

**HATE
THY
NEIGHBOR**

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PART ONE
Into The Eye

CHAPTER ONE

Kate Freeman watched her husband from the passenger side of their silver Dodge Caravan. With both front windows rolled down, the invading, hot sticky air of the early evening made her sheer yellow sun dress cling to her skin and raised blisters of sweat on her forehead. She leaned away from the seat, tugging the damp fabric above her shoulder to loosen it from her back. As the side of her thumb wiped at her brow she glanced with longing at the air conditioning controls. She settled against the itchy material of the car seat and returned her gaze out the window.

Kate scanned the large red letters of the sign above their old shop. 'FREEMAN BOOKS'. Lots of memories in there for both of them. A piece of their history. The future held who knows what? The chance for a fresh start? A new set of recollections to be lived and saved in that heavy file cabinet where each individual folder contained a chapter in their lives? And it was only a chance. The piece of their lives that had been played out here would remain here forever, like so many other chapters she had lived, and now there was only the promise the future was going to be good. As good as the last ten years had been. She prayed this disruption would not allow the nasty confusion of her youth to come back in to her life. Those were memories she preferred to ignore.

She sighed and again watched her husband, noting his slow, deliberate moves, odd in that procrastination was not his habit. It would take time to recover, she knew, but he was strong willed. Her eyes swept over him. He was tall and fair and still boyishly handsome despite approaching forty, though maturity had brought with it a slight bulge in his midsection--something regular sit-ups and jogging had failed to prevent. A gentle smile spread across her face, diminishing the clot of worry distorting her forehead.

Derek Freeman stared through smudged panes into the darkness of the empty shop, bleak without the shelves and tables and clutter of his books. Under one lanky arm he trundled a thick package, its contents concealed by a plain brown wrapper. He paused at his reflection, seeing that the grime on the glass failed to dim the shine of his blond hair.

This was a final check to make sure everything was out, the transacting of his departure with his landlord, an allowance for a bit of reminiscing--meeting Kate in the 'Research' section--before he turned the key one last time. What was it that she had looked for? A book on African cultures? Mayan cultures? Religious rituals? He remembered being fascinated by the beautiful woman

with the odd interests. A fascination as strong as the instant desire for her slender, ample-breasted, pouting form. He turned to his impatient landlord--fat, balding in an unbuttoned shirt--and dropped the keys into the man's sweaty palm. *That ends that. Goodbye Kentucky.* Derek received a check in return.

The fat man flicked gray ash from his cigar toward the curb and looked up at Freeman. "Had to take off for that big stain by the door." The panatela returned to his mouth.

Derek knew Treaumaster was a greedy son of a bitch and wanted to argue, but not as much as he wanted to be rid of the man. Derek's lips pursed as he glared at his now former landlord.

Treaumaster took a draw on his cigar. "Don't know if it'll come out, but them cleaners told me it's no problem. Lucky for you."

"Lucky for me." Muscle flexed slightly in Derek's jaw as he started toward his car. "Some damn people just can't read. That moron should've left his dog outside."

The landlord's chin dropped a bit. "Ya mean . . .?"

"Right. Like a fire hydrant."

Derek chewed his lip to keep from grinning. He wasn't normally in the habit of lying-or leading someone on in this small way--but this did feel good. He stepped into the street and could see that Kate was watching him from the Caravan, her big brown eyes quizzical. With his back to the landlord he winked at his wife, allowing himself to revel as he always did in the breathtaking radiance of her china-white skin and jet black hair--the contrast stifling to him at times. She always made him feel like flirting.

Derek glanced down the street at the new strip mall, and the B. Dalton's bookstore it contained. His smile faded. He cursed the arrival of Dalton's and the short time it had taken for the competition to overwhelm him. Even a college town like Bowling Green couldn't support two bookstores so close together because the majority of books purchased these days were well marketed, big name author fare, and the large chain store had the buying power to undercut his prices. The special ordering and varied stock of publications weren't enough to keep the quantity of customers he needed to make a decent living. Not with a family. Still, he couldn't help but feel he was just throwing in the towel. It rubbed him the wrong way. Quitting wasn't his style.

He shrugged his shoulders, knowing that the right decision had been made. Besides, times had been pretty good and profitable while they lasted. *What the hell*, he thought, *I never acquired a southern accent anyway.*

Derek went to check the hitch on the U-Haul. Only their most

precious and expensive possessions would travel with them; Kate's computer equipment and other electronics, jewelry, power tools handed down to Derek from his father. The remainder of their property, including the store's inventory, would travel by way of Mayflower Transit in a cold, impersonal semi-trailer. A separate driver from Mayflower would transport their other vehicle--an old Checker cab, converted from commercial use by some previous owner. The old cab was a brute of a vehicle, now painted green, and made from as much steel as a small third-world nation's battleship. Or so it seemed. They always felt safe in the Checker surrounded by so much heavy metal.

At the driver's side of the Caravan Derek glanced at the store in time to see Treaumaster, inside on his knees, sniffing at the yellow mark on the wall--so much like the beast Derek had blamed. Derek's smile came back easily and he allowed a chuckle to escape. He opened the door, slid behind the wheel and plopped the brown parcel onto the seat beside him.

"What's so funny?" Kate said.

"I told Treaumaster a dog left that stain."

"You didn't! That was Melissa and her watercolors." She shook her head, laughing. "You're bad." A warm, seductive smile lingered on her ruby lips.

He leaned toward her, gently sliding his hand over her cheek to the soft fuzziness of her nape, urged her toward him and kissed her. She reached up and took his hand, careful not to touch the space where his wedding ring--and half his finger--should have been. She knew it didn't bother him to be touched by her in that blank space, but she always worried that it might. Her fingers stroked his palm and again marveled at how the days he spent earlier in his life as a carpenter in his father's business had left him so permanently calloused. A seller of books with rough hands. A finger lost in a mishap with a table saw. Then there was that faint scar over his eye. If it caught the light just right you could see an indentation in his flesh, skin where a few strands of his eyebrow should have been. Not your typical book peddler, she thought.

"Do you have your medicine close by?" Derek asked.

Kate opened the glove compartment to check. The ribbed blue tube and two inhalers--one of Beclovent (beclomethasone) and the other Ventolin (albuterol)--were sandwiched among the maps and first-aid kit. She shook each of the canisters to make sure they were not empty.

"Has your asthma been bothering you lately?" Derek said.

"No. It's been pretty quiet."

A short period of silence fell between them. Kate fidgeted

with her seatbelt. The move was a big step for them, full of the unknown. Too many things to worry about. From his sallow eyes and quiet demeanor Kate sensed the depth of Derek's troubles. Perhaps he was bothered by the uncertainty of what was ahead for them. That would be a feeling shared.

"This will work out," Kate said with an evident lack of conviction.

He started the vehicle, a wan smile on his face.

She went on. "I know you could have stayed and made it work."

"I don't know about that, but thanks for the vote of confidence." He glanced at her before he checked the traffic. "I'll start up again in Wisconsin. And get back into construction . . . hire a supervisor and handle the subcontracting. We'll make enough money. I'm just glad we could hold out till the end of the semester so you could get your degree." He wheeled the car away from the curb into the tail-end trickle of rush hour, joining the river of red lights flowing past the dark strip dividing the boulevard. An opposing sea of white coursed against them, fighting the tide with an equal force.

Kate said, "Right. I know. There are more opportunities up north right now. We'll be close enough to the university in Milwaukee. That Professor Linden seemed eager to have someone help him with the research for his book. And there's the new technical school being built in Hartford." She searched his eyes. "I'll find ways to earn money, too." She paused. "And I do want to write my book."

"At least there's some good things to look forward to. That helps me not feel so bad about the closing."

The admiration the two had between them was nearly a physical entity. It wasn't just the hard work of life and love and parenting which both handled well. It was, primarily, that intangible strength needed to overcome adversity. Each had it at their core. Derek, on his own since the age of nineteen, had become successful in something he truly loved--the bookstore. Yet he wasn't so full of pride that he would ignore any way to support a family--even going back to using the skills he had learned early in life in the construction trade. Derek had lived near the area in Wisconsin they were moving to--the familiarity would be helpful.

Kate, in pursuit of a Master's degree in anthropology, set aside her studies after the struggle to earn her Bachelor's degree to be with their children. And it was a struggle. Night school, weekend classes, juggling schedules and hiring babysitters. She was glad that part was over, and the difficulties made her

accomplishment all that much sweeter. Their Wisconsin destination, though no hotbed of activity in her science, would be a healthy place to raise her offspring. She wouldn't be entirely out of touch with reaching her goal--having a personal computer with a modem allowed her to be in touch with all the universities that are hotbeds in her field--Columbia, Bennington, the University of Michigan, Berkeley--the list was long and Internet would keep her in touch. Assisting professors and curators would help get her foot in the door, pad her resume' with credentials, and maybe make a little bit of cash besides.

She tapped the package. "Any idea what this is?"

"Our last shipment. The last one received by 'Freeman Books' of Bowling Green, Kentucky. I think it might even be some things you wanted." One eye squinted shut for a second. "I thought I stopped all the orders. This must have slipped through. Anything else coming will have to be forwarded."

A grin spread her lips as the brown paper yielded to her tugging, revealing three books. "Two volumes on pagan animal sacrifices. These were hard to get."

Derek's brow furled. "That's pretty sick. Who would write entire books on that?"

"There's been a lot of study in this area the last several years. Some even think the acts of sociopaths today are similar to, or were exactly, common practices of ancient cultures. For celebration or just, well, entertainment. Psychologists are interested in this because it might help them understand why people who torture animals in their youth go on to become these nasty human monsters. Maybe all of us are capable of it."

She held up a book near his face, the third in the package. He took his eyes off the road for only a moment to peek. He frowned.

"Jeffrey Dahmer?" Derek said.

"Serial killer in Milwaukee, remember?"

"Oh yeah, cannibalism and all that?"

"Yep. That ties into ancient cultures, too. There's evidence that Neanderthals and others practiced cannibalism." She thought for a second, trying to remember a specific case from school. "There's a place in Asia--Zhoukoudian--where all the skulls found in a cave have the faces and undersides missing. Some scientists claim the brains were extracted and eaten by humans."

Derek clutched at his stomach.

Kate went on. "Hardly any other types of bones were found. Some have suggested that corpses were ritually dismembered outside the cave and only the heads were brought inside." She was

suddenly aware of how narrative she had become, hoping it didn't sound like she was reading from a textbook--the student's curse of reciting facts versus the expert's understanding of knowledge. "Of course, many anthropologists think it was only hyenas at work there."

Derek squirmed in his seat, grimacing and swallowing the sour taste in his mouth. "Just the thought of consuming human organs. That really bothers me." He cleared his throat with a long, rough percolation of phlegm. "I can't believe Dahmer ate parts of his victims."

Kate started to speak, then stopped, looking over her shoulder to make sure her children were sleeping. Both were snug and sound, Melissa's head on a pillow propped against Nathan's car seat. Kate felt a surge of warmth under her ribs, a rush of love embracing her heart.

She turned back to her husband. "Dahmer tortured animals as a young boy. No remorse. But he knew he was doing wrong. I would've liked to interview him."

Derek inhaled deeply. "God, Kate. Whatever for?"

"There's a theory that an early childhood experience, a traumatic one, or some continual bad influence, roots a deep-seated fear in the mind. This grows somehow into a hatred of a specific animal, or all animals. Everyone has a creature they find particularly distasteful. Spiders. Snakes. Insects."

Derek grimaced. "Yeah. Snakes are pretty high, or low, as the case may be, on my personal list."

"For some, it's human beings."

Derek shook his head.

"Anyway," Kate continued, "For most of us the hate is subdued, buried in the subconscious. For a few, though, it seems the hatred grows into acts of animal torture, human masochism, even in rare cases, such as Dahmer, cannibalism and necrophilia. Dahmer masturbated into his victim's gashed open body cavities."

Derek cast a narrowed look her way. "Oh please."

"That's one specific area of research; what is the exact seed for this subliminal hatred? What fuels it? What does it--or could it--feed off so that it consumes a person so?"

Derek shrugged. "Too deep for me. You're the scientist."

"Anthropologist is what I will be," she corrected him, sounding precise. "I'm not there yet. It's not really accurate to say that title is part of me."

Derek drove on and Kate dozed off, her mind filling with images of Jeffrey Dahmer, tribal rituals, and the consequences from the passion of hate.

