



IVAN BLAKE

*Someone has to  
defend the dead...  
from the living.*



dead  
scared

The Mortsafeman: Book One

## Back Cover

Who knew the dead have more to fear from the living than the living have to fear from the dead? Certainly not seventeen-year-old Chris Chandler, not before his family moved to Bemishstock, Maine in the autumn of 1985.

His father's job is to close plants for *Allied Paper Products of Wisconsin*. Bemishstock is his fourth crumbling town in six years, and each one has resented and harassed the Chandlers more hatefully than the previous. Even Chris will admit that his family's odyssey across America has turned him into a lonely, brooding nutcase, and he has only survived the soul-sucking experience by remaining virtually invisible.

Then suddenly one day, after a couple of totally stupid mistakes, Chris finds himself trapped between two nightmarish forces—a grave robber and a vengeful demon—and like the cemetery guardians of old, he must defeat both or end up a corpse himself and cursed for all eternity.

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*For my mother Mildred and my granddaughter Madelyn*

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Nuper defuncti tumulum cum polluerint prius reddidit Creatori suo tempore plenitudinis, de qua prius carnis fabricatus est in terram, et ira est ad cor dolor in paradiso Dei secundum animam.

—from *De Sanctitate Sepulchro et protectione mortuis*, 1453

Emansus de Geisteborg

Defiling the grave of the recently departed, before the Creator in the fullness of His own time has returned the flesh to the dust from whence He crafted it, is to bring pain to the soul of the departed in Paradise and rage to the Heart of God.

—from *On the Sanctity of the Grave and the Protection of the Dead*, 1453

Emansus of Geisteborg

## Chapter One

1986

### *August*

Every kid in Maine's *South Portland Youth Detention Center* was fighting some kind of demon. Christopher Chandler's demon was different; she always drew blood.

Past ten on a sticky summer night, the heavy air off the land, ripe with the smell of rotten eggs from the pulp mills and fish waste from the canning plant, no one could sleep. Two hundred boys, tossing in their beds, whispering, up to god knows what; it all made for a low, irksome hum across the complex, like flies on filth.

Chris was alone in the library, reading. One of the perks of being labelled *deeply troubled and dangerous*—he had lots of time to himself. He heard the door open, close, and then...nothing. After a minute, he called out, "Need help?" No reply. Still, he sensed someone watching from the stacks, and twice glimpsed movement out of the corner of his eye. He knew too well where this was going.

Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes passed before he heard another sound, then footsteps, and the lights went out. "You don't have to do this," Chris said. Again, no reply.

Sighing, he pushed several books into a ratty canvas bag, and stood up. Straightening as best he could, he hobbled away toward the library door, past the darkened stacks, with only the red glow of the exit sign to light the way.

"Running away, motherfucker?"

Chris stopped, bowed his head, and after a moment turned around. A pimply



kid, maybe fifteen, tall, wiry, and sweating like a pig, stepped from the shadows. Chris didn't recognise the new arrival; they all had to learn.

"You're the one who's been hiding, not me," Chris said. "You scared?"

"No, asshole, I'm not scared! But if you ain't, you should be!" The kid was practically shouting; nerves most likely.

"Keep it down...unless you *want* the guards to come." Then Chris smiled. "The idiots in Unit C put you up to this?"

"Nobody put me up to nothing. They say you're tough, but you look fuckin' sick to me." The kid was jumpy, shuffling about like he had to take a leak, and swinging a sock filled with something heavy over and over against the palm of his left hand.

"You *are* frightened!" Chris almost felt sorry for the kid. "First night in here, figure you've got to let people know you're a real tough bastard, let them know not to mess with you. They tell you, get Chandler, and you say, sure...because you're just that stupid."

"Shut the fuck up! We gonna do this...or you too much of a pussy?"

"All right. First though, you have to know how this will end." Chris lowered his voice and moved toward the boy. "You're going to get hurt. I wish that wasn't true, but it is. You're going to get hurt so bad that for the rest of your time in here you're going to be the Unit C cuddle bunny; you're going to bend over for every horny idiot who takes a fancy to your scrawny ass." He moved closer still. "You'll be so messed up you won't be able to say no to nothing and to nobody ever again." Chris smiled, waited for the images to sink in then shook his head. "But if that's what you want..."

"You don't frighten me. You can't even walk straight for fuck sake."

"Okay then, but I do have to say," and Chris stepped right up to the kid, took him in his arms, kissed him repeatedly on his pockmarked and pimply cheek, and

said, “Better you than me for a change.”

“Get off me!” The kid shoved Chris away. “Damn, you really *are* sick!”

“Yes, I probably am...and so is she.” The air crackled.

“What?”

Chris pointed over the kid’s shoulder, up toward the ceiling. “Say hi to Mallory.”

The boy spun around and screamed—screamed like he’d lost his mind—as his left ear and a strip of scalp were torn away and tossed across the room to strike the far wall with a bloody splat.

## ***October***

With all the mess on his desk, Martin Koyman might never have noticed the brown envelope had he not dropped a breakfast bagel right in the middle of it. And he only realized the envelope was still sealed when he tried to scrape the cream cheese back onto the bagel. Nothing on Koyman’s desk was sealed, not credit card bills, not the many threatening letters from collection agencies, not the letters from his wife’s lawyer, not even pay stubs. Koyman’s life was an open book, a crappy, two-bit soap opera of a book, but an open book all the same. So what was a sealed envelope doing there?

Six a.m. and the newsroom of the *Bangor Daily Courier* was almost empty. Koyman called across the room to the only other person in at that ridiculous hour. “Jackie, you put an envelope on my desk?” Jackie Cormier was a journalism intern from the University of Maine assigned to help Koyman with his investigations.

“What envelope?” she yelled back from the kitchenette as she scraped the accumulated crud out of her mug. On its side, the mug read *Rats, Plankton, Viruses, Interns* in descending order.

“You see anybody near my desk this morning?”

“Not since I got here.” Jackie filled the mug with cold coffee from last night’s pot, nuked it, and started across the newsroom toward Koyman.

Nothing on the envelope except Koyman’s name in green marker—no return address, no business logo, nothing. He ripped it open and shook out the contents; several wrinkled pages of hand-written notes, torn apparently from a ring binder, smudged with soot, holed by cinders and singed at the edges. He tossed the envelope onto an overloaded waste basket, took a bite of bagel and a mouthful of lukewarm coffee from a paper cup, rocked back in his chair, and began to read aloud the charred notes.

*....such appalling specimens and this is the worst one yet. The corpse was already in bad shape when it arrived at the funeral parlor because the deceased had been sitting in front of her television for a week before anyone found her. When Brewster’s idiot son was burying her, he managed to put the spade right through her chest. Then another week went by after the funeral before I could reopen the grave, during which time the spring rain made a real mess of her. The cheap box old man Brewster switched for the family’s expensive casket afforded little protection from the damp...illegible writing...probably caused some of the damage myself when I pulled her up through the splintered lid. But the worst challenge was her size. Florence Bloss was a giant slug of a woman.*

*Even so, I attached my Sacro-occipital Activator and applied a rotation fifteen degrees beyond the normal...text burned away... the neck snapped in a most satisfying fashion and I went looking for damage to the vertebral arteries.*

*Because of the condition of the cadaver, the head wouldn’t come away easily. As I tried to peel the skin from the neck up toward the chin...text burned away...windpipe was clogged with mud and debris that had washed into the grave...illegible...bow saw from my woodpile to finish the job so the edges of the*

*neck were ragged. All the same, the vertebral arteries were easy to locate.*

*Text burned away...the arteries at the level of the first and second vertebrae so that's where I started looking for the telltale accumulation of fluid in the basilar wall. And that's where I found it, a subarachnoid tear extending into the...illegible.*

*So another failure; I'm fairly confident that the tear this time was not the result of any flaw in my Activator, however, but rather because of the unusually thin arterial walls in this grotesque lump...illegible...have to find a better specimen for my next....*

“What the hell?”

“That's so gross!” Jackie rolled a chair alongside Koyman's desk and sat down. “Sounds like some guy's chopping up bodies.”

“Christ! I know what this is about!” Koyman sat up excitedly. “There's got to be more, some kind of explanation or context or something.” He waved his bagel toward the garbage can. “Check the envelope again.”

Jackie fished the manila envelope from atop the heaped-up paper cups and Styrofoam lunch containers in Koyman's wastebasket, and looked inside.

“Yup, a piece of paper stuck at the bottom.” Jackie pulled it out, unfolded it, and said, “Typed. No signature.”

“Okay, read it to me.”

*Mr. Koyman,*

*You covered the trial of Christopher Chandler. Do you think the judge would have been so quick to convict if she'd seen these pages? I have reason to believe the Bemishstock Police have the binder from which these pages were torn and deliberately withheld it from Chandler's lawyer. When you ask them about the notes, you may also want to ask why they told no one about the other human remains they found in the ashes of the barn—the unidentified remains. And when you show the family of Florence Bloss these notes, I expect they will insist her*

*grave be reopened. So eventually people are going to find out what really happened in Bemishstock—even if they don't want to know.*

“Christopher Chandler...the boy who killed the old man in Bemishstock last year, right?” Jackie asked as she handed the note to Koyman.

“Right.”

“I remember his picture on TV. Really good looking kid, tall, slim, long blond hair, and those grey eyes...”

“And that’s what you remember about the trial, how Chandler looked?”

“No...no of course not.” Jackie blushed, and picked up the charred notes from Martin’s desk.

“Well, I remember Chandler didn’t look quite so good in court,” Martin said. “Somebody had beaten the shit out of him before his trial. He was a wreck. I wondered if the police might have done it. Only mention of his injuries was that he’d been hurt the night the old man died. But that was weeks before the trial.”

“And these pages, are they supposed to be the old man’s notes?”

“Somebody wants us to think that. Meath his name was. Some kind of quack doctor.”

“So if Meath was stealing bodies, chopping them up, and writing notes about it, then why didn’t that come up at the Chandler boy’s trial?”

“Because maybe he wasn’t. Maybe these pages are fake. Maybe whoever sent them is hoping to use us to get Chandler’s case re-opened. And yet...”

“And yet what?”

“And yet, during the trial, I had a feeling the real story wasn’t coming out. It seemed like everyone—the prosecution, the cops, even Chandler’s lawyer—like they were all in on some secret they didn’t want the rest of us to know.”

“So maybe we should have another go at them?”

“What, you’re not enjoying Bangor city politics?” Koyman said with a grin.

“Okay, so perhaps we should.” He grabbed a scrap of paper from his desk and started scribbling a list of to-dos. “We’ll start with the old doctor. Meath got a pass during the trial. Just a sad old man, or so everybody thought, but these notes say different. Then we’ll look at the kid again; for some reason, the whole town and especially the police hated Chandler’s guts long before the fire. Why was that?”

“The note says the Bemishstock Police withheld information about remains found in the fire,” Jackie said. “Could I maybe talk to the pathologist’s office?”

“Okay.”

“And this Florence Bloss, you know that name?”

“Nope.”

“So, can I check her out too?”

“I do remember this one teacher,” Koyman said. “On the stand, he said something about Chandler telling the truth even if no one wanted to hear it. The truth about what, he never said. I tried to talk to the teacher, but he disappeared. We should try to find him. Back then, I thought the only story was how much the police hated Chandler, how they didn’t seem at all objective about the case. The Chief talked like the kid was Satan incarnate. Then the judge found him guilty and I figured that was that.”

“But maybe not.”

“No, maybe not. So, we take a month, do some digging, and see what we turn up.”

“Starting with the police?”

“Hell, no,” Koyman said. “We want to be well prepared when we sit down with Chief Gabriel Boucher. He’s not going to stonewall us this time.” Koyman clapped Jackie on the back, grinned, and added, “Young lady, I think your work term just got a helluva lot more interesting.”

*November*

“Koyman’s here, Chief, with some girl,” Deputy Ricky Pike said.

So now they were ganging up on him. “Tell them they’ll bloody well have to wait; I’m gonna be busy for a bit,” the Chief replied. “They can get coffee at Molly’s. I want to go through the case file one more time before they start in with their questions.”

Chief Gabriel Boucher—Gabe to his friends—of the Bemishstock Police Department had been on the force for thirteen years, five as its Chief. An ex-Army Ranger, he was now horribly out of shape from whisky and painkillers, and paranoid as hell due to the many secrets in his private and professional lives he was trying so hard to keep.

Koyman from the Bangor paper had phoned a week earlier to ask for the interview for a follow-up article on the Chandler trial. Koyman said he only wanted to clarify a few points. Like Gabe believed that. He could read Koyman like a book. The goddamned reporter had covered the Chandler trial from start to finish. He was short, fat, sweaty, and judging by his accent, probably a fuckin’ New York Jew—and the asshole was up to something, of that Gabe was certain.

Chief Gabriel Boucher firmly believed locals weren’t to blame for the sorry state of their town; all the goddamned outsiders were. The scam artists, the drug dealers, and the coloreds, all the wetbacks, and the big business phonies, and the goddamned down-state politicians, they were to blame. Martin Koyman was just one more in a long line of scum come to suck the last dregs of decency out of Bemishstock.

Koyman’s questions during the Chandler trial had really gotten under Gabe’s skin:

*“Chief Boucher, is it true your men persecuted Chandler for weeks before the fire?”*

*“Is it true your officers never looked at any other suspects, even though cases of*

*arson and vandalism in Bemishstock go back years?"*

Koyman was a fuckin' guest in Bemishstock! That's not how guests were supposed to behave. Boucher could have popped the bastard.

Chief Boucher was proud of the job his officers had done in keeping chaos at bay in their crumbling town. And he was especially proud of the job they'd done in nailing the Chandler kid. Justice had been served, even if the sentence hadn't been as severe as the town expected. Had Koyman and the Bangor paper given his officers their due? No bloody way. And now Koyman was back with more questions. Boucher knew from painful experience that a goddamned reporter could find scandal in the Lord's Prayer if he had a mind to—and Koyman apparently had a mind to.

Boucher opened the file. It had been sitting on his desk for days; he'd been thinking of little else since Koyman called.

He leafed through the contents for the umpteenth time to satisfy himself he'd overlooked nothing troublesome. Boucher could foresee no problems with the affidavits and transcripts of interviews, the photos of the fire scene, the fire marshal's report, or the pathologist's reports on Dr. Meath and his wife. Okay, so the kid's hospital admission record from the night of his arrest was a little weird. Chandler's injuries had been bad, real bad, but at his trial the prosecutor had argued they'd probably been self-inflicted to garner sympathy, and the judge had bought it. Boucher had heard from a buddy at South Portland the boy was still hurting himself and folks there were concerned for him. In the Chief's opinion, the kid deserved all the pain he got.

The reading material they'd removed from the kid's bedroom at the Willard place was just plain creepy: photocopied pages from some book entitled *Knights of the Night: a History of the Mortsafemen*, with sections underlined about the dead feeling pain in Paradise; scribbled notes about grave robberies in Scotland; and a magazine article on funeral practices in Asia somewhere, with pictures of a corpse and some



fucked-up villagers. The prosecutor had used the weird crap to show the boy had an unnatural obsession with death. As for the articles Boucher's officers had found beneath Chandler's bed on Dr. Meath's early career in England, the material was proof, the prosecutor argued, the accused had been obsessed with old man Meath. All this crap added up to one thing in Gabe's mind: the Chandler boy had been planning to plead some kind of mental defect in the hopes of getting a cushy stay in hospital. It hadn't worked, no goddamned way.

He also didn't think there was anything problematic in the stuff the judge had requested during the sentencing phase of the trial: the affidavits from the boy's teachers describing him as "secretive, nasty, with a bizarre sense of humor and strange fascinations", or the school counselor's statement on Chandler's state of mind in which she'd described him as "malicious with morbid and unnatural interests." She'd also said he knew right from wrong so couldn't claim to be mentally ill.

"Chief?" Pike said, poking his head in the door. "Something the reporter asked. He was wondering if we have anything not in the public record, like background stuff, stuff that didn't get used at trial. I said he had to talk to you."

"Huh," grunted the Chief. *What's Koyman up to?* "Maybe I better have a look at the Chandler box from the Evidence Room."

"Sure, Chief," Pike said, and left the office.

Okay, so they'd gathered other material during their investigation they hadn't told the DA or anyone else about, but so the hell what? Police always collect shit during an investigation that turns out to be worthless. Not like they'd withheld evidence. None of the crap they'd found would have helped the kid's defense, not one bit. It would only have confused matters.

Ricky Pike returned a few minutes later with a cardboard carton, taped shut, and labelled, *Chief's Eyes Only*. "Going to let the reporter see this?" Pike asked as he put the box on the Chief's desk.

“Not sure,” Boucher said. “Close the door behind you.” Pike got the message and left.

He ripped off the tape and started picking through the contents. Okay, this stuff was a little more troublesome.

First, more stuff from the kid’s room. A map of Bemishstock Cemetery with several graves circled in red and a list of names scribbled down the side; Boucher had done some checking and discovered all the folks on the list had been buried in the four months prior to the fire. Then a sketch of a headdress or helmet called *The Activator*. And an envelope labelled *Meath’s pellets for testing*, with goat feed inside. All garbage, for sure. Even so, it had probably been just as well no one had seen any of it because god knows how Chandler’s lawyer might have spun the stuff.

Next, the note from the Dahlman girl, the note that had made things in Bemishstock get really intense in the days before the fire. It hadn’t been introduced at trial because the girl’s death had had nothing directly to do with Chandler’s case. Boucher had put the note in this box only because the Dahlman girl had sent it to Chandler, and it was kind of interesting background. No way was he going to let Koyman see it, however, and exploit the girl’s memory. As Boucher reread the heart-wrenching plea, he felt so goddamned proud he and his men had won at least *some* justice for the poor girl.

Then, Dr. Meath’s notebook, its cover melted, and its pages charred and dirty and full of medical crap. Boucher himself had found the ring binder—what remained of it—in the ashes of the barn under a metal table where it had escaped the worst of the blaze. He’d never bothered to examine the binder closely before because the soot and the handwritten scrawl made its pages almost illegible, and from a quick look now, it was only about heads and necks and muscles and garbage like that. Boucher had concluded at the time of the trial the binder contained only patient notes from Meath’s practice. Hell, Boucher himself had gone to see old man Meath once or twice for his

bad back so his own name was probably in the binder somewhere. During the investigation, the binder had been set aside because no one had time to waste on shit having nothing at all to do with the fire. Weird, though, about the Willard girl; she'd come to the station right after she got out of hospital asking if anyone had found a binder in the ashes of Meath's barn. There'd been something a little troubling in that, so as a precaution, he'd visited the mother and warned her to stop her daughter from poking around in police business or he'd have to re-examine the girl's role in the death of Doctor Meath.

Finally, from the bottom of the box where he'd buried it, Boucher pulled out the pathologist's report; not the official one on the doctor and his wife, but the other one, the one dealing with the unidentified bones found in the ashes. "Human...but from neither of the two known victims," it read in part. Now a claim like that really could have screwed things up. The existence of the report did make the Chief uneasy. Fortunately, he'd had the good sense to lock the report away before it could do any real damage. That's why the police chief got paid the big bucks, to make hard choices, and that's what Boucher had done.

The report had arrived in his office sometime after the trial. He'd known the moment he looked at it that the pathologist was full of shit. Boucher could think of a dozen explanations why a few human remains might be found in the ashes of the barn. Maybe Meath and his wife had some retarded kid hidden away. Boucher had seen such things before. Three people from the Meath family had died in the blaze and not two, so what? Or maybe the bones had been there for decades, Indian bones even. Maybe they weren't human remains at all. The notoriously incompetent pathologist in Portland had probably mistaken goat bones for human. He was a raging drunk, and he'd made similar mistakes before. Or maybe the kid himself had brought bones to the doctor's place just to confuse matters. Well, it hadn't worked, and justice had been served.

Nope, no one knew of the goddamned report except him and the pathologist, and the pathologist was retiring in a month. Forced out, everyone said. The presence of other human remains at the scene of the fire hadn't come up at trial, not really, and it sure as hell wasn't going to come up now. The case was closed; and a good thing too.

Boucher called Pike. "Ricky, I'll talk to those reporters when they get back."

Pike stuck his head in the door. "So, you letting them see the stuff?"

"We're not going to mention any of it." Boucher closed the box, got up, and carried it to the metal locker in the corner of his office. "Koyman asks if we have anything else on the kid," he said as he shoved the box in among the crumpled papers and dirty laundry and slammed the door. "We say we gave everything to the boy's parents, and they probably threw it out when they left town."

That was the one good thing to have come out of this mess. *Allied Paper Products of Wisconsin* had been forced to pull the kid's father from the plant and the town had been given a brief reprieve. No one expected it to last. Another hatchet man would eventually be sent to close their plant, but every month the town could delay its inevitable death was another nickel in his pension fund. And that, as some bitch on a cooking show always said, is a good thing.

They both heard the front door open.

"They're back, Chief."

"Then let's get this over with," Boucher said.

## Chapter Two

1985

The blighted little town of Bemishstock, Maine—*Industrial Heartland of the North Central Coast* proclaimed the weather-beaten billboard out on Route One—had never been a fishing port, so it had none of the historic charm of some New England towns. From its founding, Bemishstock had been a mill town—but not anymore. Like many other small towns in New England, Bemishstock had become a relic of America's industrial decay.

Bemishstock had been built near the mouth of the Roan River by business partners, Roland Bemish and Andrew Stock, to take advantage of a narrow gorge through which the river acquired an uncharacteristic fury just before tumbling into Adinack Bay. Its hydroelectric dam had a century ago made the town a magnet for small manufacturers of forged tools and work clothes and cordage and timber products. Now only the carton plant owned by *Allied Paper Products of Wisconsin* remained, and Chris Chandler's father had been sent by *Allied* to close that.

All the Company's talk about searching for options and new ideas fooled no one. The townspeople knew nothing they could do or say would make any difference. The decision to kill Bemishstock had already been taken by faceless bastards half a continent away with no thought whatsoever to their fate. Richard Chandler was like death or the plague come to Maine. He was there to oversee the inevitable. From the moment the Chandler family arrived in Bemishstock, folks knew their fate was sealed; they were become like the walking dead.

The Chandler family had been living in Maine since early September. The first few weeks had been tolerable. For a while, even Chris's mother, who rarely spoke and always seemed so sad, had actually managed an occasional smile. The hills

had been bathed in glorious color and the sea had sparkled in the golden autumn light. Not now; six weeks on, the landscape, sky, and sea had all turned gray, the color of ash. And ash was the color of Bemishstock; all gray stone and unpainted, weathered wood.

Most of the shops on Main Street were already empty. In a desperate attempt to create the illusion of business activity, the Chamber of Commerce had once tried to fill vacant shop windows with displays of clothing or handicrafts or furniture, but the Chamber had long since given up and the displays were now dust-covered and depressing. Like the dark blotches beneath the skin of a dying man, the few remaining businesses in Bemishstock were pawn shops and second hand stores and tattoo parlors, and from what Chris had seen elsewhere across America when such shops arrive in a town, death is not far behind. Maybe in the mind of some god sitting on a cloud somewhere it made a twisted kind of sense that Chris Chandler should be fated to discover his calling as a defender of the recently departed in a town itself so near to death.

*Wednesday, November 13, evening*

“They’re all such idiots,” Chris said to himself. “But you knew that, so get the hell over it!” At school that afternoon, somebody had smeared blood all over his locker—third time in as many weeks—pig’s blood, but blood all the same. “Besides, it’s all crap anyway, the school, the town,” he said, then shouted as loud as he could at the seabirds that swooped and cried in the darkening sky, “It’s all crap! Crap, crap, crap!” As if to oblige, a gull chose that moment to crap on the ground in front of him.

Chris was perched on a rusted, wrought iron fence enclosing two old graves. The tiny cemetery belonged to the Willard family and was a long way back of their

farm house, where Chris's family rented rooms. Down at the bottom of an apple orchard, and a stone's throw from the rocky shore of Adinack Bay, to get to the cemetery, you had to climb over an embankment and an abandoned rail line that crossed the Willard's property and snaked down the coast all the way to Portland. The cemetery stood in the middle of a strip of scrub land between the beach and the tracks, in a tangle of dead weeds and tall yellow grass, and was practically invisible.

He'd been coming to the Willard family graveyard every day after school for more than a month. It had become a ritual. He would sit there, curse at the seagulls and stare at the two tiny gravestones, worn almost smooth by a century of Maine weather. And he'd do it for hours on end, until the dark swallowed the dregs of each terrible day.

Edna and Abner Willard had been married for fifty years, and both had died in 1873. *Beloved Edna* had passed away first and then, within a month, her *Dearest Abner*. On Edna Willard's stone, beneath a winged skull was inscribed, *Death is not the worst evil, rather when we wish to die and cannot*. And right beside her, on husband Abner's stone was carved, *O Death the Healer...Pain lays not its touch upon a corpse*. Chris hadn't a clue what either inscription meant. Had Edna ever really felt *Beloved*? She hadn't chosen the words on her stone; Edna had been dead when they were inscribed. She might have wanted something different on her headstone; maybe, *Thank Heaven that's over*, or *Keep that bastard away from me*. The dead don't often get to choose their words of remembrance. Chris suspected a lot of gravestones lied.

He'd never thought much about death before his family moved to Maine, and he sure as hell had never spent any time staring at gravestones. What kind of sane person ever would? But this town, this hellish town, it brought out the darkest part of him. Sitting by these graves had come to seem like a natural thing to do.

Besides, what else was there? Basketball? Dates with girls? Yeah right. Living in this god-forsaken town, he felt dead already. And his family had only been in Bemishstock for two months. Jeez, what would he be like in another six, a goddamned zombie?

The school bus from *Bemishstock Regional Secondary School* was supposed to drop him at the top of Willard Lane. Almost every afternoon, however, the driver threw Chris off the bus miles short of his stop. The driver usually made up some excuse, but he really didn't have to; everyone knew the real reason—Chris's dad.

The Willard house was about five miles from town, so the walk home wasn't too bad, not yet anyway. In another couple of weeks, when the snow began to fly, Chris might have to put up a little more fight. For now, he didn't mind the walk, so he usually got off without protest.

Twice when it rained, he'd hitchhiked home. The first time, he'd gotten a ride from a goat farmer who lived a mile or so past Willard Farm. As the dilapidated pickup pulled up alongside him, the old man behind the wheel had simply gestured to the rear where he'd tethered a goat. The ride had been painfully slow, and when Chris got home, he'd been wetter and a lot smellier than if he'd walked. The truck had stopped at Willard Lane without Chris signalling, so apparently the goatman knew who Chris was. As the truck pulled away, he'd read the faded lettering on its door, *Doctor Meath, Chiropractor* and then on a second line, *Quality Goat Cheese, Meat and Milk*. Too weird.

The second time he'd hitchhiked, he'd been picked up by an old lady with thin crisp blue hair, a weathered complexion and bright red lips, wearing a ratty fur coat and driving a maroon 1947 Buick *Roadmaster*—a sweet old car for all its faded paint and threadbare interior—but the old lady had driven even slower than the goatman, and she'd had the heat cranked so high Chris had nearly died.

And she'd been very chatty! Chris had soon heard the woman's entire life



story. Her name was Felicity Holcomb—Felix to her friends, she said—and the road to her house was right across from Willard Lane. She lived a couple of miles up a long dirt track that climbed to the top of the hill. As a girl, she'd summered on the coast of Maine with her family, the Harrows of New York City, but against her father's wishes, she'd fallen in love with and married a local woodcutter named Harold Holcomb. She'd been widowed far too soon, and ever since had eked out a meager living painting landscapes and writing articles on local lore for small New England magazines.

Chris had learned all this in under four miles, and their drive together had ended with Felicity inviting him to visit sometime to chat about life on the coast. Chris had rolled his eyes in bemused disgust as he got out of the car at the top of Willard Lane; he couldn't imagine ever taking such an odd duck up on her invitation.

From the main road, Chris had to walk down the long gravel lane to the enormous old farmhouse his family shared with the Willards. *Willard Farm* must have been quite impressive in its day. Now it was almost derelict, with peeling yellow paint, rotted sills, missing roof tiles, broken panes. The building was t-shaped and the Willard family occupied the much larger front section facing the highway, while Chris's family rented the much smaller back portion pointing down through the orchard toward the bay. They did have a separate entrance and several large windows facing the water, but there were only two bedrooms for the five members of the Chandler family, and the place was tiny, dingy, and cold. Chris slept in a crawl space in the back portion of the attic. You'd have thought his dad's company could have given their hatchet man a more generous housing allowance. Apparently not. Wherever the Chandlers were sent, they had to live in god-awful accommodations, like the crumbling Willard place.

Even though their house was falling down, the Willards were nice enough. Of

the once prominent Willard clan, there were now just three remaining members: an elderly and infirmed grandfather; his overworked daughter-in-law, now the sole breadwinner for the three of them; and her strange and remote daughter who was almost the same age as Chris. Grandfather Willard rarely made an appearance because of his many infirmities. His back had been broken by falling cider barrels five years before and was now twisted like a pretzel. Old man Willard's daughter-in-law, who was about the same age as Chris's mom, bore the burden of keeping the family's orchard business going and seemed almost crushed by the task. She was nice all the same, and from time to time, gave Chris odd jobs for pocket change. Then there was Gillian.

Chris had been waiting with Gillian Willard for their school bus at the top of Willard Lane every morning for almost two months, but the girl was still something of an enigma. Tall and gangly, with not a hint of shape about her, she had long blonde hair that seemed forever windblown, and was always dressed in the same baggy dungarees and work shirt. Gillian Willard clearly didn't give a damn what anyone thought of her, and in spite of her odd appearance and aloof demeanor, people generally left her alone. Perhaps that was why Chris found Gillian sort of intriguing. Everything about her shouted, "I am my own person and I don't give a crap what you think of me," and Chris admired that. Gillian was in grade eleven, a year behind Chris, and since juniors never speak to seniors, she dared not speak to him, not as they waited for the bus, certainly not on the bus, and not even on the rare occasion when they arrived home together. She always had her nose in a book and only ever spoke to one other person, her friend Madelyn who was every bit as shy and bookish as she. Gillian wanted nothing to do with Chris, and he was okay with that. He already had enough screwed-up relationships to cope with, not the least his dad.

Chris fought with his dad about everything: his unkempt clothes, long hair,

comings and goings at all hours, the perpetual sneer on his face and the constant snarl in his voice, his crappy grades, frequent calls from teachers, and occasional visits from the police whenever something bad happened in town, because as sure as pigeons crap on statues, the police always suspected the new guy. For all the other causes of conflict in the Chandler family, however, the root cause was blindingly obvious to Chris: his dad's job.

Their move to Maine was the Chandler family's fourth—fourth school, fourth house, fourth craphole—since his father had agreed to become *Allied's* killer of towns. One god-awful town after another for six hellish years. Chris figured his dad was probably some kind of victim; that his dad's bosses had probably made promises of raises or promotions or maybe a big position in headquarters the Company had yet to keep. There had to be some reason why he'd accepted this crappy assignment, but Chris didn't know what it was, and couldn't forgive him for not having the guts to walk away, to save the family from all the torment and humiliation. Whatever the reasons may have been, depression and resentment now filled the Chandlers' house like a poisonous fog, and that was why Chris tried to see as little of his family—or anyone else for that matter—as he possibly could.

Chris's little brother and sister were spared the worst of the abuse from the locals because they attended elementary school, not in Bemishstock, but five miles in the other direction, in the farming village of Perkin's Pond where people cared little about the plant. The idiots at *Bemishstock Secondary* however sure as hell knew what having the Chandler boy in their school signified. They all knew who Chris's dad was and what he was doing to their town, and they took their parents' despair out on him.

When someone trashed his locker or stole his homework, Chris got no sympathy from the teachers because they knew what his presence meant for them as well. No plant would mean no more young families; no young families would

mean no more school-age kids; and no kids would mean no teaching jobs. Chris's teachers always found a way to blame him for the pranks or the thefts or even the blood on the locker.

A few weeks earlier, someone at school had stolen notes from Chris's desk, one page of which had had his signature on it. They'd then used the notes to forge a hate letter over his signature accusing some local Catholic priest named Father David Raymond "and his circle" of "interfering with the choir boys." How the hell would Chris have even known the guy? In spite of the transparency of the hoax, the police chief, to whom the letter had been addressed, had been convinced Chris was responsible. And even though Mrs. Willard called Chief Boucher to say Chris had been helping in the orchard when the letter was shoved through the police department mail slot, Boucher still considered Chris the prime suspect. The incident marked the beginning of Chris's running battle with the cops.

Then, just days later, a girl named Darleen Jensen, a recent drop out from Chris's class, had thrown herself in front of a logging truck up on Bailey's Road. Some reporter from Bangor had stopped Chris in front of the school for a comment on the girl's death, and in an instant of ill-considered glibness, he'd said, "Can you blame her, having to live in this god-awful town?" The paper had printed the remark along with Chris's picture. Thereafter, the whole town knew Chris on sight and hated his guts, not just for being a Chandler, but for being a selfish, mouthy and insensitive bastard in his own right.

It had been a stupid thing to say, he knew that, but he'd made his point, and anyway, he couldn't take it back. He just had to avoid any more blunders and keep his crap together for seven more months. Then he'd graduate, turn eighteen, and get the hell out of Bemishstock. Maybe he'd join the Army, or go to technical school or get a job, anything so long as it took him as far away from Maine and his family as possible.

Of course, university was out because his grades sucked. Kind of too bad, since he liked history and literature: Poe and Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker and writers like that. *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, even *Castle of Otranto* were great. Every night, up in the attic crawl space that passed as his bedroom, Chris read dark, spooky stories into the wee hours, scaring himself to death. He imagined strange lights in the orchard or down by the shore, or sounds and voices on the other side of the attic wall, or scratches on the roof immediately above him. He conceived the most ghastly tales of haunted farmhouses, and vengeful sea creatures, and bloodthirsty tramps, and some nights he even tried to write them down. Invariably, however, the results were garbage because he lacked the skills and tools to do justice to his fevered imagination. So if university wasn't in the cards, then perhaps a writing program at a two-year college might accept him—if he could get the money together. That was why the Army made some sense.

Anyway, he had six or seven months to figure something out, and in the meantime, all he had to do was ignore the idiots at school, and suck it up. Seven months, no big deal, not after what he'd already been through. Besides, how much worse could the torment get?

## Chapter Three

Thursday, November 14

Richard Chandler knew the day was going to be bad. After two months of “study,” the shutdown of *Allied Paper’s* Bemishstock plant was to begin that day. The whole process would take eighteen months but the first layoff notices were going out at lunch time. He’d recommended to management back in Wisconsin the closure process start midday with the termination of two shifts and fifty men. Fifty families were going to have a hellish afternoon, fifty-one if you included Chandler’s own.

He finished dressing in the bathroom, and slipped back into the darkened bedroom to lean across his wife and kiss her gently on the cheek. She winced and pulled the sheets up over her head. “Try to have a good day, okay, Love?” he said.

“I will.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” Richard stood motionless for a moment, staring down at the slender outline beneath the sheets. And he did, he did love her. With all his heart, after everything they’d been through, all the heartbreak and worry, he loved her still.

Richard turned and left the room. He paused outside the young ones’ bedroom and thought about warning them of the day’s events, but then dismissed the idea. Chris on the other hand did need to know. There were bound to be outbursts at school once word of the layoffs at the plant got around town. Richard knew he should warn his son, but he just wasn’t up to the shouting match he knew would follow. It was going to be a bad day; another battle with his son would only make it worse.

There’d been quite a few battles already. Chris had known a different Chandler

family, a happier family. And he'd made it plain how much he hated what Richard's job had cost them all.

With every battle, he thought about telling Chris the real reason he'd accepted his soul-sucking job—that he'd in fact begged for it—but he never did. He'd never explained to the children how ill their mother really was, how desperately she needed treatment, treatment they could ill afford. He'd never told Chris how he'd fought for the job of killing towns because its big paycheck—and it was big, appearances to the contrary—was the only way he could think of to pay for the help his wife needed and the medication she took every day just to get by.

Richard didn't want any of his kids to know how close their mother was to the precipice because if one day things went terribly wrong, he didn't want them to ever blame themselves, or worse, to blame their mother. If one day she succumbed to her crushing depression, then he wanted to carry all the blame himself. He knew Chris was going through hell at school, knew his son hated Bemishstock and probably hated him, but Richard felt trapped; he could help his wife or his son. There seemed no way to help them both. He slipped quietly out of the house. Chris was strong, he told himself. His son would cope—somehow.

\* \* \* \*

Through the tiny attic window, Chris watched his father leave for work. Funny, for a moment he just stood there in the yard, not moving. Then he turned and looked up toward Chris's window like he was thinking of him. Not bloody likely! Then the moment passed.

He waited until his dad drove off before dropping down through the tiny hatch onto the second floor landing from the attic crawl space. God forbid there should ever be a fire in the house, but when he'd been given the option of sleeping in a death trap in the attic or in a shared room with his brother and sister, the choice had been a no-brainer.

He managed to wash and dress and get out of the house without exchanging a single word with anyone, which to Chris was a pretty good start to any day. And that morning, even the wait for the bus with the strange Willard girl wasn't bad. In fact, there seemed to be something different about Gillian Willard. Hair, face, he couldn't put a finger on it. She looked...well...nice, and when she caught him staring at her, she may actually have smiled.

The bus arrived. Driver, Fred Corbler—the kids called him the Gobbler—took forever opening the door, then said through his three remaining teeth, “Gonna rain something awful this afternoon.” The implication was obvious.

As Chris walked down the aisle, some of the younger kids on the bus mumbled crude names and cracks about his dad and family, insults he'd heard a hundred times before: weirdo, dick-wad, queer. The young kids' insults were nothing compared to the customary hate-filled chorus from the back of the bus: *no right to be here, don't belong, goddamned parasites, someone should burn them out, maybe kill the whole goddamned family*. Chris looked around and realized in amazement most of the older kids were not in fact on the bus that morning. Then to gild his good fortune, he got a window seat on the bay side of the bus so he could pretend to be looking out at the water all the way into town.

About two miles from town, the bus usually stopped to pick up Mallory Dahlman and her younger brother Rudy. Chris didn't normally look at the girls in school, but Mallory was a different case entirely. No one could help staring at her—neither male nor female. Secretly watching Mallory board the bus each morning was one lascivious pleasure Chris considered worth the risk.

Mallory was the most popular girl in school, every teacher's favorite, and so incredibly hot she took Chris's breath away. The way the huge waves of shiny black hair framed her pale face, the way her deep, dark eyes sometimes caught the light and flashed silver beneath her long eyelashes, the way her full, red lips



seemed fixed in a permanent pucker, the way the hem of her crisp, pleated, skirt flared away from her hips and might rise up along her thigh when she sat down, the way layers of lace showed through the sheer white fabric of her taut blouse, and the way the fulsome line of her breasts strained against its pearl buttons...God!

She always had the best things and dressed, not in cheap clothes from *Benoit's Super Saver*, but classy stuff from away because apparently her father could deny Mallory nothing. Yet no one begrudged Mallory a thing, not her looks, not her wardrobe, and certainly not the sway she held over the entire school. To everyone, Mallory was sweet, friendly, innocent and unassuming. She could do no wrong. But to Chris, she also seemed secretive and mysterious, and to have a wicked twinkle in her eye like she knew something the rest of her classmates did not, something dark and amusing like a nasty secret or a cruel joke, a joke that no one got except her. Was he really the only one who saw the shadow behind her mask? He longed to say he understood. "I get it too, I get that it's all crap, it's all for show." Of course, he didn't. If he did, he knew Floyd Balzer and his jock buddies would come after Chris like a pack of wild dogs.

Floyd Balzer was the ringleader of the loud-mouthed cretins who usually filled the back of the bus, and Mallory's boyfriend. He captained the local hockey team and was a muscle-bound jerk with the pathetic beginnings of a mustache. Even on the coldest days, Balzer still wore a skin-tight, sleeveless muscle shirt and Ray-ban aviator sunglasses like his idol, Sylvester Stallone. Floyd's dad owned a trucking company hauling wood to the carton plant, and was a big man in town—or he would be until the plant closed. The same was true of his son Floyd, big man on campus, with the prettiest girlfriend. But Floyd wasn't on the bus that morning, nor were his idiot friends, so Chris thought he might chance a longer than usual look at the luscious Mallory; maybe even talk to her.

Shortly before Mallory's stop, the wooded shoreline gave way to several acres

of lawn stretching from the road to the end of the wide headland, and there, on a bluff overlooking a long pebble beach, stood the sprawling, single-story home Mallory shared with her mother and brother. Word was Mallory's father captained some merchant ship out in Asia somewhere, and was gone for months at a time. Judging by their huge home and the way Mallory dressed, Captain Dahlman made a pile of money.

Mallory and her scrawny, pale, younger brother, Rudy, usually waited for the bus each morning in an impressive shelter at the end of their drive. Not this morning however. As the bus slowed, Chris spotted Mallory up the lane, with a group of girlfriends in front of the house. They seemed to be examining big sheets of bristle board. Three or four other cars were parked in Mallory's drive, and several parents were chatting with Mallory's mother on the porch. Floyd Balzer and a couple of buddies were carrying equipment from the porch to Floyd's pickup. So why was everyone getting a drive to school?

Chris suddenly felt sick. Oh crap, Social Studies! The sheets of bristle board: they were posters! He had a major class project due for Social Studies that day. Starting with afternoon class and for the next several days, every student in grade twelve was supposed to make an oral presentation with visual aids, and Chris had completely forgotten. He couldn't even remember the topic of the assignment because it had been given out at the beginning of term, and no one had reminded him since. How could they? He never talked to anyone. The only thing he remembered for sure was that the project counted for half the term mark.

Class projects like posters and models and booklets were always crap and a complete waste of time, but everyone played the stupid game anyway, and the only thing worse than presenting something utterly ridiculous was having nothing at all to present, which was what Chris had—nothing. Chris never made much of an effort in school and his grades were the proof, but he'd never before ignored an

assignment entirely, and having nothing at all to present was bound to draw unwanted attention.

For the rest of the ride into town, Mallory Dahlman was the furthest thing from Chris's mind. He cast about frantically for some sort of topic he could throw together in time for class. He vaguely remembered the assignment had something to do with the role of ceremony in different cultures because that was what Grade 12 Social Studies was all about, cultures and how they work. He remembered with a smile Mr. Duncan had recently shown the class an old filmstrip on coming-of-age rituals in Borneo; the teacher had practically lost control of the class during the show. Chris's presentation should probably focus on some ritual or other. All right, good start. And if he'd got the topic wrong, he'd apologize, say he'd misunderstood, then sit down and shut up. Good strategy; it had worked before.

Okay, so what ritual, what society? The only stuff Chris had been reading lately was Edgar Allen Poe. He always went back to Poe when he was feeling particularly dark. Last night he'd read *A Premature Burial* for the umpteenth time. Was there something in that? The editor's introduction to Poe's tale described how people in the nineteenth century were terrified of being buried alive, and this gave Chris an idea.

As soon as the bus got to school, he headed for the squat brick extension at the side of *Bemishstock Secondary*. It housed both the town and the school libraries, merged a few years ago to save money, and, as luck would have it, the library opened at eight a.m. Chris had twenty minutes before the first bell to find a few sources, and, with a free period mid-morning and lunch hour, he might just have time to throw some kind of presentation together.

Sure enough, the library had the same edition of Poe stories as his own, and a quick review gave him some of the detail needed to write a text. Then he flipped through the card catalogue for anything on graveyards and funerals, and

amazingly, he found a lavishly illustrated book on funeral practices around the world and another on body snatching in Scotland. He probably could have found better material, time permitting, but he wasn't looking for quality, just quantity, and with these three books, he could weave together all the bull needed. He checked out the books and hurried to class.

For the next ninety minutes, through Chemistry and Math, Chris didn't hear a word as he scanned the books concealed on his lap. At ten o'clock, he ran back to the library, found a quiet spot, and began scribbling. Half an hour later, he'd filled four pages.

Next, a poster. He flipped through the book on funerals and found an illustration of the embalming process. He loved its ghoulish complexity even if it had nothing whatsoever to do with the topic. Then, in the book on body snatching, he found a bizarre picture of a cage used in the nineteenth century to protect coffins from grave robbers. Although tempted to rip out both pictures, he just couldn't, so he forked over the cash for photocopies. Two pictures wouldn't fill a sheet of bristle board, no matter how large he might make the labelling, he needed more. Then he had a stroke of genius: *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Poe's *Premature Burial* had been filmed in 1962 by legendary B-movie director, Roger Corman, one of Chris's all-time favorites. If he could find back issues of *Famous Monsters* from the '60s, he might have all the pictures he needed. He proofed his text in English class, and then, when the bell rang for lunch, headed downtown.

At a tiny family-owned pharmacy sandwiched between two closed shops, Chris bought glue, a marker, and the one remaining sheet of bristle board in the store. Pink, just great. He asked the shopkeeper if anyone in town sold old magazines, and the pharmacist suggested *Marty's*.

Then, just as Chris finished paying, the pharmacist said, "Hey, you're the kid from the newspaper! What you said about our town! Son of a bitch, get the hell out

of my store!” Other customers waiting in line also began cursing and yelling at him.

Chris grabbed the supplies and ran.

*Marty's* was one of several dingy shops on Main Street selling used clothing, old furniture, and housewares. As soon as Chris stepped through the door, he saw the enormous stacks of magazines: *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Playboy*, and an entire box of *Famous Monsters*. He rifled through the box and found a special edition no less, entirely devoted to Corman's masterpiece, and the issue was packed with pictures of victims in their sealed coffins screaming their guts out.

He paid for the magazine, raced back to the library, borrowed some scissors from the reference desk, and quickly crafted a poster. The final product was a work of art, a ghastly, tacky work of art, and with just minutes to spare, he left the library, raced into the school and headed for his locker to put away the project until class. That's when it happened. He crashed straight into Mallory Dahlman.

\* \* \* \*

He didn't hit her hard, and he managed to drop his own stuff in time to catch Mallory before she fell. “Oh, I'm so sorry,” he blustered, half expecting her to scream and for Floyd Balzer's huge paws to grab him by the neck.

Mallory was alone, just coming out of the washroom or something, and after she regained her balance, she smiled.

“That's okay, Chris. It is Chris, isn't it?”

“Uh, yeah. I'm so sorry. It's just that I forgot about our assignment, and I was....”

“Is this your project?” She picked up the fallen poster.

“Yeah, weird huh?” he said.

She read the poster's title aloud, “*Funeral Fears.*” She was quiet for a

moment, and then said, "I like it." There was that wicked twinkle.

"I couldn't come up with anything else."

"It's funny because mine is kind of on the same topic."

"It is? On burying people alive?"

"Well, not quite. It's on funerals."

That shadow behind the mask again. "Really? That's amazing!"

"It's like we're a team, like we're supposed to help each other." Mallory leaned forward, and with a grin, said softly, "I have an idea. Let's make a pact. I'll say nice things about your presentation, if you'll say nice things about mine. Okay?"

"Okay, sure!"

"People," a teacher called from down the hall, "the bell's rung." When the teacher realized he was speaking to Mallory Dahlman, he turned all sweet and said, "We don't want to be late for class, do we, Mallory?"

"No, sir," she said in the singsong voice that drove Chris wild. Then she turned and gave Chris a sly smile. "See you in class, Christopher."

Chris was left standing slack-jawed until the teacher called to him again, this time in a different tone, "Nobody's going to wait for you, Chandler." Chris spun about, scraped gum off the padlock, opened the locker, and pushed his poster and essay inside, all the while muttering to himself, "Mallory thinks we're a team!"

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you," Mr. Duncan said as kids piled their projects on his desk and shuffled to their seats. "Looks like everyone finished on time. Good."

Close one.

"Quite a mix," the teacher said as he glanced through the pile. "Amish barn raisings, Papal masses, heavens, even the blessing of the fishing fleet, good stuff. Your oral presentation is as important as your visual aids, however, we'd best get started." Mr. Duncan set up an easel at the front of the room and then shuffled

through the projects in search of a first victim.

“Remember, I want to hear you talk about the importance of ceremony in maintaining social cohesion in the culture you’ve chosen to discuss.”

What the hell did that mean? Then, with a jolt, Chris realized his pink poster had caught Mr. Duncan’s eye. Sure enough, Duncan pulled it from the stack and said with a note of bewilderment, “I think we’ll begin with Mr. Chandler.”

A huge laugh went up from the class when the teacher placed the pink poster on the easel. “Mr. Chandler?”

Chris remained slumped in his chair, head rolled back, eyes closed. He sensed this was some sort of crossroads.

“You *are* ready aren’t you, Mr. Chandler?”

“Yeah sure, I’m ready.” Chris dragged himself toward the front of the class.

“Are you ill, Mr. Chandler?”

“I’m fine.” He turned to face the class and there was Mallory Dahlman, sitting immediately in front—and she was smiling at him. Chris’s heart skipped a beat. At him! And as she slowly crossed her legs, she winked! Oh god, it was like she was actually coming on to him!

He smiled back, a big dumb smile, took a deep breath, drew himself up, and with great self-assurance, announced, “I want to talk about the place of the funeral in nineteenth-century England. More specifically, I want to discuss the two terrible fears which gripped Victorian society and which have continued to shape funeral rituals down to our present day. I speak of premature burial on the one hand and of body snatching on the other.”

“Wait, what?” Mr. Duncan blurted out.

“I’m going to talk about premature burial and body snatching in the nineteenth century....”

“Yes, I heard you, but neither topic has anything at all to do with this

assignment.”

Normally at this point, Chris would have acquiesced, apologized for getting the assignment wrong, asked for a few days to make corrections, and returned to his seat without another word. Not today however. Not with Mallory sitting right in front of him, watching him, the object of her rapt attention. He was going to give the performance of his life, even if it killed him.

“Oh, I think it has,” Chris replied with complete confidence, “and that’s what I’ll show, if you’ll let me continue.”

“The assignment was to examine the role of public ceremony in one of the world’s great cultures,” Mr. Duncan said with growing irritation.

“The funeral ritual in any era is filled with symbolism and significance for the host culture, is it not?” Chris asked in a grand rhetorical flourish. “I propose to look at a subset of such rituals, and examine the impact widespread fear of premature burial and grave robbery has had on Western culture.”

“But this assignment is for Social Studies, not History...”

“Sir, I don’t think you ever said the culture we examine had to be a present-day culture.” Actually, Chris had no idea whether this was true, but the bluff worked.

“No, perhaps not, but...”

“And I’m sure you’ll agree the nineteenth century, with its Victorian morality and its penchant for grand industrial enterprise and exotic scientific exploration, was one of the shaping and most significant cultural epochs of all time.” No one ever said Christopher Chandler couldn’t string a line of bull if he had to. It’s just that normally he tried to say nothing at all.

Mallory Dahlman put her hand up. You could have knocked Chris over with a feather.

The teacher seemed almost grateful for Mallory’s intervention.

“Mr. Duncan, sir, I’m interested in hearing what Chris has to say about funerals



because I'm also going to talk about funerals as cultural ceremony." Then with a smile aimed directly at Chris, she added, "Our two presentations may complement each other in some interesting ways."

Chris was bowled over by Mallory's support, and so it seemed was the rest of the class—everyone except Floyd Balzer. Chris couldn't help noticing that Floyd, sitting in the back row, had drawn himself up in his chair. If looks could kill....

After Mallory's comment, a couple of students called out, "Let him finish, sir."

"Quiet, please. Oh, all right. I'll allow Mr. Chandler to continue, for the moment anyway, since it's clear he has nothing else to present."

Whoops from the class. Chris saw Floyd Balzer slam his fist down on a book.

"Thank you," Chris said with a small nod to the teacher, as if Mr. Duncan had acceded to the inescapable logic of Chris's argument and acknowledged his moral high ground. He also smiled at Mallory, and no one including Balzer could have missed that.

Amazing, what a great start!

But thereafter, he had only crap.

He blustered on for a few minutes about how fascinated people in the nineteenth century had been with premature burial. *Penny dreadfuls* with their gruesome etchings, and public lectures with their ghastly slides, all gloried in the horrific details of every patient mistaken for dead. "Imagine," Chris suggested to the class, "waking up in a dark and tiny box, where no one can hear your screams, and your shredded and bloodied fingernails can make not a scratch in the wood just inches above your face." There were shudders and gasps from several girls.

"You'd never get me in some coffin," a guy muttered.

"Wasn't your choice. People thought you were dead," Chris replied. "Anyway, people were scared enough to spend their own money to protect themselves from premature burial. You could buy coffins with bells in them."

Some clown called out, “If Dalton rang his bell, nobody would answer!” to a few nervous chuckles.

“Or you could hire a guard to sit by your grave and listen for your cries. You could even buy a grave with lights and a staircase in it. People were so upset by all the stories in the *penny dreadfuls*, they organized a *Society for the Prevention of People Being Buried Alive* and pressured their politicians for legislation.”

“Yeah but how many times did somebody really get buried alive?” a girl asked.

“Okay, maybe not often, but there were enough stories in the papers about corpses doing weird things to scare the hell out of people.”

“Doing like what kinds of weird things?”

“Well, okay, let’s say you were worried about your loved one and you dug up their corpse. What did you find? Maybe a build-up of gases in the chest made you think the rotting thing before you was still breathing. Or maybe the tendons in the legs and arms had tightened and twisted to make it appear they’d been struggling to escape their coffin. Or maybe the gases and fluids in their stomach and intestines were suddenly expelled from, you know...like everywhere.”

The class exploded in groans, and laughter, and exclamations of ‘oh sick,’ and ‘so gross!’

“And that actually happened! Of course, the papers only had to report a couple such cases to make everyone scared silly.”

By now Chris was having the time of his life. He was on a roll, and that was when he blundered.

“One of the coolest cases happened in 1832. A doctor from Zanzibar, who’d served in the British Army, was hung for drugging his wife and her lover and then burying them alive. The papers were filled with horrific descriptions of the terrible injuries they’d suffered as they’d struggled, without success, to escape their coffins.”

“Zanzibar?” called Floyd Balzer from the back of the room.

Without thinking, Chris said, “Don’t worry, Floyd, someone will show you where it is.” He hadn’t really intended the insult; it just came out.

“I know Zanzibar,” Floyd said. “Freddy Mercury’s from Zanzibar.”

“You know *Queen*?” He probably should have left it there, only he was genuinely surprised. Chris was a huge fan himself of Freddy Mercury and *Queen*, but Floyd Balzer? He would have expected Balzer to be a fan of *Iron Maiden* or *Metallica*, but never *Queen*. Chris grinned for a second and added, “You know Freddy called *Queen* the bitchiest band on earth.” A few people sniggered. “So is Freddy why you wear the muscle shirt?” More people laughed. “And why you’re trying to grow the moustache?”

The whole class roared, even Mallory!

Floyd turned purple. He slumped in his chair and glared at Chris.

“Mr. Chandler,” Mr. Duncan shouted over the laughter, “are you done?”

“Sorry, sir, no, not quite. I still have to talk about body snatching,” and he tried to get back on track. Corpses, he explained, were by the early nineteenth century in such huge demand among medical students in university towns across Europe that families had to lock away the coffins of their loved ones in cages and post watchmen near their graves to prevent their deceased from being stolen and sold for dissection.

“A *Mortsafe*...” Mr. Duncan said.

“What...?”

“They were called *mortsafes*, the cages used to protect coffins.” Mr. Duncan pointed to the strange cage on Chris’s pink poster. “We had lots of them in Edinburgh, where I grew up.” Chris had never before heard that term. “And in Medieval Europe, graveyard watchmen were called *Mortsafemen*,” Mr. Duncan continued. He then turned to Chris, and asked pointedly, “But you knew that,

didn't you? No?"

Mr. Duncan had a look of such irritation. "Look, Mr. Chandler, all this..."—and swept a hand across the poster—"may be entertaining for the ghoulish in the class, but what does any of it have to do with the place of the funeral ritual in society?"

Chris replied with some sputtered nonsense about the impact that the fear of premature burial and body snatching had had on the public. In response to the hysteria, Parliament had passed laws requiring death be officially certified by a doctor. "The result," Chris said, "is that, today, most people die in hospital, alone, at night, hooked up to some sort of machine. We no longer die surrounded by family. Death is no longer a communal experience. It has become foreign to us, terrifying." Wanting to end on a dramatic note, Chris announced, with a sweeping gesture, "Death is now under the control of doctors. Instead of it being the most human experience, it has become alien."

