are those idiots doing in his woods anyway? Don't they know what could happen? Don't they take him *seriously*?

For the record, I don't actually think I'm slinging fertilizer here. Not much of it, anyway. The maniac is real, but he's just one in a cast of characters every writer carries around within his mind, and hey, who says a writer, or a murderer for that matter, must proceed from only a single motive? There are other considerations. As Cronenberg told *Film Threat* way back in 1999:

*To me it (horror) is not a creative category. That's a marketing problem, or it's possibly a critical problem, you know, a journalistic preoccupation. But it just doesn't function on a creative level. There's nothing I can do with any of that on a creative level. It doesn't mean anything. Because each story generates its own little biosphere, and has its own little ecology, and its climate, and you're attuned to that more than anything else. So, when people say, "Is there anything you wouldn't show on film?" or "Do you ever draw back?" I'm saying if I do, it's only because of that biosphere: What is appropriate? What works within the ecology of that story?*⁵

All of this is a way of saying that story comes before everything, including genre, label, and category. The reactions one has are merely a product of the direction the story happens to take.

Something Evil, like everything else I write, is a case of more-or-less ordinary people put in decidedly extraordinary situations that bring out the best and the worst in them. In this case, the situations are (I hope) horrifying, but if you care to go further into the woods, there's a lot more to be found than the maniac's cabin. There are places even darker than *that*, and beyond them, where you might least expect it, glimmers of light, glimmers of hope, and (I trust) glimmers of understanding. To write these novels, I had to do a great deal of information gathering about the way humankind, wearing its religious, philosophical, and psychiatric hats, has historically tried to cope with the deliberate infliction of pointless suffering that we invariably experience as we move through life. Indeed, it is arguable that it is *because* encounters with evil are inevitable that people required those disciplines in the first place. I meant *Something Evil* to be something of a platform for my own beliefs and questions in this regard, but the research I did caused my own views to evolve the further I plunged into the story. The writer always comes out of his own finished stories a different person than when he began them, and it is his special conceit that he hopes the reader, too, will be changed by the experience.

⁵ An edited form of this interview is still available via *Film Threat*, but I would recommend the unedited version which can be read online:
<https://uncleanarts.com/interview-david-cronenberg/>

If not, well, maybe the maniac will entertain you.

NOTES ON PERSONS, PLACES & THINGS

Archeological techniques mentioned in this story are as accurate as I could make them. The science behind the phenomenon of “bog bodies” is also accurate. Police procedure, and police politics, are described as I myself have experienced them in my various professional capacities. Whenever I have departed from “the way it is” in any discipline, it was for storytelling purposes only.

The poem “Beware the Brooder” is taken from an episode of *The Shadow* (“Conversation with Death”), which aired on September 17, 1939. The writer is sadly unknown.

The Great Scottish Witch Hunt of 1597 is a sad historical fact, as are the details about it noted by various characters in this story, including the methods by which alleged witches were tried, executed, and their remains ultimately returned to the earth. The quotation from King James VI’s three-volume work *Daemonologie* (1597) is real, as was his obsessive interest in witchcraft. Father Carnaghan’s quotations from *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and his interpretations of Church doctrine in regard to magic are also accurate. The village of Glasmara is however fictitious.

The city of Progress, Pennsylvania, is also a work of fiction, and not to be confused with the unincorporated community of the same name in Dauphin County. The city’s history and geography are likewise an invention, though inspired by, and in many cases stolen from, the very real municipalities of York (York County) and Greensburg (Westmoreland County). Yarmouth County does not exist, and the campus of Resurrection University is merely a combination of York College of Pennsylvania and Seton Hill University, as anyone who attended either of those schools will quickly recognize. (The architecture of Seton Hill, or Hogwarts as it is known by some of its students, is a character in itself.)

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I want to thank William Hooke III of Real to Reel for suffering alongside me for six years while we toiled (ultimately in vain) on the screenplay version of this story. How well I remember those days we carefully untied one knotty plot problem only to be rewarded with a larger, knottier problem! And the lunches of Thai and Mexican food in Silverlake, and the coffees at the Farmer's Market in Mid-City West, and the phone calls I took while walking around the park by my apartment in Sherman Oaks... although the version of the story here grew well beyond what we originally intended, those intentions form the bones of this work, and for that I am forever grateful. I came to Will hoping the seed of the idea I carried could be coaxed into bloom, and bloom it did... into this bouquet of (blood-red) roses.

Similar thanks go to Michael Dell of One Nine Books, my long-suffering editor and format man, who brings order out of the chaos which is my mind. You might want to check out Mike's award-winning *Churchfield* mystery series, available on Amazon, or catch him on his podcasts, the LCS Hockey Radio Show, which discusses a hell of a lot more than hockey, or Flea Market Fantasy, which takes a deep, and I mean deep, dive into Bronze Age comic books.

On a broader front, I owe a debt of gratitude (not for the first time), to the writers of horror fiction who actually scared me growing up: F. Paul Wilson, Daphne de Maurier, and Clive Barker, whose superb *Books of Blood* gave me the inspiration to take a massive 200,000-word epic and break it into what I hope is a more digestible three-volume series. Mostly, however, this series is a love letter to Stephen King, and especially a homage to what I consider to be his masterpiece, *It*, and to a slew of horror movies, television shows, novels, and stories to whom homages are paid unashamedly throughout. Any resemblance to these works is strictly intentional.

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