CHAPTER TWO

"There's always that place off Second Avenue." Cynthia Bliant's nasal tone was punctuated by a snap of the pink gum blob in her mouth. Sickly-sweet Bubblicious strawberry permeated the interior of the car. She glanced up into the rear-view mirror and saw her client's reaction. Frosted as the air outside. Derek and Kate Freeman shot a look at each other, their expressions similar--a telegraphing of their understanding of what the real estate agent was trying to do. And a statement of their assessment of Bliant's personality. *What is wrong with this woman?*

Derek cleared his throat. "Look, Ms. Bliant--"

"Please, call me Cynthia."

"Okay. Cynthia. We're really not interested in that one. It needs too much work. I know I said a little fix-up would be all right, but that old two-story just needs too much." *It's a dump!*

"I see," Bliant said. A disappointed look came across her face. She reached for the heater control, sliding it a touch lower. "Well, I'm just not sure if there's anything else in your price range, ya know?" There was a needling tone to her voice. Her jaws began to grind at the wad of gum in quick, vigorous spurts of chewing. She pressed harder on the brake pedal and swiveled to address them. "After all, it's a seller's market. Hartford is just a-poppin'! People are moving out of Milwaukee and industry is growin'. Why, just this week a new business to manufacture high-priced bicycles opened up not far from here." She waved a hand as if to gesture a direction. A bubble grew out of her mouth, popped, and was hastily sucked back in. Derek lifted a Styrofoam cup of steaming coffee to his nose, sniffing the ebony aroma to drown out the strawberry bouquet. A touch to his lips to test the temperature and a gurgling, careful sip followed.

The stoplight turned green and the car behind them honked immediately, eliciting a grunt from Ms. Bliant. "Ooh, I just hate that!" she hissed, scowling into the mirror. Her shiny black Lincoln lurched forward then settled into a smooth acceleration, motoring across the intersection, a white plume in its trail.

"Cold one today, isn't it folks?" asked the agent.

"Yes," Kate said. "Unusually so for early November."

"Yeah," Bliant whined. "That's Wisconsin for you. Temperature can drop forty degrees in one day. Was it like that in Kentucky?"

"We had some quick changes, but nothing like this," Kate

said, scanning the homes along their route and squinting from the bright sunlight beaming over the treetops.

"I'm originally from Appleton," Derek offered. "I remember this kind of weather. I know it gets worse."

"Oh, so do your parents still live there?" Bliant said.

Derek swallowed, a small cough cleared the tightness. "No. They were killed in a car crash. One winter night a drunk crossed the center line in the fog. I was twenty-two."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Bliant smiled weakly. "Are you coming back home to Wisconsin, too, Kate?"

"No. I was born in southern Indiana. On a dairy farm outside a small town called Bedford. I moved around a lot with my mother." Kate stared out the window at nothing.

Derek cast a slow, sideways glance at his wife, knowing that discussing where she came from brought out memories of her uncle and the rape. Kate hadn't talked about it much in the years he had known her--she told him the story over a decade ago, when they were dating and the relationship was getting serious--and then only a few of the details, that it had happened. Her eyes had swelled with tears when she told him. Derek had seen a picture of her at that age. She was young and firm and vivacious, full of life--something that was missing in her uncle's life. It was a temptation her father's brother could not resist and he went for it under the illusion that her outward personality meant she wanted him too. It was a mistake that ruined her uncle's life and dramatically scarred hers. Kate's father had refused to believe his brother capable of the act and the ensuing rift with Kate's mother destroyed that marriage.

Derek studied Kate, hoping she would not become withdrawn, like the last time the conversation made her think of her past. That had been during a session with a therapist, and she didn't speak for an entire afternoon into the next morning. It had taken several days to return completely to normal. Derek wondered if his wife would ever get over the night of her sixteenth birthday.

Bliant nodded seconds later, as though at nothing in particular. She turned the large vehicle around a corner onto highway 60, going east. "What brought you to Hartford?"

"Primarily, it's a good area to raise children," Kate said.

Bliant's gum snapped. "You're right about that. Whattaya gonna be doing here?"

"Derek just opened a small book store, like the shop he operated near the University in Kentucky at Bowling Green. The competition became too tough. And he's back into the construction business, as a contractor." Seeing her husband's raised eyebrows made her pause. She smiled with a flash of her eyes. "I've just

graduated with a Bachelor's degree in anthropology."

"Anthropology? Is that where you dig up fossils and stuff?" Her gum cracked.

Kate leaned forward. "No, not exactly. That's archeology, which is a part of anthropology. I study cultures, man's origins and development. Social habits and rituals. Where he has been and where he's going." Derek tapped Kate's thigh with his fingers.

"What kinda job can you get with that?" Bliant's brow was furled in confusion.

"Well, any place that needs someone who understands human beings, both past and present. From museums to, well, even large businesses have started to consult with anthropologists--they're actually small communities, in a way. I have some work lined up with a professor at the University in Milwaukee. And I understand that Hartford is going to build a small museum, centering on Indian tribes that populated the region. I am going to try and write a book about that."

Ms. Bliant nodded. "Ya know, I admire you, Kate. It must've been hard to find the time--with the kids and everything, I mean."

"Well, it seemed to take forever. Often I went part time. But you're right. It can be terribly frustrating. You never feel like there's enough hours in the day and the pressure can get pretty intense."

Derek nodded lightly and pursed his lips. He knew all too well how his wife had dedicated her existence to accomplish her goal. It wasn't something that bothered him. To the contrary, he was proud and highly impressed with Kate. But it had added a great deal of stress to their partnership, something that probably made it stronger in the long run by living through it--coming out the other side of the experience still together and caring for each other.

Bliant smiled the smile of someone who either hadn't really been paying attention or didn't have a clue as to what had been said. She checked the dashboard clock. "Business, business, business. We are all so busy, aren't we?" She had shown them all the units on her sheet that met their 'desire' criteria in their price range. Even those that stretched their budget a little, too. A cream colored binder with house listings lay on the seat next to her, open to the page of the run down building off Second Avenue.

"Ya know," Bliant said, "Even though that unit by Second Ave' needs some redecorating--"

"Redecorating?" Derek shot in.

Bliant never paused. "--it would be a perfect size for you

and your two children. And you have pets, don't you? A dog?"

"A cat."

"A cat. Well, I'm sure you don't want to rent forever, living under someone else's rules. It's always hard to find a place that takes animals--"

"My God, what's that?" Kate asked, pointing toward several old, worn buildings set back off the road. One structure was a metal-sided barracks type affair with a curved roof capped with the orange tinge of rust, its white sides standing out among the ashen, weathered walls of the wooden buildings. Stacked in rows beside the sheds and warehouses were dozens of pallets loaded with what looked like ragged brown and gray carpet remnants tinged with bright red. Each flat carried a load at least four feet high.

"W.B. Place," Bliant said. "That's the tannery."

"So those are all *hides* piled up there?"

"Right," Bliant said. Kate scowled. Bliant said, "Well, after all, deer hunting season just started four days ago."

The fact that deer had been despised and hunted on the farm she grew up on didn't prepare her for the numbers of bloody hides she saw. It had to be in the thousands. A snapshot of her childhood 'animal hospital' in a corner of a barn flashed through her mind--the cats with bandaged paws, old Sterling her retriever, shaved on his side with lots of tape and gauze--the doctoring after a tangle with barbed wire. There were birds nursed after hitting window panes--short timer tenants, and some that stayed for a long period, mending busted wings. Lots of worry and fretting over sick creatures and what might happen next. She had gotten pretty good at being a surrogate animal doctor, and even planned on being a veterinarian--one of her many career choices while growing up--typical of the dreaming and planning young people do.

Bliant broke the silence. "Ya know, folks, that house off Second Avenue--"

"Ms. Bliant--Cynthia, we don't want that place." Derek's voice was polite, but firm.

"Oh, Mr. Freeman, I'm sure you can handle a hammer." That needling tone again.

Derek looked at his wife and rolled his eyes, his face becoming tight. He mimed strangulation behind the cover of the front seat's backrest. Kate stifled a smile, putting one hand under her nose as if wiping it and the other on his knee. Derek pressed his lips together and turned his attention to the scenery.

They rode without speaking for a few minutes, Bliant weaving down side streets--a shortcut to her office. From Highway 60 they turned south on Becker, down a mile, zigzagged for a few blocks

apiece over Vermillion and Slattery Road, then finally turned east again on Thickett. Three blocks later they intersected with Harper street.

As they crossed over Harper, Derek pointed out the window. "Hey! What about that one?" A red and white 'FOR SALE' sign stood sentry in the front yard of a small tan and white duplex four houses south on Harper from Thickett. Bliant eased the car to a stop then slowly backed up to the intersection. She maneuvered the Lincoln in reverse so she could turn onto Harper. As she moved the car ahead she inadvertently jammed the gas pedal, jerking the car forward with a chirp of tires. Her cheeks pinkened and she let the vehicle coast down Harper, parking across the street from the house. The clean 'FOR SALE' advertisement swayed gently on its rusted hanger. The duplex seemed to be one of the first homes in the neighborhood, perhaps over forty years old, but to Derek's eye it seemed well kept and sound. At least on the outside.

"Hmmm." Bliant thumbed through the house listings book. "That one's not listed with our agency." She checked her 'New' folder. Then another binder. "Nothing here on the Multiple Listing Service, either. Must be something new, just filed in the last day or so." Her jaws began to work the gum in rapid strokes.

Derek watched Kate to judge her reaction. She studied the building, not showing any clue as to her feelings. Derek felt she was considering it as a possibility.

Derek looked up and down the street, contemplating the neighborhood as their home. The buildings were a mixture of ages, some looking as new as fifteen years old while a few, including the duplex, had to be built well before they were born. One house on the corner, set back from the street more than the others, looked as though it had been a farmhouse, with a weather-beaten garage that might have been a small barn. Most likely the land in the area had once been part of a farm, with that one building standing in solitude, the lone dwelling for miles. The street terminated in a dead end bordered by trees, land never farmed, a wooded section seemingly vast judging by the depth and darkness beyond the edge.

"Having renters would help you with the mortgage," Bliant said. "If you like it you can always put in an offer through our agency." A crack of gum. "We just split the commission between agencies then." The dour look on her face spoke volumes on what the agent thought of the idea.

"Can we see it?" Kate said.

"Wait here." Bliant slipped on a pair of tight fitting leather gloves and left the warmth of the vehicle. At the door

she rang the bell and waited, turning back and forth in the cold air with her raised shoulders guarding her neck. A second ring, still no response. A stiff knock on the door was just as successful. She quickly gave up and returned to the Lincoln.

"I'm afraid no one's home. I'll call that agency and, if everything is, um, what you're looking for, I'll make an appointment if you like, Mr. Freeman. With the holiday it might take a few days."

Derek was pleased that Kate was smiling. "That would be fine, Cynthia," he said. *Maybe this house-hunting business will be over soon.*

The Lincoln rumbled to life to continue its journey to Ms. Bliant's office. A smile was beginning to grow on the real estate agent's face. Derek and Kate joined hands in the back seat, each looking with fondness in the other's eyes. Behind them, in the old maroon brick house one door south of the duplex, a curtain moved an inch back to its closed position.

CHAPTER THREE

Early the next day Cynthia Bliant sat in her office, thinking about her plan of attack. Despite the Freeman's interest in the tan and white duplex on Harper, the run down unit off Second Avenue would be a great sale for her. That dump had been on the books for a year and she and every other agent in her office had tried to push it on each client that had come along. She had to try and sell it to the Freeman's too. A sale is a sale after all. She didn't blame them for not wanting it. God, she wouldn't buy the place either.

She looked at the other desks, unoccupied at this time of the morning, and stroked the telephone with fingers tipped in red and glossy nails. Two sticks of pink strawberry gum found their way into her mouth then she again caressed the phone, waiting for the clock's minute hand to advance another tick.

The Freeman house was in chaos, like every other morning. Of course, the impending holiday made it worse. Melissa, off from school and excited, tagged after her mother, an incessant fountain of questions. Nathaniel padded along the floor, trying to keep up with them, always arriving in a room just as Kate was walking out. Each time Kate walked past him, changing direction, the boy would giggle or squawk and sit up, his diapered rear end resting on his calves. It was hard for him to maintain his balance but he seemed to be enjoying himself, as if his mother was playing a game. Melissa gave her brother a pat on his plastic pants or light rub on his head each time they passed.

Kate checked the turkey in the sink, poking at the frozen carcass with a stiff finger. The faint aroma of raw poultry wafted up at her. She glanced at the clock then back at the bird, reached for the faucet and began to run cool water into the sink. As the water ran, she surveyed the kitchen counter. Her eyes fell on the uncorked, nearly empty wine bottle. Two glasses with a small portion of the Beaujolais still in them sat next to it. She looked through the doorway into the living room, saw her bra lying on the floor and grinned. She felt Nathan at her ankles as she took her first step to retrieve the underwear. The boy gurgled and let out a yelp.