"So, that's it? You're done?" Mr. Duncan asked.

Chris nodded and started back to his desk. Mallory touched his arm and said softly, "You were great." No one in the class missed her gesture, and Chris grinned like an idiot.

Back at his seat, Chris covered his eyes as if contemplating all the pain of the world. Inside, however, he beamed like a kid at the sensation of Mallory's hand on his arm. Then he heard Floyd Balzer from two rows away, "You're a dead man, Chandler." And the realization of what he'd actually accomplished with his ridiculous performance sank in.

Two or three more presentations followed. Chris paid little attention as his anxiety grew. He'd humiliated Floyd Balzer in front of his girlfriend and the entire class; he'd even questioned Floyd's macho image. What the hell had he been thinking! At the bell, Chris tried to get out of the room as fast as he could, but Mr.

Duncan called him back.

The teacher waited until everyone else was gone before starting in on Chris.

“Look, Mr. Chandler, I know you’re getting a rough ride because of your father’s job. I’m not blind so let me be clear. I have absolutely no interest in the plant or the town or your father. I am only interested in how you perform in my class.

“I’ve no doubt you’re quite bright, Mr. Chandler, but you’re doing nothing to help yourself in my class or anywhere else for that matter, with your snide remarks, your long-suffering attitude, and your clownish performance today. I can’t speak for the rest of this school or this town. I can assure you, however, you will always get fair treatment from me, provided you make a decent effort to learn. Clear?”

Chris was struck dumb. All he could do was nod.

“You can go now.” Mr. Duncan turned away, then asked, “If you’d like to know more about *Mortsafemen*, I could lend you a book.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” Mr. Duncan collected the assignments and locked them away in a cabinet in the corner.

“Sure,” Chris said, and left the room, still rattled by the reasonableness of Mr. Duncan’s remarks. And after Chris’s ridiculous performance. *Oh crap!*

\* \* \* \*

Malcolm Duncan watched Chris walk away. *Good looking boy, if only he’d get rid of that hood and stand up straight. And those eyes!*

From somewhere inside his head, a voice bellowed back at him, *Oh Christ, what the hell are you doing?*

“I’m not doing anything,” he whispered. “I just offered the boy a book.”

*Well, don’t get involved! You’re an idiot. Gabe Boucher warned you about that*

*boy. He's trouble.*

Duncan packed up his briefcase. “More likely he’s troubled. The whole school treats him badly. I’m just trying to be a good teacher! It’s my job. Find something that interests him. Stimulate his intellect. Help him get the chip off his shoulder. With my help, Chandler might accomplish something.”

*Stimulate his intellect, my ass! Okay, so he might have something besides looks, but don't kid yourself into thinking you're actually interested in a student's well-being. Not again!*

Malcolm Duncan had no illusions. He wasn't in this job because he cared about teaching, or young minds, or much of anything else these days. He was in the job because his undistinguished academic career at a middling university in Scotland had come to an ignominious end in a scandal involving a male student, and he was hiding out on the Maine coast, trying to finish a book on Catholic ritual that he'd been picking at for decades—ever since he'd left the priesthood—in a vain attempt to recover something of his self-esteem. After getting sacked, he'd needed a job, any job, and as a kindness, an old acquaintance from their seminary days together had offered Duncan this part-time position teaching high school social studies.

*You're making headway, so don't screw things up again,* the voice in his head bellowed. *Besides, you've already taken on one troubled student! You're on thin ice with that kid, you can't afford any more entanglements.*

Still, as Malcolm watched Chris disappear down the stairs, he couldn't help thinking there was something intriguing about the Chandler boy, maybe even something of his own younger self—articulate, independent, curious, intense, a young man with a spark and perhaps some promise—now poised to throw it all away.

\* \* \* \*

Chris expected the worst as he got on the bus. Neither Balzer nor Mallory was aboard, however. Then he remembered, Floyd had driven his truck to school. Even so, word had already gone round the school that Chandler had crossed Balzer and was going to get the crap kicked out of him. Everyone had heard about the layoffs earlier that day at the plant, and there were kids on the bus going home to some pretty desperate parents, so it was open season on Chris.

As usual, he was tossed off the bus in the middle of nowhere. The shouts from every window seemed more vitriolic than ever. The only person not hurling abuse at him was the Willard girl. She seemed genuinely concerned, but he could have been mistaken.

Standing there, in the middle of nowhere, it occurred to him that he might have been set up. Had Balzer arranged with the Gobbler to toss Chris off the bus somewhere isolated where he could be beaten to a pulp without witnesses? Chris half expected Balzer's truck to suddenly come barrelling down the road with the entire hockey team and their sticks all crammed in the back. Taking no chances, he left the road and headed through the woods in the direction of the abandoned rail line.

An hour later, Chris was seated on the fence, by the two Willard graves, in the cold and gloom, cursing himself for insulting Floyd. He rocked back and forth, hands clutching the top rail for balance. Head bowed and eyes closed, he tried to quiet the pounding in his chest and the icy dread in his gut. All he'd had to do was keep quiet, but no. "Christ! What an idiot!" he bellowed over the wind and the surf. "What the hell was I thinking?"

He opened his eyes and stared down at the two small headstones. "That's the trouble. I wasn't thinking." He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Oh well, what's done was done; he couldn't change that now. He'd just have to see what tomorrow brought, and be ready. A cold drizzle began to fall. Okay, then why

should he go quietly? If he had to go down, then maybe he should go down swinging, maybe take a knife or a crowbar to school...maybe even his dad's gun.

\* \* \* \*

Getting a corpse *out* of a grave was a lot more difficult than putting it *in*, and this one was going to be more difficult than most. Against all reason, on such a bitter November afternoon, the Coyne family had insisted on watching their mother's grave being filled. He hadn't been able to cover the pit with plywood and a few inches of soil to create the illusion it had been duly closed. Normally, he could have left a new grave open like that for several days and then removed the body at a more convenient time. But not this one. No, tonight, he had to get the earth out of Mrs. Coyne's grave fast, before it compacted and froze like concrete, and he had to be careful doing it.

Six o'clock, and there was still traffic on the nearby main road. He worked in the dark, in a biting wind, and in silence. Only the thought that Mrs. Coyne would make a good specimen kept him at it in spite of the risk and the miserable cold. As he dug away at the grave, his mind wandered.

It occurred to him that every grave has similar layers. First, there are the flowers and the gifts of remembrance. Then there's the fill, sometimes clean, but more often in an old cemetery like this one, the earth is mixed with debris from other graves: shards of bone, bits of casket, hinges, locks, and the like. Then there's a layer of grave diggers' detritus: cigarette butts, chip bags, sandwich wrappers, and plastic cups. Then there are the tokens of affection placed on the casket or dropped in the pit by family and friends: the framed photos, the notes, the dolls, the trinkets, and so on. Then, if there is any kind of water course in the cemetery, there's all the fetid ooze that has leached from the adjoining graves, ooze filled with God knows what. And then finally, there's the casket.

Families might like to believe their loved ones lie cocooned in silk in some fine



wooden box. The truth is cheap laminate peels away within weeks, the pressed board swells, the box ruptures from the weight of the earth, and then it simply crumbles away. After that, in the damp earth, the satin lining and the clothes rot quickly until the corpse is, at its end, as it had been at its beginning—lying naked, on its back, in a pool of filth.

Fats and fluids leach away from the body first. Then the flesh shrinks about the bones. If the soil is dry, minerals draw moisture from the flesh even more rapidly and the corpse shrivels and becomes leathery. In damp soil, the corpse swells, ruptures and its fluids stream into the surrounding soil to mingle with runoff from other graves. Either way, in a matter of months the shrivelled remains are entombed, not in some fine piece of furniture, but in an envelope of polluted soil and every sort of wriggling insect—insects which will labor on until all that remains of a loved one are bones, picked clean. Dust to dust? There had never been anything even remotely resembling dust at the bottom of any grave he'd ever opened!

He'd never understood how people could let their loved ones lie for years in such corruption. It had always seemed more dignified to treat the departed the way people in Medieval Europe had honored theirs. They'd put their loved ones in the earth only long enough for nature to clean the flesh from their bones. They'd even hastened the process by pouring water over the grave at regular intervals. Then, after two or three years, they'd disinter the bones, wash them, and place them lovingly in a charnel house, there to rest, clean and dry, until the end of time.

If he'd ever felt the need to justify his activity, he could easily have convinced himself he was liberating people's loved ones from the ignominy of sleeping in a cesspool. No rationalization was needed however; science was all the justification required.

At last, he broke through the flimsy lid of Mrs. Coyne's coffin, widened the

hole with a crowbar, reached in and grabbed her by the hair and pulled hard. She emerged from the jagged hole like a long, gray sausage wrapped in pink lace. He quickly tore the dress and undergarments from the body and pushed them back into the box. Then he took a large sack from the edge of the grave and stuffed the corpse inside. He heaved the sack up and out of the pit and climbed out himself. For the next twenty minutes, he refilled the grave, tidied the site, and hid his tools, then slung the sack over his shoulder and headed out of the cemetery.

He took off at a run across the lot, Mrs. Coyne bouncing against his back. Twenty yards, ten, and then he was clear of the asphalt and back in the dark woods again. He walked down to the abandoned tracks that ran through town and along the bay shore. There he found his cycle, under a tarp on a small spur.

An hour or so and he'd be home. He was starving; goddamned woman better have dinner ready. It had been a productive night, however, and Mrs. Coyne would make a good specimen, of that he was confident. He'd examined her neck and spine while she'd been in the funeral parlor, and both were in good shape.

Movement! Up ahead, something in the long grass at the side of the rail bed. An animal? Coyote maybe? They could be trouble if they caught the scent of death. He stopped pedalling, turned off his lamp, and peered into the darkness. There, something moved again, near the old Willard family graveyard.

Then he smiled: the Chandler boy.

\* \* \* \*

It had to be well past supper, perhaps even past his parents' bedtime. Chris had stayed at the Willard graveyard far later than usual. He guessed his dad was happy about that. Of course his parents knew where he was since he hung out at the graveyard practically every night. Besides, they didn't much like the inevitable arguments whenever Chris came home on time, so they probably welcomed the peace and quiet. And there would certainly have been a battle tonight. If Chris had

tried to explain what had happened at school, his dad would have blamed him, and he sure as hell would have stopped Chris taking a weapon to school for protection. He'd just have to stay out here until everyone was asleep. He pulled up his coat collar against the drizzle and chilly air.

A noise, faint, far away. A kind of squeal, like a door hinge or some idiot with a squeaky voice trying to stifle a laugh.

Chris's blood ran cold. *Oh crap, Balzer is here, with his buddies!*

His mind raced. *No, not likely. Balzer couldn't possibly know I'd be outside this late.*

*Okay, so were they up at the house? Maybe they're planning to break in, maybe rough up my dad? Again, no. That would be too stupid, even for Floyd Balzer. Perhaps it isn't Balzer. Maybe it's the guys dad laid off! Maybe they're going to egg the house or spray paint something...or worse! Christ, if they start a fire! The Willard place will go up like a bomb!*

*Oh hell!* He had to warn his family!

The noise grew louder. Metal scraping against metal, and sort of regular like some kind of machine. Not so far away this time, and certainly not up at the house. It seemed to be coming from along the shore.

And now a light! Faint, like a penlight, moving slowly toward him along the old rail line.

Chris slipped off the fence, moved quietly through the tall grass, and waited. The light and the sound drew closer still. For a moment the moon peeped through the heavy cloud and Chris glimpsed the approaching device. Some sort of four-wheeled cycle squeaking rhythmically was being pedalled slowly by someone along the rail line, its axles as wide as the rails, and its four wheel rims shaped to grip the inside edge of the tracks. To add to this peculiar sight, the cycle was hauling a shallow wagon with two similar wheels, and in the wagon, a heap of

something.

Chris was so relieved to discover he was not under attack that he almost stepped out of his cover to greet the rider. Then he recognized the silhouette and dropped back into the grass. The goatman.

The bike stopped for a moment. The rider switched off the small handle-bar lamp and sat there, not moving, as if waiting for something. Then after several seconds, he turned the lamp back on and resumed pedaling.

*What the hell is the old man up to?* The strange machine trundled past the graveyard and away into the night. Chris slipped out of the grass and watched the goatman disappear in the darkness. *What the hell...why not see what he's doing? Never been down the tracks in that direction, and besides, the walk might help to warm up.*

Twenty, maybe thirty minutes later, the cycle came to a halt. The rider climbed off the bike, wiped his brow, stared up and down the rails, and smiled. Chris remained concealed in the weeds and long grass crowding the edge of the abandoned line. He was pretty sure he hadn't been seen.

The goatman's small house was a hundred feet or so up from the tracks, . Silhouetted against the night sky, the place looked like it was leaning to one side. One dim light shone through a tiny window near the back corner. Suddenly, an arc lamp, high up on a pole at the corner of the house, came on illuminating the back door, some rickety old steps, the backyard, and an outbuilding maybe fifty feet back of the house.

A tangle of abandoned farm equipment and rusted tools filled the yard, and a blackened metal barrel stood in the center of a large patch of charred ground. The outbuilding wasn't large, not much more than a double garage, but it had a covered porch, raised just a few inches out of the dirt and cluttered with old milking stools, rusted wash tubs, a broken bench, a wheelbarrow, and what appeared to be an

enormous meat grinder.

The back door of the house flew open and a squat, little woman shrieked, “I’ve got a gun!”

“It’s me, you stupid cow!” the goatman shouted as he lifted the bundle from the wagon.

“Well, your dinner is ready.” Judging by their accents, neither the goatman nor the woman was from Maine; from England most likely.

“Unlock the barn!”

The woman disappeared into the house, then reappeared with a large ring of keys. She stomped down the steps and across the yard to the outbuilding, rattled a lock, pulled open the double doors, and switched on the lights inside. Goats began to bleat in chorus.

“Get them out of there! Put them in the shed!” The goatman arranged the sack on his shoulders and started up the path.

The woman shuffled the dozen goats across the yard, around the corner of the house and off into the darkness. Moments later, she reappeared and shouted, “What’s that you’ve got?”

“It’s for my work,” the goatman grumbled as he wrestled his load across the yard.

“Oh Christ no, not another one. I’m sick of this.”

“Shut up. Stay out of it.”

The old lady retreated into the house and slammed the door.

At the barn door, the goatman shifted the sack on his shoulder again, and for an instant, something poked out of the top. *Oh, jeez, is that a leg?*

Chris must have gasped or cursed or something, because the goatman turned to look back down the path. The old man strained to see into the darkness beyond the pool of light. “Who’s there? What do you want? Are you spying on me?” he

shouted.

Chris broke from the grass and raced back along the tracks in the direction of home.

“Maude! Turn out the light, turn out the light!” By the time the light went out, however, Chris had already disappeared around a bend and into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Gillian heard Chris running toward her before she saw him through the mist and the gloom. When at last he came into view, he was winded, looking scared. Without giving herself away, she watched him bend forward to catch his breath, then draw himself up, leave the tracks and start up through the orchard toward the house. After a moment, Chris stopped again and looked back down the rail line. He appeared to be listening for something, but what? What was he up to? What was he afraid of?

Gillian wasn't outside in the dark and the damp simply to spy on Chris Chandler, not really. She wanted to help him. Over dinner, she'd come to a difficult decision. She was deathly afraid for him, and for that reason, had decided to share with Chris a secret she'd never told another soul, a secret that could deeply wound a former friend...if it was misused. But what choice did she have? And if she couldn't trust Chris with the secret, well then....

After she'd cleaned up the dinner dishes and helped her grandfather to bed, Gillian had left the house saying she needed some air before getting down to her homework. She'd expected to find Chris at the graveyard because he was always there. Not that night however; his absence confused and concerned her. For no particular reason, she'd hung around, waiting, and hoping he might still show up. Then she'd heard footsteps racing along the gravel rail bed.

In truth, this wasn't the first time she'd spied on Chris Chandler. She'd been doing so for a while. Not because she was nosy or anything; she wasn't looking for

secrets or ways to hurt him. She wanted desperately to understand him. Wherever and whenever she saw him—on the bus, at school, walking along the road or in the woods, in the largest crowds, or sitting by the graves—he seemed completely alone. As the weeks had passed, he morphed before her eyes, from a brooding, selfish idiot whom she could barely stand, then into a sad and lonely victim who took all the abuse the idiots at school heaped on him without so much as a whimper, and finally into a quiet, complex and strangely thoughtful soul whose pain nearly broke her heart.

So tonight she was going to offer Chris Chandler her friendship, and her help. She stepped from the shadows.

\* \* \* \*

As Chris walked through the orchard, he listened for sounds of the goatman's pursuit. Nothing. Then—

“Hi.”

His heart leapt into his throat.

“It's just me,” someone said softly, “Gillian.”

“Gillian?”

“Gillian Willard.” She appeared through the mist.

“Oh, yeah right. What are you doing out here?”

“Well, waiting for you.”

“For me, why?”

“Because I heard what happened at school today.”

“And I suppose you'll be happy like the rest of them when Balzer and his friends beat the crap out of me.”

“No, not at all. I hope everything turns out okay for you.”

“Oh...” Chris was taken aback by her apparent concern.

“Would you like to sit for a while?” she asked.

“Okay.”

“Over here.” She walked off into the mist. Chris followed.

Deep in the orchard, they came to two old Adirondack chairs. She wiped the damp from their slats with a rag from her coat pocket, and they both sat.

“My dad and I used to come here every evening. There’s a beautiful view down through the trees to the bay.”

“Huh.” Then silence.

“You know,” Gillian said, then hesitated, like she was weighing something painful before going on; and then out it all came. “Floyd Balzer can go nuts sometimes. He once almost killed a guy, one of his closest friends in fact, in the locker room at school after some game. He beat the guy senseless, and Floyd never explained why. The boy’s parents wanted Floyd arrested, but his dad got the police to drop the charges.”

“You’re not making me feel much better.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just you need to know some stuff about Floyd if you’re going to take him on.”

“Like how crazy he is?” Sitting there, in the dark and the damp and the cold, barely able to see each other, it seemed weird to be talking to this strange girl now, after their months of silence.

“No...like his dad beats him, I mean really beats him.”

“He does?”

“Yes. All the time, ever since Floyd was a little kid. And because his dad does, Floyd is so screwed up. He can go absolutely nuts if he isn’t afraid of you. If you threaten him back, however, he may crumble, and if you tell him that his dad’s business will suffer if he starts anything with you, then I think he’ll leave you alone. Floyd is terrified of his dad.”

“How do you know his dad beats him?”



“My dad and Floyd’s used to be friends, and my dad drove for *Balzer Trucking* in the winter. Then one day my dad saw Floyd’s dad beating him. My dad tried to stop Mr. Balzer and they got into a terrible fight, and my dad pounded him...I mean really walloped him. Dad was fired, and Mr. Balzer made sure my dad never got another job from anyone else in town. Even so, Dad never told anyone else what he’d seen. I guess that’s why Floyd doesn’t pick on me or let anyone else, because he knows that I know, and he couldn’t stand it if I told.”

“Then why are you telling me?”

“Because...because you look like you could use a friend.”

For an instant, an icy gust off the water shifted the mist, and light from the back porch fell across the girl’s face. His gaze rested on her pretty face.

“You aren’t afraid being friendly with me might make things difficult for you?” he asked.

“Do I look like I care what others think of me?”

At first, Chris didn’t know how to react. Then Gillian chuckled, and he did too.

“You can use what I told you to get Floyd off your back. You just can’t tell anyone else. Floyd is an ass, but it would kill him if people knew what a monster his dad is.”

“Maybe we *should* tell somebody else,” Chris said, “to get Floyd some help.” If someone had told Chris even five minutes ago that he would ever want to help Floyd Balzer....

“No! No, you can’t. I once asked Floyd if I could tell our minister. He started crying and begged me not to. He made me promise.”

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Gillian asked, “Where were you coming from just now? You looked sort of scared.”

“What do you know about the goatman who lives down the tracks?”

“Dr. Meath?”

“For real, he’s a doctor?”

“A chiropractor from England. Sometimes people go to him, you know, for sore muscles and stuff, because he’s real cheap and he’s local. Even my granddad goes to him when the pain in his back gets too bad. You’d have to be pretty desperate to let him treat you, though. Have you caught a whiff of him yet?”

“I saw him riding some sort of machine along the rails earlier this evening...and I followed.”

“Yeah, the bike. Dr. Meath has a part-time job in town, and he sometimes rides it to work.”

They sat in silence once again. Then Gillian smiled and said, “We should be going in, we’re getting soaked.”

They got up and started toward the house. “Hey, nice talking to you, Gillian, and thanks.”

“Yes,” she said with a smile, “but can I tell you one more thing, if that’s okay?”

“What’s that?”

“Mallory Dahlman. Be careful.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I guess she’s pretty, if you like that big boob look and all, but Mallory Dahlman can be dangerous. Please be careful around her.” She walked away into the night.

“Sure,” Chris said and headed for the door. Careful? Yeah, right. Dangerous was exactly what any guy was hoping for in a girlfriend. And as for the big boob look, well.... Then, just as he was about to open the back door, he turned and called to Gillian who was already at the corner of the house.

“Hey,” he whispered as loudly as he could into the mist.

“Yes?”

“What sort of part-time job?”

“Pardon?”

“The goatman, what sort of part-time work does he do?”

“He works at Brewster’s Funeral Home.”

## Chapter Four

Friday, November 15

Chris had an awful night. His skin crawled remembering what an ass he'd made of himself in Social Studies. He became breathless at the thought of Mallory's hand on his arm. Several scenarios for his impending confrontation with Floyd Balzer whirled about in his brain. And his stomach lurched at the image of that leg poking out of the goatman's sack.

Then there were the sounds through the wall.

He'd just nodded off when something woke him. On the other side of the paper-thin wall dividing his tiny room from the rest of the huge attic, he heard...what, movement? Faint, but something was definitely moving around in the enormous attic. In the two months he'd been sleeping in the tiny crawl space, Chris had imagined all sorts of noises, but he'd never actually been certain. Tonight, however, as he lay as still as death, he heard shuffling. Like someone was crawling...crawling across the wooden floor on the other side of the attic divide, crawling slowly...toward the door at the foot of the bed. Then...nothing. Chris froze, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for the sound to return. He stared into the darkness, toward the tiny door. Did it move? No. Merely shadows. And silence. After what seemed like an eternity, he fell once again into a troubled sleep.

\* \* \* \*

He woke late. His family was already moving about down below. He'd have to endure their conversation as he got ready for school. Even so, when his brother and sister started in on him, their questions were a shock.

“Did you have a fight at school?”

“Have you got a girlfriend?”

“What’s she like?”

“Why did you get into a fight?”

“You don’t go to my school,” Chris said. “How do you know anything happened?”

“Mommy and Daddy were talking at supper.”

Oh crap. Principal Dell must have called his parents about the screw-up in Social Studies, but that wouldn’t explain how his parents knew about Balzer and Mallory. However they’d heard, Chris had to get out of the house before the morning erupted in a shouting match, so he grabbed his school books and raced downstairs and out the door before his parents could intercept him.

He was already at the front corner of the house when his dad shouted from the back steps. “Christopher!”

Chris saw Gillian waiting up the lane, worry on her face. All the same, he stopped and walked back to his dad.

“A word before you go, son.”

No bellowing; that was a surprise in itself.

“Ed Balzer came to my office late yesterday afternoon. He owns a trucking company that hauls for the plant. I think his son is in your class? Well, I thought Balzer wanted to see me about the layoffs, but no. He wanted to talk about his son. He said you’d upset his boy by making a move on his girlfriend, and he wanted me to know that he had his son’s back. As he put it, ‘Anybody who crosses my son, crosses me.’ His way of saying whatever Balzer Junior intended to do to you would be okay with him.”

Just great! Chris’s own father was delivering death threats from his enemies.

“I don’t think Balzer expected me to respond. He’s a bully and everybody knows it. He caught me on a bad day, however. I slammed him into my office wall and...”

“You what?”

“Well, I charged at him, and he stumbled backward against the wall and slid down to the floor. I bent over him and yelled, ‘If your son so much as touches my son, I’ll immediately terminate your contract and order all your drivers off plant property. If he even looks crosswise at my son, I’ll cut you out of the closure settlement. You get me?’” Chris’s dad then chuckled. “It’s amazing how easily a bully crumbles when you call him out. Then Balzer and that huge beer gut of his got up and left my office without a word.”

Chris was struck dumb. Who was this person?

“I thought you should know, son.” His dad turned and walked back to the house.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you okay?” Gillian asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

They got on the bus and were met with the strangest silence. No cracks from the Gobbler, no bellowed insults from the kids. Just two dozen pairs of eyes watching Chris’s every move. Chris looked around the bus, something he’d never had the nerve to do before. Everyone seemed cowed. And there at the back, in the middle of his friends, sat Floyd Balzer. He was a mess: one eye swollen shut, a split lip, and an ear the size of a pork chop. Chris knew immediately what had happened—Floyd’s dad.

Gillian took her usual seat beside her friend Madelyn, and almost without thinking, Chris sat down right across the aisle. Gillian and Madelyn looked at each other in amazement. Then Gillian leaned across and whispered to Chris, “What’s happened?”

“Shove over,” Chris said. Gillian and Madelyn scrunched together to make room on the edge of their seat, and Chris slid in beside them.

“My father. He told Floyd’s dad that if Floyd started a fight with me, he’d immediately terminate Balzer Trucking’s contract with the plant.”

“So...you think...?”

“Sure, his father,” Chris whispered in Gillian’s ear so even Madelyn couldn’t hear him.

“Oh poor Floyd.” Gillian seemed genuinely concerned.

“Forgive me if I don’t feel quite the same.”

“Surely you can imagine how pitiful Floyd must feel, knowing his dad hated him enough to do that.”

Chris remembered all the times he’d thought about taking a swing at his own father, and he felt nauseous.

They rode in silence for a while before Chris moved back across the aisle. As he got up, he whispered, “Gillian, were you in the attic last night?”

“What?”

“I heard some noises in the attic near my room. Really late. Were you up there? It’s okay if you were.”

“No, I wasn’t,” she replied as if embarrassed by the idea. Then after a moment, she added, “...but maybe one of our cats?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

The rest of the ride passed without incident. Chris was kind of expecting something strange to happen when Mallory got on the bus and saw Floyd, but she was a no-show.

\* \* \* \*

The morning was even more bizarre. There were lots of glances in Chris’s direction and whispers behind cupped hands. Between periods, Gillian pulled him aside to report what Floyd was telling people.

“He’s saying that your father threatened to close the plant early if anyone

touches you. And he's also saying goons from the plant ambushed him when he went to meet his dad after school, and they beat him up on orders from your father."

"What goons?"

"That's just what he's saying."

"Don't I wish Dad had goons!"

The bell rang for lunch period. As Chris passed the Social Studies classroom heading for his locker, Mr. Duncan called to him.

"Mr. Chandler, I have that book on *Mortsafemen* if you're still interested."

"Yeah sure, thanks." Chris entered the classroom and went up to Mr. Duncan's desk. "Uh, would you have a minute, sir?" This was probably really stupid, but who else could he tell; and besides, Mr. Duncan had seemed sort of reasonable, yesterday anyway. So what did Chris have to lose? "Can I ask you something?"

"Is this about Floyd Balzer's injuries?"

"What? No, I don't know anything about that."

"So, not your father's goons?"

"My father doesn't have any goons."

"No, I didn't think so." Mr. Duncan smiled ruefully. "So what's this about?"

"It's going to sound weird, I mean really weird. Especially after my talk in class yesterday, but..."

"Yes?"

"Well, last night, late, I saw someone on the tracks behind our house. He had this big sack, and I think it may have been a body."

"A body? What kind of a body?"

"A body, a dead body."

"So you think you saw...what...a murder?"

"No, I don't think so, because the person I saw works at Brewster's Funeral



Parlor. Maybe he just stole the body?”

“Then you’re telling me you saw a grave robber,” Mr. Duncan said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Not exactly. Maybe it hadn’t been buried yet, so technically....”

“Is this a joke?”

“No. No I swear.”

“You’re telling me you saw somebody who works at the funeral home stealing one of their clients.”

“I know what I saw.”

“So now you don’t just *think* you saw a body, you *know* you did?”

“Well, I guess I could have been wrong, but I was pretty sure I saw a body. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

“You shouldn’t *do* anything. You can’t accuse people of stealing bodies when you have absolutely no proof, and you aren’t even sure what you saw.”

“Should I at least tell the police?”

“Ordinarily I’d say yes. In your case, however....”

“They won’t believe me.” Chris stood there, feeling like an idiot, like he was guilty of something when he was only trying to help. “This sucks!”

“Look, if you want, I’ll have a chat with the police chief sometime,” Mr. Duncan said. “Chief Boucher is a friend and we see each other socially from time to time.”

“That would be great!”

“I’ll ask if he’s heard anything unusual about...what...missing bodies?”

“Maybe just about the funeral home. That would be great.”

“See you after lunch then.”

“And thanks for the book.”

Chris dropped the book off at his locker, grabbed his sandwich, and headed out

of the school. No way was he going to eat in the lunchroom today. Normally, he had to put up with banana peels and apple cores being tossed at him. Today, with all the rumors about Floyd's injuries, the silence and the stares would be too annoying.

Chris felt kind of upbeat in the biting November air. The chat with Mr. Duncan was probably his first talk with a teacher in years that hadn't deteriorated into a war of words. He was encouraged at the prospect of having an ally among the teachers. Without thinking, he walked north up Main Street, away from the center of town.

Even before realizing what he'd done, Chris found himself outside the main gate of the town's nondenominational burial ground. The cemetery sprawled across several acres of rolling lawn overlooking Adinack Bay. Huge old elms dotted the grounds and a narrow lane meandered in a loop of sorts among the graves and the trees, over the knolls and through small gullies, before returning to the gate. Chris had been to the cemetery once or twice before, when he'd been trying to get away from the idiots in school.

He left the main road and walked through the gate. Crows cried as they turned in the steel-gray sky. Dead, dry leaves crunched beneath his feet. Across the grass and between the towering elms, he could see Brewster's Funeral Parlor. It bordered the cemetery along its north side.

A couple of employees, bundled against the cold, sat smoking and eating their lunch at a picnic table on a narrow gravel margin between the cemetery and funeral parlor parking lot. And sitting alone on an old kitchen chair near the woods at the far end of the parking lot was the goatman.

Meath ate a sandwich and stared down through the trees and out over the bay. Till now, Chris hadn't realized the Brewster property ran all the way down to the shore, which meant it backed onto the old train tracks. So if the goatman wanted to

steal a corpse, all he had to do was haul it out the back door, across the parking lot, and down to the tracks, then toss it onto his wagon, and pedal home.

But why wouldn't Meath just use his truck? Too noisy maybe, or because the cops might ticket the old rattletrap? The old man must have decided the bike was safer. No matter the reason for the bike, the point was Chris could indeed have glimpsed a body in Meath's sack.

For no particular reason, he decided to get a better look at the old man. He left the lane and crept among the gravestones. Just as Chris drew abreast of the goatman, he stumbled over a small stone footplate, twisted his ankle and sprawled across a particularly old and jagged gravestone. He let out a yelp and then a gasp as the wind was knocked out of him.

He lay still for a moment to catch his breath, then got to his feet painfully. Once up, he glanced through the trees. The goatman was staring right back at him. The old man smiled. Chris spun about and took off back to school as quickly as the painful ankle would allow.

\* \* \* \*

Chris had been sitting in his desk nursing his twisted ankle, his face buried in the book Mr. Duncan had given him. Mallory had come up alongside him without warning and bent down.

"I'm expecting you to say nice things about my presentation," she whispered. "And I've added some material just for you. You inspired me."

At the sound of her voice, Chris turned abruptly. Mallory's face was inches from his own, and the sight almost stopped his heart. For a moment, she remained in that position, smiling at Chris, looking into his eyes.

"I inspired you?" Chris said with a huge, goofy grin.

At the front of the class, Floyd Balzer was setting up two projectors and a screen for Mallory's presentation. He paused to look back at Mallory and Chris. In

Floyd's battered face, Chris read a mix of anger and confusion.

"All right everyone," Mr. Duncan said, "take your seats. We have four presentations to get through today, so we need to get started."

Mallory touched Chris's cheek and returned to her desk at the front of the class.

The first presentation was on baby showers and was filled with more giggles than substance. The second was on Jewish circumcision and made everyone, especially the boys in the class, quite uncomfortable. The third presentation, on the opening of Parliament in Great Britain, was excruciatingly dull, and all through it, the usual class buffoons shouted out jokes about queens and men in tights. Mr. Duncan was obviously losing patience.

"So, Miss Dahlman, you're ready?" Mr. Duncan asked. He probably counted on Mallory's presentation, which was bound to be excellent, to redeem the entire exercise.

"Of course." As Mallory rose from her desk, she looked back at Chris with a devilish smirk.

She stepped forward, turned to face the class, and said, "Hi," with the sweetest smile. The sycophantic girls at the front of the class and the ogling boys at the rear all grinned. Then to Chris's amazement, she said, "I'm grateful to Chris Chandler for his presentation yesterday and for bringing up the painful topic of funerals because that's what I want to talk about as well."

Chris beamed and glanced across at Floyd. With his swollen face and blackened eyes, Floyd looked horrified and bewildered at the same time, like he was watching two cars careening toward each other and was powerless to prevent the inevitable.

"As I told you, Mr. Duncan, I'd like to talk about funeral ceremonies among the mountain people of Indonesia, the Torajans."

“Of course, Miss Dahlman.” Mr. Duncan had been an anthropologist, so maybe he had some idea who the Torajans were. You’d hope he had some inkling of what was about to happen.

“Now please,” Mallory said to the whole class in her little-girl singsong, “you must tell me if my presentation upsets you.”

Doubtless, everyone had the same reaction. How could anything Mallory Dahlman said ever be upsetting?

“...because some of my slides may be a little graphic.”

Where was she going with this?

“All right then,” and she began. “Would it be okay if we closed the curtains?”

Several boys near the windows hopped out of their desks and pulled down the shades.

“I think most of you know my father’s Dutch, and captains an oil tanker. He wasn’t born in Holland, however. He was born in Indonesia on the Island of Sulawesi.” She walked to the map of the world hanging on the side wall of the classroom and pointed out Indonesia and the island of Sulawesi. “His parents and grandparents were Dutch Reform missionaries among the people of Tana Toraja.”

Mallory returned to the front of the room and put a large map of the island of Sulawesi on the teacher’s easel. “This is the Torajan region. It’s a kind of separate state in the centre of Sulawesi.

“My father was born a few years before the Japanese invaded Indonesia in 1939. His parents and grandfather were killed by the Japanese when they occupied Sulawesi, but his grandmother, with the help of the locals, managed to hide my father in the jungle during the occupation. After the war, she raised my father almost like a native Torajan. As a young man, my father wasn’t content to remain on Sulawesi, however. He wanted to see the world. When he was old enough, he left Tana Toraja to join the British merchant navy. In 1968, while his ship was

docked in Boston for a refit, he met and married my mother who was working there at the time. He never lost touch with his beloved Tana Toraja, and as the years passed, he once again longed for its beauty and its people.

“My great grandmother remained there, in the same small village and in the same tiny house among the people she loved, until she died at ninety-four. My father visited her whenever his ship docked in Makassar. When I was born, he even tried to move us all back to Indonesia, but my mother wouldn’t go.” Was that irritation in Mallory’s voice?

“Then in 1976, when my great grandmother died, my father took us all to Sulawesi for her funeral. Even though I was only eight years old, I still remember how beautiful Tana Toraja was. I also remember the amazing funeral. Today I want to tell you about funerals in Tana Toraja and their importance for Torajan culture.

“Tana Toraja is isolated and mountainous and so beautiful. We flew into Makassar, here.” She pointed to a port city on the map. “Then we drove north along the coast for a couple of hours before we turned inland toward the mountains. That’s what Tana Toraja means, ‘men of the mountains.’ Mebali is the first Torajan settlement you come to. Here.”

Mallory switched off the classroom lights and switched on the slide projector. Her first slide was of enormous, brightly-colored wooden houses with huge, boat-shaped roofs. “This is Mebali. The first Torajans came to Sulawesi by sea, and their houses are supposed to look like ships.

“After Mebali, the road climbs through steep mountain canyons terraced for farming.” She paused to let the class admire her slides of mountains and lush valleys.

Mallory’s next slide was of strange gods dancing on the firmament.

“Torajans believe the universe is divided into three parts: the upper world, the

world of man, and the underworld, and that their gods inhabit all three. The most important gods in the Torajan religion are Puang Matua, the god of heaven, and Pong Banggai di Rante, the god of earth.”

The class giggled at the strange names.

“Oh, grow up, all of you!” Mr. Duncan said. He was determined Mallory’s presentation would not deteriorate the way the others had. He need not have worried. Mallory gave the class a withering look, and the room fell silent.

“Then there is Pong Lalondong, the god who judges the dead.” She put up a slide of a god with a huge phallus.

There were gasps and embarrassed giggles. The teacher shhh-ed the room, and Mallory continued as if she’d heard nothing.

“The Torajans believe their purpose on earth is to maintain the balance between the upper world and the underworld. And to do that, they have to perform a cycle of rituals throughout the year, of which there are just two kinds: rituals of the rising sun and rituals of the setting sun. And the two kinds must be kept absolutely separate or the gods will cause earthquakes and illness and starvation.

“Rising sun ceremonies celebrate birth and marriage and health and food. Setting Sun rituals are all about night, darkness, and death.

“For example, during one rising sun ceremony a hermaphrodite priest asks the god of heaven to look after the community.”

“What’s a hermadite, Mr. Duncan?” someone asked. Mallory didn’t give the teacher a chance to respond.

“A Hermaphrodite,” she said with no hint of embarrassment, “is a person who has both male and female genitals.”

The girls twittered, the boys laughed, and Floyd Balzer shouted from the back of the room, “Like Dinky Doyle.” The whole class erupted in hoots, everyone except skinny little Donny Doyle, who slumped back in his chair.

Mr. Duncan had had enough. “All right, Mr. Balzer, out! Wait for me in the corridor.”

Floyd wasn't having a good day.

Balzer grabbed his books and shuffled to the classroom door. He gave Mallory the strangest look. A threat? An apology? Mallory's face remained hard and unforgiving. Balzer slammed the door behind him. Mr. Duncan struggled to silence the whispers. When Mallory asked, “Shall I stop?” quiet was restored immediately.

“The most important setting sun ritual is the funeral feast. The purpose of the funeral is to help the dead person reach Puya, the land of souls. That's where Pong Lalondong decides if their spirit will be allowed to climb the mountains into heaven to rejoin its ancestors.

“Funerals are exceedingly expensive because a lot of buffalo must be slaughtered as part of the ceremony. When my great grandmother died, my father had to pay for ten buffalo.”

Mallory's next slide, of several eviscerated buffalo piled in a heap with blood running in the dirt like a river, caught everyone off guard. Several girls gasped and turned away. The boys were silent until one whispered, “Cool” and then others sniggered. Now that was graphic.

“Sometimes a body has to be stored for months until the family can afford the funeral. Usually they store it on the roof of their home.”

Up came a slide of a badly weathered and decomposing corpse in tattered wrappings laid out on a roof top. The darkened classroom was silent save for one girl's whimpering.

“Before the funeral, family members of the deceased build a tall tower in the middle of the village with a tiny hut on top. Beneath the tower, they array gifts on tables, and tie the buffalo to stakes.

“On the first day of the funeral, villagers go to the home of the deceased to



collect the body and carry it around the tower to show the corpse the gifts and the buffalo. Then they lift the body up onto the tower and put it in the little hut. That's my great grandmother, and that's my father lifting her up."

The slide showed a small, thin, white bundle dangling by its feet at the end of a heavy rope from the top of a great tower.

"On the second day of the funeral, a Christian minister conducts a brief service, then turns the ceremony over to a Torajan priest who leads the ancient ritual. First, a committee of elders inspects the gifts and decides how the meat and the gifts will be distributed to the mourners present, and to the poor in neighboring villages.

"On the third day, the buffalo are slaughtered as villagers and guests watch. The carcasses are carved up, and the meat is given away.

"Finally, on the fourth day of the funeral, the body is taken down from the tower and carried in a procession out through the rice fields to a tomb carved into the rocky walls around the village. This is the tomb of my family."

Clearly visible in the next slide were the bones of Mallory's great-grandfather protruding through tattered winding cloth, and shoved on top of him were the newly interred remains of her great-grandmother. Both corpses stuck out a foot or more from their small niche in the cliff.

"Mr. Duncan, may I please wait outside?" asked the whimpering girl, all teary-eyed and pale, "It's just...my grandmother died last year, and..."

"Go, go," said Mr. Duncan who appeared somewhat rattled by the strange turn the class had taken. Mallory barrelled on even as the small girl left the room.

Chris marvelled at Mallory's performance. She'd known everyone was going to be shocked, and she'd done it anyway. All innocence and light, she'd set out to poke everyone in the eye just for the hell of it.

"Some of the priests of Tana Toraja practice a kind of magic. They have spells for love and good crops and fine weather. Perhaps the strangest magic they

practice is hypnotising the dead.

“Torajans believe a corpse must be buried with its family or it will not be able to find heaven. Until recently, Torajan villages were isolated and people were afraid to travel for fear they might die far away from family. If a person died far from their village, then family members had to carry the body home over difficult mountain trails. Then some Torajan priests discovered how to make the dead walk to their own funerals.”

Mallory’s next slide horrified even Chris. A black, leathery, shrunken face smeared with dirt, sparse matted filthy hair, dead eyes, and rotted teeth, a skeletal figure draped in soiled rags, blood, and mud-smeared legs, standing—if it could be called standing—on a narrow path alongside a rice paddy.

“Is she dead?” someone asked.

“Yes,” Mallory said with a look of satisfaction, “and she’s walking home.”

Mallory turned off the slide projector and turned on her small super 8 projector. The screen filled with the face of another corpse—for what else could such a rotting creature be? The camera drew back to show the pathetic creature staggering down a dusty road under its own power.

“To make the dead walk, the priest asks the gods to return the spirit to its corpse. When the corpse comes to life, the priest speaks to it in the language of the gods and instructs it to walk to its funeral.”

Several girls covered their faces. The boys seemed stunned.

“Then, when the corpse reaches home, the priest asks the gods to set the spirit free once again—like a second death. The corpse is then buried according to the proper Torajan funeral rite, and the family says guiding prayers to help the spirit of their loved one go in search of Puya, the Land of Souls.”

“Uh, Mallory,” someone called out from the back of the darkened room, “if the priest doesn’t ask the gods to release the spirit—say because he forgot the prayer,

or he got killed—then would that mean the corpse would just keep walking around forever?”

And then someone else asked, “Or say the corpse got buried before its spirit could be released, then would the corpse keep trying to get out of its grave for like years?”

“How awful! Can you imagine?” said Mallory. “Trapped forever in a decomposing corpse? Yes, I guess that’s what would happen...if for some reason the prayer for the second death couldn’t be said.” On the screen, the decaying creature staggered on.

The bell rang. Mallory turned off the projector. The darkened room was silent, save for a few sniffing girls. Finally, Mr. Duncan gathered his wits, turned on the lights, and said, “Thank you Mallory...for your...uh.” People began collecting their books. One girl asked if she could go to the nurse’s office, and several others asked to do the same. Someone came into the room to report that the girl who’d been excused earlier had fainted in the corridor.

Mallory asked Mr. Duncan, “I hope I haven’t upset people.”

“It’ll be all right, I’m sure,” he said, and rushed out the door. Mallory followed, her eyes filled with concern. For an instant, however, she turned to look at Chris with a self-satisfied smirk.

Amazing! What she’d done! And what an idiot he’d been! He’d put on a stupid little performance to shock people and got away with nothing. Mallory had played the innocent and pulled off a coup! He’d made himself look like an ass, while she’d given the whole class a right royal kick in the butt, and would probably get an *A*.

Mallory waltzed back into the room. “Well?”

They were alone and Chris was still slumped in his seat. Mallory walked slowly toward him, showing off, like a model on a catwalk, hips swaying from side

to side.

“That was...incredible.”

She stopped immediately in front of Chris’s desk. “Not too shocking?”

“Oh yeah!”

“That’s what I thought.” She grinned from ear to ear.

“But do you believe all that stuff about magic?”

“Sure, why not? I do it all the time.”

“Do what?”

“Cast spells.”

“Spells? Like witches spells?”

“Like Torajan spells, spells for good health, for nice weather, like I said...and for love.”

Whoa, where was this going? Chris’s cheeks burned. “And that movie, that was so amazing. Was it real?”

“My father took it.”

“You really believe the dead can be made to walk?”

“Of course I do. I wasn’t going to show the film. Then you inspired me, and I’m glad I did.”

That shadow behind the mask again. “We...we have to catch the bus,” he said nervously, “but maybe we could sit together?”

“How sweet,” Mallory replied, touching his cheek. His face burned and his heart almost leapt from his chest. “But my mother is picking me up.”

“Oh sure...”

“Perhaps you could come over to my house some time, and we could...talk.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“Let me worry about Floyd.” Her face became hard.

“Then yeah, sure, that would be great.”

She turned, and left the room, hips swaying from side to side as she walked away. Chris sat for a moment, almost breathless, then collected his books and headed outside.

No sooner had he left the classroom than Floyd Balzer jumped in front of him and bellowed, “You son of a bitch, I should rip your guts out!”

Chris stumbled back in surprise.

“I heard everything you said,” Floyd screamed. “You’re a dead man! I don’t care what your fucking father says.”

Chris regained his balance, pushed back hard against Floyd, and said in a low growl, “Yeah, but you *do* care what *your dad* will do...to *you*!”

Floyd paled and backed away. “What do you know about my dad?”

Kids up and down the corridor were watching the confrontation. Chris moved toward Floyd, and in a low voice not to be heard by their audience, said, “I know he’ll beat the crap out of you if you so much as ruffle my hair.”

Floyd stumbled backward and almost fell.

Time to drive the lesson home. Chris grabbed the front of Floyd’s shirt and pulled him close, then pressed his cheek to Floyd’s and whispered, “Leave me the hell alone, Balzer....or I’ll get your daddy to spank your little yellow ass, you coward.”

Floyd twisted away from Chris’s grasp, and ran. “You’re dead, Chandler!” he tried to scream, but his voice broke, and he burst into tears as he disappeared down the stairs.

“Well, that went well,” Chris said to himself, a little stunned by the outcome. He wasn’t out of danger yet, though. The school bus was bound to be packed with Balzer’s buddies, raving lunatics with nothing to lose, all out for Chandler blood.

So, a long walk it had to be.

\* \* \* \*

Chris was a half mile out of town when the big, old Buick *Roadmaster* rolled to a stop beside him. He pulled open the heavy door and bent to speak to the driver.

“Mrs. Holcomb.”

“Nice to see you again, young man,” said the old lady with the bright red lipstick and the ratty fur coat. “You’re going home, I presume? Like a ride?”

He climbed in without a word. Chris was reluctant to say much for fear the old lady would take any pleasantries as an invitation to talk incessantly.

“Look, we could make this a regular thing if you’d like, on Tuesdays and Fridays anyway. That’s when I visit my friend at the Adinack Nursing Home. We could arrange to meet somewhere.”

“Maybe,” Chris replied.

“So, thrown off the bus again?”

“No.”

“Rough day?”

“You could say that.”

“Trouble at school? Teachers or girls?”

“Both, I guess. Nobody’s too pleased with me these days.”

“Now why’s that?”

“Probably because of my dad.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah, he’s Richard Chandler....”

“Who?”

“He runs the carton plant in town?”

“Oh yes, and he might close it down. So you’re his boy. Don’t suppose that makes you popular with people in town.”

“You want me to get out?”

“No,” the old lady said with a look of surprise. “Why should I care what

happens to the plant...or to the town for that matter? What's this town ever done for me?"

"You wouldn't care if the plant closed?"

"Nobody in this town buys my stuff. Matter of fact, if the plant closes and some of the locals I've had to deal with over the past forty years are forced to leave, I may even dance a jig as they drive away."

The old car rolled past the Dahlman property. Chris glanced out the passenger window in time to see Floyd Balzer on Mallory's front porch waving his arms and stomping about in an apparent rage. Mallory merely stood there, arms crossed, seemingly unmoved by Floyd's display.

"So I guess the teachers give you a hard time because they're afraid for their own jobs. What's your problem with the girls?"

"Not all girls; one is nice."

"And is she the young Willard beauty?"

"Gillian Willard?" Chris asked. The notion he might be interested in Gillian Willard struck him as comical. "No, she's just a friend, well kind of. I don't know her that well."

"Pity."

"Why did you call her a beauty?"

"You don't see it?"

"Not really." Okay, so she'd looked kind of nice in the mist and the moonlight the previous evening when she'd told him about Floyd, but a beauty?

"Well, next time you have a chance, look a little deeper. She dresses like a farmhand because that's what she is. When she isn't studying, she's helping her mother, and they both work like dogs, or hadn't you noticed that either?"

Of course he'd noticed her working in the orchard from time to time.

"I've known Gillian since she was born. I used to be good friends with the

family until the accident and her mother had to take over running the apple business. I wish there was something I could do to help.” She fell silent for a moment. “What was I saying? Oh yes, next time you see Gillian, look closer. If she lived anywhere else, somebody would have swept her away to Hollywood and made her a star by now. She looks like some sort of ancient princess to me, tall, amazing face. One day you’ll see her in a magazine and think, how did I miss that? That’s the artist in me talking. If I could paint portraits instead of landscapes, her face would have made my fortune.”

Chris was amazed at this description of the gangly stranger in dungarees he’d avoided for months.

“So if it isn't Gillian, then who is it?”

“Mallory Dahlman?”

“Ah, the Dahlman girl.”

“You know her?”

“Oh yes. Are you two ‘involved’?”

“No, not yet. I think maybe she likes me, and she is well....”

“Stacked, we used to say when I was young.”

“Pretty.”

“Pretty? I guess, in a buxom, chunky, cheap kind of way.”

“I don’t think she looks cheap or chunky.”

“You wouldn’t. You only see those huge tits.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” Chris said, but he almost started laughing.

“How much do you know about Mallory Dahlman?”

“Not much. Just that everyone at school likes her, and I guess her family’s nice.”

“Nice!” Mrs. Holcomb almost exploded. “Have you met them? The mother drinks like a fish. The brother is a peeping tom. The father hasn’t been home in



years, because he can't stand his wife, I bet."

"How can you say those things? You can't know—"

"Listen, my dear, I've lived here for decades, and in all that time, my experiences with the Dahlman family, and with Mallory Dahlman in particular, have been my worst."

"Maybe, but—"

"Would you like me to tell you why I hold the Dahlmans in such low esteem?"

"No." Then he said, "Well, okay."

"I could start with the small stuff, all the nights the Dahlman boy used to come prowling round my cottage, tapping on the windows, banging on the walls, setting fire to my shed. And the boy was nine when he did all that.

"Or I could tell you how the Dahlman woman tried to have me declared insane because I filed charges against her dear son. It cost me years and nearly everything I had to fight that battle. Or about the time she and her daughter had me barred from all the public places in town. But you want to hear about Mallory. Okay, you asked for it.

"When my husband Harold died, I remained good friends with his brother James. Still am. He lived over near Millawamkett. Nothing romantic, James just helped me out from time to time, and we liked each other's company. We'd sit and have a beer, and we'd talk about Harold. We both missed Harold terribly. Well, James never married, and I think he may have had a crush on me, but he was always the gentleman, and he respected Harold's memory too much to ever do anything. Truth to tell, as time went by, I kind of wished he would make a move, because I missed my man. Still, neither of us dared do anything to change our comfortable relationship.

"Then, about four years ago, James had a massive stroke, and was put in the Adinack Nursing Home. I went to see him as often as I could. He was almost

entirely paralyzed and couldn't speak. He would sit propped up in bed and smile and hold my hand as I chattered away about everything and nothing. That's where I go on Tuesdays and Fridays.

"Mallory Dahlman was volunteering at the Home around the time James was admitted. Of course, we never spoke because of my fight with her mother.

"One afternoon, sitting with James, it became—how shall I put this—it became rather obvious he was aroused."

"What?"

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. Old man? Not possible. Well let me tell you, arousal and desire are not functions of age, just blood flow and imagination!"

"I...I don't think—"

"Oh, stop being such a prude. You're a teenager, for heaven's sake, you know all about this stuff. Anyway, from the color in his cheeks, and the look in his eyes and the way he was struggling to move his arm toward his groin—"

"Look, this is not—"

"Well, I guess I thought he was asking me to, you know, to help him. It makes me laugh to think how long it had taken that damned man to make a move. Anyway, I thought I knew what he wanted, so, what the hell, I slipped my hand underneath the sheets...and..."

"Look, I really don't want to—"

"Well, just then Mallory Dahlman came into the room. She looked at me and at James and at the lump beneath the sheets, and smiled this nasty, vicious smile. Then she screamed at the top of her lungs, 'They're having sex!' and ran out of the room. I heard her telling staff what had happened, and the next thing I knew, I was being escorted out of the Home. I left thinking I'd give the situation a little time to cool down, but the following afternoon, when I tried to see James again, the administrator met me at the door and said I was barred from the premises until

further notice. I asked why, and she said, ‘Because board members do not condone prostitution on public property.’

“Prostitution! Can you believe it? I’d have been flattered if the charge hadn’t been completely ridiculous. Some days later, I got a letter from the town clerk informing me I would not be allowed on any town property—the library, town hall, even the park for Heaven’s sake—because I had been caught engaging in lewd acts. Of course, I asked who had brought the matter to the town’s attention, and I’m sure you can guess—Mallory Dahlman and her mother.

“It took me months to get the order rescinded. I was humiliated, and it cost me a lot. The only upside to the whole affair was that I had been so desperate, I’d contacted my brother for help, and he was marvelous. We hadn’t spoken in years, but we’ve been writing to each other ever since. He is, or he was anyway, a successful lawyer in New York until he retired, and when he threatened to sue Bemishstock for a shitload of money, that did the trick.

“So, that’s my experience with Mallory Dahlman and family.”

What was the real lesson behind this truly yucky story, that Mallory and her family were vengeful predators? Or that Mallory volunteered at a nursing home and was sensitive enough to have been shocked by the crude behavior of some free-thinking old hippy?

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Holcomb stopped the car at the foot of the trail across the main road from Willard Lane. Chris wasn’t sure why he hesitated before opening the car door, but he did, and that gave the old lady a chance to ask if he’d like a cup of tea. His options were to go home and face questions about the Balzer incident, hide out at the Willard graveyard for hours in the cold, or accept the old lady’s invitation. Chris said yes to the tea.

The Buick rumbled up the dirt track like a Sherman tank assaulting a mountain

fortress. The ruts, mud, and the hillocks tossed the great beast in every direction but couldn't stop it. After twenty minutes, the car cleared the scrub forest and broke out onto a grassy meadow on top of the mountain. There were gorgeous views in every direction, to the east over Adinack Bay and beyond to the open Atlantic, to the north and south around the great arc of the bay, and to the west up over the rolling hills and valleys of the ancient coastal range.

Felicity Holcomb parked the car beside a small, square, saltbox-style cottage clad in rough pine boards weathered gray and silver. On the visible sides of the cottage, there were just a door and two small windows. When they went inside, however, Chris was taken aback by the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass that flooded the cottage with light and afforded spectacular views over the coast and the sea.

The cottage was one large room with a cathedral ceiling, a four-sided stone fireplace in the center, a cooking area in one corner, a toilet closet in another, and a big old bed to one side of the fireplace facing the windowed wall. The rest of the room was given over to comfy chairs and couches, to shelves of books and tables littered with small canvases and tubes of paint. Near the glass wall was a huge writing table with an ancient typewriter having pride of place amid the clutter.

“Welcome to my home.”

Whatever Chris had expected the old lady's lair to be like, it hadn't been this, not this warm and intimate and curiously beautiful room. He patted one of several cats that prowled the room, sat down in a worn floral armchair and looked out over the bay. The grey November afternoon was coming to a close, but the room was flooded with golden light.

“It's nice, Mrs. Holcomb.”

“Felix, you must call me Felix. So...tea? Or maybe something stronger?”

He had no idea whether the old lady was joking. “Tea will be fine. Hey, you can see the Willard graveyard from here.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed you there a couple of times.”

“Like every day.”

“Now why is that?”

“No reason.”

“Then tell me, why did you roll your eyes just now?”

“I did? I’m sorry.”

“You also did it the first time I gave you a ride, before you even got in the car. And you sneered as well.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything.”

“Of course you did. You do it every time I ask you an uncomfortable question.”

“Look, I said I’m sorry, okay?” He started to get up. “I’ll just go.” The last thing Chris needed was a fight with some old loon.

“No, please, don’t leave. It doesn’t bother me. It’s just that when I saw you do it the first time, I thought, we’re alike, this boy and me.”

“You and me?” Was she insulting him now?

“Please, have your tea, and let me explain.” She handed him a mug, and he sat down again. She took her own mug and sat in an old rocker by the window.

“All the years I’ve lived here, people have judged me. I’m from away, I’m alone, I always say what’s on my mind, and of course I dress—shall we say—colorfully? So, before they can attack me, I usually come out swinging. I wear even stranger clothes, and I say absolutely crazy things. That’s all I meant, why I think we’re alike.”

“Because you think my clothes are weird?” Chris struggled to keep his temper.

“No, because we’ve both been poked at a lot, we just assume the next person who speaks to us is going to do the same. So we attack before they get a chance. Or if we think the person is going to insult us, we insult them first. Maybe we don’t

use words; we just sneer or grimace or roll our eyes...or maybe we wear weird clothes...anything to show them that they can't hurt us, that we don't give a damn what they think of us."

Chris was stunned.

"Okay, now you can roll your eyes," Felix said with a broad smile.

It took a moment, but eventually Chris smiled as well, and then said, almost in a whisper, "I guess maybe I do expect people to give me grief, and maybe...I do try to get off the first shot, make them think I don't care..." He looked away.

"My father was a hard man, self-made, tough," Felicity said. "He didn't give a damn what anyone thought of him. He always said, 'In this life, it's always better to be the axe than the firewood'."

Chris didn't immediately grasp Felicity's meaning. She must have seen the confusion in his eyes.

"You know, it's better to strike than be struck. And I guess that's how I always tried to live. Then one day, my Harold—wish you could have met him, he was just a decent guy, not smart, but so wise—he said, 'You realize it's the firewood that burns bright, eh, not the axe; the axe just rusts away.' I'm not sure what he meant, but it got me to thinking. Maybe sometimes it's okay to be the firewood. Be a hard ass most of the time if you must be, only sometimes, maybe you should just take the blows. Give yourself a chance to burn bright and give others the chance to get close to you, to enjoy your warmth."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Okay, so why do you wear that old fur coat?" Chris asked with a grin. "Is it one of your weird things...to let people know you don't give a...?"

She laughed. "Well actually, my Harold gave it to me for our anniversary... right before he died."

Chris felt like crap. They both turned and looked out the window.

“There’s Mrs. Willard collecting apples off the ground,” Chris said. He could just make her out by the lamplight from atop the pole at the end of Willard Lane.

“Last of the windfalls. Got to get them up before the frost.”

“And Gillian’s driving the tractor.”

“As soon as that poor girl gets home it’s out to work.” The affection in her tone was obvious.

“And I go and sit on a fence and mope....”

“You said it, not me.”

“You can see the old rail line, where it crosses the Willard’s land....” He paused, then asked, “Do you know the goatman? I mean the goat farmer, has the next farm?”

“Dr. Meath? Ronald, yes I know him.”

“Can you tell me a little about him?”

“Well, let’s see. He’s been here, oh, must be twenty years now. Came from England, to make cheese I understand, that’s how he got into the country anyway. He was a chiropractor back in England until he got into some trouble over his research. Ronald will bend your ear on the topic if you give him half a chance.”

“And does he still do research?”

“I don’t imagine. He barely raises goats, scratches out a living working a couple of jobs like most people round here. Why are you interested in him?”

Chris was about to tell Felix of the strange things he’d seen on the tracks and at the goatman’s house. If she was already having trouble with vandals and some folks in town, however, the last thing she needed was grief from a crazy neighbor as well.

“No reason, just seen him around, and he seems like a character.”

“I thought you already knew him.”

“No. Why would you think that?”

“The other afternoon, I saw Ronald by the Willards’ cellar door,” Felicity said. “I assumed he was there to see your family because the Willards never use that door. It’s where the accident happened, in the cider cellar.”

“Huh,” was all Chris could say as he got out of the huge chair and walked to the window. No one had ever mentioned a third door into the house.

“It’s getting late,” he said, “maybe I should be going.”

“Stay a little longer, and I’ll drive you down the hill.”

“No, that’s all right. I’d kind of like to walk.”

“Well, I’ve enjoyed our chat, and I hope we can do this again. Okay, so did you just roll your eyes?” she said, and they both laughed.

As he was leaving, Chris asked, “Would you do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“If you see Dr. Meath around our house again, could you tell me?”

“You’re being mysterious.”

“It’s nothing. Just not sure what he’s up to.”

“Well, I can’t imagine it’s anything serious. He’s odd, but I’m sure he’s harmless.”

“Sure...but—”

“But I’ll let you know.”

“See you again.”

The old lady rolled her eyes and then smiled.

The hike down the trail was slow and a bit treacherous. In spite of the failing light, Chris managed to pick his way among the ruts and the puddles and got home without incident about a half hour later. To go in or not to go in, that was the question; before he could decide, however, the back porch door flew open and his brother and sister both bellowed at him, “Chris has a girlfriend!”

“I don’t.” Chris pushed his way into the mudroom.



“That may be so,” his mother called from the kitchen, “but you do have a date.”

“What?”

“A date, for dinner tomorrow evening. A young lady, a pretty young lady, dropped by the house not twenty minutes ago and asked for you. When we said you weren’t home yet, she asked us to give you a message. You’re invited for dinner tomorrow evening at six. She said you’d know who called and where she lives. Is that right?” This was the most he’d heard his mother say in months.

“Yes, I know.”

\* \* \* \*

From Willard Farm, Mallory drove to Perkin’s Pond, took the connector cross country to Route One, then headed north a few miles to Bailey’s Road. With an hour before she was to meet friends in town for a late movie, she had just enough time.

Such a disappointment Chris Chandler hadn’t been home. She would have loved to share this adventure with him. Friday night, mother’s car, and no Floyd for once, she was going to do something she’d been intending to for weeks—find Darleen Jensen. Her father had once suggested it might be possible to see the spirits of people in whose deaths one had played a part. Tonight she’d find out.

Her girlfriends would have freaked if she’d asked them to come ghost hunting. And Floyd, the wimp, would probably have bailed; at Darleen’s funeral, he’d said he felt sorry for her. Sorry? For that hypocritical bitch? Unbelievable! Now Chris Chandler, on the other hand, Mallory just knew he’d have enjoyed this. What a fascinating person. Sure, he was gorgeous, but what really intrigued her was his air of menace, like he was on the verge of killing somebody...and she knew how that felt.

Unpaved Bailey’s Road wound from the region’s largest woodlot high in the

hills back of Bemishstock some twenty miles down to the carton plant in town. During the day, a steady stream of logging trucks used the gravel track and their dust coated everything. At night, Bailey's became a quiet country lane once again. Mallory had never been out here. No one of any interest lived on Bailey's Road. All the tiny houses and old mobile homes along the road were decrepit, many without siding, most with windows sheathed in plastic, several lacking even the most rudimentary front step, and almost every yard filled with junked cars, enormous stacks of firewood, and a semi-permanent rummage sale under an assortment of shelters and plastic tarps.

Mallory got to the Bailey's Road turnoff after dark and wasn't exactly sure where Darleen Jensen's family lived along the road. She wasn't worried about finding the place, however, because there was bound to be a memorial of some sort close by. Darleen had thrown herself in front of the logging truck at the end of her own lane, and people in Maine for some ridiculous reason loved to mark the traffic deaths of their loved ones with some kind of tacky roadside cenotaph.

Sure enough, in the beam of her headlights, Mallory spotted a large white cross at the side of the road. She drove slowly past the cross and the Jensen's driveway, parking some distance along the road where she couldn't be seen by any Jensen who might be home. Mallory walked back to the cross in the pitch black and freezing cold. Since there were no street lamps or other homes along this stretch of the road, the only illumination came from an old floodlight flickering atop a tall pole near the Jensens' house.

Mallory remained in the shadows as she examined the memorial. Someone had stripped a patch of scrub and thin grass and hammered the cross into the rocky hard pack. The cross had been knocked together from old two-by-fours and painted white. It was wrapped in Christmas lights and artificial flowers, and surrounded by Barbie dolls and stuffed animals. To the upper portion of the cross was duck taped

a plasticized picture of Darleen with the words *Calt Home by thu Lord* scrawled across it. An extension cord ran alongside the drive from the cross to the house, but the lights were not illuminated.

Darleen's home was an old green trailer with dented siding and a weathered plywood extension that probably functioned as a mud room; its ply had been painted with the Stars and Stripes, now badly faded. The trailer was dark save for the flicker of a television through the living room window. A wheelchair ramp made from shipping pallets ran from the drive to a small front porch. Wooden butterflies and a large gold star adorned the front of the trailer, and the drive was lined with half-tires painted white. In a now-barren flower bed across the front of the property was written in painted white stones, *Jesus Loves Me*. How such people could possibly imagine any god loved *them* was beyond Mallory's comprehension.

Mallory left the shadows and walked to the middle of Bailey's Road. She turned slowly in a circle, all the while peering out into the dark, and listening. Dry leaves danced across the road. The wind whistled through the black spruce. She stopped to stare at the cross once again.

Then she heard the weeping. Close by.

From the house? No. From behind her. She spun about.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the dark on the far side of the road. From her drive up Bailey's Road, Mallory knew the shoulder on the left side dropped away sharply into a deep drainage ditch, but of the ditch and the trees beyond the edge of the gravel she could make out virtually nothing.

And yet, out there in the dark somewhere, someone was weeping.

Then she saw it. Up the road, on the left, almost abreast of her car, a tiny glow, barely discernable, little more than the spark of a firefly, the merest flutter of light in the blackness. Perhaps it was a trick of her eyesight, a visual memory of the lamp in Darleen's yard. But no, it really was there, a pale green glimmer, rising

from the ditch.

Mallory walked up the road toward the glow. Her heart raced—her first ghost! Suddenly, as she neared the light, a wave of excruciating pain and self-loathing overwhelmed her, and she doubled over with nausea. Her stomach heaved, her skin felt clammy, her head throbbed. Only after several minutes was she able to stand upright and stagger forward to the edge of the ditch.

Down there, in the dark weeds and the muck, she saw it—a wisp, an outline, a mere trace of a figure within the pale green glow. Then a face appeared, shattered, broken, and wracked with grief. Darleen Jensen. Sprawled at the bottom of the ditch, twisted horribly, up to her waist in freezing water flowing right through her, she sobbed, wailed, and waved her arms about, beseeching one minute, then covering her ears the next against some deafening cacophony only she could hear. Darleen stared up at Mallory, her eyes filled with torment and terror. She appeared to mouth the words, *help me, help me, I beg you.*

Mallory laughed. “There you are! Amazing. And now you’re stuck. You didn’t know did you, when you jumped in front of the truck, that you’d be stuck where you died forever? That’s what suicide gets you. Better get used to your ditch, bitch, it’s your home for eternity.”

Sitting at the side of the ditch, Mallory started tossing stones at Darleen. “You’re my first, you know!” The stones passed right through her. “And this feeling I’ve got, the pain? Is it yours? It’s like the smell of something rotten that lingers in a place even after the object has been thrown away! That’s so cool!”

The spectral figure kept right on weeping. “Can’t hear a word I’m saying, can you?” Mallory said, then fell silent for a moment. Suddenly she shouted, “Get out of there, you bitch! Come up here! Do as I say right now!”

Darleen didn’t move; she merely kept up her pathetic crying and pleading.

“Useless,” said Mallory. “Pitiful, like you always were.” Then Mallory fell

silent for a moment, pondering something. “Okay, so what if a person killed himself out of anger instead of sorrow, would that make a difference? Would their spirit still be useless like you, or would they be able to do stuff, say, maybe hurt other people?”

“Who’s out there?” someone shouted from back at the Jensen’s place. “What’s going on?” Several lights came on and Mallory heard footsteps on the wooden ramp.

She ran to her car, jumped in and drove away, laughing the whole time. She drove a couple of miles on toward the woodlot, turned in a logging road, waited a few minutes to see if anyone was following, and then headed back to town. The lights were off once again at the Jensen’s place as she raced past, except that is, for the cross. It glowed red and green.

\* \* \* \*

All night long, a chill wind off the bay rattled the small window by Chris’s bed. He rolled onto his side, pulled the covers tight around his chin, and opened Mr. Duncan’s book on *Mortsafemen*. He flipped quickly through the illustrations and then began to read. The hours fell away.

*During the Middle Ages, cemeteries were customarily constructed outside a city’s walls and so functioned beyond any sort of control... money lenders, thieves and prostitutes plied their trades with impunity...and of course grave robbers. First protectors of the dead were grave diggers...earned a little extra money from families who did not want...their loved ones defiled... However, the same grave diggers who protected graves probably also robbed them...*

*...by the end of the thirteenth century self-appointed grave protectors...began patrolling cemeteries...demanding fees for the protection of the dead. During the Great Plague, they oversaw the construction of mass graves... And as the Plague abated, they restored order to the burial of the dead...*

*...their numbers grew to a point in 1403 when protectors in the city of Mainz organized a guild, The Holy Brotherhood of Mortsafemen... colleagues all over Europe petitioned to join them. Mortmen, as they were known, became in effect an international police force for cemeteries.*

*By the middle of the fifteenth century Mortmen were so...powerful they commissioned Emansus of Geisteborg...to set out the theological underpinnings of their work, De Sanctitate Sepulchro et protectione mortuis or On the Sanctity of the Grave and the Protection of the Dead.*

*...cited biblical, apocryphal and scholarly sources to suggest the care of a corpse and the sanctity of its resting place determined the quality of a soul's experience in heaven. ... while a corpse is still intact on earth, its soul in heaven is vulnerable, and if the corpse or its resting place is defiled, then the soul knows pain, and if the pain becomes great enough, then the soul may be pulled back from Paradise to wander the earth in agony until its resting place is restored.*

*...Emansus...argued...Mortmen were for all practical purposes a religious order... their holy calling...to protect the deceased until nature, rather than man, can return the remains to the earth, and thereby, preserve the joy and salvation of the soul in heaven.*

*De Sanctitate Sepulchro...among the first books printed...gave Mortsafemen... such an exaggerated sense of their own importance that they became a kind of government unto themselves. ...adopted as their emblem a black figure with an axe standing atop a Mausoleum on a field of gold... wore long dark coats of leather... carried hatchets...adopted a brutal charter of punishment for defilers of the dead...shaved the heads of prostitutes who fornicated on graves. Money lenders... chained to gravestones...without food...cut off the hands of vandals who defaced tombstones. ...put out the eyes of thieves who stole coins and jewels from coffins... dismembered body snatchers and scattered their limbs around the cemetery to*

*assure their everlasting misery.*

*...the Mortsafemen's zeal began to appall even their most ardent supporters, and in the late sixteenth...their critics moved against them...guild was banned everywhere. What became of the Mortmen no one knew for sure.*

Chris dozed off with images of axes and body parts dancing in his head.

## Chapter Five

Saturday, November 16

When the last goat was in the tiny pen, Ronald Meath secured the gate and filled their trough with feed from the latest batch. The goats sniffed the feed warily and backed away. Damn! He should have checked the old lady's cause of death more carefully, but the goats always knew. He was getting careless; the price of so many disappointments lately.

He often asked himself—especially after yet another calamitous experiment—how he'd know if he'd gone mad? Was it madness to keep trying, in spite of innumerable setbacks, to accomplish something the whole world considered impossible? He supposed it might seem that way to a mediocre person—but not to him. Persistence in the face of overwhelming odds wasn't madness; on the contrary, it was the price of greatness—to strive, to lead, to overcome, when everyone else lacked the vision and courage to even try. And greatness would one day be his; of that he was absolutely certain, even if the struggle to achieve it cost him everything.

Ever since he'd been 'sent down' from Oxford after a night of heavy drinking—during which he'd defaced the portraits of several notable alumni including his own father's, the detestable stick insect and Harley Street surgeon, Reginald Sir St. John fucking Meath—all Ronald had ever wanted was to one day best his father's reputation. And for a while among a small circle of colleagues in the curious new American discipline of Chiropractic, he had achieved a measure of notoriety. Then it had all gone terribly wrong, everyone had turned on him, and he'd found himself raising goats on the coast of goddamned Maine. But still he wasn't about to give up on his dream, not now he was so close.



Here in Maine, surrounded by intellectual pygmies as dense as the north woods, he'd continued his research, stealing the corpses he'd needed from under Brewster's nose for years. He'd probably ground half the funeral parlor's clients into goat feed by now and Brewster had no clue. That was the one good thing about being marooned on this god-forsaken coast. No one paid him the slightest bit of attention. One day they would, however. Oh yes, when eventually his achievements attracted the world's attention, colleagues who'd once rejected him would again grovel at his feet.

In the meantime, he needed help. His wife was becoming useless. There'd been a time when she'd been quite helpful, and not just for the money she'd brought to his practice. She'd been willing to discuss his ideas, suggest improvements in his experiments, and write up his findings. Not now. Now her money was gone and she constantly bickered, and contradicted, criticized and quibbled. She wasn't even much help with cleaning up after his experiments. No, he needed an assistant, and soon. He was running out of time.

The tomb of some Austrian king reads, "He came so near to greatness." Ronald Meath couldn't imagine a more damning epitaph. That prospect—not the goats, not the squalor, not the mockery—was his nightmare; that he would come close to besting his father's accomplishments, and fail all the same.

\* \* \* \*

From the moment Chris opened his eyes, he felt a curious mix of excitement and dread. Dinner with Mallory—what could it mean? Well, perhaps the chance to fondle those incredible breasts. Or, if old lady Holcomb was right, dinner might turn into something nasty. Maybe that was Mallory's appeal; her air of...what...dark secrets? Maybe that was what intrigued him—her disquieting mix of innocence and danger.

Chris managed to wash, dress, get a bun from the bread bin, and slip out of the house without encountering any of his family, grabbing his pellet gun by the back door as he left. Gillian and her mother were already at work in the orchard, pruning limbs from their apple trees. Gillian waved. He reciprocated the greeting, then headed toward the shore to shoot water rats.

The sky was clear, the air crisp and the breeze biting. There would be frost that night. He stayed on the shore for about a half hour. He ate his bun and waited patiently, but didn't see a single rat. Too late for them, he guessed. By this time, they must already have moved away from the shore and into their winter burrows high up in the bank. Chris wandered back up to the railway tracks and began walking aimlessly in the direction of Perkin's Pond. From time to time, he shot at a crow or a gull. The only thing he managed to kill was time. And that was all that mattered. He didn't know what to expect from dinner with Mallory, but the day couldn't pass quickly enough.

"You're spying on me!" someone shouted.

The goatman! Meath stood in the middle of a small fenced enclosure squeezed between the tracks and the shore, and was surrounded by a dozen goats. Through a tangle of hair and whiskers and wrinkles, the goatman stared with watery eyes that reminded Chris of wet kelp.

"What?" Chris said, and then, "Crap, crap, crap!" under his breath. Focussed as he'd been on his footing on the old railway ties, he hadn't realized he'd walked all the way to the goatman's house.

They stared at each other in silence for a moment, and then the goatman burst into laughter. "Hah," he roared. "The look on your face, anybody would think you'd done something terrible!"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going. I'll go!" He turned for home.

"Why? This is a free country and the rail line is public land...I think anyway."

Chris stopped and turned around. Meath had left the small enclosure and climbed up onto the embankment. He now stood in the middle of the tracks, staring at Chris with a sort of knowing grin. From the man's filthy gray hair, huge arthritic knuckles, and large purple spots on the backs of his hands, Chris guessed the goatman was in his seventies or eighties. Even so, he looked to be strong. His shoulders filled out a tattered tweed jacket almost to bursting. And the soiled collar and tie he wore were knotted around his huge neck like a belt round a pig. The man had an air of menace.

"You're the Chandler boy. I gave you a ride once."

"How do you know my—"

"Oh, I know what goes on round here." He walked toward Chris. The smell of the man rocked Chris back on his heels, a mix of sour milk and manure. "I've seen you down by the Willard graves many times."

"You have?" Then how had Chris not seen Meath?

"Oh yes, and that was you I saw in the town cemetery yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Tell me, why are you so interested in the dead?"

"I'm not."

"Not sure why anybody would be. The dead are just dead, I see them every day, and I can tell you, a dead body is just rotting meat. It's waste, toxic waste."

Meath wiped his right hand on his trousers and extended it to Chris. "Ronald Meath."

Chris winced at the man's grip. "Chris Chandler," he gasped.

"It's nice to meet you, young man."

Chris was almost as surprised by the man's formal demeanor and elegant speech as he'd been by Meath's appalling smell and slovenly appearance. Not at all what he expected from the mad man he'd seen the other night bellowing at his

wife and hauling a dead body about.

“Someone told me you were a doctor,” Chris said.

“So you’ve been asking questions about me?”

“No...I.”

“I’m a doctor of chiropractic.”

“Of chiropractic?”

“One of the health care professions. Concerned with disorders of the neuromusculoskeletal system and their effects on our general health.”

“I...I just thought chiropractors did, you know, massage.”

“That’s because the cowards who practice the discipline today have abandoned the real science behind chiropractic. Today that’s all they are, masseurs.”

“But that’s not how you see it?”

“The man who founded our discipline in the 1890s discovered that vitalistic energy constantly passes up and down the spinal column.”

Meath marched right up to Chris and ran a finger down Chris’s spine; the sensation made his skin crawl. Chris tried to hold his breath against the man’s overpowering stench.

“And he also discovered that if our vital energy is blocked, our health suffers. He called such blockages, ‘subluxations’. These blockages create a breeding ground for disease, and the higher up in the spine the blockage occurs, the more serious the disease.”

Meath stepped away with a look of self-satisfaction.

“Chiropractic,” he said, “is concerned with identifying these blockages and removing them through spinal manipulation.”

Chris couldn’t hold his breath any longer. “Spinal manipulation?” he said, then faked a sneeze to cover his gasp for air.

“Adjusting the spine to eliminate subluxations—that’s the chiropractor’s role

in medicine, no matter how dangerous the adjustments may be.”

“So these adjustments can be dangerous?”

“Of course; the higher up the spinal column the blockage occurs, the more dangerous the manipulation. There are two arteries right here.” Again he marched forward and pinched the back of Chris’s neck at the base of the skull. “They flow into the brain, and if we rupture either of them, well then, let’s just say, terrible things can happen.” Again he backed away. “But perfecting dangerous manipulations is what real scientists in our discipline are supposed to do because if we can perfect the truly dangerous manipulations, we can free mankind from its most terrible diseases.”

“So if you were a scientist—”

“I *am* a scientist.”

“Then why did your colleagues dismiss you?” Oh crap, he shouldn’t have said that. Meath’s going to know Chris had been checking him out. Meath barrelled on oblivious, becoming increasingly excited in the process.

“Because none of them has the courage to follow me in my efforts to perfect the most dangerous manipulations. They’re cowards.”

“That’s it? They wouldn’t follow you?”

“And they tried to stop me.”

“Stop you how?”

“They threw me out of their associations. They took away my license. Means nothing. What do I care if they don’t approve of me?” Meath was almost yelling now.

“I know what that’s like,” Chris said, almost to himself.

“Yes, Mr. Chandler, I rather thought you might.” Meath smiled. “You’re a loner, like me.”

“Not by choice.”

“We loners, we chart our own course. We make our own rules.” Meath marched up and down the tracks almost yelling. “*Übermenschen*, Nietzsche called us, beholding to nothing and to no one, not to history, not to convention. With only the power of our imagination, we create the entirely new.”

“*Über* what?”

“I’m only interested in scientific truth, and I shall be constrained by nothing and no one in my pursuit of it.”

“Ronald,” his wife called from the house. “Who are you talking to?”

“No one and none of your business!”

“Uh, I should be going,” Chris said, backing away. “Nice to have—”

“Ronald, lunch!

“Shut up, woman! I’ll eat when I’m ready!”

“Well, don’t blame me if it’s cold!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Chris interjected, “but I have to go too,” and he headed for home.

Behind him, the goatman muttered, “That woman! It’ll give me such pleasure to break her neck one day.”

\* \* \* \*

Mallory walked into Rudy’s room wearing nothing but panties and a bra. Rudy had just finished showering and was seated on the bed with only a towel across his groin. He was struggling to bandage his right forearm.

“Get out,” he cried. Mallory ignored him.

She marched to Rudy’s side, and with hands on hips, said, “My guest will be here soon. You’ll be nice to him, and you’ll eat dinner with us. Clear?”

Rudy Dahlman was sixteen, short, skinny, with an angular face ravaged by pimples. His hair, still wet from the shower and plastered to his scalp, was a dirty blond. It appeared almost gray in the dim light. In Rudy’s own estimation, he was

the most pathetic person on the planet. The first words he recalled his father ever having said to him were, “Not my kid,” and “He’s got a face like a rat.”

“Mother’s a mess already,” continued Mallory, “and I want us to look like a normal family, so I need you at the table. You’d better not screw things up, you little creep, or you’ll be sorry.”

Mallory terrified Rudy; she always had. “But I...I’m not hungry...my arm...,” he whined.

“Let me see.”

He eased the bandage away from the wound near his elbow. What had started out as some kind of bite had become a nightmare of infection stretching the length of the forearm.

Mallory bent forward to have a look, her breasts just inches from Rudy’s face. “Oh it’s looking much better.”

What the hell was she talking about? The whole arm was yellow and hot and throbbing, and the area right around the bite was green and black and smelled like crap. And she was to blame. She’d poisoned his arm somehow, and all because of the incident with her underwear. Well, she’d gone too far this time.

“Wash it with some salt water,” she said. “It’ll be fine in no time.” Then she squeezed his swollen wrist—hard.

“Ow! God! What did you do that for?”

Mallory straightened up and gave him a look of such disdain. “So you know I’m serious. You’ll come to dinner, or else.” Then Mallory smiled, touched his cheek, and whispered, “Oh, and after Chris leaves, you can come to my room if you want...”

They both heard the car. “He’s here,” and she ran out of the room.

Rudy didn’t doubt for a minute Mallory was responsible for the poison in his arm, the same way she was responsible for all the pain and the poison in his life.

She was always telling him he was a bastard and somebody else's kid, telling kids at school his mother breastfed him until he was seven; pretending to like him and dressing him up in her underwear and clothes, and then taking pictures for the whole world to see; forever walking around the house naked and flashing her boobs and crotch at him. No, all the loneliness, all the humiliation, all the pain in his life stemmed from Mallory, of that fact Rudy Dahlman was absolutely certain.

And yet she had this strange hold over him. Somehow she managed to get him to do things for her, weird, dangerous things, whatever she wanted. And he was powerless to say no, like he was her puppet. No surprise actually, and no real magic to it though. All she had to do was flash those huge breasts of hers or let him fondle something and he'd do whatever she asked. Sometimes they even had fun together. Like the times they terrorized the old lady. Or when they took the pictures of the girl from the restaurant making out with her boyfriend.

Then, as soon as he'd done what she wanted, she treated him like crap again. No, he didn't trust Mallory as far as he could spit, and somehow, someday he'd get even.

Now Chris Chandler was coming for dinner. Chandler rubbed him the wrong way, always looking down his nose at everyone. What gave Chandler the right to judge anybody? Everybody hated Chandler. Fuckin' bastard, with a nasty sneer on his face all the time, pretending like he was better than everybody else. So maybe Mallory and Chandler did deserve each other.

Then again, you had to feel sorry for the guy. Christopher Chandler didn't have a clue what he was in for. Mallory was going to eat him alive. The guy was toast.

\* \* \* \*

Chris's father drove him to his date. The whole situation felt weird. They rode in silence up the long lane to the huge Dahlman house.

The scale of the place was impressive. Its overall appearance was not. The



middle portion was a story and a half with long single-storied wings on either side. Flanking the double front doors were two enormous columns, which somehow failed to give the place any sort of grandeur; instead they seemed out of proportion, overbearing, cold. The front of the house had few windows to soften its almost institutional look. The three-car garage to the left of the main building, by contrast, was covered in busy Victorian gingerbread and crowned with an oversized cupola and huge red weather cock.

“Odd place,” his dad said as he stopped the car by the front doors.

“Thanks for the ride.” What else could Chris have said? He wished to hell his parents didn’t know about the date. He wished they weren’t making such a big deal of it. He’d count this evening a success if he didn’t get ambushed by Mallory’s crazy boyfriend.

“If you need a ride home...”

“No, I’ll walk.” And his dad drove away.

Chris rang the bell; it chimed like Big Ben. After a moment, Mrs. Dahlman opened the door. Makeup and clothes can conceal a lot of things but not, it seemed, drunken despair. Chris noticed Mrs. Dahlman’s eyes first; they were dull grey and vacant. Her eyelids drooped, her mouth sagged open, and a line of drool dangled from her chin as though she’d just woken up from a deep sleep. Her hair, which looked like a rigid black helmet, was crushed flat on the right side and had a pronounced white stripe down the parting. She wore a strange combination of jungle print skirt and floral blouse with a wide gold belt. The effect was appalling. Oh, and she carried a full highball glass.

“Good evening, Mrs. Dahlman. I’m Chris Chandler here to see Mallory.”

She stared at Chris then shrieked, “Mallory!”

She turned and walked unsteadily across the room. “Mallory’s getting dressed. You can wait there.” She gestured to the longest sofa Chris had ever seen. “Can I

get you something while you wait?”

“Uh...Coke?”

“The drink?”

“Um...yes.”

The room was cavernous with its high ceiling and enormous windows, and cold, like a gymnasium. It didn't help that the tiled floor echoed sharply as Mrs. Dahlman crossed it in three-inch heels. The word squalid came to Chris's mind. The room had three distinct areas: on one side, an open kitchen cluttered with dirty dishes, bags of groceries, many liquor bottles, and stacks of empty tin cans; on the other, an immense dining table in dark wood covered in clutter and ringed by twelve ornately carved chairs; and in the middle of the room, the enormous couch and several chairs with stained upholstery. Around the room were many strange wooden sculptures and paintings of dark jungles, twisted figures, and colorful houses. The art was all quite menacing. And dust, dust everywhere! Did no one ever clean this place?

“Your house is—”

“Idiotic!” Mrs. Dahlman's speech was slurred. “Building a house like this, with so many windows, in Maine! It's impossible to keep warm. We have to have space heaters in every room,” she rambled on from the kitchen. “I sleep in that wing with my son, Rudy,” she said pointing to the left, and then pointing to the right, she added, “That wing is Mallory's. Her father has an office down there too. Stupid, having rooms so spread out. Costs an absolute fortune to heat.”

Chris tried a different tack. “Well the art is—”

“My husband's taste, all Indonesian. I think it's horrible.” She returned to the couch and handed Chris his coke. “I refuse to clean any of it.” Chris took a sip...and gagged.

“I put a little vodka in it, to warm you up.” She dropped down onto the couch

beside him, took a sip from her own glass, and let out a long sigh.

“Okay, thanks,” Chris croaked as the vodka burned his throat. *Vodka and coke, God!*

Mallory entered the room. Chris expected her to be decked out in something glamorous, some slinky satin thing with shoulder pads because Mallory loved shoulder pads, or maybe a huge beaded sweater because there’d been a picture of Princess Di in a huge puffy sweater in the Bangor paper the other day.

The vision that emerged from Mallory’s wing was about as unDiana-like as one could imagine. Her tiny black leather skirt strained to contain her ample bottom. Beneath her short, wine-colored jacket, of the sort bullfighters wear, a black lace corset pushed her huge breasts up and over the top like huge white silk pillows. The fishnet stockings were trashy and thrilling at the same time; the long lace gloves were just plain weird, like she’d found them in some kid’s dress-up trunk and couldn’t resist. And her hair, usually big and stiff anyway, was now enormous and added six inches to her height; and it sparkled!

“Like it?” she asked as she sashayed across the room and pirouetted in front of Chris.

“Incredible!” For some reason, he recalled the words of Felicity Holcomb at that moment: *“Pretty...in a buxom, chunky, cheap kind of way.”*

“My father sent it from London. This is the new style. Like Madonna wears.” She pulled open the jacket. “It’s a bustier. Do you think it flatters me? Everybody over there is wearing them. Mother won’t let me wear it to school.”

“Your father may like trashy clothes on his whores,” Mrs. Dahlman said, “but I won’t have you...,” and her voice trailed off.

“And these stockings, they’re pantyhose, even though they’re fishnet, see?” She raised the hem of her skirt up to her hip.

“Stop exhibiting yourself,” Mrs. Dahlman said as she dragged herself off the

couch and headed for the kitchen. “I need a refill, and dinner is probably getting cold.”

They moved to the table, set for four with brightly colored, mismatched plates. Mallory pulled Chris into the seat beside her. Mother brought dinner to the table. Chris hadn’t known quite what to expect, something unusual perhaps, given Mallory’s stories about Indonesia. Instead, dinner turned out to be a Macaroni Cheese and Hot Dog Casserole with a wedge of iceberg lettuce.

“Mother doesn’t usually cook,” explained Mallory. “We used to have a lady who did everything, but Mother fired her.”

“She was stealing from me.”

“No, Mother, I told you, Rudy was stealing from you,” Mallory said.

“Uh,” Chris gagged. His first mouthful of casserole tasted like a lump of rock salt.

“I take it you’re Mallory’s new interest,” Mrs. Dahlman asked and then drained another highball.

“We’re just friends, Mother.” Mallory grinned at Chris.

“And are you still friends with the other boy, Mallory? The Balzer boy?”

Chris wanted to hear that answer for himself.

“I’m not sure.”

“So, Chris, what do you do?”

“I...I go to school.”

“Well, of course you do. What else?”

“I...read...and I try to write.”

“Mother reads. That’s all she does,” Mallory said.

“That’s not true. I have my committees.”

“Maybe once a month,” Mallory whispered to Chris.

“What do you like to read, Mrs. Dahlman?”

“She reads romances, nothing else,” Mallory said before her mother could answer.

“I can speak for myself, young lady. What about you, Chris? What do you read?”

“Well, I like Poe...”

“Poe?”

“...the American writer?”

“No, don’t know him. What sort of books does he write?”

“He’s dead...but he did invent the murder mystery.”

“Can’t stand murder mysteries, too complicated. Rudy, now he loves murder stories. Where is Rudy?”

“Re-bandaging his arm. He’ll be here soon.” Mallory turned to Chris and explained, “He has some sort of infection. A bite of some kind according to the doctor. It’s not clearing up.”

“Rudy thinks Mallory’s responsible,” Mrs. Dahlman said, “that she put a spell on his arm.”

“He’s such a child.”

Rudy appeared looking pale and shivery; even so, he sat down next to his mother. The large cloth bandage on his arm was coming loose and beginning to slide toward his hand. “You were talking about me?”

“I said what a child you are,” Mallory said.

“I’m not. You did do this.” He pulled the bandage away from his elbow. The flesh beneath was black, and either terribly bruised or gangrenous.

Chris gasped. “That’s awful.”

“Oh, it’ll be all right,” Mallory said. “In a day or two, I’m sure the pain will be gone.”

“No, it won’t. You killed my arm.”

“I didn’t touch your arm. If I had, then it would have been to teach you a lesson. I caught the little pervert going through my lingerie.”

Chris had little interest in eating another bite.

“Mother, Chris is here to see me. I think we’ve had enough dinner. I’m going to take him to my room...for dessert.” She stood up and pulled Chris up too.

Mrs. Dahlman’s chin had fallen forward onto her chest. “I’m tired, all this cooking,” she mumbled. “I’m going to bed.” She struggled up from the table and walked away, leaving Rudy alone to fumble with a fork in his left hand.

“Nice meeting you, Mrs. Dahlman,” Chris called after her.

“Rudy, will you help Mommy to bed?” she replied.

“Oh, all right.” Rudy threw down his fork and followed his mother from the room.

“I hope your arm gets better soon,” Chris called to Rudy.

“Little chance of that,” Mallory whispered with a grin.

\* \* \* \*

Mallory’s enormous room had its own wall of glass facing the bay, a large bed, a gigantic armchair by the window, and in the back corner of the room, her own bathroom. “I love my room,” she said. “And the view! I never close these curtains, not even at night.”

Chris was amazed at all the strange stuff around the room: dolls and stuffed animals, pictures of angels and horses, and posters of Princess Di and Madonna. There were also carved heads and bell jars and strange paintings and a large statue of a god with an enormous penis. Against the back wall stood a long work table piled high with beakers, test tubes, books, drawings, herbs, carved wooden figures, and filthy rags.

Chris pointed to the table. “Is all that stuff from Indonesia?”

“Most of it, yes. It’s my little piece of Tana Toraja.”

“Is...?” He pointed to a large jar with a yellow lump floating in a cloudy gray liquid.

“Yes, it’s a foot. It’s my great-grandmother’s. Father says it will bring me luck.”

“That’s so...” He wanted to say gross, but he didn’t want to blow his chances with Mallory. “So you really do believe in this magic stuff.”

“Of course, like my father. It’s just who we are. Not my mother, though, she hates it.”

“She doesn’t seem too happy with your father.”

“You see what I have to put up with!”

“Your mother seems nice.” What a lame thing to say. In fact, Mrs. Dahlman seemed like a drunk and an emotional train wreck.

“She’s not normally so bad. She got a letter from Father yesterday saying he wouldn’t be home for Christmas. Of course, he hardly ever comes home anymore. Still, every year he says he’ll come for Christmas and then cancels. I’m used to it, but Mother always goes to pieces. She’s pathetic.”

“It must be hard for her.”

“Why? She doesn’t love him. She’s just jealous of his other family.”

“His what?”

“She’s convinced Father has another family in Toraja. He spends most of the year out there, carrying oil from drilling platforms in the Indian Ocean into Makassar, so when he’s in port, Mother thinks he lives in his home village with a Torajan family.”

“What do you think?”

“So he has another woman there, so what? He’s a man after all, and you men have your needs. Just as long as he keeps sending me presents...”

“You look fantastic by the way.”

“And?”

“And so sexy.”

He was mesmerized by the huge mounds of soft flesh bulging above the black silk cups of her corset.

“You can touch them if you like.”

His heart pounded like a pile driver. He found it hard to breathe as he moved his right hand toward her chest. He had imagined her breasts would be soft and delicate, like two living things, but as he caressed them, they seemed disappointingly hard, bound as they were in the rigid black corset. They gave not an inch to gentle pressure. Even so, the image of his hand on Mallory’s enormous breasts was an absolute dream.

He closed his eyes to savor the moment and moved one hand slowly all over the front of her outfit. Then he felt Mallory take his other hand and gently guide it toward her thigh. He kept his eyes closed as she moved his fingers slowly along the inside of her leg. Mallory sighed, and Chris opened his eyes slightly. Mallory was smiling, her breath shallow and lips parted slightly. He could not help but lunge forward and kiss her on the mouth. He withdrew his right hand from her breasts, wrapped his arm around her, and drew her to his chest, even as his left hand continued to creep along her thigh. Then Mallory’s own hand came to rest on Chris’s crotch. He gasped mid-kiss. Only by the greatest exercise of will did he manage not to make...well...an enormous fool of himself.

“Mallory,” he whispered, drawing away from her. She was staring directly into his face with the most lascivious and self-satisfied smile, like she was enjoying a moment of absolute triumph.

“And some people don’t believe in magic.” She purred like a jungle cat.

“What?”

“My spell, it worked sooo well.”



“What spell?”

“My love spell. I’ve conquered you. You want me.”

“You didn’t need a spell for that.”

“But I made you my slave. You had no will of your own.”

“Your breasts took care of that.” He reached across to stroke the tops of her breasts again.

She drew back. “Nope, sorry, the experiment is over.”

“What experiment?”

“I’m trying out different spells my father sent me.”

“Your father sent you a spell for teasing boyfriends?”

“No, of course not. In his letters—he writes to me almost every week—he always includes a spell for something. It’s our little secret. Spells for finding things, for healing cuts, for punishing evil deeds, for clouding people’s judgment, and like tonight, for capturing somebody’s will and making them do my bidding.”

“You think I was doing *your* bidding? It sure seemed the other way around to me!”

“Did it?”

“You’re incredible,” Chris said as he put a hand back on her thigh.

“No, Christopher. No more tonight, but we’ll have other opportunities to...experiment.”

“God, you’re so...” and words failed him. “They warned me about you.”

“Oh?” She pulled away. The icy look in her eyes should have been enough to shut him up. “Who warned you about me?”

“Well, the lady who lives up on the mountain for one...”

“Mrs. Holcomb,” Mallory said with such malice.

Chris knew at once he’d made a mistake.

Mallory announced, “You have to go now; it’s my bedtime and I have church

tomorrow.”

“Church? You’re kidding.” Chris almost laughed.

Her face hardened, then softened slightly. “Oh, and after you leave, don’t you dare go around the house to watch me get undressed for bed.”

With that, Chris couldn’t get out of the house fast enough.

At the front door, they kissed. Mallory stroked his cheek, and whispered, “I think this evening was the start of something special.” She opened the door and pushed him outside. With a wink and a coquettish wave, she closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Chris watched through the window as Mallory turned out the last light in the living room and returned to her bedroom. He then ran to the end of the building, around behind the garages, and down to the end of the lawn. There he stood in the dark, just beyond the pool of light from Mallory’s window.

Mallory turned off the lamps in her room one by one until only a bedside lamp remained. She paused by her bed, and stared out into the night, as if waiting for audience members to be seated. Then the show began.

She pulled off her jacket and tossed it on the bed. She ran her hands down over her breasts and hips and eased the tight little skirt down to the floor.

She walked slowly to the bureau and ran a brush through her hair. Then she crossed to the bathroom and disappeared. For an instant, Chris ached with disappointment. Mallory reappeared and tossed her stockings over the vanity chair. She walked to the window and examined her reflection. Even at this distance, Chris could see the self-satisfied smile. Then she reached behind her back and began unfastening the corset. When the sides fell free, she clutched it to her chest and crossed to the bedside table. In one movement, she let the corset drop away from her wondrous breasts, and switched off the light.

Chris struggled to catch his breath, then...

“Great show, huh?”

“What the—”

Christ! Rudy Dahlman! “Same every night.”

“You’re sick!” Chris said.

“Yeah, my arm, it’s bad.”

“No, I mean you’re *really* sick,” Chris said in horrified amazement.

“You think? I’m not the one putting on the show.”

“But...you’re watching your own sister, for god sake!”

“Give me a break. You actually believe she’s my sister? That would be gross.”

What the hell did he mean? Before he could ask, Rudy disappeared.

Chris felt dirty and sick to the stomach. He was half way home before he managed to shake the creepy feeling in his gut.

The Willard house was in darkness when he got back. Thank god, because he was still shaking and, well, still kind of aroused. Chris would not, for all the world, have wanted to answer the question, “So how was your date?” He crept into the house and up the ladder into the attic space.

Since there wasn’t headroom enough for Chris to stand, he had to crawl from the hatch to the bedside. He switched on the lamp and got an unnerving surprise. Someone had tidied his bed...and put a stack of old magazines on the pillow—chiropractic magazines. The top issue had a picture on its cover of an elegant young man in a lab coat with the caption, *Researcher of the Year—Dr. Ronald Meath*.

“What the hell?” Chris’s parents would never have climbed into the attic, and his siblings would have been too scared because of the ghost stories he’d told them. Chris turned off the lamp and looked out the small window into the darkness. Goose flesh rose on his arms.

A tiny light was moving slowly along the tracks.

\* \* \* \*

*Meath's been up here...in my room! Goddamn! How the hell?* How could he have gotten in and then out again without being seen? And why? What did Meath want? Was this some kind of joke...or a revenge thing? What the hell was Meath up to?

On the premise that the best defense is a strong offence, Chris slipped back down through the house, grabbed a heavy coat and gloves then headed out into the night. He didn't want to chance being seen by Meath on the tracks, so he crossed them and dropped down onto the beach. The tide was out, and by the scant light of a gibbous moon, he picked his way gingerly over the slippery rocks and around the tidal pools to approach the goatman's house from below. At Meath's place, the beach was a good ten feet below the rail bed, so Chris had to scabble up a muddy bank and crawl through long grass past the pen to see what the old man was up to.

The lamp atop the tall pole in the backyard was on, and Meath was already halfway up the path from the tracks to his barn. He was dragging a wheelbarrow with all his might, and in it, the same large red sack—this time full to bursting. The load gave Meath enormous difficulty.

“Help me here!”

Chris's heart skipped a beat! Was Meath calling to him? Had he been seen?

The back door flew open. “No!” his wife screamed.

“Get out here now.”

“No, I told you I would never help you do this again, never.”

“You will and right now...if you know what's...”

“All right, all right, but this is the last time, I swear. It's horrible, *horrible*.”

She pulled on a coat and stomped down the path, visibly upset. “I have nightmares every time you make me do this.”

When she reached him, Meath did the unexpected; he embraced her. “Sorry,

old girl. Sorry I yell so much. Under a lot of pressure right now. I think we've got a good one this time though."

She looked up into his face and patted his cheek. "I know, I know."

"When I get my procedure right, you just wait, this will all have been worthwhile, I promise."

"Then let's get on with it." They kissed and then turned to the wheelbarrow.

"You push while I lift and pull," Meath said. "Yes, that's doing it."

"Who is this?"

"Arthur Bent."

"What, the old church deacon from over at Perkin's Pond, the—"

"Yes, the fellow who looked like a tree stump."

"Aw, he was nice."

"He was a pig. His heart attack was long overdue."

Pushing and pulling the wheelbarrow and sweating and cursing as they did, the goatman and his wife managed to wrestle their load up to the small barn and disappear inside. As soon as the doors were closed, Chris ran across the tracks and up the path to the back of the barn. Light from the lamp pole did not reach the back or the far side of the building, so Chris slid along the end and around the corner. Half way along the dark side, slivers of light from inside shone through cracks in the wall. He crept to the light and found an old window covered over with rusted tin siding. He squinted through a crack between the tin and the window frame.

It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the light inside and his brain a minute longer to process what he saw.

Several bare bulbs dangling from the rafters lighted the interior. Filthy straw and goat crap covered the dirt floor. Old milking machines, dented wash tubs, rusty buckets and empty milk cans were piled carelessly in the corners. Wires and electrical devices and every kind of circuitry littered a workbench along the back

wall. Assorted rakes and shovels and saws and axes hung on the walls, most of them in rough and rusted condition. All was pretty much what Chris had expected to see in the goatman's barn. What he hadn't expected to see was an enormous old barber chair in the center of the room. The antique monstrosity obviously had pride of place in the cluttered and filthy building.

The huge chair stood on a small plywood platform no more than six inches above the dirt floor. The chair had splintered wooden arms, cracked black leather upholstery, and a rusted iron foot rest. It stood atop a steel center pole and had been raised to its maximum height so anybody sitting in it would be at least four feet off the ground. The whole contraption appeared top heavy and would have been quite unstable had its ornate steel base not been bolted to the plywood platform. A tangle of straps, belts and metal lattice was attached to the chair, and several ropes and pulleys hung from the rafters above it. The contraption looked for all the world like an electric chair!

A small white metal table on wheels of the kind one might see in a doctor's office stood on one side of the chair, with trays of dirty surgical instruments arrayed upon it. On the other side of the chair stood a second table, this one in wood with four-by-four legs and a thick slab for a top; it reminded Chris of a butcher's block, especially with the huge rusted meat cleaver stuck in it.

Meath had positioned his wheelbarrow in front of the platform, and was trying to pull the filthy sack away from its contents. Meath's wife, standing nearby, said, "This is always the worst part."

A bloated, gray carcass emerged from the sack. It shifted in the wheelbarrow like a nightmarish fruit jelly taking the shape of a mold.

Mrs. Meath gasped. "Damn, what a mess. Wasn't he laid out?"

"His family didn't want an open coffin, so I didn't have to clean him up."

"What's that smell?" Thick yellow liquid was smeared all over the thighs. "Oh

he's covered in..."

"No. I evacuated him. It's just preservative leaking out. Always happens, and usually from everywhere. We're lucky this time."

"And you couldn't let it settle before you brought him home?"

"It settled in the grave. The ride on the rails moved stuff around." As he spoke, Meath grabbed one of the ropes dangling above the barber chair and pulled it down to the wheelbarrow. Then he got a sheet of canvas from a peg on the back wall. "You'll have to lift him while I slide this underneath. First the legs..."

"And look straight at that mess, yeah sure."

As his wife lifted the spindly legs, Meath pushed the canvas between the gray flesh of the man's buttocks and the rusted metal of the wheelbarrow.

"All right, now under the arms." And they both moved to the other end of the body and heaved.

That done, Meath bunched the corners of the sheet together over Bent's distended belly, and hooked the rope from the rafters through the grommets in the four corners of the canvas. Then he grabbed the other end of the rope wound through the pulleys, said, "Ready," and started to pull.

The enormous corpse rose slowly, bumping against the wheelbarrow, the platform and the chair as it did.

"When he's higher than the chair, you push him forward until he's right over the seat."

"I thought you had a pulley for this."

"It's jammed."

"Why am I not surprised?" She went to the back of the barn and took down a long-handled shovel from the wall, then put the jagged edge of its rusted blade against the canvas sling, and pushed.

Once the huge carcass dangled in roughly the right position, Meath lowered it

into the barber's chair. He then unhooked the canvas sling from the rope, and pulled its corners away from the corpse. Hindquarters squeezed beneath the armrests like sausages about to burst their casings. "Get me that rope," Meath said. "I'll have to lash him to the seat to ensure he's properly aligned." Moments later, he stepped away from the corpse to admire his work.

Arthur Bent—the color of putty, with large brown blotches where preservative had pooled beneath his skin, eyes fixed in an unseeing stare, jaw still wide in a last cry of excruciating pain, yellow liquid smeared across his rump and thighs—sat tied to the barber chair with his head held fast by an incongruous pink headband to a tall metal lattice extending upward from the back of the barber's chair.

"We talked to him last Easter," the old lady said. "He liked my hat."

"You can go now."

"Thank God. I'm going to bed." She started for the door.

"No. I'll need you again when I'm finished, to get him onto the table."

"Oh God." She left the barn, slamming the door behind her.

Meath went to the workbench, pushed wires and tools aside to make space and then lifted a large, metal army-surplus footlocker from the lower shelf up onto the bench. He opened the locker and took out a filthy lab coat, which he put on rather ceremoniously. He also took out a ring binder and a tape recorder, placing them on the metal side table. Then he plugged the machine into an extension cord duck taped to the leg of the table, and pressed *Record*.

"My subject this evening is Arthur Bent from Perkin's Pond, a man as wide as he was short and who smoked and staggered about on legs too slight to support his immense weight. Bent died of a massive coronary on Wednesday, November 6th, 1985, and was interred Friday, November 10th. Apart from the few bones I had to break to release them from rigor, the corpse has suffered only minor damage. I did crush one leg when I stepped on it lifting the specimen onto my cart. I've



performed a most thorough spinal assessment, however, to reassure myself the cervical structure is intact and sufficient for my purposes.

“I shall now fit my Sacro-occipital Activator to the skull and collar bones.”

Meath pulled a second footlocker from beneath the workbench and carried it carefully to the platform as though it contained a priceless Faberge egg. He put the locker down, opened it, and carefully lifted out what appeared to be a hockey helmet inside a giant birdcage. Fastened to the base of the cage were football shoulder pads, a box with knobs and gauges and a tangle of gears and wires. For the next fifteen minutes, the goatman fitted the bizarre device over the head and shoulders of the cadaver, and tightened thumb screws into the forehead and metal straps around the throat. Then he connected various cables from the device to the wires and metal bands protruding from the barber chair. At last, the head and shoulders were encased in the birdcage contraption, and the chest and enormous belly were cinched to the chair by iron bands and leather belts. As Meath worked, he babbled into the tape machine.

“My activator is designed to eliminate the inconsistent capacity of chiropractors to handle the duration and magnitude of the load required to target the first and second vertebrae. And for posterity I say again, none of my colleagues has the courage to perform this most delicate of spinal manipulations, and were it not for my activator, I would not attempt a manipulation in this region either. Hence the importance of what I’m trying to do here.” Meath stopped speaking for a moment while he concentrated on a few final adjustments. “Now that’s done.”

He inspected each fitting one more time, and then lifted out of the nest of wires what appeared to be a kitchen timer. He set the timer and laid it in Bent’s lap.

“I shall now administer a high-velocity, short-lever thrust. The low-amplitude manipulation has the physiological effect of signalling neural discharge from paraspinal muscle tissues. I have set my activator to the next increment of duration

and amplitude in order to measure the degree of muscle spindles activation which can be achieved with my device.”

He stopped the tape recorder and waited as the timer ticked down. After several seconds, the cadaver’s head suddenly twisted to the left, then the neck cracked, and the whole body shuddered.

“Well, the activator worked flawlessly, and the crack of the spine was loud enough to wake my goats. Now I shall remove the head to determine the extent of the realignment and the impact on the vertebral arteries. I shall transect the face from forehead to chin, and then peel the skin to the left and right before repositioning the corpse for an examination of the cervical section of the neck.”

He stopped the tape recorder again and unfastened the metal strips and wires from the skull and shoulders of Mr. Bent. When the corpse was freed, Meath went to the workbench, selected a saw from the pegboard, and carried it back to the cadaver. He took a marker from his lab coat pocket, drew a black line at the base of the neck, positioned the saw on the line, and began to cut.

If there’d been a single drop of blood, Chris would have fainted dead away. There wasn’t, and after several minutes, during which the goatman had to use a scalpel several times to cut away troublesome tendons, the head came off in the goatman’s hands. He bundled an old towel on the heavy wooden table, nestled the head in it face up, and turned the tape machine on again.

“I have removed the head, and now I shall transect the face and expose the vertebral arteries.” Silence ensued as he first sliced the face, then turned the head and peeled the flesh from the neck up toward the scalp. He bent down to examine the exposed arteries.

“Damn, damn, damn!”

Meath stopped the machine and paced back and forth for a moment, waving his arms in the air. Finally collecting himself, he turned the machine on.

“There is once again evidence of subarachnoid hemorrhage. The tear is small and may be due in part to the unusual thickness of Bent’s neck. I cannot claim success, however, until I have at least one clean manipulation and one set of parameters to employ as my baseline for further refinements of my device. I shall require yet another specimen.”

He turned the tape recorder off. “You have wasted my time, Mr. Bent.” He paced about furiously. At last he sighed. “Ah well, you’ll make good goat meal, so tonight will not be a complete loss.”

*Goat meal? Meath turns dead bodies into goat meal?* The idea was just too horrible. Then again, goats will eat anything. Near Chris’s feet was a broken sack of feed. He picked up a handful of the spilled feed and shoved it into his pocket. He’d have to check the stuff out.

Meath bellowed. “Come out here and help me!”

Chris heard a door open, then slam, and the old lady appeared. “So?” she asked.

“Help me get him onto the table.”

“That’s a no then.” She shook her head and said, “Two failures this week. When are you going to stop?” From the look on her face, Meath’s wife knew immediately she’d made a mistake. Even through the peephole, Chris could tell Meath was livid.

“When I get it right,” he screamed. “And don’t you ever...*ever*...question my work! Never! Do I make myself clear? Now help me shift him!”

Meath moved the head, the towel, and the cleaver from the butcher-block table to the floor, and reattached the canvas sling to the pulley system. He rotated the barber chair to face the table, and pulled on the rope. Once the headless corpse cleared the chair, his wife pushed it with the shovel until it dangled above the table. Meath then lowered it to the table where it draped over the sides like a walrus

balanced on a bar stool.

“I’m going,” the old lady grumbled and started for the barn door. “Are you grinding him or burning him?”

“Grinding.”

“Good, because when you burn them, the smell stays in the house for days. I’ve asked you a hundred times to move your burn barrel out of the yard.”

“And I’ve told you a hundred times, I can’t risk animals carrying off any bones.”

The old lady slammed the barn door as she left.

“I swear, one day soon...” Meath said. He picked up the cleaver from the floor, lifted it high, and with one blow, hacked off Arthur Bent’s right leg.

Chris gasped at the suddenness of the act.

The goatman paused, looked toward the boarded-up window, and smiled.