Meanwhile, Derek moved from room to room, dressing, retrieving notes, taking bites from his toast or a sip of coffee and organizing his thoughts for the day. At one point he picked up last night's newspaper from the kitchen table and scanned the headlines. "Do you believe this shooting in California?" he asked, shaking his head.

"At that McDonald's in Pasadena?" Kate strode past him.

"Yeah. Two kids and an eighty-two year old man died. The old guy got a shotgun blast in the face."

"I read that," Kate called from Melissa's room. "What a tragedy."

"Why do these lunatics always seem the same?" Derek said rhetorically. He read from the page. "A history of mental problems, a loner, abused as a child. He admitted to torturing animals as a teen."

Kate walked out of Melissa's bedroom carrying dirty laundry, leaving Nathan to babble to himself.

Derek said, "Why can't they stop this before it happens? I mean, they know what to look for."

"In school I learned how ancient cultures handled it. They thought they could prevent evil things from happening by purging criminals from their ranks. They were executed in rituals."

"There's some good in that," Derek said.

"Problem is, all that was usually needed to label someone as a criminal was an accusation. Suspicion spread and when it grew to a point where enough people hated the accused . . ." She drew her finger across her throat in a cutting motion. "Kind of a police-state mentality."

"I guess some of that would be in your book, something like this in old Indian cultures," Derek said.

"Sure. I want to save that article for reference."

"Things sure were strange in early civilizations."

"Not really that long ago," Kate said. "Don't forget Salem and all those witches. That was in the late sixteen hundreds."

Kate thought about the similarities between ancient cultures and current cases where irrational and dangerous behavior sprouted. First a person was suspected of evil deeds, the belief spread and these suspicions fostered hatred. That must twist an individual--eventually they become what they were thought to be. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. She wondered if pre-historic civilizations had a solution with their ceremonial executions--a preemptive strike, so to speak, something absent today that allows the Jeffrey Dahmers and serial killers to be created, or did they just over react, murdering innocent people?

The jangle of the phone broke into Kate's thoughts and snapped her back to the fervor of the morning, now heightened by the nervous ringing. Both Derek and Kate rushed to answer it. Derek made it there first, greeted the caller then mouthed 'Bliant' to Kate. Kate planted her feet, hands on hips. Nathan grabbed Kate's jeans with a chirp of glee and bounced in place, seemingly pleased he had finally caught her.

Derek cradled the phone against his ear. "Just as I

thought," said the real estate agent. "It's a new listing." The popping of her gum sounded like bursting plastic bags in Derek's ear. He pulled the receiver away from his head for an instant. Kate laughed silently until Derek returned the phone to his head.

"And the price?" Derek asked.

"What they're asking is right in your range."

"Good. When can we see it?"

"Day after tomorrow, if you want."

"Why not tomorrow?"

"On Thanksgiving?" I'm surprised you would be willing to give up a holiday."

Derek sensed Bliant's eager tone. He was also positive he heard her fingernails clack against her mouthpiece. "Sure," Derek said. "My shop is closed. That would work out perfect for me."

"Well . . . it is vacant," said the agent. "How does Kate feel about seeing it?"

Derek shifted his attention to his wife, certain that she understood the gist of the conversation.

"It's okay by me," Kate said loud enough for Bliant to hear. "We'll have to bring Nathan and Melissa with us. It would be impossible to get a babysitter on a holiday."

Bliant spoke before Derek had the chance. "Okay then, I'll set it up. I'll have to pick up the keys from the listing agency tonight. Um, how about just after lunch?"

"Fine. That would be fine," Derek said.

There was a pause on Bliant's end and Derek heard a shuffling of papers. "Oh, another thing," Bliant said. "If things go all right, you'll be happy to know you can move in just as soon as a deal would go through. The lower is vacant."

"Good," Derek said. "By Christmas?"

"Well, no, probably not. It would take a miracle to get you in by then. The offer, assuming you'll make one, will have to go to the owners. They'll think on it for a few days, see if another offer comes in." A snap of gum. "Then there'll be a counter offer, I'm sure, some negotiating, ya know, and then the bank'll have to go through its motions. Just after Christmas, though. That's a promise."

"We've got some paperwork set up with the bank already," Derek said. "Sort of a pre-approved type of thing. At least we know we can do something."

"Great," Bliant said. "That'll help speed things up."

Derek hung up and stepped to Kate, reaching out to her. She squeezed her husband's hand, he smiled easily and completely. *Finally, a good chance at owning their own home, thought Derek. I just hope we're not setting ourselves up for disappointment.*

We've seen so many places. There's a lot of junk out there. Both Derek and Kate thought being the landlord instead of the renter would be a great change. They were tired of spending their money paying off someone else's property.

* * *

Derek Freeman stood in the doorway to the dimly lit bedroom and watched his wife tuck a blanket under Melissa's chin with gentle, cozy nudges. This was a custom of Kate's for all her daughter's six years. Kate still liked to make sure her first child was safe under the covers at the end of the day. She brushed the blond locks from the young girl's forehead and stroked her fingers over a cheek crimson from staying up past bedtime. A light kiss on the tip of Melissa's nose followed. "Good night, 'Lissa."

"G'night, mom . . . Mom?"

"What, honey?"

"Can you leave the nightlight on?"

"Yes, dear."

Derek smiled a smile that had its origins deep inside the warm center of his soul. As Kate left the room he pulled the door toward its jamb, leaving it slightly ajar so that a sliver of light would enter--another source to keep the room from darkness. And nightmares. Melissa was at that age where bad dreams seemed real enough to touch and wakening in the middle of the night sobbing happened often enough to be considered habitual.

Both parents tiptoed into the nursery to check on Nathaniel Freeman--Nate as his grandfather was called, or NATHAN with a forceful, articulate pronunciation on both syllables when mom wanted to get his attention. Derek knew his father would have beamed had he lived to see the grandson bearing his name.

The baby was still as death, peacefully holding his blue blanket against his cheek. Both parents had to stare at his back to detect the slight rise as he took his shallow breaths. Kate always had that worry that her babies would stop breathing during their sleep. The loss of a schoolmate's child from SIDS--Sudden Infant Death Syndrome--left an indelible impression on Kate, even though neither of her children had ever had an episode or shown any signs of it.

In the parlor, one lamp on its lowest setting kept the room from darkness, though the corners and small spaces behind furniture were cloaked by an inky veil. Kate and Derek moved into the room with an animation in their movements not usually present in their evening hours. The couch seemed warmer than it had been

since the air had turned cool in the fall--it was just the excitement Derek and Kate felt about the prospect of owning their own home. They sat close together, he with his arm over her shoulder, her head nestled beneath his chin, her hands on his leg.

"I hope this house turns out to be what we are looking for," she said.

"Yes. Room to spread out a little."

Out of the corner of his eye Derek saw the drapes above the love seat ripple slightly. Then a quick, jerking movement, the rings of the curtain rod rattling lightly. Derek froze, one eye narrowing. Kate noticed her husband's intensity and fell silent. She saw the second shake of the curtains, let out a tiny gasp and leaned a little in to Derek. She focused her attention on the flickering drapes. Her hand moved up to Derek's wrist. She took a deep breath, ready to speak, and bent forward, her skin tingling with anticipation. Derek began to rise in a slow deliberate move, Kate still clutching at his arm. The curtain twitched again and both of them jumped as if jolted by electricity.

"Perkins, you furball, leave those drapes alone!" Derek shouted, grabbing a pillow from behind him and flinging it at the drapes. The movement stopped and was followed shortly by the appearance of the family pet, an ordinary enough gray and off-white striped alley cat.

Kate laughed. "Perkins, you troublemaker. We were going to pounce on you!" The raggedy colored animal had gotten her name from the restaurant where they had found her, trying her hardest to tip a trash can in the alley for her evening meal. It hadn't taken her long to become a part of the Freeman family in a big way, and she acted like it.

The feline stroked itself along the couch, purring as she came. It stopped when she reached Derek and began rubbing herself on her master's calf. The purring accelerated to a tiny rumble, like the distant echo of a small outboard motor idling in a calm pine-bordered lagoon. Soon she was up with them on the sofa, walking back and forth from lap to lap. After a while it decided Kate's lap was more comfortable and settled down, its purring soft under Kate's casual stroking.

"Do you think the bank would approve the duplex?" Kate asked.

"Yeah, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. We haven't even seen the place. We don't know if we'll want it."

"I know. I'm just worried," She smoothed the fur along Perkins' spine.

"Because of the businesses?"

"That's part of it. We haven't lived here that long, either. When it comes to an actual mortgage application I don't know if a

lender is going to look favorably on three months." Kate sighed.

"The store will make enough money to take care of itself, and I'm making a good profit on those two remodeling jobs."

"Thank God for Jack," Kate said, speaking of Derek's construction expeditor.

Derek nodded. "I don't know how the bank will see it. We opened the store just at the right time, before the traditional Thanksgiving rush of Christmas shopping. Sales should be high, up out of sight, you'll see. Our savings account is going to fatten up real quick. And we still have twenty thousand in the old mutual fund from my inheritance. It's a duplex so there'll be rent income."

"I just have my hopes up, I guess. It seemed like such a nice neighborhood. So quiet. I hope there are some children living there."

Derek leaned over and nuzzled Kate on her smooth neck, lingered with a long kiss that caressed its way to her earlobe and ended in a little nibble. She turned to him and brought one hand up to lightly touch his cheek, the other moving up his leg a few inches. Their lips met with a tender, deep eagerness, then they parted to search each other's eyes. Derek reached down, lifted Perkins from Kate's lap and gently threw the animal onto the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kate ran her fingers along the clean white counter top, bouncing Nathan in her other arm. She nodded occasionally as she studied the large room. Derek laughed, pointing to an old milk chute--a hint as to the building's age. He studied the craftsmanship, paying attention to what little remodeling the kitchen boasted. Dovetail joints were evident in the construction of the oak cabinet drawers and all the material was solid wood--no plywood. Storage was both plentiful and well built. The tone of the woodwork throughout the home was an agreeable amber shade.

A faint, lingering smell of disinfectant was noticeable in place of the odors which would have been present with a family in occupancy. No trace of greasy cooking smells or baked goods. A pure ivory circle on the south wall near the ceiling surrounded by a shadowy rim of dirt gave evidence to past placement of a clock. Fake black and white brick covered the opposite wall, where the gas and 220 electric stubs came up through the floor. The wallpaper in the kitchen was a putrid yellow, green and orange striped affair that contrasted in an unbelievably garish way with the red and age-yellowed floor tiles. The middle of three bedrooms had a smell of decaying flowers and mothballs, as if an old woman had occupied it, possibly until her last day.

"Well, what do you think?" Cynthia Bliant asked, her voice laced with nasal resonance, eyes focused on her open purse as she rummaged through its contents.

"The wallpaper and tiling in here would have to go," Kate said emphatically.

Derek nodded in agreement. "Other than that, not too bad," he said. "The back yard is average, but I like the currant bushes. That bedroom at the rear of the house is a little small though." He motioned with a flinch of his head to the doorway connected to the corner of the kitchen.

"Yes," Kate added, going into the living room. "It would be fine for the baby now, but later we might need a larger room." She held her son close to her and whispered mother-talk into his ear. *My little boy won't be little forever.*

"You can never tell what will happen later, ya know?" Bliant said. "In a few years you might need a bigger place. Another child maybe, or your businesses will be so successful that you can afford the home of your dreams." She finally found a pack of gum at the bottom of her purse, unwrapped a piece and began to chew.

The real estate agent's words pleased two parts of Kate's brain--one in charge of logic and the other of fantasies. She smiled and nodded her head. "I would have to put my computer

equipment in our bedroom, the one in front." she said. "That shouldn't be a problem. That room's a nice size."

Melissa came padding into the kitchen from the small bedroom, her face filled with anticipation. "Can I have that one?" She pointed behind her.

"I suppose . . . if we buy it," Derek responded. Melissa went back to the room, dreams in her eyes. "I like the lights," she called to her parents. The bedroom was paneled with an imitation vertical plank style, colored a rusty-brown, and each wall sported a light with a small glass cylinder on top and a miniature sailing ship's wheel beneath.

"What about the curtains?" Kate asked, holding one of the parlor's window dressings in her hand. "These match well and are fairly new." Every window was adorned with a set of light tan drapes except the one closest to the front door, and that attracted Kate's attention. She walked over to it.