Chris took off running through the grass, down to the tracks, and home.

He only stopped running when he emerged from the orchard at the side of the Willard house. There, he dropped onto the back steps to catch his breath. He dared not go into the house, not yet, not panting like a maniac. He’d wake everyone. Instead, sitting in the dark, trying to still his heart, he listened for sounds of pursuit. Nothing. Then...

\* \* \* \*

“Chris?”

“Gillian? What are you doing out here.”

“Waiting for you.” She approached from the corner of the house.

“You scared me!” Chris got up, grabbed her by the hand, and hurried her to the old Adirondack chairs in the orchard. She went without protest.

“I was scared too,” she said when they got to the chairs. “I was out for a walk after helping Mom all evening, when I heard someone running along the tracks. I

didn't know who."

Chris was trembling.

"Are you all right? What happened?"

"You won't believe what I just saw." He could hardly believe it himself. "I...I followed Meath home after I saw him carrying a body along the tracks. And then I saw him do some kind of experiment on the body, and then he cut it into pieces."

"What?"

Chris started again, this time in greater detail, and when he finished, Gillian was speechless.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I...I believe you. It's just so horrible!"

"Tell me about it."

"And Meath couldn't have been cutting up something else, like maybe a goat?"

"No, I heard every word. He called him Arthur Bent."

"I know the name, from over at Perkin's Pond. This is awful! You have to tell the police, you have to."

"I know, and I will, first thing in the morning. But tonight...I don't know whether he saw me and I...I'm sort of scared. You know he can get in this house. He put chiropractor magazines in my room earlier this evening while I was out."

"No way. We would have seen him."

"What about the cellar door on the other side of the house? Could he get from the cellar up to the attic somehow?"

"Well, there is a ladder from the cellar into the old summer kitchen."

"Where's the summer kitchen?"

"It's in a part of the house we closed off years ago so we wouldn't have to heat it."

"Is there any way to get from the summer kitchen up into the attic?"

She thought for a moment and then said softly, "There might be."

"We have to bar the cellar door."

"I haven't been in the cellar for years. It's where the accident happened."

"To your grandfather?"

"And to my dad."

"Then you can't go down there, Gillian. Let me do it."

"No, I'll take care of it."

"Gillian," Chris asked, "why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because we're friends."

They got up from the damp chairs and stood for a moment in silence. Then Gillian leaned forward, kissed Chris on the cheek, and slipped away into the dark.

\* \* \* \*

"Because we're friends," she'd said. What she'd really wanted to say was, "Because you're so incredibly beautiful, and because you're lonely, and you're hurting, and I know too well what that's like."

Going down into the cellar after all this time was going to take every ounce of courage. She hadn't set foot in the cellar since the accident.

The ghastly scene remained as vivid today as if it had happened yesterday: the rumble like thunder of the falling barrels; the unearthly cries; Grandfather pinned against the cellar wall; Father sprawled on the cellar floor, broken, blood trickling from his mouth; kneeling at Father's side, cradling his head in her arms, wiping blood from his chin; hearing his last words, "Look after your mother, my precious child."

What a pointless way to die, under empty barrels in a dirt cellar! And now her family had to grub for every penny just to survive; equally meaningless. Of course, Gillian would do as her father had asked; she'd adored him, and loved her mother every bit as much; but Gillian was going to do something meaningful with her own

life—starting with her attempt to help Chris....

## Chapter Six

Sunday, November 17

“Christopher!” his mother called from the kitchen.

“What?” It had taken hours to fall asleep after Mallory’s performance and the horrors he’d witnessed in Meath’s barn. He was still in a fog.

“We’re having French Toast. Would you like some?”

“Maybe. I’ll be down in a while.”

The bacon smelled good, and he was starved after the paltry dinner he’d had at the Dahlmans. The price of a family breakfast, however, would be unending questions about his evening with Mallory. There’d been an upbeat note in his mother’s voice just then that he hadn’t heard for months. She must, on some level, have decided Mallory’s dinner invitation marked a turning point in the fortunes of the Chandler family in Bemishstock. Chris had also hoped that might be the case, but after the bizarre evening, he doubted it.

He shuddered at the memory of Arthur Bent’s butchered corpse. And he felt sick at the thought that Meath had been up here in his own room. To drop off magazines? Really? To set Chris up more like. To frame him somehow for Meath’s own crimes. Maybe that was it. Meath must have realized the police would believe anything he told them about the Chandler boy so he’d decided to plant evidence on Chris he could use later somehow.

Gillian was right; he had to tell the police before Meath had a chance to spread his lies. That said, why the hell would they ever take Chris seriously? So he’d go to them and say, ‘The goatman who has lived here for twenty years, and makes cheese, and works part-time at the funeral home, he’s stealing corpses, and experimenting on them, and then chopping them up for goat feed.’ And the cops



would reply, ‘Oh, right, sure, we’ll investigate right away. And oh, by the way, do you have any proof?’ And he’d say, ‘Well, I’ve been sneaking around Meath’s place and looking in his window at night, and...and he also said we’re both *Übermenschen*...and oh, he’s been coming into my bedroom while I’m sleeping and giving me magazines... and he made me ride in the back of his truck with a goat.’ Oh yeah, they were sure to be convinced. *Crap!*

\* \* \* \*

When the call came in from old lady Holcomb about some kid terrorizing her during the night, Chief Gabe Boucher was ecstatic. It had to be the Chandler kid, he just knew it. And then, at the crime scene, they’d found hard evidence! Oh yes, this time he’d nail the bastard for sure.

They’d finished up at the scene of the incident and were on their way to Willard Farm. The patrol car turned into the Lane. “Pull round back of the house, so the car’s handy if the kid tries to run,” Boucher said to his deputy.

He’d been hoping for an opportunity to nail the Chandler kid ever since the little prick had written the letter about Father David. The letter had spooked the Chief’s friends, and they expected Gabe to sort things out. That’s what he did; he sorted things out for his friends.

It wasn’t like Gabe and his friends had anything to hide, not really. He had his problem with painkillers under control at last. He’d almost paid off his debts, thanks to several generous albeit reluctant contributors in the Bemishstock business community. And so what if he belonged to a small circle of gentlemen who occasionally engaged in some very private and intimate personal activity? It meant nothing. They weren’t fags or anything. Hell, they were veterans and hunters and members of the fucking Legion. Some were married, and one was even a man of the cloth. They were simply respectable men who enjoyed each other’s intimate companionship from time to time, just looking for release from the pressures of their

professional lives. Maybe, if most of the women in Bemishstock hadn't been such stuck-up dogs, they wouldn't have had to turn to each other; but not everyone would understand if their companionship became known. So, when the kid wrote his goddamned letter about Father David 'and his circle,' they'd all been freaked.

It had taken some time before he'd been able to reassure his friends the letter was a hoax, nothing more than a vicious prank. Turned out the Chandler kid knew nothing at all about Father David's private life. Chandler even denied he'd written the letter, but the stunt had cost the Chief and his friends some sleepless nights, and they wanted payback. Even if the Chandler boy hadn't actually written the letter, then it sure as hell had been somebody close to him, so hammering the kid would have the same deterrent effect anyway.

"Now listen," the Chief said to Ricky Pike, "when we see the Chandler kid, we get him talking. He's bound to make things easy for us if we let him rattle on. The kid always mouths off when he feels cornered, so he's bound to let something slip. He's too stupid to keep quiet, even for his own good. All right? Let's go get the bastard."

\* \* \* \*

Chris heard the hammering on the back door, muffled voices, some shouting, and then his father calling loudly, "Christopher, Christopher, come down here."

"In a minute."

"No, get down here now!"

*What the...?* He looked out the window and saw a police car parked on the grass by their back door. Nobody drove around to the back of the house because of the lawn. So why had the police? They must be mad about something. "Oh crap! What now?"

He jumped out of bed, pulled on last night's clothes, then dropped down through the hatch onto the second floor landing and ran into the bathroom to rinse his hands

and face. He squeezed past his brother and sister sitting at the top of the stairs and ran down to the kitchen.

Two police officers stood just inside the back door: Chief Boucher and Deputy Ricky Pike. Chris knew them both; Boucher was a nasty son-of-a-bitch, and Ricky, as dumb as a post. Chris's father was red-faced and his mother tearful.

"Is this about Dr. Meath?" blurted Chris.

"What? No," Chief Boucher said, "What about Dr. Meath?"

Then this wasn't the time. "Nothing."

"Son," his dad said, "there's been a complaint made by Mrs. Holcomb, you know the lady who lives up the hill?"

Christopher was confused. "Mrs. Holcomb? A complaint? Against me?"

"No," Chief Boucher said.

"Not yet," added Deputy Pike with the biggest, dumbest grin.

Chris saw Chief Boucher glance disapprovingly at Pike like he wanted to shut him up, like he didn't want his deputy giving anything away, not yet anyhow.

"What's happened?" Chris asked.

"Someone was up to her house last night, killed one of her cats, and threw paint all over the door. Stuff like that," the Chief said.

"And took a dump in her garden," added Ricky, giggling.

"That's terrible," Chris's mother said.

Boucher nodded. "Yes it is."

"She's had trouble before," Chris said.

"And how would you know that?" Boucher asked with a wry smile.

"I had tea with her on Friday."

"So you know Mrs. Holcomb."

"Yes, she's driven me home from school a couple of times."

"Jeez, I'd like to get my hands on that Buick of hers," Ricky said.

“And we’ve talked. She’s nice.”

“Then why would you do such terrible things to her?” asked Boucher.

“Me?”

“Yes you.”

“I...I would never—”

“Explain to us then how your wallet got on her porch,” the Chief said with a malicious smile. Gotcha, Kid, it seemed to say!

“My wallet?” Chris instinctively felt his back pockets. Not there.

“Where were you last night?” Time to gaff this fish.

“I went to dinner at the Dahlmans.”

“What time did you get home?”

“I don’t know...maybe nine, nine-thirty?”

“And then what?”

“I...I tried to sleep, but I couldn’t, so I went outside.” Oh crap. “I stayed around here though.”

“You went outside. So then what did you do?”

“I...I met Gillian Willard.” *Christ! Don’t drag Gillian into this!*

“And then?”

“We talked.”

“You talked?”

“Yes, we sat and talked.”

“Mr. Chandler...even you would have to admit, that sounds lame,” the Chief said, shaking his head.

“But it’s true.” Just not the whole truth.

“Then how do you explain your wallet being outside Mrs. Holcomb’s cottage this morning?”

“I...I can’t. Maybe I dropped it on the school bus and somebody picked it up, or

maybe I lost it when I had tea with Mrs. Holcomb, I'm just not sure."

"You didn't even know you'd lost it?"

"I don't use it much, there's not much in it."

"So, your story is that you didn't notice you'd lost your wallet, and after you returned from a date with Mallory Dahlman, you spent the rest of the evening chatting with the Willard girl. When did you two finish talking?"

"I don't know, around midnight maybe?"

"Outside in the cold, for almost three hours."

"Ask Gillian, she'll tell you." *She's going to be so furious at me!*

"Let's go do that," Boucher said, and he marched out of the Chandlers' kitchen.

Everyone except Chris's mother went out the back door, walked around the house to the front door, and knocked. Gillian answered. She was already dressed and had flour on her hands, and even some in her hair. For an instant, Chris couldn't help smiling. Then he remembered why they were there, and a look of fear and uncertainty returned to his face. Gillian peered into Chris's eyes, and before anyone else could speak, she asked, "You told them?"

"Told us what?" asked Chief Boucher with a pleasant smile.

"About Meath."

"No," Chris said, "this is about something else."

"So what's this about Dr. Meath?" Boucher asked.

"It's not important now," Chris said. "Gillian, the police are here because someone was terrorizing Mrs. Holcomb last night, and they—"

"I'll handle the questions," the Chief said. "Miss Willard, what were you doing last night between nine and midnight?"

"I..." she stared into Chris's eyes.

"Just," Chris said, "just tell them the truth."

"Chris and I talked. We sat in the orchard and talked."

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Thank you, Miss Willard.” You could see it in Chief Boucher’s eyes: the goddamned Willards again! He turned away in disgust and marched back around the house. The others followed.

Chris looked back at Gillian and mouthed the words, ‘Thank you.’ He could see the concern in in her eyes, but she tried to smile. For a second, he was struck by just how lovely she was, flour and all.

The Chief returned to the patrol car, then hesitated before opening the door. He stood staring at his feet, like he was trying to get his emotions under control. After a moment, he yanked the door open, then hesitated once again. Finally he said, “You know, I can’t help noticing, Chandler, your boy relies on the Willards one hell of a lot to cover his actions.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Chris’s dad demanded.

“Well, Mrs. Willard provided an alibi for your son when everybody knew he’d written that slanderous letter about our priest.”

“Because he didn’t write it!”

“Now another Willard provides an alibi for your son when the physical evidence says he’s been terrorizing Mrs. Holcomb.”

“Because he hasn’t been.”

“Or maybe because the Willards need your rent money.”

“That’s absurd.”

“I don’t know...we’ll just have to see where our investigation leads. Meantime, stay the hell away from old lady Holcomb, boy! Or I’ll have your ass so fast—!”

“I want to see her, tell her—”

“You will tell her nothing! You will have no contact. Do I make myself clear?” The Chief was yelling now. “She’s been frightened enough.”

“What do you care?” Chris lashed out. “You don’t give a damn about Mrs. Holcomb. You let Rudy Dahlman scare the hell out of her before. You let the whole town slag her; you let them call her a prostitute. You’re the one who’s really terrorizing her.” Chris moved toward Boucher, fists clenched. “But this isn’t about Mrs. Holcomb, is it? This is about making life miserable for the Chandler family! That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Son...son,” his dad tried to restrain him. “Don’t waste your breath.”

“Kid, you don’t know ‘miserable,’ not yet,” the Chief grumbled. He got into the patrol car and slammed the door. Ricky ran around the car and threw himself into the driver’s seat. The tires carved deep ruts in the wet grass as the car pulled away. Then, at the corner of the house, it stopped suddenly, and the Chief got out.

“I think we’ll go and have a chat with old man Meath,” he said. “Anything you’d like to tell us before we do? No? Okay then.”

Ricky spun the tires in the gravel all the way up the lane. At the main road, they hung a right and peeled off toward the Meaths’ farm.

\* \* \* \*

“Why are the police always at my door?” Orla Chandler whispered to herself. “Why can’t they leave us alone?”

Chris overheard his mother. “You know why! Dad’s job!”

“Oh, give me a break,” his father muttered, and went in the house.

“Well, it’s not me!” Chris yelled after him.

His mother wrapped her arms around him. “It’s just that...whenever the police knock...I’m terrified...”

Chris hugged her and tried to comfort her. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

She pulled back slightly, looked deep into his eyes, and said, “Oh, my darling, you can’t let the darkness take you!”

“The what?” he replied. *The darkness?*

His dad reappeared on the back steps and roared, “You make yourself such a goddamned target, with your long hair, and those stupid clothes like you’re some sort of undertaker, and the huge chip on your shoulder. Why the hell do you have to act like such a friggin’ freak show? You’re only making life more miserable than it already is!”

“So, you *do* think this is my fault!” He pulled away from his mother and ran off into the orchard.

Things only got worse after that. First with Gillian. He felt awful about putting her on the spot with the police and for making her lie; well, not so much lie as conceal facts to save Chris’s skin. Shortly before lunch, he knocked on the Willards’ door, and the granddad answered. Gillian had gone to church, he said, and would be there for the rest of the day helping her mother clean, which Chris knew they did from time to time to earn a little cash.

And then with Mallory. All morning long, he’d waited for her call, and when she hadn’t by mid-afternoon, he telephoned her. Mrs. Dahlman answered and all Chris got out was, “Is Mallory...?” before she announced, “Mallory’s out with Floyd Balzer, and won’t be back before dinner. Look, this is a bad time, I’ve got to take Rudy to hospital in Bangor. He’s waiting in the car,” and then hung up.

Chris retreated to the Willard graveyard with the book on *Mortmen* and didn’t return to the house until after supper. When he finally went inside, his dad and the kids were watching TV in the living room, and mother was in her room. Chris took the plate of food from the fridge and went up to the attic without saying a word to anyone. He spent the rest of the evening reading, and, for a change, doing a little homework. He dared not look out the window for fear of what he might see, and before turning in for the night, he pushed his bed against the small door into the rest of the attic.



## Chapter Seven

Monday, November 18

As they waited for the bus, Chris told Gillian the full story of the police visit and apologized repeatedly for getting her involved. She smiled, and touched his hand. When they got on the bus, Gillian grinned at her friend Madelyn who smiled back and moved to another seat, allowing Gillian and Chris to sit together. Without thinking, however, Chris walked past them both and sat by himself midway down the aisle. When seated, he glanced up and saw Gillian looking back at him with hurtful eyes. Why hurt? They didn't sit together; they never sat together. Well, maybe the one time, and that was only because they'd had something to talk about. It had been an exception. Surely she didn't expect them to sit together all the time.

As soon as he sat, he heard giggles and whispers, then Floyd's name a couple of times and finally, Mallory's. He chanced a look around, and was amazed to discover Floyd Balzer sitting alone across the aisle from him. Floyd peered out the window, Walkman blasting in his headphones, making eye contact with no one, not even to give Chris his usual hate-filled glare.

Things became weirder still when the bus passed the Dahlman house without stopping. As the bus rolled to a stop in the schoolyard, Floyd remained seated, as Chris and everyone else got off. At the foot of the steps, Gillian grabbed Chris's arm and pulled him to one side. "Everyone's saying Mallory and Floyd broke up and you're the reason. Is it true? No, I don't want to know, but you'd better be careful. Floyd could be upset." Gillian walked away without giving Chris a chance to explain.

When everyone else had left the bus, Floyd finally hauled himself out of his seat and up the aisle. The Gobbler said, "Don't sweat it son, she's a bitch."

“Shut the fuck up,” Floyd said as he rushed down the steps and slumped off toward the school. Chris watched as Floyd’s friends fell in behind him. They were laughing and joking and pushing each other around as usual. When they got to the school entrance, however, Floyd turned on them and bellowed, “Will you jerk-offs just leave me alone!” He flew up the steps and disappeared inside. His buddies stopped cold. They looked at each other, one or two bellowed, “Well kiss-my-ass to you too!”

Chris was dumbfounded by the change in Floyd, and things only got weirder when he followed Floyd and company into the school. Floyd shoved his way to his locker through the throng of kids in the corridor. There he found a note taped to the door. Chris watched as Floyd read it and slammed his fist into the metal door. He shredded the note into a thousand pieces, threw them on the floor, and then bellowed like a wounded rhino.

Everyone turned to see what had happened. A couple of his friends came up behind and asked, “You okay, Floyd?”

“Which one of you bastards put that shit on my locker?” he shouted. “I’ll kill you!”

“Whoa, hey, calm down there, Floyd,” they said, backing away.

Floyd lost it. He started shoving people around and screaming, “Did you write that, did you?”

At which point, one of his buddies lost patience and yelled back, “Get a grip, you jerk. We don’t even know what it said!” Someone else yelled, “You’re being a total idiot, Balzer! No wonder she dumped you, you stupid piece of crap!” A couple of teachers broke up the shoving match and ordered everyone to their classrooms.

Within minutes the school was abuzz, and the crowning moment came when Mallory arrived in a girlfriend’s car. She bounced out of the car, ran straight into

Chris's arms, and gave him a huge kiss on the cheek. "I spent the night with Nancy's family. Mother had to go to Bangor."

"Yes, I know. I called your house yesterday; your mom said you were out with Floyd, so I thought..."

"What, that he and I were back together again? Oh, you silly boy. I just had to set Floyd straight on a few things. And would you believe it, he had the nerve to say the most awful things to me? I shall never forgive him!"

She took Chris by the arm and proudly marched him into the school. Chris glimpsed Gillian, watching from a distance before she bowed her head and followed everyone else inside.

\* \* \* \*

At morning recess, things went from bad to worse.

Students emerged from their classrooms to find dozens of copies of the note that had first appeared on Floyd's locker now taped to walls the length of the second-floor corridor for everybody to read. Gillian came running up to Chris clutching a copy. Even before she got to him, he could see how upset she was.

"Did you do this?" she cried, pushing the note in his face.

"What? No!" he said even before looking at the note.

Chris pried the paper from Gillian's hand. On it was a childish stick drawing that made his skin crawl: a man with an enormous beer belly, standing over a crying baby, and urinating on its head. The man was labelled *Daddy Balzer* and the infant, *Baby Floyd*. The caption read, *Baby will take whatever Daddy dishes out*.

"You must have drawn it! Nobody else knew!" Gillian said, desperation and betrayal written all over her face.

"Other people had to know—"

"No, no one! Floyd made me swear...and then I told you! Oh God!" Gillian sobbed.

“Gillian, please believe me, I didn’t do this.”

Before either of them could say another word, Floyd appeared. A crowd of kids had already gathered in front of his locker. They were sniggering at something and waiting for the next act of the drama to begin. They didn’t have long to wait. Floyd pushed his way forward and saw for himself what had attracted the crowd.

In black marker, someone had written on his locker, *Daddy’s Little Punching Bag*. Floyd then realized copies of the cartoon he’d shredded were now taped to every wall for the whole world to see. He stood there, speechless, until first one person, and then others, started giggling. That’s when Floyd exploded. “Who did this?” he screamed. “Who the hell did this?” and started rushing about, shoving people. As he neared Chris, the crowd parted. Floyd ran at him like a wild animal. Chris didn’t move a muscle. Floyd came to a screeching halt in front of him and screamed, “You!”

“No,” Chris said calmly.

“It was you, you or...or that bitch!”

Was he talking about Gillian? No, she was right beside him and Floyd hadn’t even looked at her.

Red-faced, trembling, Floyd leaned in close to Chris and whispered. “Did she make you do this?”

“Who?”

“Who? Who do you think? The witch! Mallory! You know she’ll destroy you too!” Floyd pulled back and said aloud, “You don’t know, you...don’t know...how cruel she really is.” His voice cracked with emotion.

Well, that was it; everyone burst out laughing, and the more Floyd screamed at them to stop, the more raucous they got. Floyd ran. Pushing his way through the crowd, he raced down the corridor, then down the stairs, and out the front door. The last anyone saw of Floyd Balzer, he was still running.

“Oh God, poor Floyd,” said Gillian and then disappeared into the crowd.

\* \* \* \*

For a short while, during next period, Floyd’s meltdown got some staff attention. Teachers asked if anyone knew who was responsible for the cartoon and what it might mean. No one said anything. Later, the story went round that Principal Dell had called Floyd’s father to ask about the accusation. Of course, he’d denied ever touching his son.

At the end of the school day, Mallory and Chris boarded the bus holding hands and sat together as the other girls twittered away with excitement. It amazed Chris how Mallory’s friends seemed to approve of her choice. He even overheard one girl say, “I always thought Chris was cute.” The power of Mallory; her aura trumped even the taint of his dad’s job.

When the bus stopped at the Dahlman’s driveway, Mallory insisted Chris get off with her. Everyone hooted and hollered off-color encouragement out the windows as the bus pulled away. For an instant, Chris caught sight of Gillian staring straight ahead. Even in profile, he could see how angry she was.

Mallory and Chris walked down the drive arm-in-arm. “We’ll be alone, so we can do whatever we like.”

“No housekeeper yet?”

“No.”

“When will your mom be home?”

“No idea, after supper maybe. Depends on what the doctors say about Rudy’s arm...and how much Mother drinks before leaving Bangor. She might even stay there another night.”

“Rudy’s arm’s that bad?”

“Oh yes,” she replied with a sly smile.

They went inside and dropped their books on the dining table. Plates covered in

congealed macaroni casserole from their dinner together were right where they'd left them. Mallory took Chris's hand and drew him toward her room. "I'm going to change. You can watch if you like."

In her room, she pushed him backwards onto the bed, stepped away, and began unbuttoning her starched white blouse. She pulled it out of her skirt and tossed it aside. Chris struggled to cool his excitement. *Not going to make it!* Mallory reached back to unzip the skirt, let it drop to the floor, and walked to the bathroom.

"Mind over matter," Chris said to himself through clenched teeth.

"What?"

"Nothing." Then, in part to cool his ardor, Chris called out, "Did you know your brother watches you while you're getting ready for bed?"

"He's a sick little bastard. I taught him a lesson though." Chris didn't know what she meant. Something to do with bug bites and dirty bandages, he guessed.

Mallory re-appeared wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Had she taken off her bra as well? Her breasts had come to life as she moved around the room putting things away.

"And he says you're not his sister."

Mallory crossed her arms. "He believes mother cheated on father many years ago, and that's why father never comes home."

"Do you think that too?"

"Probably. Don't care. All I know is my father loves me, and Rudy and my mother are sick. You know, a lot of nights they sleep in the same bed together; and they have ever since Rudy was a baby."

"That's so..." He was too creeped out to continue so he changed the subject. "Did you know about Floyd's father?"

"Why would you ask me that?" A shadow crossed her face.

"Not sure. I guess because we're talking about weird parents."

“Well, I didn’t before. Maybe it’s a good thing the secret’s now out. He might get help.”

“Not likely because his dad denies it.”

“Christopher Chandler! We’re here alone. I’ve taken off my bra, see,”—lifting her shirt to reveal her ample breasts—”and all you want is to talk about Floyd Balzer? Really?”

“No, of course not.” Chris lay back on Mallory’s pillows and grinned.

“Then what should we talk about?” Mallory asked with a coy smile.

“I’d rather we not talk at all. I would love to see your breasts again.”

“Well then...” She pulled the T-shirt over her head and tossed it aside. “Happy now?”

“Now your jeans seem a little out of place.”

“How right you are.” She slipped them down over her hips. “Like?”

“Oh yes. Come here.” Mallory threw herself onto the bed.

Chris’s afternoon with Mallory wasn’t the first time he’d made love. The first time had been with a woman in his father’s office at another plant, in another town and another state, when Chris had been just fifteen. A secretary, plump to bursting out of her tiny red skirt, she’d hoped to make her philandering husband jealous and to blackmail Chris’s dad into securing her a new job when that plant closed. The affair ended badly, with the husband waving a shotgun about in the parking lot, the wife threatening to go to corporate head office, and Chris’s dad threatening to charge the woman with statutory rape and luring a minor.

Chris’s second liaison, in another craphole on the Chandler family’s odyssey across America, had gone only slightly better. A cheerleader, and a favorite of the football team, had made it clear she found Chris interesting, and they’d dated a couple of times without incident.

When the girl had discovered Chris was neither the jerk she’d imagined nor the

inept lover she'd expected, she'd tried to renege on the deal with the quarterback to seduce and embarrass Chris. She'd begged the jocks to leave Chris alone, and like the dim-witted child she was, she'd expected they'd respect her wishes. The football team had no intention of letting an opportunity to humiliate the Chandler boy slip away, however, and the evening ended with Chris running through the streets in boxers pursued by a pack of howling hyenas.

With such a sexual history, Chris couldn't help but be nervous when Mallory threw herself across him. It wasn't Mallory's first time either, that was obvious, although Chris found her frenzied excitement a little intimidating—like waving a steak before a starving dog. He tried to be tender and unhurried as he caressed her breasts and kissed her belly. Mallory wasn't into tender. Her enthusiasm was overwhelming, excitement unbridled, and breathless satisfaction something of a shocker.

Nothing about the experience felt quite right. Mallory's constant giggling, persistent baby talk during their passionate embraces, and smothering affection when at last they both fell back exhausted on perfumed pillows, were all...well...off-putting. "So wonderful," she kept whispering: "I'll always be your little girl", "Mine forever", and, "I'll never let you go." That last remark sounded a little too much like a threat. Then Chris's ego got the better of him, and he lay back, with Mallory in his arms and a self-satisfied grin on his face. Had Floyd Balzer ever received such praise?

Headlights shone through the small window facing the lane. They heard a car coming up the drive.

"God, it's six and they're home!" Mallory cried, jumping from the bed and heading for the bathroom. "Say I'm changing!"

Chris pulled on his clothes and ran to the living room. He threw himself onto the couch and tried to look relaxed. The room was still in darkness and he didn't



have time to turn on a light before the door opened and Mallory's mother stumbled in.

Freda Dahlman slammed the door behind her, dropped her purse on the floor, and cried out, "Oh Christ, my boy...." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Mrs. Dahlman? Can I help you?" Chris asked as he switched on a lamp.

Freda screamed and stumbled back against the door. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing in my house?"

"I'm Chris Chandler, a friend of Mallory's? I was here for dinner last Saturday night?"

"How did you get in here?"

"With Mallory. She's changing. We...we were going to get dinner ready for you."

"Bullshit!"

"Mother?" Mallory emerged from her room, dressed in jeans and a powder blue Irish knit sweater—and bra apparently. "Are you all right, Mother?"

"All right? No I'm not all right!" She stumbled toward the couch and flopped down beside Chris.

"Where's Rudy?"

"In the hospital."

"I thought he was getting better...."

"They say he's got some kind of blood poisoning in his arm!"

"From an insect bite?"

"It's horrible...and the smell!" She sobbed for a moment, then pointed a finger at Mallory, and shouted, "You...if I find out you had anything to do with this...."

"Oh, Mother, how could you possibly think that? I'm so hurt." Mallory looked wounded, then turned to Chris and offered a sly grin.

"I have to go back tomorrow. They want to...to amputate!" Freda began

blubbing, mostly to herself.

“His right arm too. How will he ever cope?” Mallory said.

“I...I have to lie down.” Mrs. Dahlman flopped like dead weight onto her side and closed her eyes. Chris moved to make way.

“Mother,” Mallory said. No reply. “Mother!” she shouted. “Mother! Would you like something to eat before you go to bed?”

Mrs. Dahlman stirred. “Get me the vodka from the fridge and a glass.” She heaved herself off the couch. “I’ll have one drink and then a short nap.” She started for her bedroom.

Mallory intercepted her mother’s slow trek across the room to hand her the bottle and glass. In exchange, Mrs. Dahlman gave Mallory her coat, which Mallory promptly dropped on the floor.

“I may be gone a few days...” Mrs. Dahlman mumbled as she disappeared down the hall. “I’ve tried so hard to protect him...” was the last thing they heard before her door closed.

Chris and Mallory looked at each other. “That’s awful,” Chris said.

“You think so?”

“Well, yes.”

“He’s a creepy little pervert, he deserves everything he gets. Let’s eat. Let’s go out for dinner. We’ll take Mother’s car!”

The car, a fairly new Chevy, was parked askew across the front of the house, one wheel plowed deep into a flower bed.

“You can drive if you like,” Mallory said.

“No...I...”

“Then I will. Hold tight!”

\* \* \* \*

The damp air and falling temperature had rimed the dark landscape with

hoarfrost. Even so, Mallory drove at breakneck speed toward town. Chris tried his best to look cool as the car swerved and squealed along the narrow road. Images of their mangled remains in a fiery wreck brought the goatman to mind.

“Could you...” He tried to say without his voice breaking, “Could you do me a big favor?”

“Oooh, Christopher Chandler, what do you have in mind? A repeat performance?”

Was she serious? God! “It’s just I...I need to see Mr. Duncan. It’s something kind of personal, and I didn’t get a chance at school today...and I wondered if maybe we could go by his house?”

“You want to go to a teacher’s house, now?”

“No, I mean after we eat. It won’t take long. He lives up near the Potteries.”

The Potteries were a formation of tall, jagged rocks clustered along a windswept beach north of town. They’d been carved over millennia from the ancient cliffs by wind and wave and were said to look like monstrous flower pots. He had the impression Mr. Duncan lived somewhere near the Potteries because Duncan had a *Save the Potteries* sticker on his bumper, a poster on the classroom wall calling for protection of the Potteries, and had once talked about the campaign in class.

“If that’s the best idea you’ve got for our first evening together, I guess the Potteries will have to do.” Then she grinned and said, “Guess it might be interesting.”

“Shouldn’t take long and then maybe afterwards...”

“I have an idea. Let’s eat at *Jennifer’s Place*.” Jennifer was a classmate, one of Mallory’s entourage. Her parents owned a motel the other side of town, biggest in the area, and its diner, named for their daughter, was popular with truckers.

When they entered the restaurant, Jennifer was waiting tables, and became

noticeably flustered at the sight of her queen bee. The place was bustling. Even so, Jennifer immediately escorted Mallory and Chris to a clean booth. Several truckers ogled Mallory, then whispered and chuckled amongst themselves. Mallory gave them her sweetest, little-girl smile in return. Jennifer nervously reviewed the dinner specials, and Mallory and Chris both chose the hot turkey sandwich special and apple pie. Mallory wanted to treat and insisted Chris have ice cream with his pie. As they ate, they talked, first about school, then her father's work on oil tankers, and finally about Tana Toraja.

"You were only there once," Chris said, trying to understand Mallory's enthusiasm for such a bizarre place.

"As soon as our plane landed, I knew Toraja was where I belonged. If my mother would let me, I'd move there tomorrow. I'll be eighteen soon, and then she won't be able to stop me."

"You said your dad might have another family there, like another wife?"

"He won't need another family when I get there, will he?"

What the hell did that mean? If her father did have another family there, did Mallory really think he'd throw them aside—his other kids, his wife—for her?

"So you'd rather be there than here?"

"Wouldn't you, if you were me?"

"The place sounds beautiful, but I gotta say...creepy?"

"Creepy, how?"

"Corpses walking around the countryside, for one thing."

"You silly, it doesn't happen all the time. And anyway, what's so bad about corpses? They're only empty sacks."

"Walking around?"

"You're missing the point. It's not the walking that matters, it's what the walk signifies—that even death can't keep loved ones apart."

“I guess....”

“When my daddy dies, he’ll be buried in Toraja with his parents, and one day, so will I. We’ll be together, even if I have to walk there.”

“That’s like a million miles!”

“I made my daddy promise he’d summon me.”

“But your mother wants you here.”

“She hates everything about Toraja, and I hate her.”

“You hate your mother?”

“Yes, you’ve seen her. She’s a wreck and a weakling, and my brother is just like her. I may have to kill both of them one day.”

There was not a trace of humor in her face.

“Mallory, I...I can’t get over how different you seem, I mean, with me.”

“Different? How?”

“Well, at school, everybody thinks you’re such a good little girl. You’re Mallory...you’re like a princess to people in Bemishstock. Here with me...you’re...”

“I hoped I could be myself with you.”

“Yes, sure, of course, but, aren’t you afraid I might tell people what you’re really like?”

“You wouldn’t do that.” Her lips were smiling but her eyes were cold as ice. “Besides, who would ever believe *you*?”

A chill ran up his spine. “You seem so...so angry.”

“I’m not angry, I just know how things work, how things are in this world.”

“Okay, you’re dark then, like you see the dark side of everything.”

“And you don’t? Have I misjudged you? So we’re not alike, you and I?”

“Sure, sure we are. I...I see the dark side too. It’s not like I have a choice however. Everybody just plain hates me.”

“Of course you have a choice. You just don’t know how to play the game.”

“The game?”

“The game of pretend: pretend everything’s fine, pretend to be happy, pretend to care...”

“So are you pretending now?”

“No, I like you. With you, I feel I can stop pretending.” She reached across the table and put a hand on his. Chris shivered. “I want to explore my power—with you.”

What the hell did that mean? “So...at school, you’re pretending all the time?”

“It’s like a test...to see how strong I can be. It’s like when a priest in Toraja sacrifices a bull. The gods don’t want the bull, they want to know the priest is strong enough to slaughter the bull if they ask. It’s our strength—to draw blood, to cause pain, even to take life—*that’s* what makes us worthy.”

“I...I’m sorry, I just don’t get it. Why would your gods want you to pretend to be nice and sweet when you actually hate everybody?”

“I don’t hate *everybody*, just my mother and Rudy, and most of my teachers, and some of the kids at school. Not everybody. Most people just bore me because they’re ugly or they dress badly, or because they’re just plain stupid.”

“Then why pretend? Why not tell people how you feel? Wouldn’t that take a lot more strength?”

“That would be stupid, not strong at all. We have to learn how to use people in this world, if we’re going to get what we want. The gods want us to be smart as well as strong. They want us to be capable of inflicting pain, not just of suffering through it. This world is their creation, and it sure as hell isn’t filled with love and kindness. This is a world of horror and misery, and our gods expect strength and discipline from their followers. That’s what they reward.”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“From my father,” she said, and then took a long sip of coke.

“Your father taught you the world was created by gods who reward cruelty?”

Mallory waited for a moment before answering. “When my father was six, he saw his parents and grandfather killed before his eyes. His grandfather was impaled on a cross, mother raped and then hacked to pieces, and father burned alive.”

“That’s horrible!”

“He told me all about it when I turned seven, even showed me pictures. He wanted me to know just how vicious the world is, and to understand why my mother kept us apart.”

“He told you your mom was cruel too?”

“Oh, I knew it already. From the day I was born, she did everything she could to keep my father from me. Daddy said I brought love back into his life. After what had happened to his parents, he’d believed he’d never love or trust another person—and then I was born. Daddy loves me and I love him, and there’s nothing we would not do for each other.”

“But what about your mother; did she never love your father?”

Mallory was dismissive. “Oh, maybe once, but he only married her to get into this country, and then he hated it here.”

“So why didn’t he take you with him when he left?”

“He tried when I was a baby. My mother wouldn’t go. Then he tried again when I turned eleven. My mother threatened to tell the police he’d ‘interfered with me.’ Mother lied, of course. Daddy never did a thing to me I didn’t want him to.”

Chris felt nauseous. He could still hear Mallory whispering, “Daddy” in his ear earlier that afternoon.

“More even than the deaths of his parents, Daddy says Mother’s cruelty made him realize how nightmarish this world is and what our gods expect of us. We have

to be able to inflict pain—not merely endure it—if we are to thrive and be worthy of Puya.”

Chris was stunned. He had no idea how to react to Mallory’s horrifying view of the world. Chris thought he knew more about pain than most people, but Mallory’s vision came from a far darker place than even he’d known.

Mallory must have sensed how shocked Chris was. She sat quietly for a moment, then smiled. “Look at you, what you endure. Everyone hates you, treats you like scum. And do you care? No! You ignore them. You’re strong, like me. I’ve seen it. That’s what I like about you. You see the dark side, and it doesn’t frighten you. I just have to teach you how to use your strength more effectively, that’s all.” She leaned close and whispered, “Chris, you’re chosen. We both are.”

“Sure as hell doesn’t feel that way.”

“Only because you don’t know how to play the game yet. You don’t know how to pretend so you can get what you want from people. I’ll teach you. We should make an offering sometime, to help you learn.”

“What kind of offering?”

She grinned. “Of somebody else’s pain.”

This was getting way too weird. Chris wasn’t into pain, not other people’s, and certainly not his own. Even so, he asked, “So how do you make these offerings?”

Mallory sat back, wearing a knowing grin like the Cheshire cat. Then she glanced across the diner at her friend, Jennifer, bussing tables. She leaned forward and said quietly, “Did you see Jenny in the schoolyard last week, crying like a big baby? Somebody sent pics to her parents of her making out with Freddy Jessop. Now they can’t see each other anymore.” Mallory sat back, smiling. “Pain,” she mouthed silently.

“You?”

Mallory’s lips smiled, but not her eyes. “And Darleen Jensen,” she said.



“The girl who jumped in front of the truck?”

“Right.”

“How could I forget?”

“That’s right, your picture was in the paper.” Mallory laughed. “I liked what you said.”

Chris could only shake his head.

“Darleen was so sanctimonious. Well, someone sent a letter to the school superintendent saying pregnant girls like her shouldn’t be allowed to stay in school...before she’d had a chance to tell her parents that she was. That’s how they found out—when Principal Dell called them to say Darleen had been suspended. Can you imagine?”

It took a minute for the implication of what Mallory had said to sink in. “You?”

Mallory laughed. “Little Miss Sunday School won’t be going to Paradise any time soon.”

“Why not?”

“Because she killed herself.”

“So?”

“So she’s stuck here.”

“Stuck here. What’s that mean?”

“All suicides are. My daddy says people who kill themselves are deafened by the roar of their last emotion and can’t hear their family’s guiding prayers, so they can’t find Puya. They’re trapped where they died until the end of time.”

“That’s terrible.”

“And it gets better. Daddy says whatever pain the person thought they might escape by killing themselves becomes the only emotion they will know for the rest of eternity. It’s so ironic, and the gods love that. Suicides keep the weak out of

Puya, and causing someone's suicide is an offering the gods truly prize."

"So...you killed Darleen?"

"No. Of course not! She killed herself. She was weak."

"But...you sent the letter to the school board." And then, like an electrical arc at the center of his brain, Chris saw the pattern: Darleen's suicide, the pictures of Jennifer, the cartoon about Floyd, the attacks on Felicity Holcomb, maybe even the letter the cops blamed on Chris—all, Mallory's 'offerings'.

"The letter was just a test...and the bitch failed," Mallory said as she sat back looking self-satisfied. Then she bounced forward again and said excitedly, "You know, I bet if we went over to Bailey's Road tonight we'd see her spirit, still right where she killed herself, still bawling her eyes out." Mallory giggled, and added, "Because she's still weak. Only now, she's weak...and dead."

"So, you believe in ghosts as well?"

"They're not ghosts—more like...like the shadows of sad, pathetic lives. If your spirit doesn't get into Puya, then what's left of you on this earth isn't you. It's just your last emotion, like your sorrow, or your despair, or maybe your rage... your emotional wreckage. It lingers after you're dead like a stain or a smell...and for all time."

"Can anything be done to free such a spirit?"

"No. It can see us but it can't hear us. Its emotions are just too overwhelming for it to make sense of anything. It just reacts. So there's no way to help it or get rid of it. It's just left here. Like garbage dropped at the side of the road."

"So have you ever seen one of these...ghosts?"

"Yes. Darleen Jensen."

"You've seen Darleen?"

Mallory grinned. "Sure, the other night, and like I said, just sitting there in a ditch, still bawling her eyes out."

For an instant, it wasn't Mallory Dahlman across the table from Chris but a dark presence, a black cloud of cruelty and hate. Would Mallory ever really drive someone to suicide—and then take pleasure in it?

Then it occurred to him maybe she'd made it all up. The twinkle in her eye—perhaps she'd been kidding all along. She did have a perverse sense of humor after all. Ghosts and walking corpses! Yeah right!

Mallory broke the silence. "So, why do you need to see Mr. Duncan?" she asked, as if she'd just made an interesting connection.

What a relief, to change the subject. "Because he said he'd do something for me."

"Are you going to tell me what?"

At that moment, Chris didn't feel comfortable telling Mallory anything. Hell, she'd probably want to help Meath. Chopping up bodies might be just her thing.

"Perhaps, maybe after we've spoken to Mr. Duncan."

"Okay then, let's go find him."

As they were pulling out of the motel parking lot, Mallory looked across at Chris and said with a grin, "We should come back here sometime, maybe get a room, spend the whole night together."

"But Jennifer would know."

"Oh I can deal with her."

\* \* \* \*

They headed north out of town, in the direction of the Potteries. For ten minutes or so, they drove through farmland, then slowed as the road neared the water once again. They pulled off the main road into a sandy lane marked *Potteries Beach* and crept along, trying to read the names on the mailboxes. When they found the one with *Duncan* painted on it, they pulled over.

The weathered saltbox house was set well away from the road on a rise

overlooking the beach and the open ocean. They could hear the crash of the surf as they walked up the sandy path to the front door. The wind was biting and filled with salt. Chris knocked.

“Yes?” a voice called from inside.

“Mr. Duncan, it’s Chris Chandler. I’m sorry to bother you so late. I was wondering if we could talk.”

The door opened. Mr. Duncan was wearing a long, blue robe and reading glasses, his legs and feet were bare, and he was holding a book in one hand. Classical music played somewhere in the house.

“Mr. Chandler, I don’t think you should...Oh, Miss Dahlman...”

“Mallory gave me a ride,” Chris explained. “I was hoping we could talk. I wondered if you spoke to the police, and, well, there’s something else I need to tell you.”

“I guess you’d better come inside.”

They stepped into a small foyer cluttered with boots, coats, and walking sticks.

“Come through.”

Mr. Duncan led the way down the hall past a staircase, a darkened dining room, and into a large open space across the back of the house. There was a kitchen at one end and a living area at the other. Two old bay windows faced seaward. A Franklin stove with a crackling fire had pride of place in the center of the room. Shelves crammed with every type and size of book covered the walls. At the end of the room opposite the kitchen was an enormous desk piled high with papers and more books. Several overstuffed armchairs were scattered around the room.

“So, Mr. Chandler?” Mr. Duncan sat down near the stove. Chris and Mallory remained standing.

“I...I wondered whether you had a chance to—” and he glanced at Mallory.

Mr. Duncan interrupted. “You told people what you saw? After I warned you not—”

“No, I haven’t told anyone. Not even Mallory, not yet.”

“So, should we talk in private?”

“Is that okay, Mallory?” Chris asked.

“Sure. I’ll just wait here.” She smiled sweetly, crossed the room and settled into a chair beside Mr. Duncan’s desk.

Chris followed Mr. Duncan into the dining room. The teacher switched on the light, and closed the door. Chris immediately asked, “Did you tell the police what I saw?”

“No, not yet.”

“It’s just it happened again, last night. I saw the guy with another body.”

“Mr. Chandler,” Mr. Duncan said, shaking his head.

“Look, I know how this sounds.”

“Like you’re trying to set me up....” He knew only too well what Gabe Boucher thought of Chris Chandler.

“I’m not, I swear.”

“All right,” he sighed, “so what did you see this time?”

“Well, just like before, I saw the goatman—”

“Who?”

“Dr. Meath, the old man who works at the funeral home, he raises goats.”

“He’s the guy you saw?”

“Yes, on the old railway line. He has this cart he pedals along the tracks.”

“Everyone knows his bike.” The irritation in Duncan’s voice was obvious.

“And like the last time, he had this huge sack. So I followed him, and I saw him take the sack into his barn, and, well, I looked through the window.”

“You know what you’re doing is illegal.”

“Well maybe, but—”

“No buts about it, it’s trespassing, it’s voyeurism, and it’s a crime.”

“But what *he*’s doing—”

“All right, what was he doing?”

“He had a body in the sack, and he tied it to some sort of chair, and then moved the head around with some kind of electrical device, and after a couple of minutes, he took the device off the body and cut it up, just like you butcher a cow or a goat.”

“Oh, Mr. Chandler, this is really too—”

“Look, I know you don’t believe me, nobody will, but I know what I saw...and I just can’t do nothing, can I?”

“So, you think Dr. Meath is stealing bodies from the funeral home for his experiments?”

“Yes.”

“And nobody misses these bodies?”

“He takes them after they’re buried.”

“So he’s robbing graves.”

“Well, you said it happens.”

“I said it happened a hundred years ago.”

“Then why not today?”

Mr. Duncan said nothing. He stared into Chris’s eyes. Chris held his gaze. “All right,” Duncan said at last, “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. If this is some kind of a joke—”

“No, Mr. Duncan, I swear.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll go to the police. I’ll talk to Chief Boucher, ask a few questions about the doctor and the funeral home.”

“I appreciate it, I do.”

“Meantime, Mr. Chandler, you have to stop spying on your neighbors,

otherwise you'll be the one in jail, not Meath."

\* \* \* \*

As they drove away from the Potteries, Mallory asked, "Are you going to tell me what this is about?"

"Could we wait a few days?"

"You know, if we're going together, we shouldn't have any secrets."

Whoa. Where did that come from? "We're going together?"

"After this afternoon, I would have thought it was obvious. Unless of course you don't want to, in which case I might have to kill you," she said with a grin.

"Yeah sure, that would be great...going together, I mean."

"So why won't you tell me what you're up to?"

"Because...because it's weird...and it might be dangerous...and I'm just not sure of the facts yet."

"Then will you tell me *who* it's about?"

"I guess. It's about the goatman."

"Who?"

"The old guy who works at the funeral home, lives out past where I live, the chiropractor, Dr. Meath?"

"Him? He's just a weirdo, and he smells awful. Why would you be interested in him?" She grinned and asked, "Are you planning something?"

"No, not really."

"Then why would you care about a freak like him?"

"I...I can't tell you yet."

"So you won't share your secret with me. I might be a little upset if it were anybody else."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. As they neared Mallory's lane, she broke the silence. "Still waters, Christopher Chandler," she said. "You're a man of

mystery. Maybe you should spend the night at my house, give me time to examine you more closely.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, don’t worry. Mother will have passed out long ago, and she won’t come round again until mid-morning. Won’t hear a thing we say...or do.” The car rolled to a stop at the head of the lane.

This is amazing. It never rains but it pours. He was so tempted. A repeat performance might be slightly less creepy. Something told him things weren’t quite right, however.

“I...I’d love to, but...I told my parents I’d be home tonight...they worry.”

“I didn’t take you for someone who cares whether mummy worries.”

“I’m not...but...”

“It’s all right. Maybe we are moving a bit too fast. At least I hope that’s the problem.” She pulled back onto the road and headed for the Willards’.

Reaching across to caress Mallory’s shoulder as she drove, Chris whispered, “Another time?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Didn’t your mother say your brother would be in hospital for a while?”

Mallory looked across at him and smiled. “And Mother might be gone for several days.”

Chris horrified himself by saying, “Then let’s hope Rudy takes a long time getting better.” He felt acid rise in his throat as soon as the words were out of his mouth. From Mallory he got such a malicious grin.

“Oh, I’m sure that can be arranged.” The way she said it gave him goose flesh.

Mallory turned into Willard Lane and stopped the car.

“What the hell...?”

All the lights in the Willard house were on. “Something’s happened,” he said.



“Hope they haven’t toppled more barrels in their cider cellar,” Mallory said with a smirk. “Once was pathetic, twice would be stupid.”

She must have seen the shock in Chris’s eyes at the horribly insensitive remark because she said, “I’m sure it’s nothing.” Then she kissed Chris, and added, “I loved this afternoon. You were so good, the best. We have to do it again soon.” She blew a second kiss as he got out of the car. Tires spun in the gravel as she backed the car up onto the main road, and raced away into the night.

Chris saw Gillian in her bedroom window. He waved, but she disappeared.

As he walked down the lane and around the house, his unease intensified. All the lights were on in the back part of the house as well. As he opened the door, his mother rushed forward, cried, “Oh, Chris!” and threw her arms around him.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“Where have you been?” his dad demanded.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Just answer me. Where have you been since school?” His father was shaking with emotion.

“With Mallory Dahlman. We hung out at her place, then had supper together and afterwards, went to see one of my teachers.”

“One of your teachers?” His father looked stunned, apparently not the answer he’d been expecting.

“About a project...for school.”

“So your teacher can vouch for your whereabouts?” The relief in his father’s eyes was obvious.

“For my whereabouts?”

“Where you went and what you did after school.”

“Yeah sure, why?”

“Because Floyd Balzer is dead...and the police want to ask you some

questions.”

*Floyd...dead...*

His mother turned and went upstairs, sobbing.

“God, Chris,” his dad said, “the boy hanged himself, and the police seem to think you had something to do with it.” He almost broke down as well. Instead, he turned away. “I’ve got to help your mother.”

Chris couldn’t sleep that night. He played over and over in his mind the last, vicious confrontation with Floyd, and then imagined the final, horrifying minutes of Floyd’s pathetic life.

Like garbage dropped at the side of the road, Mallory had said.

## Chapter Eight

Tuesday, November 19

Chris's father drove him to the police station before school. "You keep quiet. Let me do the talking," his dad said.

An officer ushered them into the Chief's office. Chief Boucher and Deputy Pike were waiting. The Chief, seated at his desk, was the first to speak. "This is a sad affair. The Balzer family is well liked in this town." The implication was clear: the Chandler family was not. "I've given the Balzers my word the Bemishstock Police Department will do everything it can to find out what happened to young Floyd."

"Last night, when you phoned," Chris's dad said, "you told me the boy had taken his own life, hanged himself in one of the father's sheds."

"Well yes, I thought that. Since then, I've been made aware of circumstances surrounding the death that give rise to many new questions."

"Circumstances? What circumstances?"

"Why don't you let me ask the questions?"

"Because I don't see what any of this has to do with my son?"

"Well, you wouldn't, would you. From where I'm sitting, however, this tragedy has everything to do with your son. It appears young Floyd had been in a fight before he died, and judging by his injuries, he'd lost. So now it looks to me like the fight may have contributed to his death."

"And you think Floyd was in a fight with my son?"

"Hell no, I think Floyd could have taken your son apart, no problem. What I think is that Floyd was beaten up by somebody doing your son's dirty work."

"What?"

“Or yours. I’m told you threatened Floyd’s father.”

“I said I would terminate his contracts, not beat up his son.”

“That’s not what Floyd told his buddies. When he arrived at school the other day with his face cut up, he said goons from the plant had ambushed him on your orders.”

“That’s just crap! Nobody from the plant ever touched the boy! Check all you want!”

“His own dad beat him,” Chris said. “All the time, and everybody knows it!”

“Chris, quiet,” his father said.

“But—”

“There’s no proof Ed Balzer ever touched his son,” the Chief said, getting up and walking around the desk to stand directly in front of Chris. “Just some shitty cartoon—a mean joke someone played on the poor kid. And a lot of people think you were behind it, boy.” Boucher poked a finger into Chris’s chest.

“Me, no.”

“Chief Boucher.” Chris’s dad stepped in front of the Chief. “You may not know who beat up Floyd Balzer yesterday, but I know where my son was all afternoon and evening. And he has witnesses.”

“Oh? Who? Someone from the plant I suppose, or one of the Willards again?”

“The Dahlman girl and her mother, and a teacher named Mr. Duncan.”

Boucher said nothing.

“So if that’s all you need from my son, we’ll be going now.”

With that, father and son marched out of Boucher’s office.

Boucher called after them, “Chandler!” They turned and stared at him. The Chief sauntered out of his office and started speaking in a normal voice.

“Your boy has been nothing but trouble since he arrived in this town, and even if he didn’t touch young Floyd, it’s clear he drove the poor boy to take his own life.

He stole his girl, and then spread terrible lies about him and his family. I'll get to the bottom of this. And even if the law doesn't find your son responsible, I'll make damn sure this whole town does."

By the time he'd finished, Boucher was shouting at the top of his lungs. Chris and his dad turned and left.

\* \* \* \*

Boucher returned to his office and slammed the door. "That fuckin' pair! So god-damned arrogant!"

Okay, so maybe Malcolm Duncan had told him he suspected Floyd's father was beating his own son. And so maybe Boucher believed it too. After all, he knew firsthand what a bully Ed Balzer could be. They'd been in school together, and he'd had his own share of thrashings from that psycho. Only in the Army had Gabe developed the backbone to stand up to the town thug. When he'd returned from Vietnam, he was one huge knot of muscle and wound so tight on pain killers, that Ed Balzer quickly realized his former punching bag would probably beat him to a bloody pulp if he tried his old tricks.

That was many years and fifty pounds ago, and Ed Balzer was now head of an influential family in town. Boucher as the town's police chief knew only too well which side of his bread the butter was on. Damned if he was going to jeopardize his pension by crossing Ed Balzer on behalf of an asshole like Chris Chandler.

## Chapter Nine

Wednesday, November 20

In the failing light of a cold November evening, the funeral parlor looked even gloomier than usual. The old mansion had once been grand in a garish sort of way, with wide front steps, a huge porch spanning the entire front of the building and wrapping around both sides, and an oversized, purple front door in the center of its facade. It had enormous windows on two floors along with several gables in its mansard roof, and a tower high above the front door with a widow's walk around it—a touch of architectural irony probably lost on most of the funeral parlor's patrons. Now paint was peeling, several shutters dangled askew from rusted hinges or were missing altogether, and at least one window was boarded over with plywood. Apparently, in a dying town, even the business of death doesn't pay that well.

The Balzer visitation drew a huge turnout, many kids from school Chris recognized, and many adults he did not. Cars crowded the funeral parlor's short drive, lined Main Street for some distance in both directions, and filled the staff lot behind the main building where the garages and workrooms were located. Out in the drive and up on the porch, people stood chatting quietly in small groups. People who'd recently arrived were moving slowly up the stairs and through the front door, and judging by the number of people Chris could see pressed up against the windows, the crowd inside filled every room.

The Balzers were a prominent family in this backwater town, and every employee of *Balzer Trucking* had turned out, along with fellow business people, friends of the family, and even folks who couldn't stand Ed Balzer, the drunken bully. Everyone always turned out for a Balzer social event. The Balzers always

laid on a good spread and some sort of show...and a Balzer funeral would be no exception.

Chris joined the line of people making their way slowly up the front steps.

“Chris!” he heard someone call softly. “Chris!”

Gillian. She was leaning over the porch railing trying to catch his attention without drawing anyone else’s. “What are you doing here?”

She was standing near her mother, grandfather and friend, Madelyn. They were bundled against the cold and sipping from mugs that steamed in the night air. Gillian was wearing the parka she wore to school every day. Beneath it she was apparently wearing a dark dress and high heels. The sight of her legs gave Chris a momentary jolt.

People in the line ahead of Chris turned to stare. “The Chandler kid,” he heard people whisper.

Gillian passed her mug to her mother and edged through the crowd on the porch and stairs to join Chris down on the front walk.

“I thought you weren’t talking to me.”

She ignored the dig. “Do you really think you should be here?”

“I want to tell Mrs. Balzer how sorry I am, and that I had nothing to do with Floyd’s death.”

“That’s considerate, but I don’t think this is the time.”

“Everyone else from school is here.”

“Floyd’s dad is inside and he’s really drunk. He’s sitting in the corner near the coffin in the back parlor, not talking to anyone. He looks really weird, muttering to himself and wringing his hands. And, from time to time, he shakes his fists in the air like he’s having a fight with someone. I really think it would be best if you weren’t here.”

Too late.

“Chandler!” Chris heard someone shout. “You’re him! You’re the Chandler kid!” Ed Balzer stood in the front doorway. Someone must have tipped him off that Chris was outside. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Balzer pushed through the crowd to the top of the stairs and glared down at Chris as people in line cleared space between them.

“You’ve got some nerve coming here. Are your dad and his thugs here too?”

“I don’t want any trouble, Mr. Balzer. I just came to tell Mrs. Balzer how sorry I am for her loss and—”

“You little prick! Sorry for her loss? Like you had nothing to do with it?”

Chris was stunned, not by Balzer’s rage, but by the sight of Mallory Dahlman in the doorway behind Balzer. Mallory, dressed in black, was helping the grieving mother step unsteadily out onto the porch.

“Mallory,” Chris blurted out.

“That’s right, Mallory Dahlman, my son’s girlfriend! And they would still be together if you hadn’t started messing around, getting Mallory all confused, and Floyd would still be alive!”

“I...I...”

Chief Boucher also appeared on the porch. “Move along, Chandler. I think you’ve caused enough trouble already.”

“But I wanted to say—”

“There’s nothing the Balzer family needs to hear from you—except maybe your confession.”

“I had nothing to do with Floyd’s death.”

“You had *everything* to do with it, you little turd,” Ed Balzer bellowed. “You humiliated my boy.”

“No! You humiliated him, you fat drunk! You beat up your own son, for Christ’s sake!”



“Why you little—” Balzer started down the steps and would have tumbled to the concrete below if the Chief and several onlookers hadn’t caught him.

“Leave!” ordered Chief Boucher. “Get out of here!”

Chris walked away, then shouted over his shoulder, “I had nothing to do with Floyd’s death. His father did. You all know it. You know what his dad was doing to him.” No one was listening. They were trying to restrain the stumbling, blubbing father, trying to get Balzer back inside, back to his son’s broken body.

Chris walked down the drive and out onto Main Street. It would be a bitterly cold walk home because he sure as hell wasn’t going to get a ride from anyone in town tonight.

He stopped to look back at the funeral parlor one last time. Mallory was helping Mrs. Balzer inside. What the hell was she up to? Whose pain was she offering up tonight? Then Chris saw Gillian, her eyes filled with sadness and concern, before she turned and followed the crowd inside. Finally, Chris noticed the goatman standing at the corner of the house, a curious grin on his face.

“Sure, go ahead, Doc,” Chris said to himself, “pull Floyd out of the grave, break his neck, and grind him into feed for your goats. Why the hell should I care?” Then Chris walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Chris’s sleep was more troubled than usual. He thrashed about into the wee hours of the morning. One moment, the sight of Mallory arm-in-arm with Floyd’s mother had him muttering and cursing. What was she playing at? Was she just being kind? Mallory, kind? Not bloody likely.

Then the memory of the confrontation with Floyd’s father and the police chief’s accusations made his skin crawl. Surely no one actually believed he was responsible for humiliating Floyd to the point of suicide?

His pulse raced when he realized how close he’d come to a fistfight on the

steps of the funeral parlor. He could see the headlines: *Delinquent who drove boy to suicide taunts father at son's funeral!* Damn, he hated Maine, and this town and this house, and dad's job, and school, and, well, his whole crapfest of a life! Then he cursed himself for being such a wuss and for letting things get to him.

He rolled onto his back, stretched out, shoved his hands into his pyjamas and stared up at the roof boards, just a few feet above his head. Seven more months; all he had to do was keep it together for seven more months. So what if everybody in town hated him? It just meant he'd get a lot of quiet time. And what if he had a mad scientist and a grave robber for a neighbor? Some people might have thought that cool; maybe he'd even turn it into a story one day. And what if he had a freak for a girlfriend who believed in strange gods that made dead people walk and expected pain as an offering? Okay, she was a little creepy, but could she be any sexier? Those breasts, and that gorgeous butt; now that *was* pain! His hands grew a little more active inside his pyjamas, but in the cold and damp there wasn't much pleasure to be had. Besides, he did have *one* friend, well *had* one anyway—Gillian Willard. For some reason, the recollection of Gillian in a dress at the funeral home made him smile.

He rolled onto his side. Maybe if he read for a while. He reached out and switched on the small lamp by the bed. He pulled the reading basket from beneath the bed, shuffled through his stash of pocket books and magazines for the book on Mortsafemen, and began flipping through its pages.

*After the guild of Mortmen was banned in the late sixteenth century, the popular belief...they had packed away their axes and given up their cause...until they made a sudden and dramatic reappearance in the 1820s...*

*...In Edinburgh, Scotland, seat of an old and prestigious university, the theft of corpses in the early part of the century had become almost epidemic. There were neither the public executions nor the number of deaths among paupers to supply*

*the huge anatomy classes at the university with all the cadavers its medical students required. The shortage had spawned a lucrative trade in bodies obtained by less than scrupulous means. Professors and students were willing to pay as much as ten pounds for a corpse, and there were many sellers willing to oblige. Officials turned a blind eye to the trade because of the importance of the university, the popularity of the anatomy dissections which had become a form of entertainment for students and the general public alike, and finally, because grave robbing seemed a victimless crime.*

*Then one morning, visitors to Greyfriars Kirkyard discovered body parts scattered over a wide area of the consecrated ground. It turned out the parts belonged to six students, all dismembered with an axe or perhaps several axes. Pinned to some of the grizzlier body parts were pieces of paper bearing the crest of the Mortsafemen's guild, the black hooded figure with an axe standing atop a mausoleum against a field of gold.*

*Popular opinion had it the murders were the result of a war between "professional" body snatchers and medical students looking to earn a few shillings. Then, a few days after the body parts were discovered, a lengthy and bizarre tract appeared in one popular Edinburgh newspaper. The cost of the publication must have been considerable. Local authorities were never able to determine who had paid for it. The story went around that a wealthy and powerful highland family was behind the current incarnation of the ancient guild.*

*The tract, which bore the crest of the Mortmen, denounced in no uncertain terms the violation of graves, and lamented the suffering such desecration caused the soul of the deceased in the afterlife. It detailed the many horrific punishments Mortsafemen were charged by God to mete out to villains who violated the sanctity of the grave. In the days to follow, much debate ensued as to whether the tract confirmed the ongoing existence of the Mortmen's guild or was the work of a*

*copycat. Irrespective, the sponsors of the tract meant business. As if to underscore their determination to make grave robbers pay, the same morning the tract appeared, seven heads were discovered at daybreak spiked on the iron gate of the Old Calton Burial Ground. The names of the souls whose graves they had supposedly violated had been carved into their foreheads.*

*Needless to say, the number of grave robberies in Edinburgh—or at least those reported to authorities—fell away to nil almost overnight. The dismembered students and the heads of the grave robbers had put a quick and nasty end to the trade in stolen bodies. Their work done, the Mortsafemen returned to the shadows from whence they had arisen, because nothing was heard from them again, or at least not in the United Kingdom.*

In a brief postscript, the author described the last documented appearance of the Mortmen. It happened in Canada in 1979.

*Police in Montreal received anonymous reports a doctor in the city's large Haitian community had been removing kidneys and livers from the bodies of several recently deceased patients and selling them on the organ transplant black market. Police were just about to arrest the doctor when his dismembered body was discovered at home by a cleaning lady. Nailed, and quite literally so, with a three-inch spike to the doctor's limbless torso was a piece of paper bearing the insignia of the Mortmen's guild.*

*...it would seem the ancient and holy order of Mortmen still waits and watches from the shadows for another violated soul to cry out in its otherworldly agony from beyond the grave, at which time the Order will re-emerge to take its ghastly retribution.*

Retribution! Now that's what the goatman required—a dose of retribution.

## Chapter Ten

Thursday, November 21

Was it the chattering of his own teeth that woke him, or maybe the wind, or perhaps the rustling sound on the other side of the attic door? Whatever had disturbed him, Chris was now awake. He lay as still as death, listening. Only the familiar creaks and groans of the old house, nothing more.

He rolled onto his side and squinted toward the window. Still dark, and with the thick layer of ice across the pane, Chris couldn't see a thing. Not yet six a.m. but he wasn't going to get any more sleep. Too damned cold. And he wasn't going to school either, not after the humiliating episode at the funeral home. He pulled his clothes under the blankets and tried to wrestle them on without exposing an inch of bare flesh to the icy air. Rolling out of bed, he pulled back the trapdoor and dropped down onto the landing. Not a sound from anyone. He crept downstairs, washed in the kitchen sink and dried with a tea towel, then drank a glass of juice, grabbed an apple from the fridge, and left the house.

The world outside was the color of beaten pewter. The grass and trees were rimed with frost, and the gun-barrel gray sky was streaked with watery light seeping over the horizon from a weak winter sun not quite risen. Sound in the crisp cold air was keen. Chris stood by the back steps listening to the waves lapping against the shore. Would it be the beach or the hills? Somewhere up in the hills a coyote called to its kind and a pheasant cried out in pain. The hills it would be.

He walked around the house and up the lane, moving from the gravel to the grassy margin so his footfall would not be heard. He glanced back at the dark house just in time to see a light blink on in Gillian's bedroom, and a glimpse of her moving past the curtain.

Should he wait at the bus stop, and try to talk to her, or was she still mad at him? Did she still think him responsible for the cartoon which had driven Floyd round the bend? She *had* spoken to him at the funeral parlor the previous evening, if only to ask that he leave. If he waited for her, however, she might try to talk him out of cutting school, or maybe tell his parents he was. Okay, that wasn't likely, but knowing what he was up to might get her into trouble. Just being his friend had already made the police suspicious of her. The idea he might get Gillian into any more trouble made him feel awful. When he got to the main road, he didn't wait; he crossed over and started up the trail to the top of the mountain.

The track ran straight up the hill for about a hundred yards before it swung to the right and disappeared into the tangle of birch and black spruce. At the bend, Chris crouched down behind a blood-red sumac and waited. As the sun rose, the silver landscape faded to gray. Not ten yards below him, a doe and two fawns, oblivious to his presence, walked cautiously across the trail and then back into the wood. A quail, meandering through the undergrowth, came right up to him, squawked in surprise, and shot into the air. A couple of cars passed on the main road below, early risers heading for work in town. And then he saw Gillian walking up Willard Lane.

At the main road, she looked around with concern and maybe even a little irritation. She was looking for him, Chris realized with a smile. He'd never really been able to look directly at Gillian before. Normally, they were coy with each other as they waited for the bus. Recently, they'd chatted but still hadn't ever made eye contact. Why was that? What were they both afraid of? Now he looked right at her, and he liked what he saw.

She was tall for a girl. Nice. She was wearing a short, tight, dark blue jacket pinched at the waist, and jeans, not the usual duffel coat and dungarees. She had long legs. Her jeans were kind of tight through the leg and a bit flared at the ankle,

and as she turned and looked about, Chris registered a new and electrifying thought: she had a nice figure. How had he never noticed before? Okay, so not in-your-face sexy like Mallory, but graceful. From beneath a pink knitted tuque, long blond hair fell to her shoulders. In the morning sunlight, it shimmered. And she'd combed it. It wasn't flying off in all directions the way it usually did.

"You really are beautiful," he said to himself, remembering what Felicity Holcomb had tried to tell him. And Gillian was nice. He had a sudden and powerful urge to leap from the sumac, run down the hill and, what? Beg her not to be angry? Explain last night? Put his arms around her? Maybe even kiss her? *Get a grip!* She was a friend, perhaps his only friend. The last thing he wanted to do was wreck the one good thing in his life at the moment.

Gillian pulled a book from her bag, turned away, and began to read. And she was smart, too smart to get mixed up with a loser like him. Or she should have been.

A coyote stepped onto the track below him, on the scent of the deer most likely. It too looked down the trail toward the road. Gillian must have sensed the two pairs of hungry eyes upon her. She turned and looked up the trail just as the school bus arrived. She momentarily disappeared from view as it rolled to a stop. The next Chris saw of Gillian, she was looking out the window in his direction. Then the bus pulled away and she was gone.

The coyote was not fazed by the lumbering yellow beast on the road below and didn't move a muscle until it was out of sight, then its attention returned to the scent of the deer, and it moved silently across the trail and back into the forest. Blood would be spilled that day.

\* \* \* \*

Chris hiked through the morning. Melting frost made the trail muddy. The wood was silent and dark, the air damp, and the sky ominous. There would be

freezing rain before nightfall, maybe even snow. The hike to the top of the hill should have taken no more than thirty minutes. After an hour, however, Chris still had some distance to cover because he'd meandered all over the trail. He wasn't planning on visiting Mrs. Holcomb, especially since the police had told him not to. No point antagonizing them needlessly. Instead, he thought he'd hike along the ridgeline from one peak to another, enjoy the solitude and the views over Adinack Bay, maybe make a fire, and try to snare a rabbit with his bootlaces the way his dad had taught him.

Years ago, when things had still been good in the family, he'd loved to camp with his dad. He knew everything about surviving in the wilderness, and Chris had loved to watch him set up camp, find food, make chicory coffee, even roast a partridge over an open fire or maybe make a rabbit stew with sorrel, white mustard and fireweed gathered in the forest. Once, they'd spent a night in a lean-to, in a snowstorm, and had an amazing time. In the morning, his dad said, "I really believe you could handle anything, son." God, how long had it been since Chris had thought about camping with his father?

A shot resounded across the hills; then another.

Chris dropped to the ground and listened. No voices. No more gunfire. The shots had come from up the hill, near Mrs. Holcomb's place. Was she in trouble? Had the kids terrorizing her come back with guns?

Chris wasn't going to charge into danger like a madman. He wasn't going to run away either. He crept forward carefully, first to the edge of the wood, and then out into the meadow, and finally on toward the old lady's cottage.

The hilltop was still; not a soul anywhere. "Mrs. Holcomb?" he called softly.

Closer to the cottage, he called a little louder, "Mrs. Holcomb, it's Chris Chandler. Are you all right?" Again no reply. *Die Bitch* was scrawled in red on the cottage door.



Chris slipped and almost fell. The grass underfoot was wet, greasy. His shoes were red—everywhere, red. Blood and lots of it. A trail of blood led across the grass to the old lady's shed. What the hell had happened? He moved silently to the building and looked around the corner.

“You here to rape me?” the old lady yelled. She held an enormous knife in hands that were soaked in blood.

Chris stumbled backwards, almost fell, and cried out, “No...I...I was just...”

Then he spotted the deer, a young buck with its throat cut and belly opened, hanging from a hook on the wall, and the hunting rifle propped up against the shed.

The old lady roared with laughter, then realized Chris had been badly shaken. “You okay?”

“I...would never...you know.”

“Oh, I know. I was joshing you. Maybe a bit of wishful thinking, eh?” Again, she laughed.

“I heard the shots. I thought you were in trouble.”

“No, quite the opposite. Don't customarily get my deer until later in the month, but this big fellow came strolling up to the house, like he was saying to me, ‘I don't want you to have to work so hard for your winter meat this year, so take me,’ and so I shot him. I was starting to dress him when you showed up.”

“I thought you might be having trouble with kids again.”

“You mean it wasn't you who painted my door? I was so sure....”

“No, I swear.”

“Oh, I know, you silly boy. I'm just pulling your leg again. Still, your wallet was on my porch, right by my front door like somebody wanted the police to find it, and blame you.”

“Yeah, Chief Boucher came to our house. Said I had to stay away from you.”

“That man doesn't like you much. How'd you get him so riled?”

“Not sure I know.”

“Well, help me dress this deer, and then maybe we can talk over some beans and brown bread. Oh, and some beer I just made. Sound good?”

“Okay.”

“I take it you’re skipping school today?”

“Kind of.”

“Right, you pull the leg to the side so I can clear the chest...”

\* \* \* \*

They had a wonderful day. Chris couldn’t remember when he’d had a better time. They dressed the deer and wrapped each of the cuts in newspaper for the old lady’s freezer. By noon it was filled to the brim. They got covered in blood and had to scrub down out on the porch in the bracing November wind. Each took a bucket of hot water to opposite ends of the porch, and with their backs to one another, they stripped to the waist and scrubbed the blood from their arms and hands. “Now don’t look,” the old lady called. “I know how you boys can get all hopped up on hormones, and me, so vulnerable.” She roared with laughter again. Chris had half a mind to peek, just to give her a thrill, then thought twice of it.

Towelled dry, they put on matching plaid shirts. Chris’s had belonged to Mrs. Holcomb’s husband; heaven knows how long it had been packed away. They rinsed their bloody clothes in buckets of fresh water and hung them on a line strung across the porch. The November wind would dry them quickly, if it didn’t snow first.

Chris stoked the fire while Mrs. Holcomb—Felix, she insisted he call her—heated beans and buttered thick slices of brown bread. Later, by the fireplace, they ate and drank and laughed. Felix told marvelous stories about her privileged childhood in the Hamptons, wayward youth in New York City, and whirlwind romance with a woodcutter from West Mountain, Maine. Then she talked about his

death, and her loneliness, and her art, and her few remaining friends, among whom she still counted the Willards.

Chris talked about his happy childhood in Wisconsin, and love of books, history, and the outdoors. Then he described the family's slide into loneliness and resentment and his own struggle to keep things together for just a few more months. And finally, he told Felix about his dreams of travelling, of writing and of one day accomplishing something, *anything*, so long as it gave him back some sense of self-worth. It had been a long time since Chris had felt any pride in who he was or what he was doing with his life.

"Oh, that's ridiculous," Felix said with a huge laugh. "You're far too young to worry about what you're doing with your life. You don't need to make sense of life or find meaning in anything when you're just a child. You just have to live. Your job is to find joy, joy in your heart. Joy can only be found in the moment. You need to stock up on joy for the lean days to come! You don't need to worry about meaning. Meaning is something you only discover in a rear-view mirror."

"Not sure I'd know joy if I tripped over it."

"Joy is the immediate experience of something, a laugh, a look, a flower, a star, a kiss. Someone once said joy is the one emotion that connects us directly to God. I like that."

"Right now everything seems really shi...crappy, whether I look forwards or backwards."

"Even sitting here? Let me tell you, sitting here like this, warm fire, good food, chatting with a new friend—this fills me with joy."

"Yeah, I guess, me too, sort of."

"There you go." Felix smiled.

For a moment, they sat without speaking, enjoying the crackle and the glow of the fire, the wind whistling around the cottage, and the warmth of their newfound

companionship.

Felix broke the silence. "I wrote to my brother Nigel about you."

"Me?"

"I told him about the handsome young man who lives at the foot of my hill, and who, in spite of everything else he's going through, seems to be quite thoughtful and kind. Faced with some nasty people in these parts, I wrote, you still seem to be true to yourself. Heroic, that's how I described you." Chris couldn't help thinking the conversation was coming around to Mallory Dahlman. "So, don't make a liar out of me."

"Floyd Balzer killed himself," Chris said.

"I heard that."

"Some people blame me."

"Bullshit."

"Sure, but I do wonder if I could have done something to stop him."

"Poor Floyd was crushed between two soulless forces, his father...and Mallory Dahlman."

"You know about his father?"

"I know Ed Balzer is a bully and a drunk. Not a stretch to figure he had something to do with his boy's death."

"Did you know Floyd had broken up with Mallory Dahlman right before he died and I had started seeing her?"

"I'd have been surprised if at some point you *weren't* 'seeing' Mallory." Felix made quote marks in the air. "What red-blooded young man wouldn't want to? The test of your character will be how long it takes you to 'see' right through her."

Chris was embarrassed to admit he was still involved with Mallory. "Well...we haven't exactly broken up yet..."

"But she troubles you."

“I guess.” In truth, she scared the crap out of him.

“You should be troubled. She’s dangerous.”

“You know, Mallory believes the same religious stuff as her father out in Asia,” Chris said. “She believes her gods expect their believers to cause people pain, as a kind of offering.”

“That’s just bull. Mallory Dahlman causes people pain because she likes to. I don’t care how she rationalizes it. I don’t know whether it’s because of her screwed-up life or because she’s a bad seed, but she’s a nasty piece of work.” No one spoke for a moment. Then Felix asked, “Could she have stolen your wallet?”

“Why would she? I haven’t done anything to make her mad at me, not yet anyway.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have to be mad at you to want to hurt you.”

“So, was she the one who came up here the other night?”

Felix shrugged. “You saw the paint on my door, and you can’t imagine what happened to my poor cat Tinker.” Her voice broke. “Know anybody else that sick around here? Doesn’t change anything though; she’s not going to force me out.”

Night was coming on. A few snowflakes fell against the windows. The glass rattled in the stiffening wind.

“Is that what she’s trying to do, drive you away?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Not leaving.” Without asking whether Chris was staying for dinner, Felix went to the kitchen and started making sandwiches.

“The last time I was here, I got the feeling you’d be happy to leave,” Chris said.

“Oh, I don’t like what’s happening to people round here. The slow death of their town and their fear of the future, it’s made them small and nasty. Still, I love Maine, my mountain, the wildflowers, the woods, I love the smell and the wind and the sea.” She arranged lettuce and tomato sandwiches on a plate as she spoke.

“When I die I want to be buried right here, alongside my Harold. This place gave me Harold, and it brought me back to life after I lost him. So, in return, my body should nurture this place when I’m finished with it.”

Felix put the plate of sandwiches on the floor between them, handed Chris another glass of homemade beer, and sat back down by the fire.

“I don’t understand,” mumbled Chris with a mouthful of sandwich.

“It’s like the deer we dressed. I’m going to leave what’s left of it to rot away, right where I shot it, because that’s where it foraged and frolicked and fucked. That’s where it belongs—and this is where I belong. Come to think of it, I guess this mountain top is where I foraged, and frolicked and fucked.” She laughed mischievously.

By now, Chris was used to her salty sense of humour. “You think it matters where we’re buried when we die?” He took a long swig of the warm beer: strong and slightly bitter, with an orangey aftertaste, unlike any beer he’d ever had before.

“To anyone else, maybe not, but it matters to me. All my life I’ve been part of this place, and I don’t want that to end just because I’ll be dead.”

“I read somewhere,” Chris said, stretched out on the floor in front of the fire, eyes closed, “that our spirit suffers in paradise if our grave is disturbed.”

“Not sure I believe in paradise, or even in God, at least not the gods I hear people preaching about on TV. This,” she said, sweeping her arms before the window, “is all just so amazing, that no god I’ve ever heard of seems adequate. As if a god who could put a hundred billion stars in each galaxy and a hundred billion galaxies in our universe would care about the day of the week we worship or whether we eat this or that or let our hair grow or cover our heads or wear certain symbols or bow or chant or love the same sex or let women lead prayer. Petty gods dreamed up by petty minds.”

She got up again and asked, “Want another glass of my beer? Like it?”

“Love it,” he mumbled. With the warmth and the beer and the food in his stomach, Chris felt quite drowsy, so replied no to another glass.

Felix refilled her own glass from the pitcher on the kitchen counter, stoked the fire, and returned to the seat.

“I’m sure the God who created all this only really cares whether we respect her creation and care for each other. Beyond that, I expect we’re pretty much on our own.”

“Trying to see God has made some people do some pretty amazing things, you know, like painters and composers and stuff...and people who help the poor.”

Felix sipped her beer. “So maybe the *Great Big God* who made everything and is far grander than we could ever possibly imagine, she does let some people see a tiny part of herself.”

“Kind of like letting people see only one scene of a movie...or one corner of a painting?” Chris asked. “Not sure whether that’s kind or cruel.”

Felix smiled. “That’s God for you. We only get to see the part of God we deserve to see, because we couldn’t handle the full picture.”

“Okay, so, then maybe, all the kind and forgiving believers in the world get to see the loving face of God.” Chris was half asleep. “And all the cruel and bitter believers, they get their vengeful, nightmarish version of God?” He paused for a moment and then chuckled. “So I guess Mallory Dahlman will get the gods of pain she’s hoping for.”

“And may they bring her all the suffering she deserves.”

“So what sort of god do you deserve?” Chris asked.

“Me? I guess I’d like a God that’s a good conversationalist and an art lover, oh, and has a sense of humor. My husband always said you just know God has a sense of humor when you see all the bald men in the world with hair growing out of their ears.”

“And their noses,” Chris added, and they both had a good laugh.

“Anyway, I do like the idea that God—if we deserve one—cares about our resting place because I care about mine,” she said, staring into the fire. “I want mine to be here with my Harold. And if God, at the end of time, wants to take us to some place even nicer, then she’ll know where to find us.”

Chris sat up, looked out into the night, and then back at Felicity. For a moment, in the firelight, he glimpsed the beauty she must have been. Then he shuddered. Someone had just walked across his grave. The fog cleared from his brain.

“Dr. Meath,” he started to say, then hesitated. Why bring Meath up now?

“What about him?”

“Well...you know why he was expelled from chiropractic.”

“Sure, something about experiments.”

“I think he’s still doing them.”

“Experiments? What makes you think that?”

No, he shouldn’t get Felix mixed up in this. He had to deal with this himself. Hero, she’d called him. Crap.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Felix said, “you asked me to tell you if I saw Ronald at your house again. Well I did.”

“Yes, he dropped off some magazines a couple of days ago.”

“No, I saw him coming out of the Willards’ cellar just after dawn this morning.”

*What the hell?* Must have been right before Chris left the house. Meath had been in the house all night? Gillian said she’d block the cellar door, so how was Meath getting in? And why? What the hell did he want?

Chris told Felicity he had some homework assignment to finish, which was probably true even if he couldn’t remember what it was. Felix offered to drive him down the hill. He insisted on walking, however, because at the speed Felix drove,



he'd get home faster on foot.

In the doorway, Felicity thanked Chris again for all the help with the deer and for a wonderful day, and Chris blustered something about having had a great time. She said not to worry about her husband's shirt, and that she'd return his own when it had dried. They hugged and Felix kissed him on the cheek...and he did the same to her. Her hair smelled of pine; her skin was soft and scented with wildflowers.

She whispered, "You're welcome here anytime, my hero."

He grinned and ran off into the night.

The wind was raw and the snowflakes were falling more steadily now. In the plunging temperature, the muddy ruts carved by the old Buick were hardening to rock. The pools of water were already crusted over with ice. Chris tried to run, but he could hardly make out the trail. From time to time, a sliver of a moon shone between the heavy, black clouds and provided a glimpse of the track. Most of the time, however, Chris careened blindly downward. Only the trees, silhouetted on either side of the trail, let him know he was still on the right course. He slid on patches of ice, and tripped over clods of frozen mud. His knees were bloodied, he had a graze on the face that stung like needles, and his hands inside sodden mittens ached with the cold. He pushed on all the same.

The living room light was on in the Willards' house. Should he knock and ask for Gillian? No, better to check first; and sure enough, he found the cellar door padlocked, as Gillian had assured him it would be. So how had Meath managed to get in? There it was, the answer: pins in the two hinges had recently been oiled. Meath had pulled the pins. Chris found a boulder in the grass, and used it to crush the hinges and make pulling their pins impossible.

"Who's there?" Old Mr. Willard was standing on the front porch, squinting into the darkness.

“Sorry, Mr. Willard, it’s Chris, Chris Chandler,” he called from the side of the house.

“Chris, what the hell are you doing round there?”

“I...I was throwing rocks...uh, at a coyote.” He walked to the front.

“Sounded like you were banging on my walls.”

“Sorry, guess my aim isn’t much good.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be out here at this hour.”

Chris stepped into the light.

“What happened to you? Looks like you got into a fight with the coyote and he won.”

“No...I was...over at a friend’s house, and I slipped walking home.”

“Well, you should get cleaned up. The scrape on your face looks nasty.”

“Yes, sure. Uh, could I speak to Gillian, just for a moment?”

“Not here, son. She an’ her mom are over at the Balzers, to help out if they can.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Have to tell you, son, you put on quite a display at the funeral parlor last evening.”

“I know, I feel awful.”

“None of my business, and I know you’re a good kid, and I know there’s lots of folks been giving you a hard time since you moved here, but you gotta know, you have a real knack for making life more difficult than it has to be.”

“Yeah...”

“Just saying...anyway, good night, son...and get that cut seen to.”

“Would you tell Gillian I came by?”

“Sure thing.” He limped to the door, then turned back and said, “Oh, and Chris, how’s your mom?”

“Fine, I think, why?”

“Well, it’s just she seems...so sad. Wish I could do something to help.”

A bent and broken old man, and he wanted to help Chris’s mom. Nice gesture. Kind of weird as well.

“No, I think she’s fine. Dad’s job is worrying her a bit, that’s all. I’ll say you asked after her.”

“You do that. Well, good night.” He closed the door and turned out the porch light.

\* \* \* \*

Chris walked to the back part of the house. His parents’ light was on. The rest of the place was in darkness. He crept inside, stripped off the muddy coat, and went to the fridge, where he found a sandwich and a note from his mom. *Eat something. Mallory Dahlman called...several times. Did you go to school today?*

Upstairs in the bathroom, he washed and sponged the bloody graze on his face—damn, it stung—then stripped to his shorts.

“Is that you, Chris?” his mother called from the bedroom.

“Yes.”

“See my note?”

“Yes.”

“You in any trouble?”

“No.”

“Good night then.”

“Sure.”

He climbed the ladder to the attic crawl space. The magazines were gone, all of them. Meath had been in the house before dawn according to Felicity, and then broke in a second time after Chris left just to get back his damned magazines? Why? What the hell was he up to?

Chris pushed his bed along the wall to block the small door into the rest of the attic once again. Then it hit him, the door opened into the attic and not into his room. Sliding the bed against the door served no purpose. How had he missed that?

Chris spent the next half hour rigging a rudimentary alarm to the door: a coke bottle perched on a tall pile of books with a long line of shoelaces tied to the bottle and the door handle, the theory being the bottle would fall from the pile of books and smash if anyone tried to open the attic door from the other side. Chris might not be able to stop Meath from killing him in his bed, but at least he'd be awake for the event.

And with that comforting thought, he fell asleep.

## Chapter Eleven

Friday, November 22

Gillian didn't catch the bus that morning; probably helping her mom and Mrs. Balzer again. Mallory wasn't at her stop either. Helping the Balzers as well? Not bloody likely.

It turned out several girls were missing from school that morning, some because they were at the church getting things ready for Floyd's funeral and the reception to follow, and others because they were with Mallory Dahlman. Chris overheard a teacher tell several others why Mallory and company were absent.

"Poor Miss Mallory left school early yesterday because grief got the best of her. Friends took her home and stayed to make sure she was all right. Brave young lady that she is, she'll be back at school this afternoon."

"Understandable," another teacher said.

"Must make allowances at a time like this," said a third.

Did any of them know Mallory's mother was away in Bangor? Chris sleepwalked through the morning, oblivious to the cracks about the funeral parlor and plans for an encore at the funeral. He ate lunch alone and wandered early to Social Studies.

"Mr. Duncan, can I talk to you, sir?"

"Mr. Chandler, nasty cut on your face. Get in a fight? Is that why you weren't here yesterday?"

"No, sir, just sick."

"Have anything to do with what happened at the funeral parlor?"

"No. Well, maybe. Look, you've got to believe me, I had nothing to do with Floyd's death. I didn't have a fight with him or anybody else."

“You did steal his girlfriend.”

“Well, yes but—”

“Look, I don’t think for a moment you had anything to do with Floyd’s death. I know for a fact Floyd and Mallory were never very serious. Losing her wouldn’t have troubled Floyd enough to take his own life. I do believe Floyd’s father was hurting him, and I think you were brave to confront Ed Balzer about it.”

Chris was stunned.

“But if Floyd’s friends knew he was being beaten by his dad, why didn’t they speak up as well?” Mr. Duncan said, bowing his head. “And long ago, for god’s sake? They might have saved the boy’s life.” His tone turned hard. “Instead, a classmate decided to make Floyd the butt of a cruel joke. Why?”

“I would never have humiliated Floyd that way.”

“Would Mallory Dahlman?”

“Mallory?” So, Felix and Gillian weren’t the only ones who suspected Mallory.

“Floyd was a sensitive boy,” Mr. Duncan said. “He’d talk about his feelings if he trusted you, so maybe he said something to Miss Dahlman.”

“I asked her that. She said no.”

“And you believed her?”

Chris didn’t answer.

“So then who told *you*?”

“A friend of his.”

“A friend of Floyd’s?”

“Someone he’d sworn to silence.”

“So Mr. Chandler, if the only person who will admit to knowing Floyd’s father was beating him is you, and with your reputation for being a trouble-maker—whether it’s deserved or not—is it any wonder the police think you drew the cartoon? And, believe me, you *are* the only suspect they have.”

“You spoke to the police about me? About what I told you?”

“I said I would. I spoke to Chief Boucher, said I’d heard rumors some graves in the town cemetery had been tampered with. He wanted to know who told me, and I said you. The mere mention of your name gets the Chief fired up. He said you were probably making up stories to deflect attention from the other stunts you’ve pulled.”

“But I haven’t pulled any stunts!”

“Anyway, I got the Chief to telephone the funeral parlor. Gabe spoke with Mr. Brewster, the owner, and asked him point blank whether bodies in his care had been tampered with, and he denied it.”

“Of course he would.”

“And Brewster said he’d sue if he ever heard such charges again.”

“I know Meath is doing it! He’s even getting into my house...at night. He’s taken things from my room. “

“What things?”

“Magazines.”

“Magazines?”

“Yes, chiropractic magazines he lent me.”

“He took back magazines he’d lent you? Mr. Chandler, do you know how crazy you sound?”

“Meath got kicked out of some association in England for performing illegal experiments, and now he’s doing the same thing here...using bodies stolen from the funeral home. I’ve seen him doing it. And now for some reason he’s spying on me.”

“Maybe because you’re spying on him.”

“It’s not right, disturbing a person’s final resting place like that.”

“Now you sound like a *Mortman*.”

“Well, maybe because they were right. Someone needs to stop Meath if he’s robbing graves!”

“Mr. Chandler, you’ve got to get a grip. You’re a bright young man, your academic performance to the contrary. And you were brave to confront Floyd’s father. Now, however, you need to stop. I gave you the book on *Mortsafemen* because I thought it might amuse you, not turn you into some sort of vigilante. You’re letting your imagination run away with you. You’re getting paranoid, and you’re starting to worry me. I really don’t think I should discuss this with you anymore. I’m out of my depth. You need to speak to someone better qualified to help you.”

“Yeah, right, so where in this town am I going to find someone to help *me*?” Chris turned away. “Mallory!”

She was standing in the doorway at the back of the classroom. *Crap, how much had she overheard?*

\* \* \* \*

“Miss Dahlman, how are you?” Mr. Duncan asked. “Things got a bit too much yesterday?”

“Yes, sir. My friends have been wonderful, and I’m feeling a little better today. Oh, and thank you so much for asking.” She smiled ever so sweetly but made no move to approach. Then, in a coquettish voice, she asked, “Can you spare Chris? I just need a quick word before class...if that’s all right?”

“Of course. Mr. Chandler?” Mr. Duncan gestured toward Mallory and turned away.

“Uh, yeah,” Chris said and went to Mallory. “Are you all right? I worried when I heard...”

“What? That I had to go home early yesterday?” Mallory pulled him out into the corridor. She was clearly upset. “So maybe you can imagine how I felt when



I'm looking everywhere for my boyfriend, and he's not around? And then last evening when I'm waiting for him to show up at my house because I've got something special planned, and I phone his house a bunch of times, and no one will tell me where he is or why he isn't here with me?"

"I'm so sorry. I was messed up after what happened at the funeral parlor. I just couldn't come to school."

"If you'd told me you were planning to cut school, I'd have cut too, and we could have spent the whole day at my house. You know my mother's away," she said, that same sly grin plastered on her lips.

"I guess I wasn't thinking."

"So, what *did* you do? And what happened to your face? It's really gross."

"I went up in the hills, just walking...and I fell."

"You went for a walk? You could have spent the day with me, and instead, you spent it walking in the woods? God, what are you? Oh hell, you're not queer too? So...what did you do, pick flowers, write poems, and look at clouds?" she asked with a sneer. Then her irritation turned to suspicion and then to anger. "Wait, you weren't alone! You were with somebody else! Who were you with?"

"Nobody."

"Not Mrs. Holcomb?"

"No, well, I might have said hi to her."

"What has she told you about me?" Mallory's eyes narrowed.

"Nothing. Besides, I thought you'd broken up with me, the way you were all cozy with the Balzers at the funeral parlor."

"Oh, Chris! I was being nice, you idiot! After all, Floyd and I were together for three years. Our relationship was important to his parents."

"...to his parents? Not to you?" Suddenly something else Mallory had said came back to him. "Wait! What did you just say about me being 'queer too'?"

What's that supposed to mean?" Then, like a thunderbolt, it hit him. "Was Floyd Balzer...you know? Is that what you meant? Is that why his dad beat him all the time?"

"I didn't say Floyd was queer." Mallory turned away embarrassed and defensive.

"Gay, I think they prefer being called gay."

She spun about and lashed out at him. "How would you even *know* that, if you aren't *gay* yourself?" she sneered.

"I'm not gay! I think we've established that!"

"Oh, of course, my love." She tried to turn the warmth back on and pressed herself hard against him. "More please," she whispered.

Chris didn't move. "So you knew Floyd's dad beat him, didn't you. And you knew why. To punch the queer out of him, right?"

"His daddy said we had to help Floyd get his head straight." She stroked Chris's chest and kissed his cheek. Chris wasn't having any of it.

"You stayed with Floyd even though you knew he was gay."

She must have realized her charm wasn't working, so she stepped back, stared at Chris, and said. "I was doing Mr. Balzer a favor! We had, well, kind of a business arrangement. I was helping him...and Floyd of course...and they were helping me."

"Helping you? Oh no!" Was Mallory for real? "The Balzers, they were paying you?"

"No, not paying me. Just giving me gifts."

"Like all your nice clothes, so they aren't from your father?"

"My father sends me gifts as well."

"Sure, like spells and poisons for your brother's arm."

"My daddy loves me," she whispered, and started to weep.

Not going to work, Chris swore to himself.

“You knew Floyd was gay, and you knew his father wanted Floyd to appear normal at all costs, even to the point of paying you to pretend to be his girlfriend, and all the while, you knew his dad was beating him to a pulp?” Oh Christ, no wonder the poor sap killed himself.

The tears stopped instantly. “Floyd was weak,” Mallory said with such venom. “He expected to be cradled like a baby while he droned on about his father not loving him, and he would sob like a child!”

“So, you’d had enough...and you drew the cartoon. You made Floyd kill himself. It’s like you said the other night, an offering. And I suppose Floyd’s spirit is trapped here! Been to see it yet? Should be good for a laugh, right?”

“I told you, I had nothing to do with Floyd killing himself.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“The police think *you* put up those posters,” she said. “You knew what Floyd’s dad was doing just as well as me. So perhaps you did. Lots of people think that.”

“Others are beginning to put the pieces together,” Chris said. “They’re beginning to suspect you.”

“Who?”

“Well, Mr. Duncan for one.” Oh crap, he shouldn’t have said that.

“Really.” She glared at him, then turned and walked away without another word.

By the end of the afternoon, Mallory was strolling around school on the arm of some other schmuck, and Chris’s nightmare had become a great deal darker.

\* \* \* \*

Sick of all the taunts, Chris had walked all the way home and was now perched on the railing, staring down at the two Willard graves. It had to be well past supper time, and he was starving. He just couldn’t take another interrogation, however, so

here he sat, staring at tombstones and freezing his butt off.

The grass rustled behind him. Gillian, carrying a flashlight, moved slowly through the tall weeds toward him. “Hi.”

“You’re speaking to me?”

“Yes, I guess.”

“So you believe me when I say I had nothing to do with the cartoon?”

“Okay, yes. Sorry for yelling at you. It’s just I was so sorry for Floyd. He was a nice guy, once anyway. I used to like him. Crazy, huh? Then, well, he got lost somehow. When the cartoon appeared, I hated to see him in such pain. And I couldn’t think of anyone who would want to make him suffer so.”

“Except me,” Chris said. “I didn’t like Floyd, and I did make fun of him in class once, but the cartoon was cruel, and I would never intentionally hurt anybody like that. And besides, I would never lie to you.”

Gillian climbed onto the railing beside Chris.

“Mallory and I broke up,” Chris said.

“Oh yeah, heard that. Rumor is Mallory dumped you because you’re such an insensitive jerk.”

“Oh really?”

“Well, that’s one story going round. Then there’s the fact you humiliated her by making such an ass of yourself at the visitation.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

“What were you thinking?”

“Wasn’t, I guess. I just wanted to tell Floyd’s mother I grieved for her, and then leave.”

“Well, your intentions were good.” She smiled and he smiled back.

“And then there’s the story Mallory discovered you were responsible for Floyd’s cartoon,” Gillian said.

“Bitch.”

“And finally, there’s the story you’re probably gay...oh, and you kept asking Mallory to do unnatural things. Not sure how those two rumors square,” Gillian said with a grin, “but each story has its believers.”

“When Mallory wants to punish you, she doesn’t hold back,” Chris said.

“You mustn’t go to Floyd’s funeral.”

“How can I not? It would be like admitting I’m guilty. I’ll go with my parents, stay in the background.”

“If Ed Balzer will even let you in the church, you mean.”

“You know Floyd’s dad is guilty. Why doesn’t anybody else see that? Floyd’s father was beating him up regularly, probably right up until he killed himself.”

“I think it may be worse than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mom and I have been helping Floyd’s mom with the funeral and everything. Mom and Mrs. Balzer were good friends before all the trouble between our dads. Last night, when we went over there, she was all alone, sitting in the dark. Floyd’s dad was out drinking somewhere. So Mom sat on the couch with Mrs. Balzer, just holding her hand in the dark. After a while, she started talking about the day Floyd died. I was in the hall, but I could hear every word.

“I guess she was in the kitchen, cooking or cleaning up after breakfast, when she got the call from Principal Dell’s office saying Floyd had left school without permission after some sort of fight. She thought he’d come straight home, only he didn’t show up until almost suppertime.

“In fact, Mr. Balzer got home before Floyd. She saw him park the pickup back of the house, get out, scream something, and bang his fist on the hood of the truck. Then he disappeared down among the sheds.

“Mr. Balzer runs his company from an office in town. His drivers park their

rigs behind the Balzers' house when they're not on the road, however. He has a couple of sheds and mechanics back there for fixing them. Every day, when he comes home for dinner, I guess he checks with the guys to find out which trucks are running and which still need work. Anyway, Floyd's mother figured that's what he was doing.

“About fifteen minutes later, Floyd arrived. He didn't come into the house either. Instead, he headed out back as well. Floyd has his own shed behind one of the garages. It's a kind of clubhouse, with a record player, a new Nintendo, and girls' pictures on the wall, and magazines, and stuff. Mrs. Balzer wasn't allowed to go in there because Mr. Balzer said a boy needs a place where he can learn to be a man.

“Because there are these big floodlights back there, his mom could see Floyd was hurt and having trouble walking, so she called after him. He didn't answer. She wanted to follow him, but didn't because she was afraid her husband would be mad at her for coddling Floyd.

“A little later, she heard music playing, then voices yelling. She was kind of surprised because she hadn't seen anyone else go down to Floyd's shed. The shed wasn't visible from the kitchen so somebody might have gone there from another direction. Anyway, after the yelling ended and the music stopped, she heard nothing else.

“When the meal was ready, she called Floyd and his dad from the back steps. They didn't answer. She phoned the main garage, and asked one of the mechanics working late to tell her husband and son their supper was ready. The guy said he hadn't seen either of them all afternoon.

“Immediately she sensed something was wrong, so she walked down to Floyd's shed, called out to him and knocked on the door. No answer. Maybe Floyd had gone off with his friends when she wasn't looking, so she started back to the

house. Then she saw her husband staring at her from the cab of a parked truck. Just sitting there. I guess she got scared, so she went back to the shed and banged on the door again, then pushed it open. Before going inside, she looked back at her husband, half expecting him to scream at her to leave the boy alone. He was still sitting there, head down on the steering wheel. She went inside the shed...and found Floyd.

“Floyd’s feet weren’t more than six inches from the ground. A box had been kicked to one side. The noose dangling from the rafter was so tight around Floyd’s neck, the mechanics had to cut into his flesh to get it off. The moment Floyd kicked the box away, he must have regretted it because he’d fought desperately to loosen the noose. His throat was shredded and fingernails ripped away.

“Even worse, his eyes were swollen shut and lips split and bloody. He’d been beaten to a pulp before even getting on the box...or before someone put him up there. Floyd’s mom said she almost didn’t recognize him. For an instant, she thought it might not be him, perhaps a friend of his. Then she knew the truth, and she screamed and screamed.”

“What did Floyd’s dad do?”

“I guess it seemed like forever before anybody came. First, the mechanics working late ran in, and then, sometime later, Floyd’s dad. One of the mechanics had already lifted Floyd down. Mr. Balzer started screaming and hugging Floyd’s body and sobbing. He screamed he would make somebody pay for Floyd’s death...that he’d make the Chandlers pay.”

“My family, Balzer said my family? Why?”

“Don’t know. Maybe because you stole Floyd’s girlfriend, and that’s why Floyd killed himself?”

“Mallory was never Floyd’s girlfriend. She had a business arrangement with Floyd’s dad.”

“What?”

“Ed Balzer has been paying Mallory to pretend to be Floyd’s girlfriend—to conceal the fact Floyd was gay.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“You knew Floyd was gay?”

“No, but I knew he wasn’t the macho idiot he pretended to be,” Gillian said.

“He had me fooled.”

“Floyd and I were close once, back before my father died.”

“Close?”

“We were kids, played together all the time, for years. Floyd was always over at our house. We liked the same books, liked hanging out down at the beach, and drawing and stuff. Believe it or not, he wanted to be a painter one day. Back then, he was...well...very sweet, gentle even. Then the fight between our dads and the accident, and Floyd changed. He wasn’t allowed to come to my house anymore. Started being the tough guy. Then in high school, he hooked up with Mallory, and we rarely spoke after that.”

“So Floyd had lots of reasons to kill himself—a dad determined to beat his son straight, a girlfriend taking money to put up with him, and a secret life made public in the most humiliating way possible. No wonder the poor slob hung himself.”

“I’m not sure. I knew Floyd. I always thought he was sort of brave, what, with a drunk and a bully for a dad. I just don’t think he would hang himself.”

“His dad then? You think his dad beat him up...and hung him as well?”

“He was only a few feet from the shed and didn’t come running when the screaming began, like he knew what he’d find.”

“Does Floyd’s mother think that?”

“God no, I hope not. I’m sure she’d go mad if she thought her husband killed her son. Besides, I think she’s afraid of him. I think he beats her as well.”



“This just gets worse and worse,” Chris whispered, shaking his head in disbelief.

“That’s why no one in town wants to believe it. It’s so much easier to think losing a girlfriend and being humiliated by a cartoon made Floyd kill himself.”

“Only the police insist the cartoon is a lie, so how can they think he would kill himself over a lie?”

“I’m not saying the explanation makes any sense.”

“Rather than confront Ed Balzer, the police would prefer to blame whoever drew the cartoon for pushing Floyd over the edge.”

Chris put his hand over Gillian’s. “I promise, it wasn’t me.”

“I know, but someone did.”

“Maybe Floyd told a buddy what his dad did to him?”

“I don’t think so. Floyd’s reputation as the richest and toughest kid around was too important to him to ever tell his jock buddies any different.” Then she added, “Mallory Dahlman?”

“Kind of obvious isn’t it...but she says no.”

“Well, somebody drew the cartoon, somebody who knew the most intimate things about Floyd, somebody who realized how fragile Floyd was, somebody extremely cruel who wanted to cause Floyd the worst kind of pain. Know anybody else like that?”

He didn’t answer.

\* \* \* \*

Chris bundled up as best he could be in his tiny, damp sleeping space and thought about death.

A north-easterly gale off the Atlantic howled up through the orchard and whirled around the house. Every window rattled. Rafters groaned and cracked. Shutters whistled and creaked and occasionally banged against the old house. Out

in the darkness, shapes—probably leaves and branches and sea mists—cavorted and pranced about. Inside the attic, drafts like frozen fingers probed every corner and even beneath Chris's icy sheets.

Several days had passed since Chris had seen or heard anything from Doctor Meath. All the same, he'd checked the pop-bottle alarm system before turning in.

Whatever would Floyd's family inscribe on his headstone? Not the truth, that's for sure, not that he'd been gay, and beaten to death by his own father. Headstones often lied, of that Chris was pretty certain.

Some German poet Chris had once read wrote that each of us is actually two persons, the living person and the dying person, and the truer of the two is the latter. The truth of who we are emerges gradually and with ever greater clarity as we creep closer and closer to the abyss.

The truth of who Floyd Balzer had been in his short, pathetic life had only begun to emerge after he died, after his nightmarish days were cut short, and after his battered corpse had been cut down from the rafters of the tiny shed.

What did Abner Willard's gravestone say? *O Death the Healer...Pain lays not its touch upon a corpse.* It would have been comforting to think Floyd's death had put an end to his pain.

It had become clear to Chris in the past few days most people in Bemishstock didn't want to hear the truth about Floyd Balzer, least of all his family. They preferred the lie. So, if the truth of who one was in life remains a secret in death as well, then does it follow one's pain continues right along with the lie?

## Chapter Twelve

Monday, November 25

Floyd's funeral was scheduled for eleven a.m., and students were expected to show up for early classes before going to the service. Everyone attending would be released from school at ten-thirty for the short walk across town to the grand old Episcopal Church. Chris had arranged to meet his parents in the parking lot of Millie's Coffee Shop, midway between the school and the church, so they could go to the service together.

The bus ride to school was somber—none of the usual shouting and taunts and bouncing around from seat to seat. Even the Gobbler had on a dark suit. He didn't acknowledge Chris and Gillian as they climbed aboard. Chris sat with Gillian who had on a dress, not that he could see much of it because she was bundled up in a duffel coat and tuque against the raw November wind. Even so, Chris found himself transfixed by the sight of her knees; not boney or scraped as he had expected, but smooth and shapely.

“Are you looking at my legs?”

“No.”

“Well, don't!” she said, and punched his shoulder. Their eyes met, and Gillian frowned before looking away in embarrassment.

“Hey, thanks for dinner on Saturday,” Chris said. “I loved it. And thank your mom for the work. I needed the cash.” Over the weekend, Chris's mom and dad had driven into Bangor for some medical thing, and they'd taken the two young ones along, so Chris had been home alone. Mrs. Willard had offered some work bottling new cider and then invited him to dinner. He'd had a terrific time. After supper, he and Gillian had played Cribbage and then chatted until well past

midnight about books and music, about songs she'd composed and stories he'd written, and about Gillian's dreams of travel and Chris's nightmares of Mortsafemen. Mrs. Willard had asked if Chris was okay with sleeping alone in an empty house, and he'd said sure. Truth to tell, he'd been scared silly. He'd locked the attic hatch and slept on the couch in the living room with all the lights on. Gillian and Madelyn had arrived Sunday morning with a thermos of hot coffee and cinnamon rolls, and they'd eaten breakfast together, chatting about nothing in particular until the time came for Gillian and Madelyn to go to church.

As the bus rolled round a curve, Gillian leaned against Chris. She looked up into his face and found him staring at her once again. This time, she smiled back and touched her mittened hand to his.

The bus didn't stop at the Dahlmans' place. Chris guessed Mallory would probably be part of the Balzer family cortege. He shook his head and said, "Bizarre."

"What is?"

"Mallory and Floyd."

"Do you miss her?"

"No, it's not that. It's just she probably played a big part in Floyd's death, and yet, at his funeral, there she'll be, weeping and playing the grieving girlfriend. It's like the final insult to poor old Floyd."

"She's cold."

"Calls for some kind of retribution."

"What?"

"Mr. Duncan's book?—the one I showed you on Mortsafemen, the guys with the axes?—anyway, it says they punished people who defiled the dead because defilement causes the departed great suffering in paradise. Retribution, they called their punishment. That's what Mallory needs, retribution."

Cars packed the schoolyard. Parents waited to take their kids to the funeral when classes were dismissed mid-morning. People had parked at the school to make room at the church since its small lot would be filled to capacity with Floyd's extended family.

Two police cars were pulled up by the school's front door with their lights flashing. As Chris walked into school, the officers glared and whispered to one another.

In the school foyer, Chris saw Principal Dell, the School Board Chairwoman, and Chief Boucher, in heated discussion. When they realized they could be overheard, they took their conversation into the school office and shut the door. On his way to class, Chris overheard several students chattering about some teacher getting fired.

Chris had expected the atmosphere in the school to be grim and sad in anticipation of the funeral, but no. The place buzzed with excitement as if something strange was about to happen. Curiously, there were no morning announcements over the PA. Usually, Principal Dell played a chorus of *We are the World* and then babbled on about the most inane stuff. Chris expected the funeral would have given Dell the perfect opportunity to intone about the loss of a young life or the sadness of the day or the proper deportment of students attending a funeral. Instead, the PA remained silent. Apparently Floyd's funeral was already old news. Even our death, it seems, earns us barely an instant of attention.

\* \* \* \*

The funeral went remarkably well: a huge crowd, nice hymns, and lots of tears. Best of all, there was no repeat of Chris's clash with Balzer Senior. Drunk and oblivious to Chris's presence, Ed Balzer stumbled down the aisle to the pew reserved for family of the deceased. His wife supported him on one side and Mallory on the other as he staggered forward. Mallory played the grieving

girlfriend to perfection, dabbing away tears, patting Balzer Senior's shoulder when something moving was said, and nodding vigorously in agreement with all the tributes. You had to wonder what recompense she'd extorted for her masterful performance.

Floyd's mother said a few moving words about the gentle child she'd nursed. An aunt told a charming story about Floyd's first steps. Not once during the service however did Ed Balzer raise his head. He didn't sing, didn't speak, didn't even acknowledge the casket as the hockey team carried it up the aisle. The only time he showed any interest at all was when Floyd's teammates took the lectern to remember their captain. They ended their bizarre tribute with a chant that they were going to get the bastard who'd humiliated their leader. For several seconds, the soaring church nave rang with the phrase, "We'll kill the prick that done our Floyd." Ed Balzer jumped up and joined in their chant, exhorting the rest of the congregation to join in until his wife, in a rare display of strength and rage, pulled the drunken slob back down into his seat.

Chris and his parents sat in the last pew, spoke to no one, and slipped to the side of the church when everyone else followed the casket outside. They waited in the shadows for the crowd to disperse before leaving. Chris watched Gillian accompany her mother into the church hall where a light luncheon was to be served. Interment was to follow the luncheon. Attendance at the interment was limited to the immediate family. No doubt Mallory would be there.

Chris remained dry-eyed as he left the church, unmoved because, knowing all he'd learned of his former tormentor, he'd been left with the profound sense that nothing anyone had said about Floyd during the service had anything to do with the lonely, gentle and beaten soul Floyd might really have been.

"Can't even spare the poor kid a tear, you piece of shit," the police chief said as Chris passed him on the church driveway.

He said good-bye to his parents in the coffee shop parking lot. He declined their offer of lunch, said he wanted to get back to class before the crowd, and set off for school.

Gillian ran up alongside and blurted out, “Mr. Duncan’s been fired.”