"They stay, if you want them," Bliant said. Wouldn't fit in their new place, I guess." Ms. Bliant looked as though she was getting warm, a sheen conspicuous on her forehead.

Kate thought the glass in the window with the missing curtain was recently replaced, the glazing fresh, a single coat of white paint. The sill was worn, unmistakably scratched, as though worked over by claws. She bent for a closer examination and noticed a dark reddish stain soaked into the grain of the wood. The orange-toned carpeting beneath the marked sill had a trace of the redness smeared into it and looked as though it had been scrubbed in an attempt to clean it.

Derek addressed Bliant. "Why did they sell, anyway?"

"I don't really know. The agent at Federated only said that the place wasn't working out for them." A tiny pink bubble mushroomed between her lips and popped.

"No structural problems, I hope."

"Shouldn't be." The agent quickly thumbed through a packet of papers. "None listed. Of course we'll check for any liens on the property. And you can have the place inspected to your satisfaction."

"Of course." Derek rubbed his chin. "When--if--we put an offer on this place I would want a plumber and electrician to give their opinions, besides the usual bank ordered inspections. My people." He stepped into the living room to join Kate.

"That can be done." Ms. Bliant was beginning to twitch, a nervous smile flickering at the edges of her mouth. She followed on Derek's heels out of the kitchen and flipped open a folder to the fresh offer sheet on top; it sat there with the Freeman's personal information already filled in. The intervals between her

gum snapping shortened.

"Derek," Kate said, "Look at this. Does this look like blood to you?"

Derek bent to examine the red discoloration. "Kind of." He looked at Bliant. "Do you know anything about this?"

Bliant's animated gesturing with her hands, the simultaneous shrug and shaking of her head, suggested the disavowal of knowledge. Her gum cracked in short bursts. "I don't even think it's blood . . . you know, kids and their artwork." She didn't bother to mention the previous owners had no children. "Umm . . . don't you think the kitchen is nice and big?"

Kate didn't really believe the scarlet stain came from youngster's mischief--it looked too much like dried blood. She supposed somebody got clumsy and put their hand through the glass. She wandered out of the room, through the kitchen and down the hall while Derek remained, concentrating on the stain. Bliant moved back to the kitchen to a spot where both Derek and Kate were visible.

Kate peeked into a closet, saw it wasn't empty and swung it open all the way. "Oh, look at this," she called. Then, to herself, almost in a whisper, "I wonder why they left this here." She bent down and picked up a small padded pet bed from the floor. The label on the side proclaimed in proud yellow letters that it was a genuine 'KITTY-NAPPER'. Melissa, finding her mother, seemed enthralled by the bed and ran her fingers over its aqua-hued calico covering. Kate said, "It looks so new."

Bliant said nothing.

Derek moved to the driveway side of the house, spreading the drapes to scrutinize the condition of the window frame. He glanced across the single-lane ribbon of concrete to the neighboring maroon brick dwelling, its side cast in shade. A curtain quickly snapped shut. Derek smirked. *Must be a nosy neighbor.* "Who lives next door, to the south? Any idea how old they are?"

"I don't know," Bliant said. "Just your typical neighbors, I'm sure."

Kate returned to the living room. She set Nathan on the bright carpeting to let him investigate the quality of the weave. "This rug will have to go," Kate said. "It's ruined in spots. And ugly." She pointed to the area around Derek's feet. "That's an odd place for wear, right in front of the window. So close to the wall."

"Maybe there was an easy chair against it, like this," offered Bliant, motioning with her arms to show how the chair could have been set parallel to the wall.

"I don't think so," Derek said. "A chair would have faced the corner of the room--it wouldn't fit with its back against it--and your knees would be inches from the corner. And the worn area is too wide."

"Somebody spent a lot of time at this spot," Kate said. "Looking out."

Bliant, her leg straight, tapped at the floor with her toes, cleared her throat and snapped her gum. "You're right about this carpet, it's gruesome. Well, you can always reduce your offer by an amount you feel suitable to replace it. I'm sure the owners won't object. Or they'd meet you half way." A crack of gum. Pause. Crack.

Derek, his back to the real estate agent, looked at Kate, rolled his eyes and then shrugged. Addressing Bliant, he said, "Another thing. I'd have to meet the upstairs tenant before I bought this place. The last thing I need is a surprise."

"Absolutely, Mr. Freeman--Derek, I agree. I will arrange that for you." She checked her info sheet. "A single man. Mr. James Sadowski."

Derek left the two women and walked out the front door. He spent a minute studying the aluminum siding then turned his attention to the huge tree in the middle of the yard. It had a trunk almost double his reach around, and the first thick, black limbs were ten feet from the ground. The leaf-bare branches reached up and sprawled in all directions like a mass of petrified snakes, reaching over the yards bordering both sides of the lot. Some of it lay directly above the house to the north. Twigs and finger-sized sticks littered the grass inside the drip-line. It badly needed a trim. At its base was a seat built from planks that boxed the tree in a square. Six inches of dry, brown leaves had collected there. Derek couldn't decide exactly what kind of tree it was, but guessed it might be some sort of maple.

"You gonna buy this place, mister?"

The thin voice from behind startled Derek and he turned quickly to see two young boys looking at him, both squinting, one with his head cocked. "Hi guys," Derek said. "You live around here?"

"Yeah. Down the block." They pointed their stubby fingers at homes toward the dead end of the street.

"So what are your names?"

"Peter."

"Jamie. I got two sisters. Brigid and Kristen."

"You gonna buy this place?" Peter asked. The boy wiped snot onto the sleeve of his coat.

"We might. We're looking at it now."

Jamie, his eyes widening to big ovals, leaned forward and whispered, "The lady in that house is a witch." He motioned at the maroon brick house with a jab of his thumb and shot it a fleeting glance.

"And I bet she eats children on Halloween, too?" Derek laughed softly.

Jamie, aiming his digit further south, said, "They're mean, next door to the witch's house. That's the witch's kids." He scowled. "They took my ball last summer."

"I see. Some people just don't know how to get along with kids, I guess. I have children."

"Boys?" An expectant look sprung on their faces.

"One," Derek said. "But he's not a year old yet. I have a girl, too, old enough for you to play with." He smiled at Peter.

The boys frowned at each other. "Yuck! Girls!" They started to trot off down the sidewalk, their scarves flapping after them, then turned and darted across the street. "See ya, mister!"

Derek shook his head and chuckled. He remembered being that age. There was always one 'witch' in the neighborhood. Someone who was up there in years and stayed in a lot, never decorated their homes for Christmas or Halloween. *Old Mrs. Sawyer. Damn, we gave her a hell of a hard time.* It wasn't until he embraced adulthood and got to know a woman similar to Mrs. Sawyer that he understood why people could be like that. The elderly, he discovered, sometimes don't have the energy or reason to bother with all the usual trivia and rituals that most people allow in their lives.

Ms. Bliant emerged from the duplex, grinning at Derek. "What do you think? Can I write this up?"

"It's fine, Cynthia. I like it. We'll talk it over tonight." He noticed Kate, watching them through the front window, wearing a smile. While nodding he said, "there's a good chance we'll make an offer. After we meet the tenant."

"Excellent." She reached for Derek's hand, her gum snapping and popping frantically. "I can't tell you how glad I am that we found a place where you'll be happy. Finally, you can find peace."

CHAPTER FIVE

The hour was too late for anyone on Harper street to be awake, to serve as witness. A holiday night, full stomachs and early bedtimes, deep and sound sleep. Damp, light fog envelops the neighborhood. Only creatures of the night stir in the chilled shadows.

Among the nocturnal beasts moves a creeping mist, a different sort of unpleasant vapor, amorphous yet unified, its core flowing within the larger mass of diluted fog. Seeping out of the filthy sewer in the ravine in the woods it came to search, to hunt. Low to the ground, shifting yet not separating, pouring through the trees, probing for its next victim.

It was time for another.

An hour earlier it had emerged from the basement drain of the tan and white duplex, flowing through the rooms of the vacant lower unit, pooling in spots, sniffing for the leftover scent of the living. The odors and aromas and pheromones left in traces by the humans who had been there that day were plentiful enough to be an intoxicating sustenance to the vile damp thing. The essence of Kate Freeman especially aroused it, invigorated it, and filled it with an understanding that to change the goodness of her to a loathing it could absorb could instill a new power, a lasting, perhaps complete and permanent transformation.

It could stay.

It had lingered, tasting the scent, then slithered back to the dark wet sewer to begin its hunt.

Now, out of the woods, down the street, called by the soft purring of a feline maybe forgotten at its owner's curfew, the vaporous entity moves with a determined, deadly purpose. Faster toward the cat, the fog enticed by the animal's warmth and blood and heartbeat.

A thin, ashen haze encases the neighborhood, the undead vapor rolling within it. Human eyes falling upon it would perceive an unusual movement centered in the thickest part of the fog, as though driven by a twisting, slow, wind.

Closer. A cry from the cat, its awareness piqued. It scratches at the door of its master, no response. Harder with anxious claws, watching the fog approach, scraping paint clean off the wood. Hissing. A howl. The tumorous mist closes in on the animal.

The light above the door snaps on, a second goes by, fingers of vapor circle the feline. The door opens a crack, allowing the cat to come in, a curse to slip out. Mercy De Ville's eyes are groggy slits, she fails to see the fog, really see it, the

movement within it. The door latches, the light blanks, darkness returns.

The thick haze drifts back to the forest, slips between the trees, pours over the lip of the ravine. It glides through the bars guarding the storm sewer into the inky cavity below, as though sucked in by the earth itself.

In its lair, bubbling through the trap of the basement sewer drain, rising, the fog thickens into a smaller shape. It becomes more defined, dense. The materializing object settles onto the cool gray concrete, wetting a silhouette of itself onto the floor.

As it solidifies, it takes on a recognizable shape. Limbs appear. A head. Torso. A human form, grayish, embryonic. Features now of a man, naked and unconscious, curled like a fetus, wet to the bone.

The heavy scents of birth and sex clove the air.

He came out of it in reverse order as he had gone into it, the same as every time--through a gateway of pain. More asleep than awake, that seemingly impossible with the intense, tormenting sensation of a hot wire straight through the center of his brain.

As his arms regained function, they moved so his hands could embrace his skull. A low moaning, a guttural complaining seemed to weep unbroken from his drooling mouth.

The transitional agony was nearly ruinous to him, and each time he feared it. Feared the transformation more than death. Yet he knew it not as a metamorphosis but only that as the darkness approached with the driving torment, there would be a void and wakening with more suffering and what he thought to be nightmares. And the dread of not understanding his drenched, naked body and the reek of musk. Denial. Dismissed as sleep-walking, perhaps with acts of perversion he cared not to ponder. There would be snatches of memory for him, non-belief, judging it as only bits of a bad dream. Yet at the conclusion of the event, after the dissipation of pain, he felt complete, whole. Satisfaction warmed him and he did not know why. He yearned for that feeling to stay, and deep inside a fraction of his soul embraced the nightmare as provider. There was a trace sense it was all true.

The spirit seed within him, despite the weak humanity that had before fought it, began germinating from the promise of eternal existence. Lust for the becoming, a power that redefined the limits of nature. As a parasite throughout the centuries in others including this one, it had hungered for that permanence. Now that goal could be. This host would be the vehicle.

It had set upon him, enabled by the combined forces of many, that invisible energy that comes from one thing only. The

solitary thing without peer that emotes the black side of human action.

Hate.

CHAPTER SIX

Late Saturday morning, gray, dismal and cold. The existence of the sun was a myth. Between the jabs of a biting wind an occasional snowflake fluttered down from the icy sky. Derek Freeman stood at the bottom of the exposed stairway leading to the upper unit of the duplex, head bowed and shoulders raised as a guard against the weather. The stairs, attached to the outside wall on the driveway side of the house, were supported from underneath by tall, slightly warped four by fours. The ash-colored coating on the steps was worn smooth, almost like glass, and the white paint on the wooden handrail was streaked black from countless passings of soiled hands. He promised himself that enclosing the stairway would be one of the first projects he would undertake. *I can just see it now, some frail old lady slipping on the snow and ice, head over heels. The last thing I need is a lawsuit.*

He gingerly began to climb the steps with one hand on the flimsy rail, his feet picking their way between the clumps of ice stuck to the planks. *Yes, definitely the first project. This has to be considered when we make the offer.*

At the top of the steps was a small enclosed porch, its ceiling barely high enough to clear Derek's head, with a narrow slit of a window below shoulder level on the driveway side. He entered it hoping that Cynthia Bliant had done her job and notified the tenant. A push on the smudged, paint-caked doorbell button produced a muffled buzzing sound from inside.