\* \* \* \*

“What? No!” Chris felt like someone had just kicked him in the groin.

“It’s true. He’s been ordered to clean out his desk and leave the school by the end of lunch hour.”

“Why?”

“Early this morning, an anonymous letter showed up at Principal Dell’s house. It accused Mr. Duncan of immorality, of encouraging homosexuality, and of failing to get a student in need the help he required. And attached to the letter was a handwritten note from a student to Mr. Duncan. Apparently the note thanked Mr. Duncan for helping the boy see that his feelings for other boys were nothing to be ashamed of.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Madelyn! She told me right after the funeral. Her mom’s the Chair of the School Board, right? Well, Madelyn’s mom got a call from Principal Dell early this morning about the letter and the note, and she told Madelyn when they were driving to the funeral.”

“I don’t get it. So some student confessed to Mr. Duncan he’s gay, so what? What does that have to do with Mr. Duncan?”

“I guess it’s clear from the note Mr. Duncan admitted to the boy he’s gay too, and that lots of other people are as well. That’s partly why the boy wanted to thank Mr. Duncan—for helping him feel less alone.”

“Have they talked to the boy?”

“They can’t.”

And it hit Chris. “Because Floyd Balzer wrote the note.”

“Yes.”

“So even though Mr. Duncan didn’t *do* anything, I guess Principal Dell thinks he shirked his responsibility...because he didn’t tell anybody else about Floyd’s problem, not the school counselor, not even his parents.” It all made a nightmarish kind of sense. “So Dell sees Mr. Duncan as being partly to blame for Floyd’s death.”

“And now people know Mr. Duncan is gay, Principal Dell is probably glad to have an excuse to get rid of him.”

“The letter accusing Mr. Duncan, you said it wasn’t signed?”

“No it wasn’t.”

“So they have no idea who sent it?”

“No.”

“Oh Christ, I just know Mr. Duncan’s going to think I had something to do with this.” Chris took off running back to the school.

\* \* \* \*

He raced up the stairs and along the corridor. A police officer was waiting outside the Social Studies classroom, probably to escort Mr. Duncan off the premises when the time came. He made no move to stop Chris. In the classroom, Mr. Duncan was alone and hurriedly packing his things into two small boxes.

“They fired you?” Chris asked.

“What does it look like?”

“Can’t you fight this?”

“Fight? Fight what? It’s true! The letter is true! I should have helped Floyd! Not said, ‘You aren’t alone’ to the poor kid. He needed proper help, and I didn’t get it for him. Help, not with his sexuality, of course not. With his dad and his...his guilt, although Christ knows who could have helped the poor boy? His parents, the



Principal, the guidance counselor? Did they really want to know their big man on campus was a queer? Still, I should have tried. I should have said something. He was in such pain!” Tears streamed down Mr. Duncan’s face.

Then he stopped packing and looked at Chris. His sorrow gave way to suspicion, and then to anger.

“But you knew, didn’t you? You knew Floyd was gay, you knew his dad was beating him, and you knew why!”

“I didn’t —”

“*You* wrote the letter to Dell.” Duncan’s anger grew. “Of course you did! You may not have drawn the cartoon about Floyd, but you wrote the letter about me! It had to be you, you and your girlfriend because no one else knew about Floyd’s note!”

“I only heard about the note this morning—”

“For God’s sake, why have you done this? What did I ever do to you?”

“Nothing! I—”

“I have to live with the knowledge I could have helped Floyd and didn’t,” Mr. Duncan said, “but you, you weren’t content to let me punish myself. You had to humiliate me as well. “

“I didn’t—”

“Don’t keep saying you didn’t! They have Floyd’s note!”

“So?”

“So the note was on my desk! In my home! Hardly anybody has ever been in my home, and only two students, you and Miss Dahlman!” He shook his head and resumed packing.

“Then Mallory took it because I—”

“What difference does it make which one of you took it? You damned well brought her into my home.”

“Why would I want to hurt you?” Chris pleaded.

“Mr. Chandler, I don’t know what goes on in your head. I was warned about you. I just didn’t listen. Christ, I thought a friend was doing me a favor when he got me this job. And now it’s cost me everything and a poor boy his life. So please, just go. I have no more time for you. I’ve got fifteen minutes to finish packing before everyone gets back from lunch. The sooner I go, the less abuse I’ll suffer.”

“Mr. Duncan, I swear—”

“Get out, Mr. Chandler.”

\* \* \* \*

Chris stumbled out of the room, went to his homeroom, and sat there, stunned, oblivious to the few students who straggled in. Shortly before the class bell, a roar went up from the crowd in the schoolyard. Mr. Duncan’s departure was about as bad as he’d feared.

At the end of the afternoon, Mr. Duncan’s dismissal was still pretty much the only topic of conversation as students went to their buses. No one paid much attention to Chris, no one except Mallory.

Chris was walking across the parking lot in the direction of Main Street, head down, lost in thought. He felt like crap. No way would he be able to listen to all the garbage on the bus without losing it. He’d have to hitchhike. Maybe Mrs. Holcomb would be along soon.

“I would offer you a ride, except I know how much you like to walk,” Mallory said, leaning against her mother’s car in the embrace of a new boyfriend, some jock grinning like an idiot who couldn’t believe his luck at getting fifteen minutes with the legendary Dahlman boobs.

Mallory was the last person in the world Chris wanted to talk to. Anger got the better of him, however.

“Back from the burial? You must have enjoyed yourself,” he said. She missed

the dig.

“It was all so sad, it broke my heart. I’m sure Floyd’s in a better place.” She made a sad face, then grinned.

*If ever there was a case for retribution! But how?* What could he possibly do to punish such a...? He turned and walked away.

“You look nice,” Mallory called after him. “New girlfriend pick out your clothes?”

“What new girlfriend?”

“The Willard girl.”

“She’s not...” A chill ran down his spine. Mallory’s expression was menacing.

“Nice dress,” he replied. “Your daddy buy it for you?”

Mallory glared at him, then smiled her sweetest smile. “Billy dear,” she said and patted the jock’s chest, “will you give us a minute? Mr. Chandler and I have a few things to settle. One minute, my love.”

The jock moved off to join a group of buddies, glowering back at Chris from time to time, fists jammed in his pockets, probably to stop his knuckles dragging on the pavement.

Mallory waved sweetly at her jock then turned to Chris. She moved so close her breasts touched his chest, and whispered, “Chris, you and I really don’t need to part. This is all just a misunderstanding. Oh, Billy’s nice—well, he’s an idiot but a nice sort of idiot, and he’ll do anything I ask, anything at all.” Was that a threat?

“Chris, listen to me, we only fell out because you questioned me. You didn’t trust me when I told you I had nothing to do with Floyd’s death. You shouldn’t doubt me when I tell you something. That’s not how two people as alike as we are should treat each other. I’m willing to forgive you because I think we could have something special together, something interesting. We were good together, really good, weren’t we? Our afternoon, in my bed, remember? Why can’t we be like that

again? What do you say? I'll get rid of Billy. You get rid of the Willard child...and we'll go somewhere in my mother's car...and make up."

He stared at her, unable to believe what he was hearing. For a moment he was speechless, then he said, "You took Floyd's note from Mr. Duncan's house."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No. No I didn't take it."

"And you sent the letter about Mr. Duncan to Principal Dell. One of your *offerings*, was it?"

She stepped away from Chris, turned toward Billy, and waved sweetly. Then she said to Chris, "Why are you bringing this up now? Floyd is dead, Mr. Duncan is gone. What does any of this have to do with us?"

"Because I'm trying to figure out—behind all your lies and pretending—who you really are?"

She glared for a moment and then moved close, smiled and whispered in his ear. "You want to know the real me?" She pressed hard against his chest. "I'm the girl who made your heart nearly explode with excitement...and your prick as hard as a gun barrel. I'm the girl who can fulfill every desire you have ever known and many you cannot imagine." Then the smile vanished as she backed away. "And I'm the girl who can make your life a misery if you cross me."

Chris struggled to show no weakness, in spite of the icy grip on his heart. "So you did take the note."

"I'm not saying that. If maybe I did though, it would have been to protect this community."

Chris shook his head. "They tried to warn me about you, but I didn't listen."

"What are you talking about?"

"People said you were dangerous."

“And who are *they*?”

“Mr. Duncan, for one.”

“A pervert.”

“Your brother.”

“Another pervert.”

“Even Floyd.”

“Biggest pervert of all.”

Chris said nothing more.

The malicious grin returned to Mallory’s face. “Not your old lady friend, the Holcomb woman? Another pervert. Did she tell you what I caught her doing in the hospital?”

“You’ve been terrorizing her.”

“She’s a clown! She deserves everything she gets. Oh, and your new little friend, Little Miss Hillbilly? What does she say about me?”

“Nothing.” Was she threatening Gillian now?

“Oh, I’m sure!”

Mallory spun away and started back toward Billy and friends, then stopped, turned, and said, “Have you noticed how bad things happen to people who are not my friends, to people who hurt my feelings, who criticize me? I have the gods of my ancestors to thank for that. I always knew they would support me if I was strong. Now I know just how strong I can really be, and I have *you* to thank for that.”

\* \* \* \*

Cold and exhausted and filled with dread, Chris climbed up into the attic space. He pushed the hatch cover back into place, checked the pop-bottle alarm system and small door at the foot of the bed, and slipped under the covers, still wearing the shirt and slacks he’d worn to the funeral. Even so, the damp sheets made him

shiver. He lay on his back, motionless for a moment, and then rolled onto his side to switch off the bedside light. He scraped frost from the small window by the bed, and then peered outside. Something stirred out in the dark.

A light...moving slowly along the railway line. He knew what it meant—Floyd's remains were about to endure their final humiliation. Chris pulled the sheets over his head and whimpered.

\* \* \* \*

The pop bottle fell to the floor and skittered under the bed. Chris's eyes flew wide. For an instant, he saw nothing, then, slowly, a dark shape at the end of the bed—no, not a shape, darkness...black as coal...beyond the open door.

“Who's there? What do you want?” Then the smell hit him and he knew...the goatman.

“Oh, Christopher,” Meath whispered, “a pop bottle? Really?”

“I'm going to call my parents!”

“Do that and....” A match flared to life in the darkness beyond the doorway. For an instant, the goatman's crouched body and crazed face glowed in its light. Meath held the tiny flame toward the doorway. “I might just drop this.”

“No please.” In terror, Chris scrambled out of bed like a cockroach and jammed himself under the eave opposite the door to get as far away from the flame as the crawl space would allow.

The goatman blew out the match. “Then let's chat, you and I.”

“How did you get in here?”

“You thought crushing a few hinge pins would stop me? And yet you overlooked the screws holding the hinges in place? So stupid! How I get into this house isn't important. Just know that I can, and by a hundred ways, so don't try to bar me again.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Your help, isn’t it obvious? I need someone to assist me with my work, and we seem suited.”

“How do you figure?”

“I’ve told you my story, how I’ve been persecuted. You suffer much the same way from your schoolmates. You choose to live apart from lesser people, as do I. You don’t have much else to do with your time or many prospects for the future, and I’m offering you a chance at fame when my work succeeds. And you don’t seem to be shocked by dead bodies. I know that because you’ve been watching me. So it seems logical you should become my assistant. In fact, I rather expected you’d show up at my place tonight. You knew I had new material to work with.”

“You’re crazy! I’m not going to help you!”

“I don’t like your tone. I thought you were a bright lad who’d appreciate the opportunity I’m offering. Have I misjudged you?”

“You’re damned right!”

“Then,” and Meath struck another match, “perhaps I’ll terminate this chat.”

“You’ll be trapped up here as well!”

“Not if I toss the match in there with you and then bar this door. You know your walls are made of sawdust. They call it suicide board for a reason. One match and boom. Me, I have a route out of this house and nothing to stop me.”

“No please, wait. I was only thinking of you,” Chris said.

“Thinking of *me*?” The goatman grinned and blew out the match. “This better be good.”

“You don’t want my help. The police are all over me. You don’t want them looking too closely at you too.”

“Chief Boucher and his idiot deputy paid me a visit the other day,” Meath said. “Out of the blue. Your doing, I suppose. Everything worked out though. They asked if I was having trouble with any local kids, and I told them no. Then they

asked if I'd seen you hanging around. They said you've been bothering some of the other neighbors. So I told them I'd seen you walking on the tracks...but nothing else. They seemed disappointed. If it would make them happy, I could always make up something, make myself into one of your victims." Chris could hear the grin in Meath's voice. "If you won't help me, that is."

"What about your wife? Doesn't she help you?"

"She met with a little accident the other night."

Bile rose in Chris's throat. "So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come to my place the next time I bring home a specimen. I'll explain the rest then."

"A specimen?"

"Another corpse, of course."

The small door started to close, then stopped.

"Oh, and remember," the goatman said from the darkness, "I can always find another way into this house...and as far as I'm concerned, one corpse is as good as another." The door slammed shut.



## Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday, November 26

At first light, Chris dropped down to the landing, crept out the back door and walked around the house to examine the cellar door. Sure enough, the screws holding the two hinges to the weathered wood had been removed. The door was back in place and the padlock still closed, so at a casual glance all looked secure. All Chris had to do was swing the two hinges away from the wood and pivot the door on the padlock to open a gap wide enough to climb through. *Crap.*

Gillian appeared at the corner of the house. “Chris, what are you doing?” She had on bunny slippers and a well-worn plaid housecoat down to her ankles. In spite of his anger and fear, Chris smiled at the sight of her.

“What *are* you wearing?” he asked.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, you creep!” She spun around and headed back the way she’d come.

He ran after her. “No, I’m sorry,” he said, “it’s just that, well, I guess I was expecting you might look a little more sexy in your pjs.”

“I’m not sexy! I mean I am sexy, but I’m not trying to look sexy. I mean, oh you pig!” She spun away again.

“No wait, I’m sorry.” He touched her arm and she stopped.

Her back still to him, she said, “If you must know, this was my dad’s housecoat. I like how it still smells...of him.”

Chris felt like an idiot. “Well, I like it too, and it’s sensible. It’s freezing out here.”

She pulled the housecoat close about herself, and turned to look at him. “So what are you doing?”

“I had a visitor last night, Dr. Meath, in the attic again.”

“He was? How?”

“Come see.” He demonstrated the useless hinges. “And he says he has a hundred other ways into the house. I guess he makes a regular thing of it. So, you know, you might want to lock your bedroom door at night.”

“Now you’re really scaring me.”

“Welcome to my world.”

“What does he want?”

“He wants me to assist him.”

“That’s crazy. He raises goats.”

“And experiments on dead bodies...”

“Well, I hope you told him to take a flying leap.”

“He threatened to set the attic on fire...so I said yes.”

“Oh, you’ve got to tell the police! And Mom and Granddad.”

“No, not yet. I don’t want you to become another target for Meath, or for the police. Mallory Dahlman is already threatening you because of me. So please don’t say anything to your mom until I’ve done what I can to stop all this. I’ll talk to the police.”

“What did you just say?”

“I don’t want you to become a target for Meath.”

“No, I mean about Mallory Dahlman.”

“Nothing, forget it.”

“Chris.”

“Okay, she sort of threatened you because she thinks you’re my girlfriend, and...I think she’s dangerous.”

“I’ve been telling you that for days. But your girlfriend? She thinks I’m your girlfriend?”

“Be careful. And tomorrow, I expect there will be rumors...about us. Just ignore them, okay?”

Gillian looked stunned. Chris moved forward, took her in his arms and hugged her almost desperately. In that moment, it had seemed the most natural thing to do.

At first, Gillian stood there, not moving, then she put her arms around Chris and pressed into his embrace. She murmured, “It’ll be okay, everything will be okay.” Chris hoped with all his heart she really believed that.

After a moment, he said, “We’ve got to get ready for school. See you up at the road,” and walked away.

\* \* \* \*

They didn’t talk much at the bus stop, as though they were afraid to speak because they didn’t know where a real conversation might lead. On the bus, Chris didn’t sit with Gillian. If they were already in Mallory’s sights, the wise thing seemed to be to play things cool for a while. The bus didn’t stop at the Dahlmans’ house. *Okay, good start.*

When they got off the bus, Chris headed for the police station. Gillian ran after him and asked, “Would it help if I came too, to tell them I believe what you’re saying about Dr. Meath?”

“Not sure. They already think your family’s protecting mine for your rent money. I don’t think there’s much point in making them suspect you’re mixed up in one of my stunts.”

“But this isn’t a stunt, is it?”

“No.”

He took her hand, held it for a moment, and then headed for the police station. Gillian started back across the school parking lot. Mallory Dahlman stood by her mother’s car several parking spaces away, watching her. Mallory gave Gillian a tiny wave and a smile, then spun about and marched into school.

\* \* \* \*

Felicity Holcomb stoked the fire in the woodstove, pulled on her husband's Irish knit sweater, grabbed a coffee, and stepped out onto the porch. There were streaks of bronze across the pale blue sky and a golden glow on the horizon where the sun was about to rise. Truly there were moments when her mountain top really did feel like paradise!

The previous evening she'd picked up her mail in town, and such news! Her brother had written to say a New York gallery was interested in mounting an exhibition of her work. And in the same post, she'd got the latest issue of *New Yankee Arts*, featuring an interview with some old broad from the Maine north coast—her! What a glorious day.

She stepped off the porch and headed across the meadow to her husband's grave to tell him all the news. She spent half an hour by his side, then collected washing from the line, cleaned up the breakfast dishes, and finally settled by the stove to read the interview.

*Holcomb:* When I was young, when my family came to Maine on vacation and we drove up the coast from New York, I had this dreamy idea of life in all the small towns we passed through. I expected they would be friendly, peaceful, happy places where petty frustrations and jealousies would be dealt with amicably. How wrong I was.

*Interviewer:* That's not how it is?

*Holcomb:* For one thing, resentments and antagonisms are no less intense in small towns than in large; quite the opposite, in fact. I think intimacy magnifies the power of bad feelings. It's amazing to me how much oxygen bitter feelings and suspicions consume in a small town, and when emotions explode, the damage they do is multiplied because their container is so confining. In a dying town like Bemishstock, the damage is even greater because the container is becoming ever

smaller.

*Interviewer:* Then why did you stay?

*Holcomb:* After my husband died, I asked myself what I hated about this place and what I loved, and what I loved far exceeded what I disliked that I had to stay. I love the light, the colors, the moments of pure magic up on my mountain, and how they make me feel, and I realized I wanted to capture it all. Perhaps if I'd ever studied painting—if I'd been told how it's supposed to be done—I would never have had the courage to try. I hadn't, so I simply started painting. The same can be said of my writing. I never studied journalism. I simply loved the stories people shared with me, small stories of sorrow and success, of heartache and happiness, so I started writing them down. I suppose if I hadn't started painting and writing, I would have had to raise chickens. That's probably what my tombstone should say: *Painter for want of Chickens.*

Had she really said that about chickens? Oh well, it made for an amusing anecdote. Her biggest fear, when friends at the magazine had asked for the interview, had been that she might say something to get Bemishstock riled up again. On balance, she didn't think she had. Besides, who in Bemishstock would ever read *New Yankee Arts*?

Yes, this was going to be a terrific day indeed!

\* \* \* \*

Deputy Ricky Pike was on duty at the reception desk when Chris walked in. Pike grinned. "Come to turn yourself in?"

"I want to file a report."

"File a report? What the hell does that mean?"

"I mean I want to report an incident."

"Like a complaint? You want to file a complaint?"

"Yes...against Dr. Ronald Meath."

“Meath? Funny thing, we was at his farm the other day, asking about *you*.” Pike rifled through papers in a drawer, pulled out a form, and handed it over. “Here, start writing.” Chris took a seat against the opposite wall. Pike called out, “Chief, I think you better come out here.”

“What is it?” the Chief replied from his office.

“It’s the Chandler kid. Wants to file a complaint.”

After a moment, Chief Boucher appeared, muttering to himself. “You shittin’ me?”

“Can I talk to you?” Chris asked.

“The station isn’t really open yet,” Boucher muttered, “but...oh what the hell, sure, come on in.” He signalled for Chris to follow and walked back into his small office. He pointed to a chair and sat himself down behind his desk. Boucher took his sweet time folding the newspaper he’d been reading, obviously disgusted with this infringement on his private time and not the least bit interested in what Chris had to say. Nevertheless, he picked up his buttered toast, took a large bite, and said, “All right, kid, let’s have it.”

“I believe Dr. Meath has been stealing bodies from the funeral home and performing experiments on them—”

“Oh goddamn, not this again!” Toast and spittle showered Chris.

“And last night Meath came into my home and threatened me. He said unless I helped him, he’d set fire to the Willards’ house.”

“So you’re saying Dr. Meath offered you a job,” the Chief said with a smirk. “Lucky you.”

“This is no joke.”

“No, it’s not,” the Chief rumbled. “It’s a goddamn crime, you coming into town, creating misery with all your vicious stunts.”

“Me?”

“Your crack in the paper blaming the whole town for that girl’s suicide. Then your letter about Father David—”

“I had nothing to do with any letter!”

“Well your name was on it. Then your wallet up at Mrs. Holcomb’s place—”

“Mrs. Holcomb is a friend!”

“Makes what you were doing even sicker. And what you did to poor Floyd Balzer, well that was murder in my books.”

“His dad—”

“And then to go blaming his father, a respected businessman, and an employer who ain’t threatening to can half the town like *your* pa.”

“It always comes down to that.”

“And to ruin the life of a sweet, gentle man like Malcolm Duncan...” The emotion in the Chief’s voice surprised Chris. “You know, he still has friends in this town, close friends who’ll never forgive what you did to him.”

“I did nothing to Mr. Duncan, I liked him!”

“You were the only one who coulda taken the boy’s goddamn note from Malcolm’s desk.”

“No, somebody else—”

“You went to his fucking house! No one goes to a teacher’s house!”

Boucher was livid and had been bellowing at the top of his lungs. He drew a long breath to calm himself. “Now you come in here saying stuff about a harmless old man who wouldn’t hurt a fly. Why, I have to ask myself? Maybe to shift attention away from what you’re really up to? Well it ain’t gonna work, Chandler, I’m watching you.”

“Why does it have to be me?”

“Did you just hear me? Your name on a letter, your wallet at old lady Holcomb’s place, threats everybody heard you make, and goin’ to a teacher’s

house!”

“That all proves nothing—”

“It’s a pattern! And as my daddy used to say, if it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck...” Boucher’s voice rose, “then it’s probably a fuckin’ duck!”

“You okay in there, Chief?”

“Yes, Ricky, we’re just having a nice chat, Mr. Chandler and me, getting a few things straight.” He turned back to Chris. “We about done here, son?”

“I didn’t do any of those things. I swear! I’m being set up!”

“Oh, Christ, so now you’re the victim. Let me tell you how I see things. This was a quiet town. Oh, we had a few problems, a few drunken kids, a few fights. Then the Chandler family arrives, and we got ourselves a goddamn crime spree! Hate mail, vandalism, and a suspicious death. And now you come in here and accuse a nice old gentleman who’s lived in our town for twenty years, who scrapes by, working two-three jobs and making cheese. And he’s supposed to be a goddamn grave robber? Especially when no one else in the whole goddamn town thinks any graves have ever been touched...and I mean *ever*? No, boy, I don’t see no victim. I see a goddamn maniac, hell bent on making everyone else suffer!”

“It’s all circumstantial!”

“Now you think you’re a goddamn lawyer? Well, you ever notice there’s folks everyone trusts, and then there’s folks you meet and you just know you can’t believe a word they say? Well, you’re one of those people, boy. I don’t believe a goddamn word comes out of your fucking mouth!”

“And that’s my fault?”

“Sure as hell ain’t no one else’s. Since you arrived in this town, you been walking around, dressed in black, won’t talk to no one, goddamn sneer always on your face, making all your teachers hate you with your nasty attitude and your arrogance in class, always ready to fight like you’re on a hair trigger. Oh, I talk to



people. I know what they think of you. And you wonder why folks don't trust you? How stupid can you be?"

Chris was horrified; was that how people saw him?

"Look, kid," Boucher said, leaning across the desk, "I was probably like you when I was young, thought I was tough, thought I was better than everybody else. Then the army sorted me out—"

"Why the hell does everybody keep saying they're just like me?" Chris said. "You're not! You're nothing like me! None of you!"

"No, you're right," the Chief snapped. "No one in this town is the piece of shit you are." His voice grew louder. "You hang around here like goddamn stink round an outhouse. Christ, I would love to wipe the sneer off your face!"

Chris had no idea he was sneering, then realized...he was!

"Now, get the hell out of my office, and don't come back until I tell you to—and believe me, I will. And then we'll talk...or rather, *you'll* talk. Because when the time is right, I'm going to make you sing like a goddamn canary."

\* \* \* \*

For the rest of the day, Chris heard none of the taunts from his schoolmates and only came out of his fog of confusion when Gillian stopped him in the corridor mid-afternoon to tell him the rumors had indeed begun.

"People aren't saying anything about us," she said quietly. "They *are* saying," she paused, noticeably embarrassed, "that you and Mr. Duncan were lovers, and the note to Mr. Duncan wasn't from Floyd. It was from you."

"That's crazy! Everyone knows that's not true. People saw Floyd's note."

"No they didn't. Only Principal Dell, Madelyn's mom, and Chief Boucher ever actually saw it, and they aren't telling people who wrote it, probably to protect Floyd's family. Lots of people know what the unsigned letter said, the one that accused Mr. Duncan, but no one saw the note from Floyd...so some people are

saying you wrote both. You wrote the note to Duncan because you were lovers...and then the letter to Dell to squeal on Mr. Duncan...when he...broke up with you.”

“This is so nuts!”

“So, I guess we don’t have to worry about people thinking I’m your girlfriend.”

“Even if you really are?” He reached out to take Gillian’s hand. “Look, let’s cut class for the rest of the day.”

“Okay,” Gillian said without a moment’s hesitation. “Where will we go?”

“We’ll go and see Felicity Holcomb.”

“What a great idea,” she said. “I haven’t seen Felix in months.”

Mallory Dahlman, who’d been hiding around the corner, listening, watched them go, her face red with rage.

\* \* \* \*

“I just knew it would be a great day,” Felicity Holcomb said. With cups of cocoa, before a lovely fire, Gillian and Felix chatted happily as Chris looked on, smiling. They talked about family, Felix’s article, plans for her upcoming exhibition, and the latest letter from her brother in which he recounted their childhood shenanigans on Long Island. Chris and Gillian joined Felix in a wonderful dinner of venison stew, and then, as stars came out and the moon rose over the bay, it was time to go. On the porch, Felix said how pleased she was to see them together. “If you ever want a place to ‘get romantic,’ just come on up.”

“Please, Mrs. Holcomb!” Gillian replied with feigned indignity.

“Although I’m starting to think you could do a lot better than this guy,” Felicity said. “He finally gets up the nerve to ask you out and where does he bring you? Up a mountain for a free meal and an afternoon with an old woman four times your age.” Then she smiled and hugged them both. “Seriously though, the one thing life has taught me—you have to grab all the love that comes your way,

because you never know when it might be taken from you.”

They said their good-byes, and Chris and Gillian began their hike by moonlight back down through the dark wood and the bitter night, feeling wonderfully warm together. Part way down the hill, Gillian said quietly, “I had such an amazing afternoon.”

Chris stopped, turned, and took Gillian in his arms. Off to one side of the trail, they heard the hoot of a snowy owl through the trees, then the strong beat of its wings as it flew from its perch and fell upon its prey. Chris could just make out Gillian’s face in the moonlight, but he could see the glow in her eyes. And then they kissed.

A branch snapped somewhere in the dark.

“You hear that?” Gillian asked

“Probably a deer?” *Or not...*

“We better get home,” she said. They held hands for the rest of their walk down the trail.

## Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday, November 27

The sound of a siren and the smell of smoke roused Chris from his sleep. The clock by the bed said midnight. His father shouted from below, “Chris, get up!”

The smoke was faint. Even so, Chris leapt from bed, grabbed clothes, drew back the hatch cover and dropped down onto the landing. “Is that smoke?”

“Yes, there’s a fire. They might need our help.”

“Where?”

“Up on the mountain. The fire truck from town just went up the track. Come on!”

“Mrs. Holcomb’s place?” Chris cried as he ran after his father.

Chris could see flames high on the hill against the night sky as they ran up the lane and across the main road to Mrs. Holcomb’s trail. A police barricade blocked the trail, and Chief Boucher, shouting into a walkie-talkie, held up a hand to stop them from crossing it. After a moment, he ended his bellowed communication with the fire chief up at the cottage and turned to Chris’s dad. “Not needed,” he said, “the fire department has everything under control. Don’t need a pair of gawkers.”

“She’s my friend. I want to help!”

“Leave it to the pros, boy.”

“Pros? They’re volunteers, they need all the help they can get!”

Chris’s dad tried to remain calm. “Look, Chief, the plant pays for one of the town’s trucks. I should be able to see how the equipment I sign for is being put to use...or I may have to reconsider our investment.”

The Chief stared, his anger palpable. “All right, all right, you can go up.”

“Get the car, son.”

“Whoa there!” the Chief called after them. “Walk. Don’t want any other vehicles messing up the trail. Hard enough getting the fire truck up there.”

“No, I walked the trail earlier this evening. It was frozen solid,” Chris said.

“You what?” Boucher asked.

“I was...” *Oh crap.* “I was visiting Mrs. Holcomb.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re—”

“After I specifically ordered you not to have any contact with her?” Boucher shouted.

“But we’re friends.”

“And you’re also a suspect in her attack...and now, maybe in her murder!”

“What? She’s not dead...”

“Don’t know. The fire chief hasn’t been able to get inside the building yet. And he smelled gasoline.”

“No, God no!”

“So move away from the barrier, and don’t even think about trying to get up the hill by another route, either of you.”

As Chris and his dad turned for home, the Chief yelled, “And I’ll expect to see you both in my office first thing in the morning.”

\* \* \* \*

The visit to the police department before school was as perfunctory as their previous visit, except this time Gillian came along. The Chief accused Chris of going up the hill to terrorize the old lady, and Gillian described the lovely afternoon the three of them had spent together. The Chief said Chris had disobeyed a court order to stay away from the old lady, and Chris’s dad pointed out that a bellowed demand from a blowhard does not constitute a court order. And the meeting was over.

## Chapter Fifteen

Thursday, November 28 to Monday, December 2

Thanksgiving passed without celebration at Willard Farm. The days following the fire were filled with heartache. Mrs. Holcomb's remains had been found in the ashes of the cottage. Word was she'd died trying to find refuge beneath her bed. Why she hadn't fled the cottage as the fire raged was a mystery. Much of her body had been badly burned. Her face, however, which she'd covered with wet towels as she'd hid under the bed, was remarkably undamaged. The police, in an especially vicious gesture, demanded Chris make the official identification, thinking perhaps the ghastly sight might shock him into a confession. Instead, he drew some consolation from the peaceful look on Felix's beautiful face, and to the Chief's horror, even bent to kiss her cheek before the county medical examiner draped the sheet back over the corpse. For an instant, and in spite of the strong odor of fire, Chris detected the faint smell of wildflowers on her skin.

On Monday, all sorts of stories were going around school: old lady Holcomb had been prevented from escaping by a blocked door; she'd been practicing some sort of ritual when she tipped over a candle and set her witch's robes on fire; Chris Chandler was the principal suspect since he'd admitted to spying on the old lady; and since she was a known prostitute, her murderer had probably been a dissatisfied customer.

Chris guessed most of the stories originated with Mallory. From time to time, he saw her draped over her new love, Billy, or laughing at some lame joke, or listening to the inane chitchat of her teachers—pretending to care. Their eyes met just once before Felicity's funeral. For an instant, Mallory feigned a sad face and pretended to wipe away a tear, then laughed, and took Billy's arm. He appeared to

flinch. A large bandage covered his forearm.

From the morgue in the town's small hospital, Felicity Holcomb's body had been moved to the funeral parlor. Since too much of the body had been consumed by flames, there was no mention of a public viewing. And besides, who would have come? Instructions for the disposition of Felix's remains were provided over the phone by her brother Nigel from New York, and he wired the money for a modest funeral to the undertaker. There was to be no funeral notice or obituary or church service, and attendance at the interment was by invitation only. Felicity was to be buried beside her beloved husband Harold on the top of their mountain.

Nigel Harrow flew into Bangor from New York, rented a car, and arrived in town two days before the graveside service. He'd already booked rooms at a grand old seaside inn down the coast for himself and an elegant young man. The presence of the young man fueled the dirty stories about Felicity and her relatives. Sitting beside the young man at the coroner's inquest, however, Chris learned he was actually an artist's agent from the gallery curating the upcoming exhibition of Felix's work. The event, he said, would transform Felicity Holcomb into a household name. When the agent had learned of her death, he'd asked her brother if he could attend her burial to see where she'd lived and painted, and to buy up any of her canvases still in the area.

The inquest lasted only a day, and the finding was, 'Death from smoke inhalation in a fire of suspicious origin.' The police recounted the incidences of harassment reported by Mrs. Holcomb. The fire chief gave evidence concerning an exploded gas can he'd found in the ashes of the porch and some sort of wooden obstruction across the doorway. However, since no one had ever been charged with harassing her, since the wooden object blocking the door had all but burned away and could not be identified, and since Felix herself may have stored the gas can on the porch, no finding of foul play was rendered. Chris tried to attend some of the

proceedings during spare periods at school. He was emotionally drained by the whole affair and could only shake his head when the verdict was read.

On the morning of Felicity's funeral, the sky, which had been gray since the fire, managed to brighten, and the damp chill that had hung over the coast for as long as anyone could remember suddenly lifted. Everyone enjoyed a last day of warmth before winter set in with a vengeance. Present at the interment were Felix's brother Nigel and her husband's brother, James Holcomb, Gillian, her mother and grandfather, the artist's agent from New York, a gallery owner from Bangor, two of Felicity's friends with the magazines, *New Yankee Arts* and *Historic New England*, and of course, Chris. They'd tried to dissuade James from attending because of his frail condition, but he'd made it abundantly clear he wanted to be there. The funeral director had agreed to deliver the simple wooden casket to the foot of the trail, and from there, Gillian's mother trucked it to the top in her pickup. She stopped the truck at the edge of the meadow, and they all in some fashion helped carry Felicity's coffin to the side of her husband's grave, all except James who remained in the truck wrapped up in blankets and Gillian's grandfather who said he'd keep James company.

On her husband's simple headstone was inscribed his name and the words, *Let Us Meet Here, My Darling*. Next to it, Felicity's grave, which Nigel had personally prepared, had a matching stone that read, *Sorry to Have Kept You Waiting, My Love*. Chris both teared and chuckled as he read the inscriptions. No lies there.

The whole afternoon was like that, filled with stories and songs and laughter and tears. Then they all helped lower Felix's casket into the grave, fill it in, and cover it with the last few wildflowers of the autumn. There were hugs and more tears, and then they strolled across the meadow to the ruins of the cottage and stood in silence.



After a moment, Chris turned away from the cottage and walked to Felicity's old car, still standing where she'd parked it, alongside the shed which had also burned. Some of the Buick's paint had been scorched by the fire, but otherwise it appeared to be in running order. Nigel came up beside Chris.

"A real beauty wasn't she."

"I miss her," Chris started to say.

"No son," her brother chuckled, "I was talking about the car. But yes, I miss my sister too."

"You have to believe me, sir, I had absolutely nothing to do with the fire...no matter what the police chief may have said at the Inquiry."

"Oh, I know that, son. My sister thought you were quite special."

Chris was overwhelmed. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I think she would have wanted you to have these." And he handed Chris a set of keys. "I found them in the ashes. Felicity told me her car was how you met. So...it's yours," he said, "if you can get it off this mountain."

"What?" Chris was stunned.

"The car, son, it's yours."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Well, I'm not going to sell it, so if you won't take it, then it's just going to rust away up here, and that seems a shame. Let's make a deal. You use it to look after Felicity's grave, drive up here from time to time to cut back the weed, maybe place a few wildflowers."

"It would be an honor." He fingered the keys and played with the fob, a piece of charred deer skin. "You know, she told me we have an obligation to sleep in the soil where we lived most fully."

"Sounds like my sister. Look son, you're finishing high school soon. Well, when you're done, contact me; we'll see what we can do to improve your

prospects.” And Nigel walked back to the group.

Chris remained by the car, stroking it, remembering the first time Felicity had picked him up in it, how he’d sweltered and cursed her excruciatingly slow driving. Then he remembered her warm face and humor and courage. He would treasure Felicity’s memory and her car for years to come.

The sun had begun to set and a chill wind rose up the hill from the bay. Chris glanced at his watch, four-thirty. Without speaking, the small group turned from the ashes and strolled back across the meadow toward the trail. Gillian’s mother drove the two infirmed old gentlemen to the bottom of the hill. The others opted to walk.

That evening, Chris joined his family for dinner, the first meal they’d eaten together in years. Even his mom seemed cheerful; new medication she’d picked up in Bangor, she said. They’d finished eating and had moved to the living room. Chris was telling them about the beautiful service and the gift of the car and the kind words from Felicity’s brother. His parents looked at each other in amazement. “Maybe our fortunes are changing,” his mother said with a weak smile.

Then the doorbell rang.

\* \* \* \*

Chris’s father left the living room to answer the door. After a moment, he called, “It’s for you, son.”

“Is it Gillian?”

“No,” his dad said as he came back into the living room and sat down.

It was one of Mallory’s friends, one of her minions. “Hi, Chris.”

“Hi.” He struggled to remember the girl’s name, Grace or Faith or something.

“Can I talk to you?” She sounded so pitying and sorrowful, as if she was about to break some terrible news.

“Sure.” He didn’t invite her in or make any move to join her outside.

“I mean, out here?”

“All right.” He slipped on his shoes and went out onto the steps but went no further. “What’s up?”

“Okay, well, it’s Mallory. She’s so upset.”

“And I should care why?”

“She says she has to talk to you.”

“Maybe at school tomorrow?”

“No, now. She has to talk to you now. She’s in her car—we’re all in her car—up at the road, and she says it’s extremely important.”

This sounded far too much like a setup. “I don’t think so. I’m just finishing dinner.”

“But Mallory needs you.” The girl seemed quite incredulous anyone could say no to Mallory.

“What about Billy?”

“They broke up this afternoon.”

“Smart man.”

“No, Mallory dumped Billy because her heart belongs to you, that’s what she said, only to you.”

“I’m...flattered. The answer’s still no. I just got home from a funeral...and I’m still...very emotional, and I don’t think I could handle seeing Mallory right now.” Because he might kill the bitch if he did.

“Oh, okay, I understand. Mallory is going to be so disappointed.”

“Well, tell her I’m sorry. She’ll just have to wait.”

“Actually, Mallory was afraid you might not want to see her. She knows how much she hurt you.”

“Oh yes, she really did.” Chris almost laughed out loud.

“So she wrote you this note and told me to give it to you if you refused to talk.”

She handed Chris a small envelope.

“What does it say?”

“I...I don’t know...It’s only for you. She said you have to read it right away. She’s so upset and we’re really worried about her.”

This had to be a trap. “Well, tell Mallory everything’s going to be okay. Tell her to be strong.” Oh, she’ll love that.

“I will, and thanks, Chris. Mallory is right about you. You really are nice. And I,” she leaned forward and whispered, “I never believed you were queer.”

Chris almost choked. “Okay, goodnight.” He waited on the steps as she disappeared around the house, then, by the porch light, read the note.

*Chris, my dark prince,*

*I’ve made a terrible mistake. I thought I could put you out of my life. I can’t. I thought I was strong. I’m not. I’ve hurt you and so many others, and now I’m being punished, and I can’t endure the pain. Please, you must forgive me. I need you more than ever. Come to me and I’ll do anything to win you back. I beg you, come to my house tonight at 11. We’ll take Mother’s car, we’ll go wherever you want, and we’ll do whatever you wish, just as long as we can be together.*

*If you don’t come, I dare not think what I may be forced to do.*

*Your loving Mallory*

What the hell? So...geez, so bloody creepy. *My dark prince?* Where had that come from? Way over the top. Had Mallory really believed he would fall for something so stupid? She probably had the whole hockey team waiting, ready to beat the crap out of him. Or maybe she was trying out one of her magic spells, trying to manipulate him. Or maybe she was working with the police, and they were waiting at her house, ready to pounce on a prowler. Well, her trap wasn’t going to work.

Then he reread the last line; *if you don't come, I dare not think what I may be forced to do*. Was it some kind of threat? And against whom, against him, or Gillian, or maybe even herself? Oh crap.

He jumped off the porch and ran after Mallory's minion, shouting, "Wait a minute!" He had to know what Mallory was up to. In the dark, he could barely see the girl at the top of the lane. Again, he shouted but she disappeared round the corner. He ran as fast as possible to the road, just in time to see the tail lights of Mallory's car disappear in the distance.

"So what do I do now?" he said to himself and started back to the house. Then he heard an engine.

Thinking Mallory might be coming back, he waited on the main road but no car appeared. The engine noise grew louder. Then, high up on the hillside, he saw lights, a pair of them, coming down the track from Felicity's cottage.

What the hell? Her car?

Chris ran across the road, stood right in the middle of the track, and waited. A hundred yards above him, a vehicle rounded the last bend and accelerated down the slope toward the main road. It showed no sign of stopping. Only at the last second did he throw himself to the side as an old truck rolled past, spun wildly as it hit the asphalt, and squealed to a stop. Sprawled in the frozen grass, Chris looked up at the driver. Meath! The doctor stared back, a huge grin on his face, then floored the truck, spun its tires, and rumbled away into the night.

"What have you done?" Chris shouted at the top of his lungs. He scrambled from the grass and first ran after the truck, then turned back and started up the track like a madman. "Please, not Felix!" he said over and over to himself, as he slipped and stumbled up the icy slope. Meath couldn't have taken Felix's body! There wasn't enough left for him to use! No coat, no gloves, a bitterly cold night, Chris felt only the heat of his anger.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from the wood, chest heaving, gasping for breath, and sweating like a pig in spite of the cold. The night was pitch black, and for a moment, Chris had difficulty orienting himself. Slowly at first, he picked his way across the meadow in what he thought was the direction of the two graves. When he sensed he was close, he began to run. In the dark, he didn't see the new mound of earth. He fell headlong over it and into a shallow pit, right on top of the splintered wooden box which just hours ago had held his dear friend. He howled in pain and then in anger.

He dragged himself out of the grave, pulled two long splinters from his leg and right arm, and cried, "I'm going to stop you, you bastard!" Then the hopelessness of the situation sank in, and Chris sobbed. It would take half an hour just to get down the hill, and another half hour to get to Meath's place. The mad man would have done his worst before Chris got close.

For an instant, moonlight broke through the cloud, and Chris glimpsed across the meadow the hulking silhouette of the old Buick. Felix was telling him what to do! He searched his pockets for the keys—found them—then ran to the car and fumbled with the lock. It wasn't going to start. Battery was probably dead. He pulled open the heavy door, and the roof light came on.

Chris threw himself inside, put the key in the ignition, and tried to turn the engine over. It coughed and died twice. On the third try, the engine roared to life. What an old beauty! He hit the gas, spun the steering wheel, and headed off across the meadow in search of the trail down the mountain.

"Heroic," Felicity whispered as the Buick raced away from the ashes of her cottage.

\* \* \* \*

Chris had never approached Meath's farm from the main road before, so he missed the turnoff, realized his mistake, and slammed on the brakes. Stopping the

Buick was like stopping an aircraft carrier. The car left a fifty-yard strip of rubber along the road before it rocked to a halt. He slammed the shift into reverse, and in a cloud of smoke, raced backwards until the car was abreast of Meath's turnoff.

The old Buick lurched and bounced along the muddy lane as fast as Chris could push it until the house appeared in the distance. He eased off on the gas, rolled the Buick alongside Meath's pickup, and shut off the engine. No sign of Meath, so he got out of the car and walked cautiously toward the house.

The front door opened and Meath's wife appeared. She staggered out onto the porch on crutches and in great pain, her neck cinched in some sort of high collar.

"Where is he?" Chris shouted.

The old lady waved a crutch as if to warn Chris off. Her mouth opened in a silent cry.

"I said, where is he?"

She pointed at her throat, apparently unable to speak, and again tried to wave Chris away. Then she gave up, and pointed a crutch to the side of the house.

Chris ran to the back of the house and threw open the barn doors.

"Ah, Chandler!" Meath was standing by the butcher's table. "Just in time. The wife's no longer much help," he said. "Shall we get started?"

Meath lifted the familiar red sack out of the wheelbarrow and onto the table.

"Well, get over here!"

"I'm not here to help you, you freak. I've come to take Felicity Holcomb back."

"Having second thoughts? I guess I don't blame you...she is an awful sight." He opened the sack and Felicity's remains tumbled onto the table in an oily black heap. Her face was placid, almost serene, but her ash-streaked upper body was barely recognizable as human...and her lower half was a nightmare of charred and twisted sticks which had once been bones, and shredded black hide—once skin,

now dripping with a thick, tar-like fluid and caked with dirt.

Chris had not been prepared for the sight. In the morgue, only Felicity's face and shoulders had been visible, and they'd been washed and made to seem human. Now....

"Oh, I know what you're going to say, she's too badly damaged to be of any use to us. Not to worry. I examined the neck when I had the remains in the funeral parlor, and I am pleased to say, it's in good shape, for a human briquette I mean." And he laughed. "So let's get her into..."

On the verge of tears, Chris cried out, "No, you have no right."

"Don't start that again. We haven't time. She's soon going to start smelling something awful. You haven't worked with burned corpses before. I have, and let me tell you, the smell when all those roasted organs turn bad..."

As Meath spoke, he arranged the charred remains in an upright position, balancing them on what must have been the pelvic bones. "Not enough left to strap into the chair. We're going to have to do the test on the table. You hold the torso upright while I install my Activator. You're going to want to wear gloves. She's dripping badly...all the fats have been boiled out of the skin. There's a pair on my workbench. We'll use the bags of feed by the milking machines to hold her in position when we turn on my device."

"I'm not going to let you do this," Chris said. In spite of the horror before him, he kept telling himself, she was his friend and would not have wanted this. "I'm taking her back to her mountain!" he shouted, and ran to the table where he pulled the doctor's hands away from the corpse.

"What are you doing?" Meath seemed momentarily stunned by this show of insolence. "Get away!"

They shouted at each other across the heap of charred flesh.

"You have no right to do this!"



“And you have no right to stop me!”

“This is not what she wanted!”

“She’s dead, she’s a pile of crud, she’s not even a *she*! There is no *she*, Look at it.” Meath grabbed Felix’s hair and shook the head. “It’s road kill, you stupid boy!”

“I’m putting her back in the earth where she wanted to rest.” Chris grabbed Felix’s hair as well and tried to pull her head away from Meath.

“No one wants to be in the earth, you idiot.” Meath grabbed the charred shoulders and shook what remained of Felicity’s body. “We want to be alive! And when we aren’t, then what the hell do we care where we are—because we’re dead!”

“I’m taking her!” Chris grabbed a handful of bones and tendons with one hand and shoved Meath away with the other. They struggled. Felix slipped out of their grasp, her head striking the corner as the remains slid from the table. Her neck fell across the edge of the wheelbarrow with a sharp crack before dropping to the dirt.

“Well, now look what you’ve done!” Meath said as he bent to examine the charred heap. “You idiot, you’ve broken the neck. If you’d let me work, her pitiful life might have served some purpose. Not now.” He stood up and stepped away from the body. “So, go on, take her!”

Chris gathered up the remains of his friend, slipped them back into the sack, and lifted it onto his shoulder. She weighed practically nothing; not surprising, since she’d always been quite small, and now, well, only half of her was left.

“Of course, I rescind my offer,” Meath said.

“You’re nuts.”

“And you’re in grave danger. Ha, did I just say grave?” Meath started to laugh.

“I’m going to stop you,” Chris shouted as he left the barn.

“How?” The doctor followed Chris outside. “No one around here believes a word you say. Oh, and I know where you sleep.”

Chris opened the trunk of the Buick and gently placed the sack inside. He closed it and got into the car. Meath stood on the porch beside his wife, wagging a finger in Chris's direction as the car pulled away.

At first, Chris felt fired up by his conquest. Heroic! Then doubt set in as the adrenaline rush ebbed. So what now? Take her to the police as proof of what he'd been telling them about Meath? The corpse was in his possession and not the doctor's, so who were they likely to believe? What about taking the remains to Felicity's brother at his hotel? No, he was already on his way back to New York. Then it became blindingly obvious what he had to do.

\* \* \* \*

What a performance Mallory had given! All the tears and the fainting, all the hand wringing and the prayers for Chris's love and forgiveness, and her little circle of idiot girlfriends had eaten it all up. As she'd thrown herself about the room and wept like a cartoon princess, they'd hugged and kissed and held her tight. They'd given her sips of soda water and applied cold compresses to her forehead. As the evening had worn on, and her mother had turned in, they'd made her cocoa, then undressed and bathed and tucked her into bed. And then they'd all sat around the edge, patting her hands and wiping away her tears. They'd even sung to her! Finally around ten—when she'd pretended to doze—they'd left. Thank the gods!

Time for the good stuff!

She dragged the trunk with her most treasured Torajan paraphernalia out from beneath the bed. Her first task had been to finish the stitching on the dolls. She loved the scarlet thread—dyed it with her own blood—she'd used to embroider Chris's name. Then she anointed both dolls with more blood and marched them through their intended actions. She unfolded her father's prayer script and whispered the holy words. The power of the words coursed through her. She felt so powerful at that moment she was prepared to walk to the brink of death to control

Chris Chandler and to punish him for ever having denied her. There was no doubt in her mind—no doubt whatsoever—that he'd do exactly as she'd instructed in her note.

He'd arrive precisely at eleven, and when he did, she would own him. From that day forth, he was going to do everything demanded of him. Never again would he say no to her. And together, they were going to make their classmates dance like puppets; in fact, they were going to control the whole damned town. For the next six months, they'd turn Bemishstock into a pit of sorrow and suffering, and her gods would be enraptured and eternally in her debt!

Then, in the spring when school ended, they would travel together to Toraja to find her father, and she'd discover the truth. After all their years apart, after all his promises, if her father put aside his Torajan family to make way for her, then she'd dispose of Chris. If her father would not, then Chris would enact vengeance on her dad, and it would be merciless.

So good to have a plan!

Mallory pulled a coat over her sheerest nightdress and boots over her bare feet. She took a blanket from her bed and car keys from the kitchen counter, and left the house.

As she crept across the yard, she smiled to think that somewhere out there in the night, Chris was on his way to save her...and lose himself.

She opened the garage door, slipped inside, and then closed and locked it. Her hero would have to break it down. Way more dramatic. She got into the back seat of her mother's car and wrapped herself in the blanket. In spite of the cold, she dared not turn on the car engine, not until just before the appointed time. The engine had to run just long enough to create the illusion she'd been trying to kill herself. She'd pretend to be unconscious when Chris broke down the door. Only a half hour to wait.

Time passed ever so slowly. She shivered and grew angrier by the moment. It was almost inconceivable, but if for some unfathomable reason, Chris did not show, then there would be hell to pay. She'd unleash such a nightmare...

She pulled the blanket tighter about herself. Her hands and feet were numb. Chris had to be getting close by now. Ten to eleven. She'd soon turn on the engine. The warmth would be welcome. She yawned, rubbed her eyes, and fingered the keys.

\* \* \* \*

How he loved the old Buick! It rolled smoothly through the night, like a hippo on a mud bank. The heat belting out was marvelous. And for a moment, Chris even allowed himself to enjoy the aria on the eight track.

At Willard Lane, he saw Gillian standing by the side of the road. He eased the car onto the shoulder and rolled down the window.

“What’s going on?” Gillian was visibly upset. “Were you out joyriding?”

“No. Get in and I’ll explain.” He opened the passenger door and Gillian climbed in.

“How did you get Felicity’s car? Was that you driving it down the hill? I was getting Granddad into bed when I saw it come tearing down the hill and drive off toward Perkin’s Pond. I couldn’t believe it. I thought maybe somebody had stolen it. I ran around to your place to tell you. Your dad said you’d gone out after dinner.” Gillian was practically in tears. “I thought Floyd’s teammates had taken you. I’ve been waiting out here ever since. I’ve been so scared.”

“Gillian, I’m sorry, really, but it’s incredible! You won’t believe what I just did! I rescued Felicity!”

“But...she’s dead.”

“I rescued her body from Meath!”

“Oh no!”

“No, it’s good, it’s really good.” Chris turned the key and the old car roared to life again.

“Where are we going?”

“Up the mountain.” He swung the car across the road and onto Felicity’s trail. “We have a job to do.”

As they drove up the long track to the mountaintop, Chris recounted the whole ghastly story. At the meadow, he drove right to the side of the desecrated grave. They got out, and by the headlights of the car, set to work. As best they could in the dark and the cold, they sorted out the broken boards and the torn linen at the bottom of the grave. Then Chris lifted the sack from the trunk and eased Felicity back into the simple coffin. He took pains to arrange her head as naturally as he could on the small silk pillow. Then he wiped some of the earth and gore from her cheek and whispered, “Sleep well.” Gillian watched, never flinching. Then they moved the splintered boards back onto the box and pushed earth back into the grave. “I’ll come up here tomorrow and finish the job properly,” Chris said. “But...I feel good.”

“You should, you did a brave thing.”

“She wanted to rest here undisturbed, and it’s my job to see she does.”

“She called you her hero.”

They hugged.

“Chris, you’ve got no coat on, you must be freezing.”

Chris hadn’t realized he was trembling. “Yeah, I guess, kind of.”

“Let’s get in the car. It’s warm.”

“I must be filthy.”

“Yes, well you are, but we need to warm you up.”

Chris crept into the house long past midnight. He’d used the downstairs

mudroom in Gillian's house to wash the worst of the dirt and gore from his hands and face. She'd also cleaned and bandaged his wounds from the tumble he'd taken into Felicity's open grave. Then she'd kissed him good night. "I'm proud of you," she'd said as he'd walked away from her front door.

Climbing up into the attic, some of Chris's confidence and self-satisfaction had begun to slip away. How the hell was he going to sleep knowing at any moment the doctor might open the tiny door at the foot of the bed and toss in a lighted match? Then he had a brainwave. He'd sleep in the main section of the attic.

If Meath came looking for him, he might have more warning if he wasn't in the usual crawl space. With more room, he might even be able to put up a decent fight. Chris opened the tiny door and slipped through on his belly. The main attic was far colder because it didn't have suicide board beneath the rafters to provide meager insulation. Chris dragged a couple of blankets and a pillow with him and made a bed of sorts behind some old trunks. Fully clothed, he settled into his new sleeping space, and for warmth, shoved his hands in his pockets.

That's when he found Mallory's note.

## Chapter Sixteen

Wednesday, December 4

Against all odds, and on a pile of musty blankets, wearing almost everything he owned against the raw, damp cold in the attic, and crammed behind two old trunks, with dead flies, cobwebs, and spiders all over him, Chris managed to get the best night's sleep he'd had in days, all five hours of it anyway.

He was awakened by his father calling from the landing below. He had to scramble the length of the attic and back through the tiny door before answering for fear he'd give away his strange new sleeping arrangement. "Be right down!"

"You're going to miss your bus."

So what, he had a car! He grinned, pulled on some clean clothes, and did the best he could to put things back to normal in the crawl space, in case Meath came snooping. Then he dropped down through the attic hatch.

His father was waiting for him. "What happened last night? We were worried about you. You went out to speak to that girl, and never came back. Not very considerate leaving us hanging."

Chris wasn't sure how he felt about this new familiarity with his parents; he was accustomed to coming and going like a lodger instead of a family member. He had a ready answer however. "Well, after telling you and Mom about the car, I was excited and wanted try it out, and it ran beautifully. Sorry."

"Is it outside now? Well, let's see it."

Everyone traipsed outside and soon they were joined by the Willards. They took turns sitting in the old car and Chris and his dad and Grandpa Willard discussed how the singed paint might be repaired. The school bus came and went, but so what? Chris and Gillian were going to drive to school in style. They were

sure to give everyone something to talk about.

As it turned out, hardly anyone noticed the car.

\* \* \* \*

The huge Buick swam along the road like a steel whale rising and diving through the waves. Chris's dad had managed to un-stick the temperature gauge so they could cut the heat to a tolerable level. Chris and Gillian sat side-by-side, grinning proudly—until they neared the Dahlman property.