He bent to peek out the narrow window, seeing that it offered a view nearly blocked by the maroon house next door. Only part of the front yard of the neighboring house, a sliver of the road and another home at an angle across the street were visible. As he looked out, a middle-aged woman came into sight, most of her light brown hair in curlers, her large body bulging from her unzipped coat and half-tucked-in blouse. She was carrying a plywood cut-out of a Santa Claus figure. Derek thought she must be one of the "witches' kids" that the neighborhood boys had talked about.

The woman stood for a moment, scratching the back of her red, oversized sweat-pants and squinting at the painted likeness of Santa. She appeared to be wavering. She positioned the flat statue, pushed her weight onto it and thrust the support post into the hard ground, jerking forward and coming close to stumbling over it. Even from behind the glass, Derek heard the woman's grunt. She straightened herself, stepped back to look at her work, which was at a slightly crooked angle, smiled faintly then plodded out of view. Derek wondered if she was disabled, drunk or

both.

He rang the doorbell again. After a moment the kitchen light went on and through the wispy curtains covering the door's window he saw a portly human form approach. The door opened and Derek was greeted by a somber faced, obese young man clutching a can of Miller beer. "Yeah?" The stale stench of alcohol breath greeted Derek's nostrils and he guessed from the slur in the man's speech it wasn't his first drink of the day.

The renter took a long pull from the can, stroked his curly black beard and tried in vain to pull his T-shirt over his ample belly. This he punctuated with a soft, rolling belch.

"Jim Sadowski? I'm Derek Freeman. The real estate company should have called you."

"Oh yeah, right. Come on in." He stepped back, ran his fingers through greasy, unkempt hair and waved for Derek to enter. He held his beverage up. "Beer?"

"Uh, no, thanks," Derek said. "I won't take too much time. Just wanted to meet you and check out the upper unit."

Sadowski downed the last of the can, set the empty container on the kitchen counter and waddled to the refrigerator to retrieve another. "Ya sure?"

"No, thanks." Derek shook his head. A sudden spike of pungent odor met his nose. A smoldering green-plant smell tucked away on some file card in his memory. Where had he smelled that before?

Sadowski leaned his hip against the edge of the counter top, snapped open the can and took a long drink, pumping his throat to absorb about half the liquid. "So you're gonna buy this place, huh?"

"We'll probably put in an offer, at least."

"Gonna raise my rent?" The can met his mouth.

"I hope not," Derek said. But I'll be honest with you. It depends what the mortgage payment and other expenses are. I'm renting myself right now so I understand where you're coming from, but I can't make any promises." *What is that strange burning smell?*

Sadowski grunted and took a long draw on his brew, nearly emptying it. He mumbled with the beer can against his teeth. "Don't matter. I'm not gonna stay around here forever, ya know." The can came away for another belch, this time a single staccato rap, louder than the last. Spoiled, acidic malt fumes wafted over to Derek.

Derek misunderstood a few of Sadowski's garbled words and before he responded he asked the young man to repeat himself. Derek frowned. "Oh? Any problems with this place?"

Sadowski narrowed his eyes, brought the can to his lips, head tilted back. A deliberate sip. "Nothin' major. It's just the neighborhood. It kind of gives me the creeps."

Or the other way around, thought Derek. He was beginning to think he wouldn't be too upset to lose this man as a tenant. "I see." His eyes wandered into the living room, the faint haze hovering there. His gaze fell on a coffee table, and the pipe in the ashtray. Then he remembered where he had last encountered that burning green-plant smell. It was in a dormitory party at Kate's college in Bowling Green. It was pot.

"Like last night," Sadowski said with blurred words. "I thought I heard, like, wind or somethin'. Downstairs. Scared the shit outta me."

Derek wondered if Sadowski's imagination was constantly spiked by drugs. Then again, he wasn't sure if he caught everything the drunken man had said, and decided it wasn't important enough to ask him to say it again.

Sadowski coughed. "I'll probably stick around for a while, ya know? Now that the old owners moved out. They were the creepiest, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"They never were too friendly. And just before they put this place up for sale they started acting queer. They would scream in the middle of the night and stuff and you could hear them breakin' shit. Kind of pissed me off." He took a large swallow from the can, finishing it, and smacked it on the counter top. "We didn't see much of each other."

"Well, we're pretty quiet. Our oldest child is six and well behaved. My son is really still just a baby."

"Kids, huh? A baby?" Sadowski scowled and went to the refrigerator for a refill on his beer.

"We have a cat, too." Derek was beginning to feel as though he was the one being interviewed. And in this case he felt like he wanted to give this person a bad impression.

"A cat, huh?" Sadowski muttered something under his breath. The can hissed open. "The old owners had a cat, too." He sucked on the container, trying hard to finish it in one breath. He failed, coming up for air with a gasp. A rivulet of beer ran from the corner of his mouth. "I think they got rid of it, though."

* * *

Kate Freeman added her signature beneath her husband's and handed the pen back across the kitchen table to Cynthia Bliant. The real estate agent smiled, took a moment to review the forms

and placed copies of them in a large yellow envelope.

"Well then," Ms. Bliant said. "All I need from you is a five hundred dollar check for the earnest money and we're all set." A pink bubble grew out of her mouth, expanded to translucency and popped.

Kate opened her purse and dug through its contents for a few seconds before coming up with their checkbook. "Here it is, all written out." She tore the check from the book and gave it to Bliant, let out a light, purring moan of satisfaction and wrapped her hands around Derek's upper arm. They looked at each other, a spark in their eyes.

"I'm sure this will be accepted," Ms. Bliant said. "It's a fair offer. I'm sure the counter offer won't be too much higher." She tucked the check into her briefcase and reached over to shake hands with both of them. "We'll be talking to you soon."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I never would have believed it," Bliant's nasal voice came through the telephone. "So few duplexes in that area and no counter offer. I'm kind of amazed. And to sign your offer right when they received it. Well! I am delighted!" Her chewing gum cracked smartly a few times, annoying Derek's eardrums. "And congratulations, Mr. Freeman. Derek."

Derek flashed an 'O.K.' sign to Kate and she walked over to him, grinning wide. He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Thank you for calling us so quickly, Cynthia. You did a fine job." He winked at Kate.

"Well, thank you, Derek. I do hope you'll remember me if you should ever decide to sell the place."

"Oh, we'll remember you, that's for sure," he said. Kate put her hand over her mouth to stifle the giggling. "What's next?" Derek asked.

"We'll get a date set up with the bank. I can do all that for you. Since you already had a loan application on stand-by and all your credit checks came back clean the other paperwork should just about be ready to go. Just a few final touches will be needed there. I'll call you back when I get a closing date from them. They told me before, 'less than two weeks, maybe even at the end of next week'."

"Okay. Once again, thanks."

"My pleasure."

Derek replaced the phone on the hook and bent his head to give Kate a long kiss. When he took his lips from hers she reached up and pulled him back. They ignored the meowing of Perkins, who, noticing the affection, came over as if to get some for herself.

* * *

"It's too cold to be moving!" Kate hollered into the biting gale, adding several deep coughs. She lifted the collar of her long coat and turned away from the rented panel truck, walking behind it to block the north wind. A snowflake impaled itself on her nose, followed by another that splatted on her pinkened cheek. Both turned to water drops in an instant. She gazed skyward. The forecast called for five inches.

"She's not much for winter, Jack," Derek said to the man holding the other end of the couch.

"Neither am I, my friend. Neither am I. Why my parents moved to this God-forsaken place I will not ever understand." A

low-toned laugh rumbled from Jack's broad chest. "I remember the hot days of my teen years very well, mon. But I be here, for better or worse."

"Tell you what. A hot cup of cocoa has your name on it after we get this inside."

"How about something a little stronger, mon. Like warmed rum? Something to remind me of Jamaica."

"Sorry. I don't think I have any rum. We don't drink too much hard stuff. Some wine or beer once in a while."

Snow swirled about them. It was coming down harder now. Derek stared at the gray and white void above them, his eyes darting around at the multiplying shower of flakes.

Jack balanced the sofa with one thick black hand while his other disappeared inside his large coat. It came back out holding a pint bottle. "Well here then, I be equipped. Good dark Jamaican rum." He handed the unopened bottle to Derek. "Consider this an installment on a housewarming present, mon."

"Well, thanks, Jack. A drink of this does sound like a good idea right now." As if to emphasize Derek's point a gust blew against the couch hard enough to shift the two men sideways. Derek tucked the bottle in his coat pocket.

A short blast from a car horn attracted their attention. The small red vehicle emitting the salutation stopped and a slight man with round-lensed glasses emerged, one hand clutching his lapels, the other grasping a large white and red paper bag.

"Who would that be?" Jack said.

"Gary Zandermann. He's my assistant at the bookstore."

Jack reached for Gary's hand as he approached. "Greetings. Jack Winston. I'm Derek's expeditor at the construction company."

"Looks like you're just in time, Gary," Derek said wryly. "This is the last piece."

Gary smiled. "Good timing, indeed!" He lifted the bag from his side. "I stopped at Kentucky Fried Chicken after I closed up the shop. I thought you might be hungry."

"Thank you," Kate said emphatically. That solved the problem of getting supper together with everything in disarray. She took the food from Gary and went inside.

Gary held the outside door back as Derek and Jack squeezed the large couch through the opening. With everyone inside Kate sealed the door behind them. This last piece of furniture fit snugly among the boxes, lamps and other odds and ends crowding the front room--barely enough space to maneuver between them.

Gary nodded at the boxes of computer equipment. "Derek tells me you're writing a book on prehistoric Indian cultures of the Mid-west. Sounds fascinating. How is it going?"

"Oh, I'm making progress," Kate said on her way to the kitchen. "It's been a little slow lately with all the confusion."

"Quite understandable," Gary said sympathetically.

"I'm gathering information, but I haven't decided on the exact direction of the book. Something in the area of ancient rituals and practices. Either as a study on discipline and punishment, or comparison of ties to possible European ancestry. There hasn't been a lot written about those topics."

"I see," Gary said. "You're studying tribes like the Chippewa and Oneida, the Potawatomi, right? There's been a lot of books on them, Kate."

"Oh, no," Kate said. "Those are much too recent. I'm talking about groups called Paleo-Indians, from about ten thousand years ago. And other cultures, up to about thirteen hundred A.D., before Columbus--like the Aztalan people, out in Jefferson county. The Woodland Indians would be part of that study too--they were a widely scattered group."

"Don't get her started," Derek winked at his wife. "She'll be giving out homework in a minute." Kate slapped Derek on his shoulder in a playful way.

Melissa came marching by, going from box to box tapping each on its top like a drum. No need to wonder what Nathan was up to; he was napping in his bedroom in the crib, the first piece of furniture set up. Derek caught a glimpse of Perkins browsing through the mess. "Hey, you silly cat, what do you think of your new digs?"

"Please," begged Kate from the kitchen, "Don't use the word 'digs' in reference to that cat until we get the litter box filled."

Jack chuckled, then pointed to the pocket of Derek's coat holding the bottle of Jamaican spirits. "Mon, what are you waiting for?"

"Oh, right," Derek said, retrieving the bottle. "We should open this to make sure it's not stale."

"Absolutely," Jack said.

Gary's eyes twinkled and he finally let go of his lapels. His topcoat fell open, revealing a blue and white checked bow tie. He took off his spectacles, retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and began to wipe off the melted snow.

"Kate, plug in the microwave, will you?" Derek said. "And find three mugs. Four, if hot buttered rum sounds good to you. And some cinnamon sticks."

"In this mess?" Kate said incredulously.

"Well, my friends," Jack said. "I figured you would be at a loss to find all the ingredients." He pulled a package of the

requested spice sticks from his pocket. All four adults laughed together.

The warmth of the heated rum slithered down the men's throats, gathering in the hearts of their bellies. The faint presence of cinnamon hung in the air. A satisfied smile, a harbinger of the glow to come, spread over Jack's face. Derek and Gary showed similar, though less exuberant appreciation. Kate, abstaining from the alcohol consumption, was wasting no time and had already begun to unpack several cartons in the kitchen, searching for cat litter and plates for their meal.

She joined the men in the living room, settling on the couch that had been carried in last and coughed deeply.

"Are you okay, Kathryn?" Jack asked.

"I'm fine. All this rushing around and dust being kicked up got my asthma going a bit, that's all."

"Do you need your medicine?" Derek asked. "Do you know where it is?"