When Chris saw the flashing lights coming toward him, he slowed the *Roadmaster*. An ambulance from town, travelling at breakneck speed, turned into the Dahlmans' long drive, squealing its tires as it left the main road. Two police cars with their lights flashing were parked up at the house already, and a third was stopped just off the main road at the top of the drive. Ricky Pike, standing by the single car, waved the ambulance past and on up to the house.

The Buick drew abreast of the Dahlmans' driveway. "What's happened?" Gillian murmured.

"Should we ask?" Chris said as he pulled the *Roadmaster* over onto the shoulder.

"I...I'm not sure."

Chris suddenly wheeled the car across the road, pulled alongside Deputy Pike, and rolled down his window.

"I'll be goddamned! How'd you get this car?" Pike asked.

"Mrs. Holcomb left it to me."

"The Chief know that?"

"What do I care?" Chris said.

"He'll want to know for sure."

"What's happened?" asked Chris.

"Can't tell you."



“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both, I guess.”

“Is the boy sick again?”

“No. The girl this time.”

Chris’s blood ran cold. “Can I go and see?”

Gillian put her hand on Chris’s arm. “Chris, I don’t think—”

“Nope. Chief said no one’s allowed up there.”

“She’s a friend.” He felt sick.

“Chris,” Gillian started to say.

“It’s just I might know something.”

“Nope, no one’s allowed,” said Pike.

“But—”

“Back this car out now!”

Chris hesitated, then revved the car, threw it into reverse, and tore out onto the main road, tossing a great shower of dirt and gravel in Deputy Pike’s direction.

“You son of a...,” they heard Pike yell as the Buick roared away.

Neither said a word until they pulled into the school parking lot and saw the many small groups of students standing around, talking quietly. Some folks hugged one another and a few seemed to be crying. Members of the hockey team were comforting Billy, who sat on the school steps, his face in his hands.

“What did you mean when you said you might know something?” asked Gillian.

“Huh?”

“To Ricky Pike, you said you might know something.”

“No, not really.” Chris didn’t know how to explain Mallory’s note.

They got out of the car and walked slowly toward the school. No one paid them the slightest attention. Chris hadn’t known what to expect but it wasn’t this. No

finger-pointing, no taunts, nothing. He stopped and stood for a moment, trying to pick up the whispered conversations around him.

“I’m going to class,” Gillian said. “See you later?”

“Yeah.”

She looked at Chris hard, then shook her head. He didn’t even notice she’d walked away.

\* \* \* \*

No one knew for certain what had happened. A lot of people had heard police cars racing out of town with their sirens blaring around seven in the morning. Most people knew Mallory and Billy had broken up, and she’d been very upset. One story going round was that Mallory’d had a fight with someone else after the breakup, maybe her mother or a girlfriend or even another boy. Nothing was for sure.

Chris looked around without success for the girl who’d delivered Mallory’s note, on the chance she might know more, so he headed for first class. Then, passing the school office, he spotted her inside with several girlfriends, all sobbing hysterically.

First period was given over almost entirely to rumor. Notes and whispered stories flew up and down every aisle, and grew ever more colorful. The Dahlmans had been murdered in their beds. Mr. Dahlman had returned, killed everyone, and was now on the run. Mallory had been killed, and the arrest of her murderer was imminent. And finally, Mallory’s brother had hanged himself because he’d been Mr. Duncan’s lover.

Then during recess, and in a crowded hallway, Chris ran into the girl who’d delivered Mallory’s note. She flew at him, swinging her fists and shrieking. “Mallory asked you to come, begged you, and you ignored her! You could have saved her!” Other girls joined the attack. “You broke her heart! It’s your fault! You

bastard, she loved you and you let her die!”

Chris was struck dumb. A teacher heard the shrieking, came running, and managed to pull him away from the girls and into the school office.

“Good, you found Chandler,” the school secretary said. “Principal Dell wants to talk to him right after he makes an announcement,” she said, dabbing her eyes. The teacher pushed Chris down onto a wooden chair by the reception desk. “Wait here,” he grumbled.

“It is my dreadful duty,” intoned Dell over the PA, “to announce that our little community has suffered another terrible loss. I have been informed that Mallory Dahlman, a treasured member of our school family and a beautiful soul, has died. I am not at liberty to say how because the circumstances are still under investigation.”

Chris heard cries up and down the hallway.

“I do want to say a few words, however, about what we must all do now to honor Mallory’s memory.” Dell’s voice broke. “We...we must start by helping each other through this awful time. No one should grieve alone. Your teachers are here to help. And you should reach out and comfort one another. We all need the support of friends, and never more than at a time like this. I can assure you, sorrow is soothed by sharing with friends one’s happiest memories of the dear departed.”

Chris sat staring at his feet. Share what with friends? What did he feel? Shock, certainly. Sorrow, not sure. Guilt?

“Christopher Chandler,” Principal Dell said, standing over him, “Come into my office.”

The Principal pulled a gray metal chair up in front of his desk for Chris then sat on the other side. “Very tragic affair,” he said, and then waited for Chris’s reaction.

Chris knew only too well what a piece of work Principal Dell was. The kids in the junior school had invented a jump-rope rhyme which pretty much summed up

people's feelings about the Principal:

*Mr. Dell loves to ring his bell,*

*Mr. Dell wants us all in class,*

*Mr. Dell can go to hell,*

*Mr. Dell can kiss my butt...*

*One, two, three, four...*

The entire school hated Dell for being a preening, fawning, interfering prig whose only goals in life were to impress the school superintendent and to get a better job elsewhere, preferably as far from Bemishstock as possible. Chris guessed Dell had probably been mad as hell when he'd got word of a second suicide among his students in as many weeks. How was he going to explain that to any prospective employer? Chris guessed Dell would be looking for revenge.

"You were close to Mallory Dahlman," Dell said.

"Maybe for a while."

"But not lately?"

"No. Sir, can you tell me how Mallory died?" He stared directly at the principal. Dell smiled.

"I understand Mallory was upset. Friends had been trying to comfort her all evening. They'd put her to bed, and, at her mother's suggestion, they'd given her cocoa with a couple of sleeping pills dissolved in it."

"Sleeping pills? Did Mallory know about the pills?"

"No. Anyway, her mother had gone to bed and her friends thought Mallory had dropped off, so they left. Soon after, however, Mallory got up, left the house, and went to the garage. There, she started her mother's car, wrapped herself in a blanket, and lay down in the back seat. She died from carbon monoxide poisoning."

"So...she killed herself?"

“There’s some question about that, whether she intended to die or was simply trying to keep warm on a terribly cold night.”

“Mallory was too smart to think she could run a car in a closed garage.”

“She was distraught,” Dell said. “Her emotions may have clouded her judgment. She was waiting for someone, someone she loved, someone who did not show up.” Dell might have expected Chris to say something, but he didn’t. “You, she was waiting for you, Chandler. Isn’t that correct?”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. Miss Dahlman asked you to come.”

“We’d broken up. I thought she was seeing someone else.”

“She asked *you* to come to her house, no one else.”

“I thought it was some kind of trick.”

“She begged you, her friends begged you. She even told you she might hurt herself.”

“No, she said she might do *something*. I didn’t know what. I thought it might be a trap, like she wanted to hurt me. “

“Mallory Dahlman? You thought Mallory Dahlman wanted to hurt *you*?”

“I don’t know, maybe. I didn’t think for a moment she’d actually kill herself. She was strong, she was proud of being strong.”

“Her heart had been broken, and she reached out to you, and you ignored her.”

“I had something else to do.”

“And what was that?”

“It’s personal.”

“You disgust me, Chandler. You’d been given the opportunity to save a life and were too selfish to even try.”

“You know nothing about Mallory Dahlman. If she killed herself—and I’m not sure she did because she thought suicide was weakness—but if she did, then she

was probably trying some stunt that went wrong, because she sure as hell didn't kill herself from a broken heart. I don't believe Mallory Dahlman ever had a heart!"

"You're mad." The principal's face filled first with amazement as Chris spoke, and then with rage.

"If you want to know how I feel," continued Chris, "I think Mallory Dahlman was the cruelest person I've ever met, and believe me, I've known a few real bastards. I think Mallory drove Darleen Jansen and Floyd Balzer to suicide. I think she wrote the letter that got Mr. Duncan fired, and I think she may even have started the fire which killed Mrs. Holcomb, her or her pet monkey, Billy. Ask him! Ask Billy about his arm. That's the kind of monster your precious Mallory Dahlman was."

"And how is it you saw this monster in Miss Dahlman when no one else in this entire town could see it?"

"Be...because she told me. She thought we were alike."

"And were you?"

Maybe, maybe they were; he'd let her die, hadn't he? Oh Christ, he'd let Mallory die! Then Chris pulled himself together.

"Look, if you called me in here to ask if I feel guilty for not stopping Mallory from killing herself, then yes, I guess I do. If I'd thought for one minute she was going to harm herself, I would have done whatever I could to stop her. So, guilty yes, but am I sorry she's gone? No. Not one bit."

"I think you're sick," Dell said. "I want you to leave now!"

"Did you ever wonder why so many rumors get spread around school? Ever wonder why so many hate letters get sent or secrets somehow get exposed? Mallory!"

"Get out of my office!"

“She inflicted so much pain, and for all your snooping and interfering, you didn’t have a clue.” Chris got up and went to the door. “The day will come when this school will realize it’s better off without Mallory Dahlman.” He opened the door to leave.

“Wait in the hall for the police. They have questions for you,” Dell shouted.

“So what else is new?” He walked out of Dell’s office and then, without stopping, into the hall, past the sobbing girls, and down the corridor toward the main entrance.

The school secretary yelled after him, “You have to wait for the police!” He kept on going. He threw open the front door, ran down the steps and across the parking lot, and got into the Buick. Clutching the steering wheel as hard as he could, he shouted, “No more! For Christ’s sake!” The cry was primal, like he needed to smash something or put a fist through a wall. He spotted a couple of teachers and several members of the hockey team running toward him. The old Buick roared to life and raced out of the parking lot.

Chris was halfway home before he remembered Gillian.

\* \* \* \*

The police cars were still parked out front of the Dahlman house and Deputy Pike still manned his roadblock at the top of the lane. Pike recognized the Buick as it flew past. He shouted something and stuck his middle finger in the air. Chris raced by without a second glance.

No way was Chris going home; after the promise of the previous evening, he couldn’t face his mother’s inevitable disappointment. He drove up Felicity’s track to the mountain meadow, parked by the ashes of the cottage, and sat staring out over the bay.

What the hell could he do? There would be no getting out of this mess, no lying low, no keeping it together until after graduation, not anymore. Everyone at

school—hell, everyone in the whole town—was going to want to make Chris Chandler’s life an absolute nightmare. There would be no escape this time.

And his family? What would they make of a son who’d had the chance to save a life and chose instead to test drive his new car? It would confirm their worst suspicions about their thoughtless and surly son. Do the right thing or do the selfish thing, and sure enough, he’d done the selfish thing.

Only it wasn’t like that. He’d had to make a choice between honoring the last wishes of a true friend and saving the life of a real monster...and he’d honored a friend. Then why didn’t it feel like the right choice? Maybe because all he’d done was save a corpse. A corpse, *half* a corpse, that’s all he’d rescued. And who the hell would ever know or care? He couldn’t tell anyone, and even if he could, who’d ever believe him? He was screwed, royally screwed, and he could see no escape.

He was tired of fighting all the time and with every goddamn person in his crappy life. He put his head down on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. Maybe Mallory, in her own sick way, had shown him how to find peace. After all, he had a car, and you don’t need a garage to fill a car with exhaust, just a length of pipe and some rags, and there were sure to be both in the ruins of Felicity’s cottage. He was just sick and tired of being the butt of everyone’s insults and suspicions, and after today, his life was going to get a helluva lot worse.

Nobody was ever going to give him a break now.

Well, nobody except Gillian...

\* \* \* \*

A sharp knock on the driver-side window woke Chris with a start. It took him a moment to shake the cotton from his brain. The windows of the car were fogged over. He wiped away some of the moisture.

“Gillian!” She looked blue with the cold. He rolled down his window. “What



are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Quick, get in.” She ran around the car and climbed in the passenger side.

“What time is it?”

“Way past four.” Gillian was still shivering and the sun was setting.

“So I’ve been up here for hours,” Chris said. “I...I’m so sorry, I just couldn’t stay at school.”

“Yeah, I saw you drive away.”

“Christ, I should have waited for you.”

“That’s okay.”

“Did anybody give you a hard time?” he asked, “You know, for being with me?”

“I...I don’t think anybody believes we might be together, don’t think they even noticed.” She looked down at her lap.

“No?”

“Not sure I do either.”

“What?”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious you’re really broken up over Mallory.”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“I guess I was stupid to think you were over her...”

“Gillian, listen to me. I hated Mallory, I did. I don’t think I ever cared for her, not one bit.”

“You sure fooled everyone at school...and me. They’re saying her death was a terrible mix-up, and they think you’re heartbroken over it. At least some people do. Others, well, they blame you.”

“But it’s neither of those things. I’m not heartbroken, but I didn’t want her to die. I...I guess I’m ashamed. “

“Ashamed? Why?”

“I’m such a scumbag.”

“A scumbag?”

“I...I got mixed up with her because, well, you know, because of her...”

“Her breasts. I kind of guessed that.”

“Her looks, and her popularity, and I guess because I was flattered, because she said I was dark and cool and mysterious and dangerous...and that’s how I always hoped people might see me.”

“As creepy, you mean. Yes, you can be creepy at times.”

“But it was just a stupid act...a disguise. Felicity saw that.”

“And called you a hero.”

“I’m no hero. That’s the last thing I am.”

“She saw you as a hero because, in spite of everything, you were still you.”

“Around her maybe. Around everyone else I’ve been acting like an idiot! I don’t know who the real me is anymore.”

“You rescued Felicity from Meath. That’s the real you.”

“I probably did it for the car.”

“You did it because you knew how important it was to Felicity that she rest beside her Harold, because that’s how you treat your friends.”

“I had the chance to save a life, and I messed up!” Tears were running down his cheeks.

“Chris, you couldn’t have done anything to save Mallory. Her fate was always in her own hands, not yours.”

“I know. Still, shouldn’t I at least have tried?” he sobbed.

“And done what? You know she was trying to manipulate you. She was a stupid bitch, probably too stupid to realize running the car in a closed garage would be dangerous. And if she did know, then she was probably so confident you were

under her control she thought it worth the risk. She wanted to own you, and if she'd got you back, she would never have let you go.”

Chris took a big breath and tried to compose himself. “I guess maybe Mallory’s gods have other plans for her.”

Gillian wiped tears from Chris’s cheek. “Scumbag, huh?” she whispered.

## Chapter Seventeen

Thursday, December 5 to Saturday, December 14

Everyone in town knew about Mallory's note—her minions made sure of that—and just as Gillian had said, folks fell into two camps. Either they believed Chris to be the broken-hearted suitor who'd failed to reach his beloved in time, or the monster who'd coldheartedly let his ex-girlfriend take her own life because he'd been too busy to help her. Of course, there were a helluva lot more people in the second camp than the first.

People gave Chris a wide berth, like he carried the plague or something. The whispers and the stares were almost worse than the taunts had been. When Chief Boucher demanded Mallory's note, he'd probably hoped it might somehow implicate Chris in her death, but it didn't. Besides, Gillian Willard gave Chris an alibi for the time of death. "Again," said the Chief.

Chris's role in Mallory's suicide wasn't the hot topic of conversation in town for long; Mallory's visitation quickly took over. Mrs. Dahlman arranged to have her daughter laid out at the funeral parlor for nine days prior to the interment. Word was her father needed the time to get home from Indonesia. The funeral home announced Mallory would be on display from noon until seven every day, and visiting quickly became the thing to do. Over lunch hour, every kid in school trekked to Brewster's to see her laid out in a dazzling pink satin dress which seemed garish to some and breathtakingly beautiful to others.

To Gillian, Mallory looked like the kind of cheap prize doll they give away at carnivals, her arms stiff at her sides, rigid, white as porcelain, anatomically bizarre and dressed in shiny satin. The coffin was a pink and purple affair covered with huge flocked roses. By Wednesday, the crowds of students had become so unruly,

Mr. Brewster asked Mrs. Dahlman to curtail visitation. Thereafter, Mallory was returned to the freezer to await her funeral the following Sunday.

For the six days Mallory was on display, her brother sat by her side the whole time as though he dared not miss a single second of the experience. Rudy'd been released from hospital against the doctor's wishes and kept the vigil in spite of his heavily bandaged stump and apparent pain. He looked like death itself, sitting for hours on end by Mallory's corpse. Some thought him courageous and devoted. Others found his presence disconcerting—sitting there motionless, not speaking, head bowed, and wearing the strangest grin like some sort of simpleton, like he was gloating.

\* \* \* \*

Chris agonized over the funeral. His parents would not attend; they were too confused by their son's apparent indifference to a young girl's suffering. His mother was heavily medicated and didn't leave her room for the entire week. If Chris decided to go, he'd be on his own.

Emotions would be raw at the service; there was no knowing what might happen if he attended. He was equally afraid tempers might boil over if he didn't, if people thought he'd turned his back on Mallory yet again. Gillian offered to accompany him. He wouldn't hear of it however. No, he had to face the ordeal alone.

The day before the funeral, Chris resolved to attend. He planned to sit at the back, participate respectfully, and then leave. He'd do nothing to draw attention to himself and speak to no one. If there was going to be trouble, he wouldn't be the instigator.

Then Rudy Dahlman telephoned.

"I have a favor to ask," he said with a creepy snigger.

"Of me?"

“No matter what happened between you and my sister, you were close, for a while anyway.” That weird giggle again.

Where was this going?

“I’ll be at the funeral service tomorrow, only I can’t be a pallbearer,” Rudy said. “So I wondered if you would be.”

“What? Be a pallbearer? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“It’s no big a deal. You help lift Mallory’s coffin from the hearse and then carry it down the aisle at the start of the service. Then you sit with the other pallbearers during the service, and at the end, you help carry the coffin outside again. Then you help lift it back into the hearse, and at the cemetery, you help carry it from the hearse to the grave. That’s it.”

“Who are the other pallbearers?”

“Oh, you know most of them: just a few of Mallory’s friends and a couple of family acquaintances.”

“Who specifically?” Chris trusted Rudy like kittens trust pit bulls.

“Okay, there’s Billy, a couple of his teammates, Principal Dell, and Chief Boucher.”

“What are you playing at, Rudy?”

“Nothing. How can you even ask me that? I thought you’d like a chance to help.”

Crap, oh crap. He felt trapped, like he had to say yes or be thought to have rejected Mallory a second time. “All right, I’ll do it.”

“I figured you would. Anybody else in your shoes would have said no. Not you, you just had to say yes.” Rudy sniggered again. “You really are a do-gooder. Always gotta be better than everybody else.”

“I’ll do it because Mallory was a friend once.”

“You think she was ever your friend? You’re such an idiot. I guess nobody told

you what the cops found in her room.”

“No.”

“Well, along with her candles and masks and herbs and bugs and bones and all the other Torajan crap, my dear sister had this piece of old animal skin—from a cat or something—and she’d made two dolls out of it. She’d glued some human hair onto one of them—blond like yours, by the way—and stitched your name across the chest. The other was this girl doll with black hair. There were strings attached to the arms and legs, like puppets. And get this, they were sitting in a little cardboard car.

“The police figured they were just some weird toys. We know different, don’t we. Mallory actually believed she could control you with her dolls and her magic. Fuck, was she ever wrong!” Rudy laughed hysterically.

“Rudy, if you know how much Mallory hated me, then why do you want me to be a pall bearer; I never did anything to you.”

“You think I’m doing this to hurt you?” He caught his breath. “I couldn’t give a damn about you. I’m doing this to hurt Mallory. It will kill her to see you at the corner of her coffin. Oh yeah, she’s already dead!” He started laughing again and hung up.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sunday, December 15

Chris arrived early for the service. He got a lift into town from Mrs. Willard because he didn't want to draw attention by driving the *Roadmaster*. Outside the church, he got instructions from the funeral director, put on the cheap gray cloth mourning gloves the pall bearers all wore, and took up a position at the curb to await the hearse. To his surprise, the other pall bearers didn't say a word to him. Only Billy said anything at all. He was pale and shivering, moaned several times and kept rubbing his bandaged arm.

"Hurting?" Chris said.

"It's killing me. The doctor says it got infected somehow." Ah, Mallory, one more offering for the road? Then Billy looked up, realized who'd asked about his arm, and said, "Piss off." After that, nobody spoke.

People entering the church were somber and silent, each moving in his own small bubble of grief. If someone did register Chris's presence, it was with a confused glance and a hurried, disapproving whisper to friends.

The hearse pulled up to the church and the Minister, Mrs. Dahlman, and Rudy stepped out. No Captain Dahlman after all. The Minister took Mrs. Dahlman's arm and helped her up the stairs. Because of her heavy veil, Chris couldn't tell whether grief or alcohol made Mrs. Dahlman unsteady. Rudy followed some distance behind and made no effort to help. For an instant, he glanced in Chris's direction and grinned.

The funeral director shuffled the pallbearers to the rear of the hearse, slid the coffin out on rollers, and instructed the six on how to raise it to their shoulders. And into the church they marched.



At the end of the service and interment, all Chris could recall were several meaningless details: the many elderly aunts who wept so loudly one could hear nothing of what was being said; the huge, rose-colored marble cross Mallory's mother in a drunken stupor had ordered for her grave; the ridiculous lies inscribed on the cross: *Cherished daughter, beloved sister, and treasured friend*; and finally, the screeching sound the clockwork motor made as it lowered Mallory's coffin into the grave. A final insult came when the funeral director suggested the pallbearers might like to keep their gray mourning gloves as a souvenir.

Chris turned away in disgust and headed out of the cemetery. Only as he passed the hearse did Chris realize Dr. Meath was its driver that afternoon. Meath grinned through the window. Icy fingers ran up and down Chris's spine.

\* \* \* \*

Chris set off for home along the old railway line. Mrs. Willard had offered him a drive home, but he'd declined. He needed time to himself, so he could either walk the highway or walk the tracks. He dared not take the highway because of all the traffic heading to the Dahlman home for the reception. The rail line passed far closer to the Dahlman place than the road, but no one was likely to notice him creeping along the rail bed in the gray light of an icy afternoon.

As soon as Chris cleared the town limit, he felt better. Attending the funeral had been the right thing to do. He'd done his duty, caused no trouble, and held his head high throughout. It had given him a kind of closure. Mallory was gone, and the dark place into which she'd drawn him was now history. On a small trestle over a tributary of the Roan River he stopped, ripped off the mourning gloves, and threw them out into the current. Then he dug his hands deep into his coat pockets and pushed on for home. Tonight, he might even try explaining to his mom and dad what had actually happened the night Mallory died.

After the trestle bridge, the rail bed meandered inland for a mile or so through

woods and across fields before it again picked up the shoreline. Chris was trudging along a straight stretch of track just a few yards above the water's edge. This piece of the line was one of the reasons the railway had been closed, because it flooded often in spring runoff.

Between the track and the beach were dunes and sea grass, and above the track, a huge swathe of low marshy ground covered in blueberry bushes—now withered by the autumn chill. Late afternoon, the wind had weakened, the sun was setting behind the coastal mountains, and the overcast sky was streaked with a burnished gold which usually augured snow.

Up ahead, the blueberry marsh ended, and the land rose away from the shore in a wide plateau affording sweeping views of the beach and the bay. Not far now to the Dahlman place. Chris couldn't see the house yet, but he could see the lawn running across the back of the building and a few of the cars parked there for want of space in front. He decided to walk the shore instead of the track to be on the safe side; he'd pick up the rails again on the other side of the Dahlman property.

Then he saw the girl.

A good hundred yards or so ahead, just beyond the marsh, she stood in the middle of the track, motionless. And she was staring right at Chris, as if waiting for him.

He couldn't make her out or anything much about her. The sun had just disappeared behind the line of hills. A few clouds near the horizon were still edged with gold, but the shoreline was fast disappearing into night, and a mist was rising from the blueberry marsh. Chris couldn't see her face or tell what she was wearing, or even the color of her hair. Even so, he sensed something about her, something familiar.

The way she stood there...so weird. And surrounded by a kind of greenish glow. Chris felt uneasy. His skin grew clammy. He tried to calm himself. Probably

someone from the reception, a family relation out to get some air or to get away from the stifling grief inside the house. Or maybe someone from school, one of Mallory's friends. He stopped and stared back at the figure.

"Hello," he called, "do I know you?"

No reply.

Then he noticed the image of the girl appeared to shift and turn, the way images seem to twist in the heat rising from asphalt in the blaze of summer. Yet the night was freezing cold. Was the movement a trick of the twilight, or maybe the mists from the marsh?

The last thing Chris needed was a shouting match with some distraught relative or school friend of Mallory's, out here on the tracks in the cold and the dark, not after what had happened at Floyd Balzer's visitation. He would have some reputation if that happened a second time.

He took two or three tentative steps forward, to get a better look at the figure. Then it hit him, the nausea.

Chris doubled over and almost lost his lunch, then straightened up and tried to move forward. The closer he got to the figure, the worse he felt, heart pounding in his chest, hot bile rising in his throat. Then he realized what he was feeling—anger, fury even—but not his own. He was feeling someone else's emotion, someone else's anger—and the anger was directed at him!

He tried to make sense of what was happening. Something...something had overwhelmed him, like a stench that made one sick the closer one got, but it wasn't a stench, it was a feeling. "That's crazy," he murmured. Then the anger turned to rage. He felt a roiling pain in his gut, then a burning thirst for vengeance. Fury rose in his throat like acid.

"Who *are* you?" he cried out. "What the hell is going on?"

The scream, when it came, was ear-splitting, the scream and then the howling

wind. At that moment, the figure started moving toward him. Then it took off in a blinding rush, racing along the track like a wave of scorching heat exploding from a blast furnace.

The force of the wave threw Chris a dozen feet backward. For a moment, he lay sprawled across the rusted rails and the splintered ties, stunned. A great weight then fell on him, crushing him against the rail bed. He was kicked about like a rag doll, lifted into the air and flipped over, and his face ground into the gravel rail bed like a cigarette butt in an ash tray.

The attack ended almost as quickly as it began. Chris lay winded, bruised and bloodied.

Someone or something appeared above him. A face, eyes burning with hate, stared down into his. Hands grabbed his throat and squeezed. At the icy touch, he heard a deafening cacophony, maddened cries of rage and wild screams of hatred, and in the whirlwind of noise, one singular accusation: “You were supposed to come! You were supposed to come!”

Oh hell no! Mallory! And he passed out.

\* \* \* \*

When Chris came to—sprawled across the tracks, head half buried in the rail bed—everything hurt and night had fallen. He raised his face from the gravel, spit out dirt and grit, and tried to look around. No one, nothing, only darkness, the rustle of sea grass, and the wash of the surf. He tasted blood in his mouth and one eye was swollen shut. He struggled to his knees. His ribs ached and when he coughed, a lancing pain shot through his chest and he tasted blood again. When he tried to spit, a tooth wiggled beneath his tongue.

What the hell had happened? Mallory? No, not possible. He must have been mugged. Probably Billy and friends. Had they caught him by surprise, maybe hit him over the head? Or, maybe he'd hallucinated, had a stroke or a breakdown, or

something like that.

God, it was freezing. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious, but long enough for salt spray from the surf below to completely soak his clothes and his eye to crust over. An icy drizzle had started to fall. Chris shivered uncontrollably. He needed help. It took him some time to stand, longer still for his head to stop spinning. There was no way he'd make it home on foot, not in his condition. A thought struck him; he'd only been a short distance from the Dahlmans' house before the attack.

Chris staggered along the tracks past the marsh, then through the sea grass, up the dirt bank, and onto the lawn behind the Dahlmans' house. The reception had ended; the cars were gone and the house was in darkness save for a single light in the living room.

He limped around to the front door and knocked as best he could. How foolish was this, to expect help from the family of the girl he'd let die? But what choice did he have?

Someone called from the other side of the door, "Who's there? What do you want? Go away!"

"It's me, Chris Chandler," he mumbled through swollen lips. "I need help."

The door opened a crack. Rudy Dahlman peeped around the edge of the door. He appeared pale, weak and scared. When he saw Chris, he broke into a wide grin. "Well, look at you," he said. "Had some trouble?"

"I need to use your phone."

"You need a lot more than that. You know it's almost midnight?"

"Is your mother...?"

"Dead to the world, with drink I mean," and he laughed. He led Chris inside, but made no move to help him. As Chris limped to the sofa, Rudy went to the kitchen to get something with which to clean Chris's wounds.

Chris looked around the huge living room through his one good eye. Plates and glasses everywhere. “Bigger mess than usual, eh?” Rudy called from the kitchen. “Great crowd though, you missed a terrific party. Don’t know who’s going to clean up,” he said as he returned to the couch with a bowl of water and a dish towel. “I can’t, and Mother, well Mother.... We should just set fire to the whole place and be done with it.”

Rudy put the bowl and cloth on an end table near Chris, then left him to take care of himself. Chris soaked the cloth in the warm water, squeezed it out as best he could, and started dabbing his face. He was already feeling a little stronger. He rinsed his hands in the bowl and splashed water on his face. It stung like the blazes, but he managed to wipe away some of the gore from his closed eye and to get it open. Then he rose from the chair and staggered to the kitchen sink to rinse his face a second time and drink from the tap. He spit out yet more gravel.

“So are you going to tell me who did this?” asked Rudy.

“I...I’m not sure. Maybe I was mugged. But then Mallory...I can’t believe it....” Chris replied as another wave of nausea doubled him over.

Rudy watched Chris gag and wrap his arms across his gut. “Believe what?” he asked. Then a light seemed to go on in Rudy’s brain. He jumped from the sofa and babbled, “Oh please, you don’t mean...? Oh hell, this is great!”

“What is?” Chris limped back to the sofa.

“Mallory! You saw Mallory!”

“She said suicides have to stay here,” Chris said as he dropped down on the couch again. “I thought she was talking crap.”

“This is so amazing.” Rudy was jumping up and down with excitement.

“Unbelievable, more like.”

“Mallory’s ghost attacked *you*. *You!*” Rudy stood over Chris like he’d just landed a knock-out punch in a prize fight.

“How can this be?”

“Because she killed herself in our garage and now can’t find her damned Puya! Too cool!”

“And she died hating me....”

“That’s right! You were the last thing on her sick little mind. You, not Mother or me. Oh this is great!”

“But if she knew what would happen to her spirit, why did she kill herself?”

“Maybe she didn’t mean to. Maybe she thought you’d come and save her.”

“So I’m to blame.”

“Or maybe she wanted to kill herself so she could keep punishing you forever.”

“Okay, Mallory’s out there and mad as hell at me? I just have to stay away from here and I’ll be fine. She said suicides have to hang around where they died which means she has to stay near your garage. She’s your problem, not mine.”

“Oh hell!” Rudy shouted, and then doubled over with laughter. “Are you in for a nasty surprise!”

“What?”

“You’ll soon find out.”

Where Chris got the strength he didn’t know. He reached up, grabbed the scrawny little bastard by his shirt front, and pulled him down. Caught off balance, Rudy fell at Chris’s feet. Chris knelt on his chest and screamed, “Tell me what you know, or I’ll beat it out of you!”

“All right, all right.”

Chris let Rudy go and eased himself back onto the sofa.

Rudy crawled away, and started to laugh again. “I have to warn you, knowing won’t help you.” He got up from the floor and sat in a chair, grinning and giggling. “You’re totally screwed.”

Rudy stroked his bandaged stump and began. “You see, our beloved father,

when he heard his little princess had offed herself, he got blind drunk and did a bad thing. I thought it was all bullshit, but now...! Here, read it for yourself,”

Rudy reached into a trouser pocket, pulled out a thick wad of paper, and handed it to Chris. “I was saving this for the family Bible!” He started laughing like a hyena.

“It’s a fax,” Chris said, smoothing out the pages.

“Yeah, it arrived last night. Maybe I should explain what happened first. Last week, when Father got Mother’s telegram about Mallory, he telephoned her right away, and they had this huge fight over the phone. Father said he wanted Mallory’s body shipped to Rantekale so she could be buried with his parents. Mother said no. Father threatened to cut us off if he didn’t get the body. Mother threatened to tell his bosses about his second family in Indonesia.”

“And would they care?”

“I guess Father didn’t want to take the chance because he caved and said he’d come home for the funeral. Mother agreed to delay it until today. Then last night, Father sent this fax. There’s a machine in his office. They use it to stay in touch, pay bills, that kind of stuff. Mother was already passed out when his fax arrived, so I got it.”

Chris started reading the fax aloud, struggling at times because of the handwriting.

*Freda,*

“Mother,” explained Rudy.

*I will not attend our daughter’s funeral tomorrow. It would have been kinder to tell you sooner, but I’m not interested in being kind to you. Tell my employer anything. I still won’t attend. Our daughter would not have wanted to be buried in Maine; you know it, and yet you insist on keeping her there. Why? Because all you’ve ever wanted was to hurt me, and keeping my daughter from me has always*



*been your way.*

*Well, she'd be alive today if you'd let her come to me years ago as she wished, so I hope you're satisfied.*

*With Annisa gone...*

"It's the name the locals gave Mallory when we visited Toraja..." explained Rudy.

*...I will never again return to Maine. I pity Rudy having to live with you, but we both know the truth. He's yours, not mine.*

"Nice guy, huh?"

*I'll sign the house over to you, provide for you both for as long as you wish, and I'll never visit you again. I'm sure this arrangement will please you, and I'll instruct our lawyer to put this agreement into immediate effect. There's one thing you must do for me in return, however. Do as I say and I'll be out of your life for good. Refuse and your life will become even more of a misery than it is already.*

*I know you won't believe what I'm going to tell you; you never did take the ways of the Torajan people seriously. Be that as it may, they're my people and I believe as they do, and more importantly, Annisa did too. For her sake, suspend your disbelief and do as I instruct.*

*When I got your telegram, my ship was docked in Makassar. Despite what I told you, I had no intention of returning to Maine for the funeral. Instead I drove to Rantekale to grieve with my friends. I went to see my godfather Rahmat, the village priest, and we talked and cried and drank a lot of arrack.*

*I found it hard to believe Annisa killed herself because she knew what the act would mean. The idea of her spirit in torment till the end of time drove me mad. I begged Rahmat to think of a way to help Anissa find Puya in spite of her suicide, and he had an idea. We'd help Anissa die a second death.*

*A suicide's only hope of release from endless torment is a second 'cleansing'*

*death. It's a dangerous ritual, and once begun, must be carried out exactly and to the very end, no matter how horrifying some parts may be. It cannot be stopped, cannot be reversed, and must be completed.*

*First, the family must ask the gods to temporarily return their loved one's spirit to its remains. The Cleansing Death prayer is a variation on the prayer priests use to walk a corpse to its own funeral.*

“Mallory show you Father's film of the creepy dead lady?” Rudy asked.

“Yeah.”

“Believe it?”

“Not until now.”

*When the spirit is inside its body once again, the family must read a second prayer to calm the troubled spirit and clear away the emotion that drove the victim to suicide in the first place. This part of the ritual is the most awful because the corpse will thrash about. The spirit will feel all the pain that drove it to suicide in the first place, and it will be maddened to find itself trapped inside a rotting corpse. The family may have to restrain the corpse until the calming prayer is read.*

*Once the calming prayer has worked and the corpse is still, the family must ask the gods to release the healed spirit from its body a second time. This is the second cleansing death, and with its second death, the spirit will leave behind all the madness that drove it to suicide.*

*Finally, when the cleansed spirit is free from the body once again, it will be able to hear the family's guiding prayers and go in search of Puya.*

*Freda, that's all I wanted for Annisa, to free her from her torment, and that's why I begged Rahmat to do what he did.*

*At first he refused. I offered him money, lots of it, and he finally agreed. Together, we would begin the ritual of Annisa's second cleansing death by asking*

*the gods to return her spirit to her corpse.*

“But your dad is half way round the world,” Chris said. “How could his magic work here?”

“How the hell should I know? Torajan crap was Mallory’s thing. I sort of remember something about gods existing in a world parallel to ours, not just in Toraja. Distances don’t mean anything to their priests; they cast a spell in Toraja, the request goes into the world of their gods, and it comes out wherever they want it to.”

Chris tried to make sense of Rudy’s explanation, gave up, and returned to the fax.

*In the morning, we staggered to Rahmat’s house, ate something strange, and then chanted and burned dried roots, and I fell into a trance.*

*I saw Annisa dressed in pink silk and surrounded by pink and purple flowers. I called to her. She looked at me and then began searching frantically among the flowers. She started to scream and to tear at the earth, blood all over her hands, and as I watched, the flowers began to wilt and worms appeared among the rotting plants and...*

*I awoke and knew immediately we’d made a terrible mistake. We had begun the ritual, but we couldn’t complete it! I’d been too drunk to realize when we began the ritual that I couldn’t possibly get back to Maine in time to read the calming prayer or the prayer of release over Annisa’s body before you buried her.*

*Rahmat was horrified. It was what he’d feared most, that the ritual once begun would not be completed. He vomited and cursed me again and again. If I hadn’t got him drunk, he shouted at me, he would never have begun the ritual. We had made things far worse for Annisa’s spirit because, instead of being tormented and tied to her place of death forever, her spirit might now be tormented and trapped forever in a box, inside a rotting corpse, deep in the earth.*

“But this is nuts,” Chris said. “When did your father start this ritual, yesterday? If it had worked, Mallory’s corpse would have been flopping about in the church during the funeral. It wasn’t. You were there. Nothing moved.”

“That’s because when Father started his ritual, Mallory’s corpse was too far away from her spirit. The body was in town at the funeral home, while the spirit was way out here and too stupid to know where to look.”

“So now, she’s not just waiting to kill me, she’s also searching for her corpse?”

“Right. And that’s not the best of it. Before Father did his thing, Mallory’s spirit was mad at you but stuck here where she died. All you had to do was stay away. Now, because Father asked his gods to reunite her spirit with her body, her spirit is free to wander anywhere in search of her corpse. Which means she’s now free to follow you—anywhere! Which means you’ve got one hell of a problem: a pissed-off, dead girlfriend who can follow you and keep beating the crap out of you until she stumbles across her corpse—which she may never do.

“Follow *me*?”

“Who else is she going to follow? You’re the one she hates. She found you out there on the tracks, so she knows where you are, and now, if you run in any direction, she can follow...and she will follow because she hates you that much!”

“Okay, your dad wanted your mother to do something to set this mess right. What was it?”

“Keep reading.”

*Freda, you must complete Anissa’s cleansing death. First, bring her body back to the house to reunite it with her spirit. It will be obvious when this has happened. You might have to tie the corpse down until you finish the ritual, but don’t weaken. Mallory’s not alive. She cannot be returned to us; at this point, all we can do is help her to a peaceful afterlife.*

*Then you must read the calming prayer over her, and finally, the prayer for*

*her second death. Rahmat has written both out, and I'm sending them to you with this fax. You won't understand a word since they're written in the language of the gods. Even so, Rahmat insists both prayers be read over our daughter's body exactly as they're written.*

*One more thing; I realize you may have destroyed Annisa's corpse already. Perhaps you had her cremated to prevent me from seeing her when I returned for the funeral. I wouldn't put it past you. If that's so, then you must use any remaining parts of Annisa—her hair, nails, dried blood, anything you can find around the house she may have touched—to serve as a temporary repository for her spirit until she can undergo her second cleansing death. If the items are laid out properly, her spirit will find them, and you can read the prayers over the parts instead of the entire corpse.*

*You must do this, Freda, because if you don't, you may be in grave danger. I pray Annisa's last moments were filled with love...*

*"We know different, don't we," chuckled Rudy.*

*...but if they were not, if perhaps she was filled with anger, if her death was meant as an act of vengeance—against you, most likely—then you and Rudy are in terrible danger because Anissa's vengeful spirit, deafened and driven mad by its rage, will lash out at you and anyone else it senses is important to you.*

*So do as I say, Freda, if not for my sweet Anissa, then for your own pitiful self.*

*"This is crazy!" Chris said. "I thought Mallory had made all this magic stuff up, like it was a bad joke, or she was crazy. Did you believe any of this?"*

*"Well, I didn't, not until you showed up with the shit beat out of you—by a ghost."*

*"This is totally nuts!"*

*"Must be flattering to think you were the last person on Mallory's mind before she whacked herself."*

“So she’s out there, mad as hell, can’t find this Puya place, and is waiting to beat me to a pulp again.”

“No body, no brains, nothing left of our dear Mallory, except one big fucking ball of hate...for you!”

“Okay, so what did your mother do when she read the letter?”

“Nothing; because I never showed it to her. I told her Father had faxed us to say he wasn’t coming home. Mother was a real mess after that. Then I sent Father a return fax telling him we’d take care of Mallory.” And again, he grinned.

“So *you* did what your dad asked?”

“Hell no! I gathered up everything in the house Mallory had ever touched, and burned it all, right before the funeral. I never believed any of Father’s Torajan bullshit, but I wasn’t going to give Mallory the satisfaction of doing her stupid magic, even if she was dead. And if it turned out there actually was something to all Dad’s ‘tormented spirit’ crap, then I was hedging my bets. I’d make sure Mallory suffered in her afterlife, the way she’s made me suffer in this one.”

“You weren’t afraid of her?”

“Not really. I just figured it was all garbage. Then you knocked on the door, and I almost crapped my pants. I thought you were Mallory, come to punish Mother and me. Then I saw you, and I knew we were off the hook!” He let out a raucous laugh. “You’re obviously the one she’s mad at, and all because you didn’t come when she snapped her fingers.” He kept grinning like an idiot. “Don’t you feel stupid?”

“So, if this stuff is for real, then I have to find Mallory’s body, reunite it with her spirit, and then read the special prayers or she’ll keep coming after me.”

“Forever!”

“Okay, so where are the prayers?”

“Funny thing, I burned them too.” Rudy roared with laughter.

For an instant, Chris wanted to leap across the room and beat the little weasel to a pulp. He needed the kid, however, for the moment anyway. He had to get as much out of Rudy as he could before punching the creep's lights out. He took a moment to consider his options.

"Maybe I don't have to read the prayers. I just have to lead Mallory to her corpse."

"You got it. She can only keep following you around as long as she doesn't know where her body is."

"When she finds her body, she *has* to re-enter it because her gods have ordered her to; then, if I bury her..."

"Right, my dear sister will spend the rest of eternity thrashing about in her coffin until she grinds herself to dust. Sweet. We both win. And leading her to her corpse shouldn't be too difficult. After all, it's got a goddamned eight-foot high pink cross on top of it!"

Oh hell no! An icy hand seized Chris's guts and twisted. Mallory's corpse! He hadn't actually seen it at the funeral; no one had, the casket had been closed. "But if her body isn't in her grave..."

"Sure it is. You and the other clowns buried her. We all watched."

Chris said nothing.

"What...like...maybe she wasn't in the stupid coffin? Are you saying you stole her?"

"No! Not me."

"But somebody? You think somebody might have stolen Mallory's corpse?"

Yeah, and Chris knew who.

"That would be so cool," Rudy said. "I knew every guy in school had the hots for her body, but dead? Now that's sick!"

Chris had to get out of there. He had to get to Meath's place before the doctor

fed Mallory's corpse to his goats, assuming, of course, Meath had her.

"If Mallory's corpse really is missing, well, then you truly are screwed." Rudy let out another raucous laugh. "You and all your friends."

"What?"

"Your friends, they're screwed too. If you have any friends, I mean."

"What about my friends?"

"It's like Father said." Rudy grabbed the fax from Chris, rifled through the pages, and read, "...*Anissa's vengeful spirit, deafened and driven mad by rage, will lash out at anyone it senses is important to you.*" He laughed again.

"What does it mean?"

"I think it means if you even touch someone, Mallory will think you care about them and she'll do to them what she did to you." He laughed, and said, "Great, huh?"

"You're such a slimy piece of crap."

"Me? All my life I've had to put up with bastards like you, taunting me, playing cruel tricks on me, hurting me. Why shouldn't I take a little pleasure in someone else's pain for a change? And you, you always were a dickhead, with your 'I'm better than you' attitude and your black clothes, like you're sooo cool. Well, not anymore. From now on, your life is gonna be nasty and lonely."

Chris stared at him for a moment, then suddenly leapt from the sofa and dove across the room as fast as his injuries would allow. He seized Rudy, dragged him up into his arms, held him in a crushing embrace, and kissed his cheeks over and over again.

"What are you doing? Get away from me!" Rudy cried. Then it dawned on him what Chris was up to, and he screamed, "Oh god, no!" and fought like a mad man to break free of the embrace. He didn't have a chance.

"Call this a test," Chris said. "Maybe Mallory can't hear what I'm saying. She



sure as hell can see!” Chris lifted Rudy from the floor, swung him from side to side like a beloved teddy bear, and kissed him time and time again before letting the scrawny creep fall to the floor.

“I wonder what Mallory will make of our new friendship,” he said, then grabbed his coat and limped to the door. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Chris opened the door, and a wave of white-hot rage swept past him.

“No! Mallory, please no!” Rudy screamed.

Chris pulled up his collar against the bitter night air and slammed the door behind him. As he limped toward the road, he heard the sounds of furniture breaking, dishes being smashed, and screams.

## Chapter Nineteen

Monday, December 16

Chris hobbled to the road and started for home. There were no lights along this stretch. “No chance I’m going to reach Meath in time to stop him,” Chris said under his breath, “but I have to try.”

He’d beg a lift from the first car which came along. Someone was bound to take pity on him; after all, he was a bloody mess, and probably unrecognizable as a Chandler. He could still taste blood in his mouth, and his left eye had crusted over again. With each step, he shuddered at the throbbing pain in his right hip and leg, and every icy breath felt like a shard of glass being pushed deep into his chest.

He dared not look back. Somewhere out there in the darkness behind him, he could feel Mallory’s presence. She must have finished with Rudy by now. He didn’t suppose she’d be content to follow him for much longer. The nausea was returning, the bile rising in his throat.

Even before he heard the engine, Chris saw the lights of a car up ahead moving slowly toward him. Then the air crackled...and Mallory chose that moment to vent her rage again.

A terrible scream deafened him, a burst of blue light almost blinded him, and a wave of white hot rage knocked him to the pavement. His skull smacked against the asphalt and he was dragged to the middle of the road, right in front of the approaching car. All Chris saw were stars from the blow to his head and headlights coming toward him. Burning rubber filled the air as one of the tires skidded to within inches of his face.

The driver’s door flew open. “Chris?” someone cried. “What’s happened to you?”

Gillian! She ran to Chris's side and reached for him.

"No!" he shouted, and Gillian fell back.

"What? What is it?"

"You mustn't touch me. You can't let her see." Chris struggled to his knees.

"Who? See what?"

"Mallory!"

"Mallory...Mallory Dahlman?"

"When you were driving toward me, what did you see?" Chris tried to stand, then doubled over, struggling to draw a breath against the headwind of pain engulfing him.

"I...I don't know. I was driving along, looking for you in the ditches. Suddenly I saw a bright light in the road ahead, and then there you were, sliding across the pavement."

"A light, that's all you saw?"

"Just the light."

"But it was Mallory!"

"Mallory's dead."

"I know that. But I saw her tonight, *twice*, and each time in a bright light. I did, I saw her, I swear. And both times, she attacked me."

"Chris, you're talking crazy! I'm taking you to the hospital!"

"No, we have to get to Meath's place. If I don't stop him, I'm going to be seeing a lot *more* of Mallory."

"Stop Meath from what? You can't go fighting anybody tonight, you're hurt!"

"I have to! You must believe me. I'll explain everything on the way."

In spite of the pain, Chris refused Gillian's assistance as he limped to the car. Gillian got back behind the wheel and Chris into the passenger's seat. He wiped some of the blood from his face and tried to reopen his swollen eye. Gillian made a

three-point turn in the road, and they headed for Meath's farm.

"It's a miracle you came along," Chris said, picking gravel from the gashes on his face.

"I was frantic when you didn't come home after the funeral. So was your mom. She came to our door and asked that I take the Buick and look for you."

"Glad you did," Chris said through clenched teeth. The side of his face that Mallory had dragged across the asphalt was one huge weeping graze and stung like the blazes.

"I thought you'd been attacked by the hockey team or Ed Balzer or maybe Mallory's relatives."

"No, it was Mallory."

In a breathless rush, he told Gillian about the girl on the tracks and the attack, visiting the Dahlman house and the bizarre fax from Mallory's father, and his suspicion that Mallory's corpse may have been stolen by Meath. Talk of ghosts and Torajan prayers made absolutely no sense to Gillian. She only understood a fraction of Chris's tale, something about Meath having Mallory's corpse, and him needing it back.

"You're doing this for Mallory?"

"Not for her, well kind of, but not because I care about her. I need to get her remains back from Meath, because if I don't, then Mallory will never leave me alone."

"You mean...her memory will haunt you?"

"No, I mean *she'll* haunt me!" Reflected in the front windshield, Chris glimpsed a face, the merest suggestion of a face, hovering in the back seat. Hate burned in its eyes. "She did this to me. And she attacked me again, back there on the road. You saw the light. Her father said..."

"Mallory's father?"

“I told you—in the fax he sent to Mallory’s mother.”

“Oh, okay.” Gillian’s confusion was obvious and entirely understandable. Chris sounded mad, even to himself. The situation was totally insane. He tried to explain once again.

“It’s like this. Mallory’s dad says because she committed suicide, her spirit is stuck here—part of it anyway, the last emotion she experienced before she killed herself, her anger at me. It’s not Mallory. I don’t think her spirit knows what she is or who we are or what we’re doing. She can’t even hear what we’re saying. She’s just anger and hatred, that’s all—hatred of me and anyone important to me.”

“And you believe the bright light I saw was her.”

“Yes.”

“So if all that’s left of her is hate, then how can she be smart enough to know who’s important to you?”

“Anyone I touch or hold or kiss, she just reacts. Hugging is enough to set her off. I hugged her brother Rudy, and she tore into him.”

“If I’d helped you back there in the road...”

“She’d have attacked you too.”

“So...until she’s gone...we can’t even touch each other?”

Chris said nothing.

“Okay then...why isn’t she attacking you now?”

“I...I don’t know. Maybe because she has to build up enough strength between attacks, like an electrical charge, like lightning in a cloud.”

“And why hasn’t she killed you?”

“I don’t know that either. Maybe she can’t. Maybe we’re linked somehow—she can’t kill me without...I don’t know...maybe hurting herself even more.”

“But if she hurts you enough...eventually you are going—”

“I don’t want to think about that.”

“Chris, you don’t actually believe any of this, do you? Maybe you’ve got a concussion.”

“I only know what I saw, and what Mallory has already done to me.”

“All right. If it is Mallory then how do we stop her?”

“We lead her to her corpse and then we bury it, spirit and all.”

“Lead her? How?”

“She’ll go where I go, and she’s already following us, me anyway.”

“What? Where?”

They were nearing Willard Lane. Chris suddenly said, “Pull in.”

Gillian turned into her lane and stopped the car. “I don’t understand. You said we had to get Mallory’s corpse before Meath destroys it.”

“Yes, I have to, and you have to call the police.”

“You can’t fight Meath alone! Wait. Maybe we should check Mallory’s grave before you go tackling Meath. What if he doesn’t even have her?”

“I don’t have time. If Meath has her, he’ll destroy her body as soon as he’s finished his experiment, and then I’ll be stuck with Mallory’s spirit forever. And if he doesn’t have her, well, then I’ve got time to find her. So I have to try Meath’s place first.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste time calling the police.”

“The police have to see for themselves what Meath’s been up to. That’s why you have to call them and say I’m on my way to Meath’s place because I think he stole Mallory’s body. And if they won’t believe that, then say I intend to hurt Meath. Say whatever you have to, to make them come. When they arrive and find Mallory, maybe then they’ll believe what I’ve been saying. After that, I hope I can reunite Mallory’s spirit with her corpse and somehow get them both back into a grave so she can’t attack me anymore.”

“I’m frightened. If Meath’s as mad as you say, he might kill you.” She started

to reach across the car to touch Chris's cheek.

"No, Gillian, please." He pulled away. "Look, I know this makes no sense. You just have to trust me. I've got to stop Meath, and you've got to call the police."

She got out of the car and Chris slid into the driver's seat. Gillian looked at him with tears welling in her eyes.

"I can do this," Chris said with a smile. "But please, get the police."

He pulled the car door closed and threw the Buick into reverse. It roared backwards up the lane, then headed for Meath's farm.

\* \* \* \*

Chris struggled to keep the huge car on the icy pavement. Freezing drizzle coated the windshield and wiper blades, making it almost impossible to see the road ahead. Chris touched the brakes as he approached Meath's turnoff, and the car went into a violent spin which he barely managed to stop before plowing into a ditch. He took a moment to get his breathing under control, then backed onto the road, spun the car around, and took off down the winding track to the farmhouse. Through the trees and the freezing drizzle, he could just make out the lights ahead.

The Buick rumbled and plowed along the icy trail about as fast as its Fireball Straight-8 could manage. Ruts and boulders and potholes and stumps threw the beast of a car about wildly. Chris, tossed around like a rag doll, clung to the huge wooden steering wheel. Every inch of him hurt. One enormous mud hole bounced his head so viciously against the roof of the car that, for an instant, he could see only shooting stars. Wouldn't you know, Mallory chose that moment to lash out again. She raked Chris's back right through the car seat with what felt like a fist full of razor blades. He screamed in agony and lost control of the car.

The Buick leapt from the icy lane, plowed across a patch of rough ground and over a huge mound of frozen manure, barely missing Meath's truck, and then,

almost airborne, it slammed into the shed to the right of the farmhouse. Chris heard the screams of goats as the two-ton car crushed everything inside the building.

At the sound of the crash and the screams of his goats, Dr. Meath came running from behind the house brandishing an old rifle, and shouting, “What the hell? What the hell?”

Chris clambered out of the Buick and stumbled across the wreckage of the shed and the shattered remains of a dozen goats, many not yet dead and screeching in agony. Meath, now standing on the porch, howled with laughter. Chris stared in disbelief at the wreckage around him.

“Well, this is too good to be true!” Meath roared. “If I thought you were going to help me before, I sure as hell own you now, boy. With what you’ve just done to my goats, I own your sorry ass for all time. You will do everything, and I mean everything, I tell you to do. Get me? So, you’d better follow me or you’re dead meat—like my goats.” Meath turned and headed for the barn behind the house. “You’re just in time to see something amazing.”

“What about the animals?” Chris asked, surveying the wreckage and the gore. One goat thrashed about at Chris’s feet, blood gurgling from its mouth and a long splintered board protruding from its belly. Another goat, bleating horribly, stumbled past on three legs, dragging its mangled fourth behind.

Meath wheeled about, raised his rifle, and fired off several quick shots. A few of the most horribly injured goats simply exploded in front of Chris. Blood and flesh splattered all over him.

“Leave the rest. The cold will take care of them.” Meath marched off toward the barn. “If we’re successful tonight, I won’t ever have to look at another damned goat,” he said over his shoulder. “So follow me!”

Chris stumbled after Meath. Bad beginning, absolutely the worst goddamn beginning he could have imagined to his battle for Mallory’s corpse.



\* \* \*

Meath's wife, still on crutches, stood in the barn doorway. "What happened?" Her voice was barely human. She tried to get out of her husband's way. Not quickly enough.

Meath shoved her to one side.

She dropped the crutches, stumbled backwards and flopped down on her backside. She grabbed her neck and cried out in pain, then sat there, whimpering pathetically. Meath made no move to help her up.

"Come in, Chandler. Say hello to the wife; she got her voice back, sort of." He swept his hand around the room. "Oh, and say hello to your classmate. I think you were close once."

As Chris stepped into the barn, his stomach lurched in horror. Lashed into the barber's chair was Mallory's naked corpse, her flesh the color of congealed oatmeal, with great purple blotches where fluids had pooled beneath her skin. Her body was covered in dirt, and her hair was matted with grass, dead leaves and mud. The clothes in which Mallory had been laid out at the funeral home now lay shredded and scattered in the dirt around the platform.

The beautiful young woman he'd desired, caressed, and embraced just weeks ago, now utterly debased and corrupt; the sight of her horrified and sickened him. His head spun and stomach roiled; he staggered to one side and grabbed the barn door frame to stop from toppling over.