"It's in my purse, but I don't need it. This will pass right away." Another dry, rib-cage rattling cough.

"Is your asthma very bad?" Jack asked.

"It only acts up when I get a cold, or the pollen is high, or I exercise without first using my inhalers, or I get too excited."

Jack's eyebrows raised. "Sounds like you have to be careful."

"It's just enough of a bother that I let myself worry about it. But not all the time. Sometimes I go for days, forgetting I have it because there are no symptoms. Even when it does act up, it's usually only a minor coughing jag." As if on cue, a low bark erupted from her lungs. "Once, though, I had a classic attack where I could hardly breathe. We ran the shower hot to make steam and I double-dosed my medication. It was kind of scary."

"I imagine so." Jack smiled warmly.

Gary turned his wrist over, checking the time. "Sorry I wasn't here for all the fun, but the slave driver kept me shackled down. As usual." His laugh accompanied Derek's grunt. "But I must be off, my wife and child are waiting."

"Aren't you staying for supper?" Kate asked.

"No, no, they'll be expecting me. And I should be on my way before this storm gets worse. That little car of mine can only handle so much snow and ice. I just hate this nasty weather." Gary set his empty mug on a box, stepped to the door clenching his lapels together and waved goodbye before he took his leave.

Kate flipped the deadbolt behind Gary, then pointed to a spot by the front window. "I think the Christmas tree should go right there."

"Christmas tree?" Jack said, looking at the date on his watch. "That was a week ago. Most people be taking down their tree 'bout now."

Derek shrugged, a half-smile on his face. "We . . . well, actually, it was Kate's idea, we're going to celebrate Christmas again--here in the new place. Gifts under the tree and everything." Jack's teeth gleamed between his cheerfully parted lips. Derek gazed at the chaos around him. "There's a lot of work to do before the tree can go up." No argument could be made against a rational person's guess that it would take a week to get all the boxes cleared out.

From somewhere in the house a distant hissing noise made it to the three. Their heads turned in unison to listen.

"What the devil was that?" Jack asked, the hairs on his forearm standing up, a chill wave spiraling up his neck. Melissa trotted out of the kitchen to hold her father's hand, standing behind him as if he were a shield.

"I think Perkins found something she doesn't like," Kate said as she walked toward the rear of the home. "I hope we don't have mice." Derek, Jack and Melissa followed.

In the small bedroom at the back of the house the gray and off-white striped furriness of Perkins stood perched on the window sill, her back arched, fangs bared and shining eyes transfixed on the swirling snow outside. She hissed again. The rasping anger coming from the cat seemed louder than they had ever heard it. Jack shivered. "That is a hideous sound."

"Oh, you get used to it," Derek said. "Cats get pissed off pretty easily."

Kate shot a look at her husband for his language. She scooped the feline from the ledge and dropped her to the ground. "I've never heard her that upset about anything. Something must be out there."

"Yeah, right," Derek scoffed. "A bird landed near the window or a bag flew by in the wind. That animal likes to pretend she's some big predator."

Kate peered through the window for a quick look, freezing at the sight of a dark human shape standing in the back yard to the south of them, its stiffness contrasting with the barren trees and bushes thrashing in the wind and driven snow. The hood of a parka fully covered the person's head, but he, or she, appeared to be watching their house; the gaping shadow in the hood of the coat where a face should have been was pointing directly at her. Kate felt a stab of cold, as though a blast of the outside air had come directly through the glass. "Derek. Look at this." She stepped slowly away from the window.

Derek sipped his rum and exchanged places with her, glancing where his wife had been staring. "What? I don't see anything."

"Don't you see that . . . that man?"

He looked again, moving his head around to scope the entire yard. "I don't see anybody." He looked at Jack, raising an eyebrow, trying not to smirk.

"There was a man out there," Kate said, her tone pitched a notch higher. "It must've been a man. Too big for a woman, I think. In the yard next door. Just standing there as still as a statue. It was kind of bizarre. He was looking at me."

"Honey, you're not supposed to be seeing things. We're the ones who are drinking." He laughed and swayed toward Jack, who stifled himself with a forced appearance of politeness.

"Hey, I saw someone there!" The attitude in her voice was that of a child no one believed.

"Okay, okay," Derek said. Probably the next door neighbor checking out the weather." He took another sip from his glass and touched his wife on the arm. "I believe you, Kate. It's not a big deal. Don't worry about it."

She shook her head and left the room.

Derek said to Jack, laughing, "You know, I talked to some neighborhood boys when we were looking at this place and they swear the old lady next door is a witch. And her kids live in the next house down." His look could not have been any more mocking.

Jack's face took on an ominous scowl. "Where I was born witchcraft is treated very seriously. There are a great many people who believe in the supernatural." He reached up to place a wide ebony hand on Derek's shoulder. "They have seen the work of evil with their own eyes."

Derek grunted and took a long drink.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the two hours Melissa Freeman had been awake she managed to turn the living room into an explosion of multi-colored gift wrap, oblivious to the Scotch pine's fragrance enveloping her and the darkness beyond the windows. She had accomplished the feat on her own--brother Nathaniel, even with this ritual repeated so soon after the actual holiday, two weeks prior, was much too young to understand that toys awaited your awakening on Christmas morning; that the proper procedure was to get out of bed long before your parents wanted to get up. Melissa was beside herself--two Christmas' in one year!

Having a father who owned a book store meant books as presents. That made Melissa happy. She loved to spend time with those many good stories. The girl had been reading for a year and loved it immensely. She neither cared nor understood that getting books at cost made it easier to give them as gifts. Melissa went from package to package, examining the little stiff tags naming the receiver of the gift. Each one bearing her name brought a smile to her face, a gasp, a rise in blood pressure, and a frantic tearing of bright paper. The bundles and boxes that contained things other than books were the best because they were the true surprises. Even clothes delighted her. The budgeted Christmas expenditure being split between the two celebrations wasn't noticed. For Melissa, it was the number of packages, not what they cost.

Finally the rustling and occasional giggle woke Kate and Derek. Kate combed her fingers through the mass of tangled black morning-hair obstructing her eyes, rolled over, checked the alarm clock and moaned.

"How early?" Derek asked, raising his head from the bed.

"Just shy of five."

His head dropped back onto the warm pillow. "Thank God this normally only happens once a year. Who had the bright idea for doing this twice?" Kate sidled next to him and ran her hand along the inside of Derek's leg, making him forget entirely who to blame.

They dressed quickly in robes, hoping to catch their daughter's expressions before she had opened all her presents. This Christmas rerun so soon after the real thing did nothing to diminish their anticipation. This was one of the few occasions in a year Derek was dominated by bliss, all other concerns somewhere in his unconscious mind--an entirely too brief period that made the ongoing struggle of life disappear for a while. Time away from work--Jack and Gary could handle the businesses for these

hours--had become much too rare. The pureness of a day off lifted his spirits like no other non-sexual event could.

For Kate, it was pure serenity, a warm feeling of love and security. A rare moment where she was able to subdue the worry over the possible tragedies waiting in everyday life. She supposed she would always be the protective parent, even when someday, hopefully, she became a grandmother.

Derek rubbed his eyelids with a knuckle as he sauntered into the living room. He stroked Melissa's tender hair and mumbled something about the coffee pot calling him from the kitchen. Kate followed and laughed when she saw the huge mess Melissa had created. Against a wall leaned an aluminum snow shovel, a large red ribbon complete with bow adorning its handle. Derek eyed it and snickered. "Gee, honey, thanks, just what I needed."

Kate smiled devilishly. "Look's like you're going to get a chance to use it today, too."

Derek looked out the window, unhappy to see a three inch accumulation of snow coating his driveway. "Oh, yeah. Now I remember one thing I liked about renting."

"At least you won't have to bother the guys on your crew to come and do it like you did last week."

"That was kind of expensive," Derek said.

"You'd better get out there before we go to church," Kate admonished. "If the car drives on that stuff it'll pack down and get icy."

"Church? This isn't really Christmas, you know."

"Melissa asked if we were going, just like on the real Christmas. I think she wants the complete experience."

Derek thought the mass two weeks ago would suffice for their annual pilgrimage to church. Apparently not. Although they considered themselves to be Catholic, Christmas was usually the only reason the family made an appearance for services. Kate went a few additional times with Melissa--Easter and Ash Wednesday at least--but Derek perpetually found himself too busy to attend, except, of course, for weddings and funerals.

As he neared the end of the driveway each scoop of the white stuff seemed heavier than the last. Derek soon convinced himself that a snow blower was in his future. Above the sound of his grunting into the cold, calm air he heard the scraping of another shovel somewhere nearby. He glanced over his shoulder and saw his neighbor two doors to the south removing the powdery white stuff from the sidewalk. *Must be the other "witches' kid"*. A grin parted his lips. The man's back was to him and Derek could see he was concentrating on the task facing him, so he thought it best to continue with his own work before he would go and introduce

himself.

Just as Derek threw a load of snow toward the pile between the sidewalk and the road, the air moved with a sudden rush and before the icy powder landed the sound of raspy, humid breathing overwhelmed him, as though it was inches from his ear. He turned to come face to face with a man and jerked in shock, wondering how he had been approached so quickly without hearing a step. *I must be daydreaming.*

It was instantly and painfully obvious to Derek how acutely ugly the man standing in front of him was, his first impression formed by the dominating lines and wrinkles on the man's weathered visage. Tufts of stringy gray hair protruded from under his tight black skull cap and his overly large and open-pored nose had a purplish hue to it.

"George Cain."

His voice was heavily graveled, as though he had ingested broken glass many years ago and had never healed. His open mouth exhibited yellow teeth interrupted by the gaps from those missing and broken, and several were capped with dark brown stains, like the painful rot of exposed nerves. Derek was glad there was a light wind, for he could only imagine Cain's mouth a fetid cavern. Cain didn't offer his hand to Derek, only stared at him with clammy eyes.

Those eyes.

Behind the glassy pupils a cloudy film begged for healing. Derek thought of his grandmother and her cataracts, the vision-robbing fog that stole her sight. But despite the evidence of a brutal life Derek wondered if the man was really old enough for the disease.

"My name is Derek Freeman. We bought this place last month." He offered a handshake to Cain, an offer unacknowledged.

"Spent a lot of my time in the Navy." Cain coughed hard, producing a mouthful of thick, yellowish phlegm that he spit into the snow. "Don't drink anymore. Haven't quit smokin' though. Camel straights for over forty years. Filters are for fuckin' pussies." He coughed again, this time swallowing the juice, and reached into his coat to retrieve a half-empty pack of his favorite brand.

"I don't smoke, myself. Never started," Derek said.

Cain crimped the end of the cigarette with his lips, looked at Derek with an eye squinted shut, and nodded. "Sometimes I wish I never did. Too fuckin' expensive." He produced a tarnished Zippo from his pocket and lit the cigarette. The glow from the flame heightened the ruddy color of his face and seemed to bother him, his eyelids pinching nearly shut. With the fire out and the

smoke entering his lungs, an obvious sense of relief flowed over his face. He almost smiled. "Maybe I'll quit this shit someday."

Derek nodded, wanting to add something about the health risks of smoking but instead remained silent.

"Mother-in-law lives next door to you. Agnes Barber." Cain thumbed at the old maroon brick house. "We live in the next one down." His thumb jerked in a southward direction. "Lived here for thirty-seven years. Loretta's mother been here since she was seventeen. She's ninety-one now." He seemed to lean closer to Derek. "We don't like bein' bothered."

For a moment that Derek thought lasted too long they stood without speaking. Cain seemed to be watching his neighbor as though sizing him up. Derek felt an odd twist in his gut, the sense of being studied in a rough roadhouse bar by a tough who lived to dominate and searched for weaknesses.

Without another word or gesture Cain turned and walked away from Derek. Freeman watched the man retrieve his shovel from where he had left it propped against a tree and walk back toward his house.

Derek kept his focus on Cain. *Jeez, what a strange man. He's more than a little odd. No doubt he lived a rough life. He shook his head. Come on, Derek, give the guy a break. I'm sure he's not that bad.*

So entranced was Derek with watching Cain's back he was unaware that Kate had come up behind him. "Who was that?" Kate's voice startled Derek and he almost dropped his shovel.

"George Cain," Derek whispered. "Our neighbor."

"I heard his voice as I came out the side door," Kate said. "God, he seems a little creepy. Kind of crude too. I heard some of what he said."

Cain stopped, his hand reaching up to touch his temple. He bent, as though wincing, reeled and stared at Kate. She gasped, a shiver running through her entire body, then sucked more cold air when she realized from Cain's parka he was the man she saw the day they moved in. Cain's head shuddered, he turned away and started again, lurching down his driveway, finally disappearing behind the side of his house.

CHAPTER NINE

Kate parked the Checker at the end of the driveway, let it idle and, after admonishing Melissa not to touch anything, got out and went to the mailbox, leaving the car door open to the icy air. As she thumbed through the bills and junk mail on her way back to the car a voice called to her from the other side of the street. Mercy De Ville, coat open, hair in curlers, waved to Kate as she crossed over.

"Hi. I'm Mercy. Mercy De Ville. I live a few houses down on that side." She pointed, her elbow cocked, finger bent. "The white cape cod." From a pocket she retrieved a pack of cigarettes with a lighter tucked under the cellophane and tapped it to coax one of the slender white cylinders out. She lit it with a smooth hard draw.

After Kate introduced herself and a few minutes of informative banter and idle chatter Mercy abruptly changed the subject. "I saw your husband talking to George Cain the other day," Mercy said.

"Yes. What a . . . peculiar man."

"That's putting it lightly. That S.O.B. is so mean."

"Well . . . I don't really know . . ."

"Listen," Mercy said in a hushed but excited tone, leaning closer. "The stories I could tell you. He swipes kids' toys and things like that." Mercy glanced at the maroon house, taking a drag on her cigarette. "Old Mrs. Barber is kind of, like, a prisoner, ya know? I mean, like, Cain always yells at her when she comes outside."

"I guess I'll stay out of his way," Kate said, moving toward the Checker. She thought Mercy might be exaggerating, but an itch crawled down her neck thinking of Cain in the snowstorm and Derek's description of him.

"Best for you if ya did," Mercy said flatly with a nod. "I think a lot could be blamed on that man. Bad things that have happened over the years."

"Bad things?"

"Strange stuff. And his wife, Loretta. Ya know she's a drunk?"

Kate put a hand on top of the car's door frame and one foot onto the rocker panel. She didn't care to get dragged into what seemed to be rumor laden gossiping.

A dented baby blue station wagon turned the corner with a single honk from its driver. The man behind the wheel displayed no emotion on his face. He made a single flip of his hand at the

women, a detached sort of wave.

"Oh, there's Ray," Mercy said. "I gotta go. We'll get together and talk sometime."

"Let's do that," Kate said, trying to hide her lack of enthusiasm.

"Yeah, that George Cain," Mercy called from driveway's apron to the road. "I really, really don't like him, ya know? I just hate people like that."

George Cain stood admiring his trophies and treasures in one of the small, dim partitions of his basement. The tight cubicle was walled with rough, unfinished planks and a single low-watt bulb hung behind him. He picked up a glass baby-food jar with a dead multicolored butterfly in it as a wave of mild pain hit him. A second, more severe, like a shock, followed before he could blink and lingered, pushing out at the insides of his skull. The third wave eclipsed the second and mushroomed, stayed, grew. His eyes rolled back and his knees buckled, though he did not collapse.

"Fuckers."

His breathing became quick gasps for air. His grip on the jar increased. He knew pain and darkness and dreaming were coming. Dreams or nightmares, it was the same. The voice inside his brain, like a parasite, whispered to him, told him how they were talking about him, hating him. And he believed. Believed the whispered words. And felt the hatred. And there was confusion.

"No!"

His resistance was weak. Not that he could stop it. The gateway of agony a few pounding heartbeats away and the black on black void that would swallow him chewed at his brain, unrelenting. He began to allow it to consume him, if it wanted to. Allow it because a fraction of him wanted it--after the nightmares and raging torment there would be calm and the unexplained sense of fulfillment. Of being alive. Of becoming. And maybe when he woke a new treasure would be there beside his wet, naked, stinking body. The fusion of fear and longing contorted his features, a picture of the struggle within him, a passionate commingled raging of unbridled conflict.

In his hand, the small glass jar with the dead butterfly cracked, then imploded within his fist. Bits of glass and dry, colorful wings showered to the floor. A trickle of blood ran from the butterfly iridescence-stained palm of his clenched hand, drops falling in time with every other beat of his pulse. The coppery aroma of the crimson blood heightened his perception of the pain and he licked once at his wound, tasting his life on his tongue.

But then it weakened, deprived of the fuel of hate, the brief supply consumed before the transformation could be attained. As immediate as it had come upon him it receded, leaving him dizzy and unsure of the details of the episode. Cain was only aware that he hadn't succumbed, hadn't slipped under--his body was clothed. His thoughts were fragments of anger and lust and death and grisly acts of barbarism. He sank to the floor to rest, soon just below the surface of sleep.

* * *

As the snow blower was being rolled off the trailer Derek wrote the check for the balance of the payment. The service man reviewed the controls of the machine again, the same as Derek had been instructed at the man's shop the night before.

The truck drove away with Derek standing alone, admiring his new toy, almost wanting a snowfall. He looked at the clear sky, recalling it had been two weeks since the last storm. He opened the checkbook to the register and wrote the necessary information, thanking himself for remembering.

Derek's eyes moved up the trunk of the big ancient tree towering over his front yard. He paid special attention to the limbs hanging over both his north and south lot lines. Twigs from the aging tree were scattered everywhere on the snow, a regular occurrence, he assumed. *I bet old Mrs. Barber, or more to the point, her son-in-law, aren't too fond of this. Chances are Cain gets kind of pissed about it.*

The rattling of a throat being cleared of phlegm startled him. He turned to the sight of a pair of bloodshot and murky orbs held captive by a heavily wrinkled and gaunt face. He recoiled slightly, looking down at the aged woman, taking in all her features. Her thick bifocals magnified the size of her discolored eyes to insect-like proportions. A jagged scar above her right eyebrow trailed down on the bridge of her nose. Gray hair hung in loose bunches around her head, looking in need of a wash.

Her voice creaked as she spoke. "I'm Agnes Barber. I live next door to you." Her smile was yellow and broken. She nodded toward the maroon brick house between the Freeman's and Cain's.

"I, um, I'm pleased to meet you," Derek said.

She lifted a plastic dish wrapped in tin foil up at him. "Here you go," she wheezed. "Some birthday cake. I was ninety-two yesterday."

"Oh, how nice. Thank you Mrs. Barber." Derek took the tightening of the wrinkles on her face as an indication of a smile, a display of pride. He remembered George Cain telling him

two weeks ago she was ninety-one and wondered if it really was her birthday, or was this only an excuse to meet him. Or did she only *think* it was her birthday? Could it be Alzheimer's? He peeked under the foil, seeing a generous slab of frosted angel food cake.

"Made it myself," Agnes Barber said. A small pause followed, with Mrs. Barber looking at the ground, mesmerized. "My husband died thirty-seven years ago. I been mostly alone. Still bake, though." She pointed a bony, shaking finger at him. "Just bring the plate back when you're done."

Derek nodded approvingly and beamed, flashing his teeth. "Well, thank you, and happy birthday." He wasn't quite sure how to carry on a conversation with someone this many years his senior. They had nothing in common, he supposed, their perspectives of life as different as their entirely uncommon experiences.

Mrs. Barber shuffled off in her stooped manner, hands held loosely together in front of her. Derek lifted the foil again and fingered a taste of the frosting. It was among the sweetest he had ever tasted.

"Kate?" Derek's voice rang out as the storm door creaked shut behind him. He set the plate on the table and called to his wife again.

"What is it?" Her voice was low as she came from Nathan's bedroom, a finger to her lips. Derek whispered, "Cake. From Mrs. Barber. She said she's ninety-two."

Kate flashed an astonished look. "That's pretty old to be baking and going out in winter. She must be very spry."

"You should see her close up. You'd swear she was closer to a hundred and twelve."

"Oh, come on." Kate brushed at her husband's chest. She lifted the foil gingerly to examine the treat, as if she were going to find something living. "Are you going to eat this?"

"We can share," Derek offered.

She cast a dubious look his way. "That's not what I meant. Do you think it's safe?"

"What? Safe to eat? Are you kidding?" He took on a scorning look. "What do you think, she poisoned it?"

"You never can tell. We don't know any of these people that well. What if she's not all together upstairs and used kitchen cleanser instead of flour. I don't know."

"Oh, come on, Kate!"

"Well . . ."

"You sound like those neighborhood kids I talked to when we were looking at the house. Or Sadowski."

"Kids? Sadowski? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, their heads were full of witches tales and 'weird' things going on. Talk about suspicious. Or is that superstitious?"

"Why didn't you tell me that? Maybe we shouldn't have bought this place."

Derek shook his head, then snickered. "Sometimes I think you're just a little paranoid."

"Hey, she is related to George Cain, if only by marriage. I sure as heck wouldn't take anything like this from him."

Derek smirked then dropped his sight on the cake. It called to him, wanting to be eaten. Then an image of a cauldron and a primeval witch came to mind, with Cain standing behind her wringing his hands, his yellowed teeth exposed in a voyeurous grin. Derek suddenly erupted with laughter at his outburst of imagination. "Sometimes you make me crazy." He wrapped his arms around Kate and squeezed.

A young girl's singing filtered into the room, heralding the entrance of Melissa. She spied the treat on the table and her eyes widened. "Hey, cake! Can I have some?"

Kate and Derek looked square at each other. Kate took the plate from the table and set it on the kitchen counter. "Maybe later. Go wash your hands for supper. We'll be eating soon."

Melissa scampered off as both parents shot a glance at the cake before they met in a stare. Derek could almost read Kate's mind--if she had any doubts about feeding the treat to their child, why would they eat it themselves? Kate picked up the plate, stepped on the lever to open the trashcan and let the cake slide in with the rest of the garbage.

Kate frowned, the dish angled downward in her limp grasp. "Maybe I am being paranoid. Mrs. Barber is probably just a nice, elderly lady. I feel sorry for her that her son-in-law is such a gruff old coot." After a pause, she said, "I suppose even he has a good side."

Kate rinsed the dish off at the kitchen sink then slipped on an overcoat. "I'll be right back. I'm going to meet Mrs. Barber."

Kate pushed the button at Agnes Barber's front door and waited--a long polite pause to account for the old woman's diminished mobility--then rang it again. Her finger was ready to push a third time when the lock clicked open. Agnes Barber peered from a slit next to the door, then cracked it barely wide enough to put her head through.

"Hello, I'm Kate Freeman. I came to return your plate."

The door opened a little wider. "Oh, thank you dear. Won't you please come in?" Her voice was brittle and thin, as if her

vocal cords were coated with shellac.

Kate stepped over the threshold into pale light thrown from a nearby lamp and handed the clean plate to her neighbor. She tried not to stare at the brutality that time had waged on the aged woman's features. Instead she looked around the room hoping to find the neatness of the elderly so she could give Mrs. Barber a compliment. To her dismay the parlor looked as though it hadn't been cleaned in months, perhaps years. It struck her that throwing away the cake away had probably been the right decision. A hint of urine wafted past her. Definitely the right decision.

"Can I get you some tea, Kate?"

Kate saw hope on the woman's face, understanding that she was probably the first visitor Agnes Barber had in quite some time. She was about to give an affirmative reply when a door slammed shut somewhere in the house. Mrs. Barber winced but did not turn toward the distraction.

"Ma?" A raspy, keen-edged voice drove into the room.

Kate recognized it--that brief previous eavesdropping cemented it in her mind. There was no mistaking it was George Cain.

"Ma? What are you doing?"

Agnes Barber licked her lips, her chin quivering. She looked past Kate to the front door, then again at her guest. Mrs. Barber blinked a few rapid times, her face tightening with a look of stoic preparation. Kate retreated a step, sensing the invitation for tea had passed, but also because of the queasy feeling that passed through her from the thought she would have to meet Cain.

"Ma!" George Cain's voice approaching, elevated.

"Maybe some other time, Agnes," Kate said, turning the doorknob. Both women smiled, Kate knowing she was forcing her own and she thought there was pleading in Agnes Barber's eyes. Kate yanked the doorknob, turned and stepped through the portal, pulling the door behind her. Her back was to Cain as he entered the room and though she could not see his wild gaze boring into the base of her skull her mind exploded with the sense of being watched.

CHAPTER TEN

Kate let the bedroom window shade fall back against the glass, a sigh rushing through her lips. As she slipped back under the covers she turned to Derek, saying, "They were right. I'll bet there's at least six inches out there."

Derek rolled over, pushed his face into the pillow and groaned. He got up to take his own look at the white mess outside then slumped back into bed, pulling the blanket up to his neck. "So now I get to try that snow blower, right?" A groan rumbled from him again, this time punctuated with a short grunt. "How come snow was so much fun when I was a kid?"