"Gracious, boy, what happened to you," Meath asked when he saw the extent of Chris's injuries. "Townspople not pleased you showed up at the funeral? No matter. I'm glad to see you."

"What have you done to her? It's...it's...appalling!"

"Appalling? It's science. And I haven't done anything yet."

"How did you get her body? We buried her! We filled the grave. I was there."

“What did you see, a tasteless pink and purple coffin?” Meath slammed the barn doors shut and crossed to the barber chair. “I wasn’t about to let such a spectacular corpse slip through my fingers,” he said as he fondled Mallory’s shoulder. “So, last Wednesday, when Mrs. Dahlman ordered her daughter’s remains returned to the freezer because of all the gawking kids, I switched her with some old farmer from down the coast whom we were burying the same afternoon.” Meath put on a lab coat and lifted the activator from its footlocker.

“Only a handful of people showed up for the old man’s service, and they certainly didn’t want to see his ugly face, so the casket remained closed. No one had the slightest idea Mallory was in there instead of him. And since no one stayed for the interment, I faked the closing. I’d have dug her up on Friday or Saturday if there hadn’t been all that fuss at the parlor over the girl’s funeral arrangements. And I’d have been back here with her earlier today if Brewster hadn’t insisted I put in an appearance at the Dahlman wake.”

Meath wrestled his birdcage mechanism onto Mallory’s shoulders and had just started adjusting the device around the head and neck when the barn doors flew open.

“Close those doors!” he shouted at his wife.

The old lady crawled to her crutches and tried to stand.

Chris heard the air crackle and saw a pale blue light outside the barn doors, and then a ghostly face. Meath was too preoccupied with the activator to notice.

“After I left the wake, I went back to town, pulled the dear girl out of the ground, and brought her home in my truck.” As he talked, Meath tightened the first thumb screw against the gray flesh of Mallory’s forehead. “Come up here. You need to see how this is done.”

On crutches once again, Meath’s wife turned to close the barn doors, but too late.

Mallory swept into the barn screaming like a banshee.

A wave of fury and a rush of scorching air sparked and crackled and knocked aside everything in its path. Old lady Meath was knocked to the floor again. She clutched her neck and screamed in agony. Bulbs exploded, shelves toppled, tools fell from the back wall, and milk buckets flew in all directions. Meath was thrown from the platform and into the dirt. Chris flew backwards against the side wall of the barn and slid down onto his backside. The wind knocked out of him, Chris knew too well what had happened...and that Mallory was far from finished.

The blast rocked the monstrous barber chair backwards. Several bolts fastening its circular base plate to the platform ripped from the plywood. The chair rocked forward and more bolts were torn away. For just a second, the chair came to a rest. Then all hell broke loose.

A shudder ran through Mallory's corpse. The arms twisted and legs kicked out against their restraints. The head jerked up and down and the mouth—which had been stitched shut at the funeral home—opened in a silent scream. Mallory's lips were shredded as the stitches pulled through the soft tissue. Dead eyes opened in a gaze filled with horror.

Mallory Dahlman had found her corpse; her spirit had returned to its putrefying flesh.

“What the hell was that?” Dr. Meath gasped. “Lightning? Was the barn hit?”

“It's Mallory,” Chris shouted. “Look!” Her corpse was thrashing about like a gaffed fish in the bottom of a boat.

“Nonsense. She's dead, I drained her myself.”

“She may be dead, but she sure as hell wants out of that chair.”

“Lightning. Ball lightning, that's it.” Meath got up from the floor and brushed dirt and goat crap from his lab coat. “Some kind of electrical discharge. Look, there, it's making the muscles twitch.”

“No, it’s Mallory!” Chris struggled to stand. Every breath felt like a shard of glass in his chest.

“Don’t be stupid,” sneered Meath.

“I’m stupid? You’re the one with a dead girl in a barber chair. And she isn’t just twitching. She’s jumping around like a bucking bronco.” Chris coughed, clutched his chest in agony, and spit blood. “If we don’t bury her soon, she’s going to rip herself to pieces. We’ve got to bury her right away.”

“Hell no, this is great.” Meath returned to the barber chair. “I thought she was a wonderful specimen before, and now! Alive yet not alive? Absolutely perfect! Quick, help me tighten the screws around the head before she damages her neck. We’re only going to get one shot at this.”

“No!”

Meath scowled at Chris. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean no, I won’t let you do this! We have to bury Mallory. You should never have dug her up. You should never have dug any of them up!” With that, he dove across the barn, and tackled Meath.

They rolled off the platform and onto the dirt floor; Chris cracked his head against the barber chair. For the third time that night, he saw stars, but he would not let go of Meath’s legs.

“You little bastard, you’re next, I swear.” Meath kicked out savagely at Chris and tried to break his grasp. “Help me,” he cried to his wife as they wrestled in the dirt, “Please, Maude! Help me!”

Clinging to the doctor’s legs with every ounce of his strength, Chris didn’t see the old lady drag herself across the floor, find the rusted shovel near the platform, and then balance herself up on her knees. All Chris saw was a fourth explosion of stars—and then blackness.

\* \* \* \*

Chris came to with a scream that shredded his throat. Blood flew out of his mouth. Pain shot from his neck, down the spine, and out into his limbs. Every nerve ending was on fire. He screamed again. The agony was electric. Then, over his own cries, he heard the click of something mechanical against his skull. He tried to grab at his neck, but couldn't raise his arms. He couldn't move at all. "I'm paralyzed!" he tried to cry out, but couldn't even move his jaw.

"Oh please. I haven't done anything to you yet," Meath grumbled in his ear, "well not much, anyway."

Chris's eyes flew wide. Meath's face hovered inches away.

"This is so good," Meath said. "For years I've had to work with corpses, smelly, bloated corpses of country fools. And now suddenly, I have two healthy young specimens—well, one and a half anyway—alive enough to give me good results, and dead enough so no one will miss them when I'm done. Everyone thinks the Dahlman girl has already been buried, and after all the trouble you've caused, Chandler, I bet your own family will be happy if you disappear."

"What have you done to me?" Chris uttered through clenched teeth. His hands and feet were lashed to a kitchen chair, head and shoulders fastened inside a web of wires and steel, and jaw clamped shut in a metal cup. He could feel thumb screws cutting into his temples and forehead.

"You can relax, Chandler, I want to finish with the girl first."

Mallory's corpse thrashed about more violently than ever. And with many of the bolts which once held the barber chair to the plywood platform now dislodged, the entire chair rocked from side to side.

"Perhaps you can tell I'm using the latest version of my activator on the girl. It has an improved clamp on the jaw to rotate the head more precisely. You will have to be content with an earlier model. If I'm successful with Miss Dahlman, then I may not need your neck at all, Chandler. So let's keep our fingers crossed.

Remember though, if you give me any trouble, I have only to tighten this screw..." Meath turned a screw at the base of Chris's neck; he heard a terrible crack at the back of his head, and pain shot down his spine. "One turn and you'll be a cripple for life. So sit back and enjoy the show."

Chris had to do something to buy time until the police arrived. "Look at her!" he tried to say in spite of his clamped jaw and clenched teeth. "She's been dead for a week and yet she's trying to walk! Don't you think that's amazing? Shouldn't you be studying that?"

"Chickens with their heads cut off do it all the time."

"But she's human...or at least she was!"

"I told you. It's just some kind of electrical discharge. I've worked in a funeral parlor for twenty years. I've seen bodies sit up, pass wind, and soil themselves. I've even seen them open their eyes and throw their arms in the air."

As Meath spoke, he examined the cage encasing Mallory's head. While Chris had been unconscious, Meath had somehow managed to finish installing the activator in spite of Mallory's crazed thrashing about.

"And on nights when I was on duty at the funeral home and bored, I sometimes applied electrical leads to their muscles and made them dance. Miss Dahlman's performance is a little more dramatic, but so what? I don't care about parlor tricks. I'm far more interested in my own work, so shut up, or it's the screw for you."

At every point on Mallory's body where she was restrained, the ropes had already cut through the skin to expose muscle and bone; no blood, just yellow liquid oozed out of every severed vein. Her struggle to break free was becoming more and more violent as the restraints ate away more and more flesh and became less and less effective.

"Must hurry," Meath said as he finished his examination, "or we'll have to tighten the fastenings all over again." He laid the kitchen timer in Mallory's lap,

stepped away from the body, and turned on the tape machine.

“I have finished setting tensions, and in spite of the subject’s persistent movement, I should be able to get good readings. The timer has been started.”

Under his breath Meath counted down from ten. As he whispered, “One,” the activator made a strange rattling noise followed by a brief pause, and then a sharp crack. Something like a spring flew from Meath’s contraption and across the barn. Mallory’s eyes almost jumped out of her skull, and for an instant, she ceased her crazed attempts to break free of the chair. Then her frenzied movement resumed, only this time the jaw dangled loosely, and the head was cocked unnaturally to one side, and bobbed about as if the neck was made of rubber.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” shrieked Meath. “She was moving around too much, I couldn’t set the tension right! Oh Christ, I think I’ve damaged my Activator. Damn bitch!” He paused, drew a long breath, shut off his tape machine, and turned to Chris. “Well, small setback,” he said. “Thank goodness I still have you.” Meath chuckled, and in spite of Mallory’s movement, he managed to unfasten his activator from her head. “Miss Dahlman, I’m done with you, so...into the fire you go.”

“No! You have to bury her! You can’t destroy her, otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“Otherwise her spirit may not rest.”

“What spirit? And why should I give a damn about her spirit anyway?”

Because she’ll torture the hell out of me forever if she gets free of her corpse again, Chris wanted to scream.

“I know what you’re thinking, Chandler. You want me to bury her so you can lead police to the grave and prove you’re not as crazy as they think. That’s your scheme, isn’t it?”

“No, I only want Mallory to have a proper burial. We were close.”

“Oh, spare me, Chandler.”

Because Mallory’s bindings had sliced deeply into her flesh, Meath had to cut them away before shifting her. And before he severed the final ties, he got an axe from the pegboard and hacked off her feet. “Can’t have you wandering away,” he said.

Still flailing about, Mallory slithered out of the chair and down into the dirt where her mindless attempts to stand without feet were almost comical. For a moment, Meath watched bemused, then picked up the shovel his wife had used to crown Chris, put a foot on Mallory’s chest, grumbled, “This is how I treat cadavers that damage my equipment,” and drove its rusted blade through Mallory’s neck.

The first slice didn’t do the trick. He had to use the jagged blade of the shovel to hack through tendons and bone before Mallory’s head rolled away from the writhing corpse. “Lively bitch,” he mumbled, “handful in the sack, eh, boy?”

Meath then got a long knife from the workbench, kicked Mallory onto her back, and knelt on her. “Spectacular breasts,” he said under his breath as he carved a great hole in her chest. He reached inside the cavity and pulled out her heart, wet and gray like a dead jellyfish. It continued to beat somehow, oozing a thin trickle of yellow liquid into the dirt. The body still flailed about, its movement somewhat diminished. Now less difficult to handle, Meath heaved Mallory’s corpse onto the butcher’s table, tied her there with a length of rope from the barber chair, and found his cleaver. She was soon reduced to a heap of writhing limbs and chunks of throbbing torso.

Meath got the wheelbarrow from the porch, stacked Mallory’s pieces in it, and wheeled them outside.

“What’s he doing?” Chris cried.

“Getting rid of her,” his wife said, still kneeling in the dirt where she’d remained since knocking Chris unconscious. “His burn barrel’s in the yard.”



Chris first caught the familiar tang of kerosene, and then the most appalling stench as Mallory's remains caught fire.

\* \* \* \*

"Burning nicely now," Meath said as he came back into the barn.

"Oh, the smell," the old woman said. "You moved the barrel!"

"I pulled it onto the porch. The freezing rain has turned to snow, and it's really coming down. If I'd left the barrel in the yard, the fire would have gone out."

"The porch is too close! The barn'll catch fire!"

"You think I'm stupid? I partly covered the barrel to keep the heat down and the flame low. Means she'll take all night to burn." He wiped grease and soot from his hands as he spoke. "Strange, parts of her are still flopping around in the flames; not for much longer though. So, Chandler, now you."

Meath walked to Chris's side and said, "This chair has to be on a level surface for my activator to work." He walked around Chris deep in thought, then around the barber chair, and finally examined his pulley system. "I don't suppose you'd let me put you in the barber chair without a fight, would you?" he asked. "The chair would be best for you. It'd improve your chances of surviving my procedure, and even if the device fails, your ordeal might be less painful in the chair."

If Chris agreed to the move, Meath would have to undo the restraints and thereby afford him a chance at escape. "All right," he said.

"Excellent. This is how we'll proceed. My wife will cut your ropes while I keep my hand on the activator. As soon as you're free, you'll get up, go to the barber chair, and sit down. Try anything and I'll turn this screw. You'll be immediately paralyzed. Clear? Good." He yelled at his wife, "Get over here."

Sobbing with pain, she got up from the dirt and limped to her husband's side. He handed her the knife he'd used to remove Mallory's heart.

An opportunity to break free during the move never materialized, and Chris

soon found himself trussed to the barber chair like a scarecrow to a post.

He was running out of time. His neck was literally on the line. He had to do something, so the moment Meath let go of the activator screw, Chris began rocking back and forth as violently as he could. The top-heavy chair wobbled from side to side and swivelled at the same time, first clockwise and then counter clockwise.

“Stop that!” Meath shouted, barely jumping clear of the wrought iron foot rest as it spun past. The last few bolts holding the chair’s heavy base plate to the platform pulled free of the plywood, and the chair toppled sideways.

Meath dove to catch the huge chair, knocking his wife aside as he did. With all its teak, iron and steel, the chair weighed a ton. He knew instinctively he couldn’t simply catch the enormous chair. He crouched and scrambled beneath it, catching the full weight of the chair across his right shoulder. He tried to heave the chair upright, but Chris was still thrashing about, and, since the chair swivelled, Meath wasn’t able to get a good enough grip to stabilize it. At any moment, the huge chair threatened to twist away from him and crash to the floor.

“Help me,” Meath shouted as he struggled against the chair’s great weight and wild twisting motion. “I can’t get it upright! He mustn’t fall the way you did.”

Still sprawled in the dirt, his wife shouted back, “What? What did you say?” She tried to stand.

“If Chandler falls, his neck may be damaged,” Meath said through clenched teeth.

“What did you mean, *the way I did*?”

“You remember. When you fell, you tore muscles in your neck.” Meath could barely draw a breath as he struggled to hold onto the chair.

“When I fell? You told me I had a small stroke in my sleep.”

“Yeah that’s it. For Christ sake, woman, help me!”

“When did I fall?”

“Fell, stroke, what does it matter?” He was almost sobbing with the exertion.

“It matters to me! When did I fall? *How* did I fall?”

“You stupid bitch, you fell when I tried to put you into the chair...”

“When?” She dropped to her knees once again.

“After I drugged you, now help me, I’m losing my grip!”

“You *drugged* me?”

“It was after Arthur Bent. I was so disappointed and sick of using cadavers, I had to have a live specimen! You have to understand—”

“So you used *me!*” she cried out.

“If I’d known I’d get two perfect young specimens this soon...”

“But you used *me.*”

\* \* \* \*

Thirty years they’d been together, ten in splendor back in Britain and twenty in squalor on the coast of Maine. They’d both been in their late thirties when they’d married, the spinster and the mad scientist, she with money and a bad back, he with a name and a wild shock of hair. Meath was crazy, of that she was quite certain, but, then, so was she most likely, to have put up with him all these years.

And what she’d put up with: his insufferable arrogance during the good years; his drinking and violence during his fall; the poverty and humiliation, the insults and the blows, out here in this stinking hovel, with goats and corpses, and the stench of burning flesh night after night. And the things he’d made her do! He’d insisted she help with the crazy experiments, and she did! Oh yes, she had to be as mad as her husband.

What was this hold he had over her? Once there might have been a hint of admiration, even though she’d never believed any of the nonsense he spouted about vital forces and sublaxations, not really. He wasn’t especially good looking; then again, neither was she. The best that could be said for either of them was that

they had each other. And for all the disappointment and misery, there had been times when he'd been different. For all the times he'd struck her and roared like a wild animal, for all the times he'd threatened and belittled her, there'd also been moments of tenderness—he might wash her hair in the sink, or massage her sore feet, or bring her tea in bed—amazing what a little tenderness could make up for.

But this! He'd thrown her into the dirt like a severed limb from one of his corpses. She had blood and goat dirt all over her and the excruciating pain in her spine was melting away the last vestiges of her sanity. No amount of foot rubs and promises would ever make up for all this.

And to learn he'd tried to *use* her in one of his mad experiments! He'd drugged her and tried to strap her into that damned chair! He'd actually tried to use his ridiculous spine-shattering device on her!

She crawled across the floor toward her husband and the teetering barber's chair, the pain in her back screaming like some Greek chorus, urging her on. She picked up the rusted and bloody shovel from the dirt—the one her husband had used to sever the girl's head—and raised the blade as high as she could.

\* \* \* \*

Chris didn't stop thrashing about; he didn't dare. He did see the old lady pick up the shovel.

“Yes, you stupid bitch...yes, I used you! I had no one to help me, so I dropped you. And if you don't help me now, I'm going to drop this boy as well!”

From the dirt where she knelt, the old lady swung the spade at her husband's legs. Its rusted, jagged edge sliced through his Achilles tendon. Meath screamed, turned to stare at his wife in horror, and then toppled to his knees.

She took another swing. This time, the spade caught her husband across the mouth. It knocked out several teeth and ripped his cheeks open from ear to ear like a hideous, bloody smile. As he howled in agony, he collapsed under the weight of

the chair and pitched forward onto his face. Chris and the huge chair landed across Meath's back. Chris heard the crunch as several of Meath's ribs splintered beneath the enormous weight. Mrs. Meath lifted the shovel to take her third swing at her husband but couldn't raise the spade high enough from her kneeling position to do much damage. Even so, the blow to his head silenced his screams, for the moment anyway.

The chair rolled off Meath's back and planted Chris face first in the earth. "Help me, please," he tried to say.

The old lady paid Chris no mind. She retrieved the crutches, hauled herself up, and started for the door. No sooner was she outside than she slammed into Gillian Willard.

Gillian had been running full tilt toward the barn and lost her footing on the ice and snow. As they collided, Gillian screamed and tried to catch the old lady. Too late. Mrs. Meath fell sideways and out of Chris's sight. He did hear a crash and huge whoosh as the burn barrel was upended. Everything immediately burst into flames.

"Oh God! I'm so sorry!" Gillian screamed.

Still tied to the chair, his face pressed into the earth, Chris saw little of the nightmare unfolding outside. He did see smoke and tiny flames creep beneath the old boards of the barn wall however. Struggling to lift his head out of the dirt, he watched helplessly as Gillian tried to drag Mrs. Meath clear of the burning porch. The woman must have cracked her head on the burn barrel when she fell because she wasn't moving in spite of the flames licking at her from every direction.

Gillian tried to smother the old lady's smouldering hair with her sweater, all the while crying, "Forgive me, forgive me."

"Gillian, you have to leave her," Chris called as best he could with his jaw still clamped shut.

“That poor woman,” Gillian sobbed as she stepped over Mrs. Meath and ran to Chris.

“That poor woman?” Chris said through clenched teeth. “She brained me with a shovel and then opened her husband’s face with it!”

Gillian stared down into the doctor’s shattered face. “Is...is he dead?”

“Gillian!” Chris shouted to snap her out of the trance.

“Oh, okay.” She pulled the metal cup away from his jaw.

“Did you call the police?”

“Yes. Then I heard gunfire.”

“Meath shot some goats.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t wait at home.”

“Help me out of this.” He pulled against the restraints.

Gillian looked about frantically for something with which to cut the straps, spotted a scalpel on a small metal table, and ran to it. Next to the scalpel lay a binder full of Meath’s notes, proof, in Meath’s own words of his crimes. Burning debris had already melted its plastic cover to the metal table. Gillian ripped out several pages and shoved them in her pocket. She then grabbed the red-hot scalpel. It burned her hand and she screamed, but held it all the tighter and ran back to Chris. Kneeling beside the enormous barber chair amid the cinders and ash, she began cutting Chris’s bindings.

“Where’s Mallory?” she yelled over the roar of the fire as she sliced through the last few cords.

“She was in the barrel.”

“Meath burned her?”

“After he hacked her up. We’ve got to save some part of her! “

“What? Why?”

“Because I have to give her—or part of her anyway—a burial if I’m going to

be free of her.”

“Okay.” Gillian got up, and ran outside.

Chris tried to stand. He doubled over with pain and almost vomited, then tried a second time, and again the pain staggered him. Finally, he steeled himself and started for the door.

Something grabbed his ankle, and he fell headfirst into the dirt. He almost lost consciousness from the lancing pain in his chest and pounding in his head. Blood from his mouth trickled into the dirt.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Meath rumbled.

Although the words in his shattered mouth made little sense, Meath’s anger was palpable and his grip on Chris’s ankle like a steel trap. Evidently, he was determined to never let go, even if it meant they both died in the fire. Still holding Chris’s leg, Meath struggled to get up, but his useless foot gave way beneath him and he fell forward again.

Chris kicked against the doctor’s grip. His own injuries and the thickening smoke were getting the best of him. He coughed, tasted blood, and closed his eyes. Why fight this? What for? He had nothing to look forward to even if he did escape this particular nightmare. Only another nightmare and then another after that. No, he couldn’t keep fighting, not any longer.

In that moment, someone whispered in his ear. “Don’t you dare roll your eyes at me, young man,” and for an instant, amid the ash and cinders, Chris smelled wildflowers. He squinted up through the smoke and found Felicity Holcomb looking down at him. He felt her fingers on his cheek and heard her say, “Heroic, that’s how I described you. So, don’t make a liar out of me.” She kissed his forehead, smiled, and then faded from view.

That’s when he heard Gillian cry from the doorway, “Chris, Chris, you’ve got to get away!” Face smeared with soot, and hands blackened, she ran to his side and

started kicking at Meath's arm. She needn't have bothered.

Fire had freed Mallory Dahlman's spirit from her burning remains.

Chris heard the distinctive crackle. Through the smoke and the flames, he peered toward the door and saw the air outside begin to bend and twist, then Mallory's face, hovering, hate-filled, and murderous. Chris instantly knew what to do. He wouldn't let Meath win...or Mallory!

Twisting back toward Meath, Chris threw himself across the doctor's crumpled body, then lifted the old man's head from the dirt, and kissed his ravaged cheek.

"Wha...!" was the only sound to escape the bloody hole in Meath's face.

Gillian backed away, horrified. "God, what are you doing?"

"Run!" Chris said and then pressed his lips to the doctor's shredded face, kissing Meath again and again on the shattered mouth. Meath screamed with the agony of each kiss and released his grip on Chris's ankle. Between kisses, Chris whispered, "Retribution," then rolled clear of the dazed old man just as Mallory took over.

Meath's body rose into the air. Mallory's malicious face appeared in the swirling smoke. It stared into Meath's eyes. Meath stared back, uncomprehending, and was flung to the floor again. He lay there stunned. Then his head rose from the dirt and started to turn. Mallory twisted Meath's skull to the left, farther and farther. The doctor howled in agony. Bone shattered, flesh tore, and blood gurgled from Meath's ragged mouth. Then his head twisted to the right, this time farther still. Meath's eyes bulged from his face, blood trickled from their sockets. The mangled mouth opened in a terrible, strangled scream as the head twisted all the way round...then came away from the shoulders entirely, like a drumstick torn from a Thanksgiving turkey. Blood gushed from the ragged neck; sinew flapped about in the torrent, like a rag snagged at the end of a storm drain in a downpour. Finally, Mallory ripped into Meath like a root grinder into a tree stump, bits of



flesh flying in all directions.

While Mallory was busy with Meath, Chris got to his feet and cried out to Gillian, who stood frozen in horror near the doors, “Get out! Get out of here!” and stumbled after her. He’d just stepped over the old lady when Mallory lost interest in the doctor. Her eyes, two black holes in all the smoke and fire, looked around the burning barn.

That’s when the barn exploded. Maybe Mallory, maybe a can of gasoline? Whatever the cause, the force of the explosion brought the building down and drove Chris and Gillian clear across the yard. Gillian struck the corner of the house and fell unconscious in the snow and long grass. Chris hit the stair railing and fell on his face in the slush at the foot of the back steps.

He lay gasping for breath and coughing up blood. Even so, he felt...good! It wasn’t the pain or the fear or the dread of what was still to come he felt, it was the satisfaction at what they’d done! They’d stopped Meath, the grave robber was no more—the *Mortsafemen* had triumphed!

“Retribution!” he cried out, then coughed and clutched his chest in agony.

In the distance, Chris heard sirens. He rolled onto his back and squinted upward into the falling snow. The pain in his chest was excruciating. He could feel the jagged ends of several broken ribs grinding against each other as he tried to breathe. He grimaced and pinched his eyes shut, coughing up blood again. Then he heard the air above him crackle. Slowly he opened his eyes...and looked straight into the grinning face of unmitigated hate.

Mercifully, he lost consciousness.

## Chapter Twenty

### Dying days of the year

Darkness...floating. Then sound. Movement. Shuffling close by. Something touched Chris's cheek. He was too scared to open his eyes to see who. Then it hit him; he was still alive! Absolutely bloody amazing!

Near as he could tell, he was stretched out on a firm bed with a single sheet covering him. He hurt everywhere and was unable to move; his arms suspended in slings of some sort, neck held fast in a kind of brace, legs being pulled straight down the bed, and jaw fastened shut. Had Meath done this? Then the image of the doctor's severed head floating in the flames came back to him.

From the smell of the place and the bustle around him, it became obvious—he was in a hospital. He opened his eyes.

“Doctor!” a large woman fiddling with an IV drip beside the bed called out. “He's coming round.”

“Oh, Chris!” His mother appeared above him. “You frightened us so!”

“Mo...” he tried to say. All he managed to do was drool.

“Don't try to talk, dear, the doctor needs to look at you.”

“Christopher, Christopher Chandler,” a brusque voice said. An older man appeared above him. “You took quite a beating.” The man shone a light in Chris's eyes, listened to his heart, and ran a hand across his ribs. Chris winced in pain. “Still tender? To be expected. Three broken ribs. They'll take several weeks to knit properly. You also have a perforated lung, a broken nose, lacerations to your face and numerous bruises, some far worse than others.”

Mallory's first attack.

“Then there are the torn muscles in your neck and three ruptured discs in your

spine.”

He probably had Meath’s Activator to thank for that damage.

“Your jaw is broken back here at the right ramus, and will be wired shut for a month or two, so get used to drinking through a straw. Both your tibia are broken and we had to repair them with pins, hence the pulleys. And finally, both your arms are fractured, the humerus of your right and the ulna of your left. Oh, and your left hand has been crushed.” Chris’s left hand was one huge ball of gauze.

He couldn’t recall any of those injuries. Mallory’s work after he’d hit the house most likely. Still, she hadn’t killed him, and that was the most incredible thing because she sure as hell could have. Or maybe she couldn’t; maybe her gods wouldn’t let her. Or maybe she enjoyed tormenting him way too much to kill him just yet.

“The good news is most of your injuries will heal,” continued the doctor, “your jaw, your arms, your legs, your ribs. The bad news is your spine has suffered some significant damage, and I cannot say whether you’ll ever walk upright or without pain again. And your hand, well, we’ve done what we can to reconstruct it. I doubt you’ll ever regain its full use, however, and you’ll likely never again have sensation in your fingers.”

Chris struggled to speak.

“No, you can’t talk,” the doctor said. “Not until the wire comes out of your jaw. You’ll have to write on this.” The nurse placed a small slate beneath his right hand and a piece of chalk between his fingers. Ever so slowly, he printed,

*Gillian?*

“Ah, Gillian Willard. I’m afraid she suffered a fractured skull and we’re keeping her in a medically-induced coma to give the swelling in her brain some time to diminish.”

*Be all right?*

“Too early to say. We’re cautiously optimistic. She’s going to be with us for some time however. So, if there is nothing else, I’ll see you tomorrow.” And with a simple nod to Christopher’s mother, he hurried from the room.

Chris’s mother pulled a chair up to the bed, took Chris’s hand and began to sob, “We were so worried about you!”

*Where’s dad?*

“He, he’s been called back to Milwaukee. They’re moving us back to headquarters. He and the kids have gone ahead. What with all the publicity here, we just thought...”

Chris didn’t know how to react. Back to Wisconsin, great. He’d had his life ripped to shreds and the crap beat out of him, and the rest of the family got to leave goddamned Maine. Then again, in his heart, he knew their leaving was for the best.

“All this!” his mother whispered. “Oh, Chris, what happened? What did you do?”

*Nothing wrong, I swear.*

“That’s not what the police are saying, dear. They say you’re going to be charged with murder! Oh, my poor baby.” She wept inconsolably.

*But Mom, he wrote, as she read his words aloud, I fought the darkness...and I won!*

She gasped, smiled weakly, and wept again.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*1986*

### **January**

A month later and the beginning of a new year, Chris was still in casts and unable to speak; some of his injuries were actually worse, and although the doctors were perplexed, Chris was not. Every other day or so, when no one was around, Mallory found some new way to make him suffer. Mallory's attacks were not as frequent as they'd been in those first hellish days after the fire. Frequent enough though. She perforated ear drums, scratched corneas, bruised kidneys, ripped out stitches, broke fingers and toes, and so on; nothing that would kill him, merely cause excruciating pain. All the same, and in spite of his condition, at mid-month, he was summoned to court.

Since Chris was almost eighteen, authorities first had to decide whether to charge him as an adult or a juvenile, and with what? Of course, Chief Boucher let everyone in Bemishstock know where he stood; the Bangor paper quoted Boucher as saying, "Try the creep as an adult for murder." The paper had had to clean up the real quote.

The District Attorney had a different view. He was concerned the evidence did not support a murder conviction. There was nothing to suggest the fire had been started by anyone other than Meath, and he was known to often burn rubbish late into the night. There was no proof the Chandler boy had overturned the barrel which in turn had ignited the barn. And finally, the bodies of Meath and his wife had been too badly burned to determine what injuries, if any, they might have sustained before the fire. The best the DA believed he could get was a conviction

in District Court under the Juvenile Code on charges of criminal mischief and animal cruelty. Even so, both were serious Class C offenses punishable by 5 years imprisonment, and the DA told the Bangor paper the State would seek the maximum penalty.

At his initial court appearance, Chris was assigned a public defender because his dad satisfied the Court he could not pay. All the talk at the hearing about his mother's medical expenses caught Chris completely off guard; he pressed his father for an explanation but got none.

All his dad would say was, "I love you, son, more than you will ever know, and I'm certain you've only ever tried to do the right thing. Me too, I'm just trying to save your mom, you have to believe that. She isn't strong, not like you. You don't need me to get through this. You can get through anything. I know, I've seen what you can endure."

Him? Strong? His dad thought him strong? Chris was dumbfounded, overwhelmed. He sobbed and moved forward, arms outstretched to embrace his dad, but the bailiff pulled Chris back. Thank god, too. In that moment of reconciliation, he'd forgotten all about Mallory.

Chris's attorney was a local kid fresh out of law school, who made no attempt to conceal his contempt for Chris. When Chris tried to tell his tale of grave robbery and a vengeful spirit, one scribbled sentence at a time, the young lawyer lost patience and threatened to quit if Chris ever repeated the story. "Say any of that bullshit in court and you'll almost certainly be locked up in a psych ward for years."

His lawyer was firm. "I'm telling you, address only the charges. You're charged with stalking the old man, destroying his goat shed, and provoking a confrontation indirectly resulting in a fire and the deaths of two people. Say nothing about grave robbery or weird experiments because you have absolutely no

proof, and it makes you look nuts. Besides, what Meath was doing is irrelevant; he's not on trial, you are. Admit only that you were watching Meath because you kept seeing lights on the tracks late at night, and that you did not intend to hurt him when you went to his house, merely to find out what he was up to. Say you struck his shed and killed his goats by accident, and you didn't see how the burn barrel got knocked over. Got it? Nothing else!"

A tight enough story, and basically true. From the get-go, however, Chris's cause was lost.

Because of the seriousness of the charges, Chris's adjudication hearing—as a trial under the Juvenile Code is called—before a judge in District Court was open to the public. It snowed heavily that January morning, but the drifts didn't prevent a huge crowd of townsfolk and high school kids from showing up for the spectacle. Ed Balzer, Principal Dell, many of Mallory's former groupies, Billy and the rest of the school hockey team—they were all there. Even the Bangor paper dispatched its star reporter, Martin Koyman, to cover the hearing because of the loss of life.

There were gasps when Chris was wheeled into the courtroom on the first day, arms and legs still in casts, neck in a brace, and jaw still wired shut. He'd lost nearly thirty pounds, his eyes were sunken and the bruises all over his body had turned from purple to a sickly yellow. His attorney had hoped Chris's condition might elicit some sympathy. Instead, as he sat slumped at the defense table, he looked evil and menacing.

From the beginning, the prosecution wasn't content to focus on the facts of the case. Chris may have been charged with stalking, but the DA wanted to convict him of being a right royal bastard. He used Chris's own books and writings to show the boy had an unnatural fascination with death, and police testimony to make the case for his anti-social behavior. The DA then read an affidavit from Mr. Duncan who, according to the Prosecution, was too ill to appear, to prove Chris

had been obsessed with Meath, and paranoid when he began stalking the old doctor. The DA's summation made it clear he considered Chris devious and dangerous and probably guilty of killing Meath even if the State couldn't actually prove murder. The courtroom erupted in applause when he finished.

For his part, Chris's attorney conceded Chris had been watching Meath but only because Meath's own conduct was bizarre. He conceded Chris may have had some wild theories about the doctor's behavior. No one could prove the doctor had been aware Chris was watching him however, and Chris's suspicions had had no impact on Meath's reputation or his job. Chris's lawyer said crashing an old car into the goat shed had been an unfortunate and almost unavoidable accident given Meath's poorly maintained lane and the ice and snow which had recently fallen. As for the confrontation with Meath, Chris had only wanted to satisfy his curiosity about Meath's behavior when he went to Meath's place that night, and there was no proof their confrontation had turned physical. "In fact," the lawyer asked, "if the court would agree to delay proceedings until Gillian Willard is well enough to appear, she will testify Chris Chandler had no intention of hurting Dr. Meath in spite of what she told the police over the phone."

"That's not going to happen," the judge replied, and the courtroom applauded. "Miss Willard is in a coma. To delay these proceedings until she can testify would be ludicrous. In fact, she might never again be well enough."

The remark was like a dagger to Chris's heart.

As for the fire, the lawyer reminded the judge Chris hadn't seen the burn barrel being tipped over. All he saw was Gillian Willard arrive in time to pull Mrs. Meath away from the blaze. "Perhaps," Chris's lawyer suggested, "Mrs. Meath tipped the barrel over; after all, she'd been fighting with her husband even before Chris showed up."

And there was another possibility, suggested the lawyer. Someone else might



have been involved in events that night. Chris had been attacked by unknown assailants on his way home from Mallory Dahlman's funeral. Rudy Dahlman had been attacked and was still recovering in the Caribbean with his mother. And no one knew for certain who had tipped over Meath's burn barrel. "Could it be," the lawyer asked, "that a mad man was on the loose in Bemishstock?" A Hail Mary pass at best, and even Chris could see the writing on the wall.

One thing puzzled Chris about the hearing; why was there no mention of Mallory's remains? Surely someone had found parts of her near the burn barrel. Gillian couldn't have picked up everything. So why hadn't anyone mentioned other bones? Chris pressed his lawyer to ask Chief Boucher if any other human remains had been found. After a brief hesitation and an angry stare in Chris's direction, Boucher said, "No," and the lawyer didn't pursue the matter. What had happened to Mallory's remains?

The outcome of the trial was inevitable. Christopher's father, who'd attended the trial from the start, was seated right behind his son and put his hand on Chris's shoulder when the judge began to read her verdict. Chris felt the grip tighten as she spoke.

"Guilty of criminal mischief," she said, and then announced Chris's disposition hearing would be the next day, its purpose, to determine how best to rehabilitate the convicted delinquent. Normally, a judge would have asked for recommendations from the Juvenile Corrections Office before pronouncing sentence. In this instance, she said, "I have already formed my own impressions of the young man based on the evidence presented."

Things got nasty after that.

At the judge's invitation, several members of the *Bemishstock Secondary School* staff were asked to comment on Chris's character. The school counselor described Chris as "vindictive and given to bizarre fantasies." Teachers said he'd

been brooding and disrespectful, and Principal Dell recounted Chris's vicious and insensitive reaction to the news of Mallory Dahlman's death.

The Judge then asked Chief Boucher to summarize his dealings with the boy. With obvious delight, Boucher told about the hate letter with Chris's name on it, about Chris's wallet found on Mrs. Holcomb's porch, about the malicious cartoon that had cost the Balzer boy his life, about the note stolen from a teacher's house after Chris's late-night visit, and about the confrontation with a grieving father at his son's funeral.

Chris's attorney tried to have the Chief's remarks struck because Chris hadn't been charged with any of those incidences. The judge overruled the objection. Chief Boucher was merely reporting on his informal encounters with the boy, she said, not on the boy's record. Then the judge muttered to herself in a manner audible to the entire courtroom, "Still, where there's smoke..."

Chris's lawyer called no one on his behalf. He considered asking Mrs. Willard to appear. Chris refused however, afraid she blamed him for Gillian's injuries, and with good reason.

The one person who did come forward on Chris's behalf was an absolute shocker, and to no one more than Chris. Mr. Duncan had asked to appear. A hush fell as the former teacher entered the courtroom. He certainly wasn't the man who'd fled *Bemishstock Secondary* two months earlier. He was thin, ashen, with a glisten of sweat on his face and several bright red blotches around his nose and mouth. Even so, there was a determination in his bearing.

Mr. Duncan began by saying he stood by his affidavit as a faithful account of his conversations with Chris. Then he told the judge he'd had a lot of time of late to consider further his impressions of Chris Chandler and had concluded there were two things the Court needed to hear about the boy.

"First, whatever else Chris Chandler may be," Mr. Duncan began, "he is bright,

imaginative, and has promise. He may have lost his way in Bemishstock, but that's because he got caught up in a web of bitterness and deceit he did not understand and could not control."

Mr. Duncan paused at this point, as if summoning his strength before tackling a difficult task. "And second, Chris Chandler is brave. He was the only person in this town who had the courage to say out loud what others knew but were too cowardly to admit, that a poor boy named Floyd Balzer had been shamed and beaten to death by the very people who should have protected him."

The court erupted with cries of *queer*, and *lies*, and *shame*, and threats of death—Ed Balzer even had to be restrained—but Mr. Duncan pressed on.

"I'm beginning to think that if Chris Chandler told the truth about Floyd Balzer when no one else had the courage to, then perhaps he was telling the truth about Dr. Meath."

With that, Mr. Duncan left the court. He didn't even make eye contact with Chris.

The judge took a day to consider her decision. The court was again packed when she read the sentence: Chris Chandler would serve two years in the South Portland Youth Detention Center. The courtroom exploded in anger; given all the hoopla around the case, people had expected the Chandler kid to be branded with an M for Murderer and horsewhipped in the town square, or some equally barbaric punishment. But no, he was shipped off to detention.

## **February to August**

Kind of a pretty boy as inmates go, and still frail from his injuries, Chris could have expected a hellish time in the detention centre. From the moment he'd arrived, however, he'd employed his strategy of embracing his enemies to wreak

havoc on people who gave him grief.

Chris suffered frequently and horribly from Mallory's rage, and so did anyone else who took him on. Mallory attacked every two or three days, and less often if Chris managed to deflect her rage onto someone else. To inmates and guards alike, Chris soon became off limits, almost a taboo subject. No one could explain his injuries and absolutely no one could figure out how he managed to punish people who crossed him. It became apparent to all, however, the smartest thing to do was simply leave the Chandler kid entirely alone to suffer his own torments. Once in a while, some new arrival still made the mistake of crossing Chris. The latest victim had been a kid who'd had to be shipped off to a psych ward after his ear and scalp were ripped away by what he described as demons.

It amused Chris to think that having Mallory around was like having a kind of superpower, the crappiest superpower imaginable, but a superpower all the same. And the first thing he planned to do with his superpower when he got out of South Portland was re-acquaint Mallory with Floyd Balzer's father. Ed Balzer, his soon-to-be new best friend, would be so tickled to see Mallory again.

Chris's mother wrote twice. The letters were surprisingly upbeat, and each closed with the same cryptic affirmation: *I'm proud of you, and I know we'll defeat the darkness together.* Chris didn't know what she meant. No matter, for some strange reason, his mother was proud of him, and that was all Chris cared about.

He'd been in South Portland for about six months when he got a letter from Felicity Holcomb's brother in New York City. Nigel Harrow wrote to say he'd just learned about Chris's trial, and was disappointed Chris hadn't contacted him for help. He added that he'd reviewed the trial transcript, was appalled at the judge's conduct, and was determined to launch an immediate appeal.

In his reply, Chris explained he hadn't wanted to abuse his friendship with Felix by asking for Nigel's help, and for the moment anyway, was content to serve

out his sentence because he was using the time to get his life back on track. One day, he might want to clear his name. For the present, however, he was content merely to be away from Bemishstock.

Of course Chris tried to contact Gillian Willard. He first wrote the Willard family in March to ask how Gillian was doing and to express his profound regret for getting her mixed up in the dispute with Meath. Gillian's mother wrote back to say Gillian was still in a coma, she would never forgive Chris for what had happened to her daughter, and Chris should never again attempt to contact their family. It took Chris days to get over the pain of Mrs. Willard's reply.

Thereafter, Chris threw himself into other things. He read novels, attended classes, and stayed pretty much to himself. The one thing that broke the monotony of incarceration was the occasional letter from Rudy Dahlman. Rudy wrote every few weeks to say in words simply dripping with malice how much he hoped Mallory was still beating the crap out of Chris. Rudy minced no words about the mauling he'd taken from Mallory, and swore repeatedly he'd have his own revenge on Chris one day. Well, mused Chris, at least somebody besides my mom is thinking of me.

Then in July, Chris learned through Nigel Harrow that Gillian had been released from hospital. Nigel's art dealer friend had visited the Willards in connection with the Holcomb exhibition in New York and been delighted to find Gillian up and about. Chris immediately wrote to Gillian herself in the hope she might read the letter before her mother could destroy it. His first letter was simply to say how pleased he was to learn she was out of the hospital and how terrible he felt about the pain he'd caused her. No reply. So he went for broke in a second letter and wrote the most achingly truthful letter he could manage; he described at length his profound admiration for her courage and strength, and the deep affection and longing he felt for her. Again, no reply. That was that, he'd concluded; his

ludicrous battles with Meath and Mallory over dead bodies and Torajan magic had cost him the dearest friend, the bravest ally, and most beautiful person he'd ever known.

Then one day, after almost eight months, Gillian Willard came to visit.

## **September**

Gillian was already seated at a table in the cafeteria when Chris was escorted into the cavernous room. As he hobbled across the empty hall to meet her, he could see the shock in her eyes at the sight of him. She, however, looked...stunning.

"Hello, Gillian," he said. "You, you look...absolutely amazing!" And he meant it.

She stood up as he approached. When he got to the table, he sat down painfully. She was even taller than he remembered; her long blond hair, no longer wild and windblown, now hung to her shoulders where it turned up slightly and bounced softly. She was wearing a blue crocheted dress that fell just to mid-thigh, and she had the most beautiful long legs. Gillian looked breathtaking, like some kind of fashion model. How right you were, Felicity.

"Oh, Chris..." His appearance had obviously caught her off guard.

"I...I'm surprised to see you after all this time," he said.

"You're wondering why I didn't write."

"No, it's okay. You're here now."

"But I want to explain," she said. "After my coma, I didn't know what had happened to you and Mother never told me about your letters. In the hospital, they said you'd moved away, and you hadn't written to me because you probably wanted to forget all about your time in Maine. Then, when I finally got out, Mother said Chief Boucher had threatened to re-investigate my role in the fire if I tried to contact you."

"He said that?"

“Yes.”

“But you came anyway.”

“I told my mom what really happened at Meath’s farm, and she finally gave me your letters, and, well, I had to see you.”

*Oh God, she’s here to tell me to get lost!* After his pathetic little love letter, she’d felt sorry for him and had come in person to tell him to move on. She was too honorable to do it in a letter. He felt like such a fool.

“Oh, Chris, you look awful,” she said. “No, I mean you look great, but your injuries! Shouldn’t they have healed by now?”

“I have Mallory to thank.”

“She’s still here?” Gillian looked horrified and confused.

“Oh yes, and having just a wonderful time.”

“But I buried her bones...”

“You know where they are? That’s marvelous!”

“Sure. You said she’d be trapped in her remains if we got them together. Then why is she here? How did she get free? How can she still be here hurting you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the fire? It must have driven her spirit from her flesh.”

“Then what can we do?”

We, she said we! “Well, Mallory’s *supposed* to be inside her remains since her gods ordered it. Perhaps this release is just temporary. If I can get her together with her bones again, maybe she’ll be trapped again.”

“And then what?”

“Well, then I could bury her and let her suffer for eternity. Or I could find the right prayers to say over the bones and set her spirit free to find the Land of Souls.”

“Part of me says let the bitch suffer,” Gillian said, “but the other part says we should do the right thing. So, I guess we have to find those prayers.”

Chris smiled. “I’m going to write to her father. I managed to find an address for

his employer. I'll say I was a close friend of Mallory and Rudy, and how I admired Mallory's passion for Torajan lore. I'll ask for the prayers Rudy read over his sister's body because they sounded very musical. Her father doesn't know they were never read. And I'll also ask if he knows any Torajan priests in New England in case I have more questions about Torajan religion. The only reason I haven't written him yet is because I'm afraid he might recognize my name. He might know Mallory killed herself because of me."

"Chris, you must let me write the letter. I'll do it today!"

"You'd do that for me? After all the pain I caused you?"

"Oh, Chris," and she started to reach across the table.

He pulled back. "No, we can't touch, not yet."

"Sure, I know, Mallory will come after me, the way she did Meath..." and Gillian visibly shuddered, "but, Chris...I..."

"Yeah, I know..." But he didn't know. He didn't know if she cared for him at all anymore. Nine months had passed. Why would she want to have anything to do with a loser like him? And yet she seemed to be genuinely concerned.

He tried to sound almost casual as he asked, "So what's happened to you since... since..."

"Our battle? Well, I think you know I cracked my head when I hit the house. After they brought me out of the coma, for a while I had a few problems. I'm okay now though, just the odd headache."

Five months in a coma! "I'm so sorry." He almost broke down. "I'm so sorry for getting you into this whole mess."

"You shouldn't be! We had to do it." She teared up too. "There's nothing to be sorry for! That's what I wanted to tell you! Meath was a monster. We were doing something important. That's all I have ever wanted, to do something that matters. And we did it together. Maybe nobody else knows, but we do, and that's what's



important.”

“I never expected anyone would get killed.”

“That was Meath’s own fault. He and his wife, they deserved everything they got.”

“Yeah, when I think of what he tried to do to Felicity.” They smiled at each other tenderly. “So, when did you get out of hospital?”

“July. And that’s when I learned where you were. A nurse told me you were in jail. I was horrified and didn’t know what to do but I had to try. I knew where Mallory’s bones were, I thought maybe I should tell the police. I hoped they might prove what you’d been saying about Meath, so after I got out of hospital, I went to the police station. They wouldn’t talk to me. Chief Boucher said the whole matter was closed and I should consider myself lucky they didn’t ask more questions about my presence at the Meaths’ farm the night of the fire.”

“And that’s when Boucher threatened your mother?”

“I didn’t know he’d done it. He frightened Mother terribly. That’s why she kept your letters from me.”

“That’s okay. But what about Mallory’s bones?”

“Well, when I kicked them out of the flames—Mallory’s skull and a couple of other large bones—I used my sweater to pick them up. I ran down to the tracks and threw them into a tidal pool where I thought they’d be safe from animals until I could come back for them.”

“Funny, if you only picked up a few bones, then there must have been others nearby. Why didn’t the police find those? Well, anyway, after you got out of the hospital, you got the bones out of the water...”

“And I buried them in our family graveyard...where you used to sit.”

“Perfect.”

“And creepy; I read the inscription on my great, great grandmother’s

tombstone...*'Death is not the worst evil...'* Weird huh?"

"...*but rather when we wish to die and cannot,*" Chris answered. "Fitting for Mallory."

"That's one thing I don't get," Gillian said. "So if Mallory's beliefs about spirits and walking corpses were somehow true, then why didn't her spell to control you work? And since it didn't work, then maybe the prayers to release her spirit won't work either."

The same questions had occurred to Chris and given him many a terrible night. "I don't know what happened? Maybe Mallory just got them wrong...so we'll just have to get them right."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Oh, that reminds me," Gillian said, "when the hospital gave me back the clothes I'd been wearing the night I was admitted, there were some pages in the pocket of my coat, pages I'd taken from Meath's barn. Here." She pulled a wad of singed and sooty pages out of her purse and passed them across the table. "I think maybe the police have the rest because when I asked if they'd found Meath's binder, the Chief got real serious and told me to get out. You really need to read them."

"Later, okay?"

"Sure, only we do have to talk about setting things right."

Five minutes ago, he'd thought she was there to tell him to get lost, and now she wanted to help him set things right. He couldn't believe his good fortune. "Sure, just not right now, okay?" He wanted to revel in every beautiful detail of her.

They sat in silence for a moment, happy to be together after all this time.

"By the way, I have your car," Gillian said with a wonderful smile.

"You do? That's great! How?"

"After the trial the police returned it to your parents, and since they were leaving town, they asked my mother if she would keep it for you, until you got out. It's in our

barn. Grandpa even fixed the damage from the accident and the paint where it got burned. Sometimes I go and sit in it—to be near you. That’s where I read your letters.”

“How are your mom and grandfather?” It was such a transparent effort to change the subject and avoid talking about the letters. He was still worried all this chit-chat was leading up to some heartbreaking news.

“Good,” Gillian said. “Did you know Felicity is kind of famous now, because of the exhibition in New York? Anyway, we had a bunch of her paintings from a long time ago and the agent, the one who came to her funeral, well he came back later and bought some of them for a lot of money, so Mom was able to get a few new pieces of equipment for the business, and that’s helped us a lot.”

“That’s wonderful.” Now the hard stuff. “And how’s school?” By which he meant, are you seeing anyone?

“Good too, I guess, busy. I had to start the school year a week or two late but I’m doing okay.”

“Why late?”

“I was having a little trouble walking...”

“Oh god, Gillian, I’m so sorry!” He was crushed to once again realize what she’d been through because of him.

“No, it’s fine. I just had to do a bunch of exercises to get my balance and strength back. So now I’m good, and I’m even kind of a celebrity. Oh, and you remember my friend Madelyn, well we’ve both heard we’re getting full scholarships to U Maine, so yeah, school’s good. And you, how are you doing, other than Mallory, I mean?”

“Well, believe it or not,” Chris said, “I’m taking classes too, and I’m doing okay. A couple of good grades, great in fact, for the first time ever. And I’m going to be getting my diploma this spring, same time as you.”

“That’s great. And do you know what you’ll do when you get out of here?”

“College I hope. I’d like to learn to write. Maybe the Army first though.” Then with a wry smile Chris added, “Or maybe I’ll hunt down grave robbers; somebody has to.”

“Not without me, okay?” Gillian said softly, with a big grin. “We’re a team.” She slid her hand across the table toward him, palm up.

“Gillian! Your hand!” Across her palm was a vicious-looking, bright red scar, almost as if she’d been branded.

“Oh yes, my mark.”

“How?”

“When I picked up Meath’s scalpel to cut away your ropes, it burned me.” She made no move to conceal the injury. “My hand’s fine now. It only looks bad. Does it remind you of anything?”

He studied the scar closely, every ridge, and tear, and jagged edge. The pain she must have endured, and for him! He would never forgive himself. Then suddenly he saw it. The crest of the Mortsafemen! There it was, diagonally across her palm, silhouetted in scarlet, the arched mausoleum and hooded figure holding an axe. He looked up at Gillian in amazement.

“You see?” she said. “We really are a team!”

Chris moved his left hand toward hers. Although he longed to grasp Gillian’s hand, he dared not for fear of what Mallory might do. Besides, he hadn’t recovered sensation in his left hand. That’s why it came as such an overwhelming surprise when their fingertips touched and a wave of such intense pleasure ran through his hand and his entire body that it took his breath away. He looked deep into Gillian’s eyes and saw the same flutter of pleasure there too. She smiled the most beautiful warm smile Chris had ever seen, and he wanted nothing more than to dive across the table and sweep her into his arms.

Then he saw Mallory’s face—in the corner of the room, up near the ceiling—

hovering there, staring at him—waiting.

## **November**

As Martin Koyman and Jackie Cormier entered the Bemishstock police station, they overheard the deputy say, “They’re back, Chief,” and the Chief reply, “Then let’s get this over with.”

Koyman chuckled to himself. If the fat bastard Boucher thought this business was going to end today, he was in for the shock of his life. What they’d uncovered in the past month took Martin’s breath away. It was probably the biggest story of Koyman’s career! Well, more precisely, of their careers, because Bemishstock was going to make the reputation of his young intern as well. She had done amazing work, and he couldn’t have been more proud of her if she’d been his own daughter. What she’d uncovered!

“Thanks for seeing us, Chief,” he said, poking his head into Boucher’s office. “I know you’re busy.”

“No problem,” Boucher replied, but Koyman could read plainly the look of utter disgust on Boucher’s face as he and Jackie sat themselves down.

“Chief Boucher, this is Jackie Cormier. She’s been working with me, and she has a few questions for you.”

“Sure.” Boucher grinned and sat back in his chair. He probably thought Jackie was going to be a pushover. The idiot wouldn’t know what hit him.

“So,” she began with a disarming smile, “what can you tell us about the remains you found in the ashes of the barn?”

“You mean old man Meath and his wife?”

“No. I mean the other bones, the ones the Court never heard about, the ones the pathologist in Portland examined and determined were human. I believe you got his

report a short while after the trial?”

The Chief sat stunned, silent. His face flushed.

“Oh, and while you think about that, perhaps you could comment on the story that the Bloss family has applied to exhume the remains of their aunt, Miss Florence Bloss?”

“Who the hell is Florence Bloss?”

“She was a single lady, lived out near the Potteries. She was supposed to have been buried in the Bemishstock cemetery. Her family now has reason to believe, however, her remains may have been tampered with before her interment.”

“Probably another stunt by the Chandler kid,” the Chief grumbled.

“Not likely,” Jackie said with another disarming smile.

“And why not?”

“Because Miss Bloss’s funeral was in April last year, five months before the Chandler family moved to Bemishstock.”

The Chief sat in silence. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Crackerjack, isn’t she,” Koyman said with obvious delight. “We’re all going to be hearing a lot more from this young woman.”

When the Chief spoke, he could barely whisper.

“Why are you doing this now? The kid will probably get out in a few months.”

“Something Chandler said when we interviewed him last week,” replied Koyman.

“Okay, so what was that?”

“*Retribution.*”

## **About the Author**

I was born next to the pub in a small village in England whose church was haunted by the Grey Lady and whose churchyard held my ancestors. My family immigrated to Canada when I was five and I attended sixteen schools before completing grade eleven. I did undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Canada and the United States and taught university for fifteen years before joining the Federal Government. I have written radio documentaries, a Christmas special for television and a vampire stage play, all of which have been performed. I have lectured and advised governments all over the world, and now travel purely for pleasure. I love reading, wines and water gardening, and am a father and a grandfather, and most important, a husband of nearly fifty years.

\* \* \* \*

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## **Dead Silent**

### The Mortsafeman Book Two

Chris Chandler is attempting to escape the glare of the media while the State of Maine reviews his conviction and investigates the disappearance of so many corpses from Bemishstock. He is hiding out in the tiny town of Lewis, Vermont where he's been invited to house-sit the estate of a mysterious family with a history stretching back to the thirteenth century and the Albigensian Crusade. In Lewis he discovers one of the town's prodigal sons has recently returned with a plan for a Goth festival and *Grand Guignol* Theater, which he'll fund through the sale of human remains. Again, Chris and Gillian battle defilers of the dead, this time with the aid of an ancient amulet and an army of tortured phantoms, while their search intensifies for a way to lay Mallory Dahlman's vengeful spirit to rest.





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