"Because you didn't have to shovel it or drive through it," Kate said. "I can't believe how much we've had since Christmas."

"Yeah. At least it's Sunday. I can get the driveway cleared before I go open the store."

"Are you going to open? With that snow out there?"

"Of course."

"Business is kind of slow now, isn't?"

"Well, yes, almost nothing compared to the Christmas rush. But there's a ton of gift money still out there waiting to be spent. A lot of kids get to spend it on books. Or video games." He paused. "Maybe I should start selling games."

"Kind of a sacrilege, isn't it?"

"It would make money and bring people into the store."

Kate smiled. She approved of his entrepreneurial spirit. It didn't hurt to have more than one way to provide an income. "I just hope you don't get too bored today."

"No, I've got those blueprints to look over for that remodeling job. The Swenson's."

"Right. When will that start?"

"I've got Jack putting together a materials estimate. The plans are pretty well set. I can get the crew going in the next few weeks." His hand slid under the sheets and her gown to find her breast. Kate took a startled breath, her eyelids flashing wide for a second like cat irises plunged into sudden darkness.

Kate's gaze fell on the computer equipment occupying the desk in the corner of the room, its barren cyclopean eye staring at her. She began to stare back at it, swept with guilt that she was falling behind in her research task for Professor Linden at the University. And there was so much to do on her book--a stack of notes and reference material cluttered her work area.

Her voice was tranquil as she spoke. "Professor Linden gave me the name of someone to talk to for my book. An old Indian

woman that lives right here in Hartford." Derek snuggled up to her, his front against her hip, his fingers moving lightly over a rising nipple. She inhaled, the rushing air sucking over her tongue, cooling it like a splash of ice-water. She paused for a moment, eyes fixed on the ceiling before she continued, though her words came out halting, drifting. "I'm going to . . . set up an interview with her, hopefully--in the next . . . week or so. She's supposed to be very . . . knowledgeable about--customs and rituals no longer practiced." Derek's pressure on her soft, white mounds of flesh increased and her eyelids fluttered shut. A minute went by before her hand covered his on her breast and lingered, then moved him away with a gentle touch. "You'd better get at that snow."

He grunted without speaking and poured himself out of bed to dress quickly. Kate got up too, pulling the tie around her bathrobe tight before she went to check on Nathaniel and Melissa. Both children were eating breakfast, Nathan in his high-chair, making Kate wonder how her daughter had gotten the boy up into it. Melissa had poured bowls of cereal for the two of them. A small puddle of milk decorating the table indicated she had not been perfect in that act. A half empty box of Cheerios lay on its side on the kitchen counter, with several of the doughnut shaped bits scattered over the floor. Kate grinned but shook her head, not knowing whether to be happy her daughter was trying to be helpful or upset at the mess she made. She decided that Melissa was growing up, striving to show she was big enough to 'handle' things--no need for a scolding that would diminish the girl's small attempt at independence.

Kate watched her children for a moment, her pupils glazed as if in a trance, another place, and she thought of the things that they would be confronted with in their lives as they grew up, after they grew up. What might be waiting for them out there, what would they have to deal with? There would be happiness and sorrow. Falling in love. Dealing with her and Derek's deaths. And their own. The tragic things lying in wait for them bothered her, knowing that they could spring like the unexpected trap on a wild animal's leg. All that just for being born, for being human. She wiped those thoughts from her mind, wishing they would all stay forever at their ages.

Just as Kate finished cleaning up the spilled milk, the dull beat of the snow blower's engine penetrated the old walls of the home, making Kate question if it was too early for Derek to be bothering the neighbors. A check of the time on the round white clock above the kitchen cabinets made her feel comfortable. *Most people should be up by nine-thirty. Even if it is Sunday.*

Derek aimed the snow blower west and headed down the driveway between his house and Mrs. Barber's. The fluffy white crystals sprayed from the chute in a straight line until caught by the north wind, where they were broken up into a wide pattern, with a small portion of the driven flakes scattering, riding the air onto Mrs. Barber's property. Derek tried to point the chute a little more to the north to keep the orphan flakes from going onto the Barber place, but the relentless wind would have nothing to do with that, stubbornly insisting some snow was going to go anywhere except where he aimed.

He cleared his first lane into the street, then spun the heavy machine on its tires to cut another swath in the other direction. He watched the errant snow fly into Mrs. Barber's yard and his sight stopped on the Santa Claus cut-out, buried up to its armpits, cocked a little sideways and backwards from the certain barrage of winter weather. The bearded smiling visage of Santa looked insanely oblivious to the prospect of the complete burial sure to happen with a single small blizzard. Derek wondered if the ornament was going to stay there until springtime.

The low roar of the motor hypnotized Derek in a mild sort of way, letting him concentrate on the task at hand. He kept his head tucked in to his chest, trying to keep as much of the blowing snow from stinging his cheeks and getting down his collar. After the third path from the garage to the street had been made he was struck abruptly with the sense of being watched. He glanced up out of the corner of his eye and saw Mrs. Barber standing on her porch, one bony hand clutching the lapels of a thick brown sweater and the other in a white-knuckled fist waving in the air. Her mouth was working but the drone of the blower's engine made her look like a mime. *Uh, oh, I think she's pissed at me.*

When he neared her on the next pass some of what she was yelling made it to his ears. ". . . snow! . . . my porch. . . other way!"

Derek at first felt sorry for the old lady, knowing that the little bit of snow drafting onto her property was probably dusting her porch as well. He also thought she shouldn't be out in the cold with so little clothing to protect her, and maybe not go outside in the winter at all. He considered stopping and talking to her, or getting a shovel to complete the job, but he knew he couldn't get it finished in time. Using a shovel for one hundred-twenty feet of concrete coated with this much of the stuff was out of the question, anyway. Then it occurred to him that the tight spacing of the homes, paired with the wind and snow, was an unfortunate situation that people have to understand--there has to be a little give and take among neighbors.

I've got to get this done so I can get to work. The wind is coming from the north and there is no way I can stop this stuff from blowing into her yard. Jeez--you'd think she never lived through a winter. Satisfied he was in the right, his attitude changed a little. He suddenly had the impulse to flick the chute in her direction. For a second. That would shut her up.

His fingers caressed the aiming control for the chute a moment then he removed it, not able to find that streak of meanness in him, though he thought the image of her standing there with her face sprayed white was kind of funny. He shook off that feeling, wondering what made him want to do something so cruel.

A sudden change in the direction and intensity of the wind threw the icy mist straight up at her, as if reading Derek's mind. She froze for a second, her arms at stiff, odd angles to her body, then stomped off, disappearing into her home. Derek rolled his eyes, knowing she would think he did that on purpose.

Satisfaction and relief came upon him as Derek wheeled the silent snow blower back to the garage, brooming the machine off before storing it. He brushed the caked snow off the front of his jacket and pants with his gloved hands and stamped his feet before going inside. *I suppose I'm going to get hassled every time I do this.*

Kate put a plate of eggs, bacon and toast in front of him at the kitchen table the moment he sat, an unusually large breakfast for him. Steam from a fresh cup of coffee drifted up, it's ebony aroma adding a chocolaty thickness to the air. "Well, this is good service. Eggs and bacon, too. What a treat."

"Wait until you get the bill."

"I suppose you'll want a tip?"

Kate playfully slapped his shoulder. "How did the blower work?"

Derek chomped a big piece of toast off, talking with his mouth full. "Pretty good, but it's not the fun toy I hoped it would be. And Mrs. Barber came out, madder than a hornet, because the wind was throwing snow into her yard."

"Not much you can do about that."

"I know." Derek swallowed the mouthful of toast, washing it down with coffee. "It's not my fault the wind blew some of it toward her."

"Derek! You didn't spray her on purpose, did you?"

His sheepish look gave away his thoughts, and he spoke in a defensive tone. "I didn't try. This gust came through and . . ."

"That poor old woman. I suppose I should go over there and apologize. Actually, you should do that."

Derek shrugged his shoulders. He finished everything on his

plate then dressed to leave. He kissed his wife and gathered his children into his arms to give them each a squeeze and peck on the cheek. Each child responded with a giggle and a kiss in return. "I love you, Daddy," Melissa said. Nathan gurgled syllables sounding like "Wuv you, Dadda." Derek gave them both an extra hug.

As Derek closed the door behind him he heard the angry cry of George Cain. He turned to see Cain standing on his mother-in-law's porch, screaming incoherently and pointing a finger at him. Derek dismissed him with a wave of his hand, then called back to Cain, "The wind blew the snow over there. What am I supposed to do?"

Cain never paused to listen to Derek's explanation, his salvo of hostility laced with cursing and violent, animated gestures. Even from that distance Derek could see the redness in Cain's face and the veins stretching in his neck. Derek chose to ignore the man and went to the garage to start his car.

Inside their home Kate heard the screaming and went to the living room window, carefully pulling back the inside curtains a fraction, leaving the sheers to hide behind. She saw Cain, leaning over the porch rail, his face toward their garage, gesturing and livid. The sight of Cain made her recoil a bit and she let the drapes fall back to a tiny slit, just enough for one eye to see. She heard her husband say something and watched Cain respond with the threat of waving fists. The sound of Derek's car engine brought her relief, for she then knew that her mate would not get into a battle with the old man.

As Derek's van backed down the driveway Cain continued with his oral assault, swiveling with the vehicle as it traveled, stopping to face it as it went out into the street. Cain yelled a few more obscenities at Derek, pushing off his toes for emphasis, and didn't let up until Derek disappeared around the corner.

Cain instantly spun and glared at Kate, pointing at her with silent fury, as if he could see her through the sheers and curtains. Kate gasped, a chill driving down the light hairs of her neck along her spine and into her fingertips. Her throat tightened as if an asthma attack was coming, and she frantically tried to remember where she had left her Ventolin inhaler. Her mind was blank. Cain stood motionless, his foggy-black, bottomless pupils drilling into hers, his finger steady at her face. She pinched shut the tiny gap in the curtain entirely. Her heart beat in slow, hard-pounding beats, the room seemed to shrink in on her and she felt dizzy and lethargic, the heat of panic flushing her cheeks.

He knew I was watching.

She, frozen, gaped at his form through the thin fabric, as though locked a staring contest. Cain stood there for what seemed to her minutes, the glaring whites of his eyes visible within his dark outline, fixed on her, penetrating her soul.

* * *

It had started snowing again by the time Derek, bored from a slow day at the book store, came rolling into the driveway, the Caravan packing down the light covering of flakes into wide tracks bearing tread imprints. He stowed the vehicle in the garage, deciding to check in with Kate before removing any of the new accumulation. On his way to the back door he made up his mind--the white stuff would lay on the pavement until it stopped falling. He hoped Sadowski wouldn't be bothered by it.

"Hello, love," he called out as he entered the kitchen, snapping on the light. He received no answer.

"Kate?"

He walked into the darkened living room, saw that it was empty and went back into the kitchen.

The silence was not normal.

"Hello, Kate? Melissa?" He went to the back hall, called into the basement without getting an answer then returned to the kitchen.

"Daddy, daddy, daddy!" panted Melissa, racing from her brother's bedroom into the kitchen and her father's arms.

"Hi, kiddo. Where's your mom?"

"In Nathan's room."

"It's so quiet around here." Derek lifted his daughter to cradle her against his chest and carried her to the closed door of his son's room. He grasped the doorknob and turned, pushing in to a lightless void. "Shhhh!" He was admonished from the shadows. He could barely make out the black shape of Kate's head over the top of the easy chair. Kate whispered again, "He's almost asleep."

"Dah-dee?" The boy's sleepy voice carried a tone of hope. Derek put Melissa down and bent to kiss his son on the forehead. "Goodnight, Nathan."

"Dah-dee. Up?"

"No Nathaniel, you have to go to sleep now. Beddy time."

"That's right," echoed his mother softly.

The boy began to whimper but was easily quieted by the soft shushing of his mother's voice and gentle stroking of his tiny ears. It didn't take long before Nathan was asleep enough to be put down on his mattress.

The light in the kitchen seemed extra bright to them after the murkiness of Nathan's room. Even Derek blinked a few times to adjust. Kate put a hand on Melissa's shoulder. "You better go get ready for bed. You have school tomorrow."

"Aw . . ."

"Come on," Derek added with a playful swat on his daughter's bottom. A grin split his face as he stomped both feet toward her, arms raised above his head. "I'm going to get you!" He growled. "Franken-dad!"

"Dad-ee!" Melissa dodged back and giggled, putting her palm over her mouth, retreating to her bedroom.

With their daughter tucked safely in bed the house took on a palpable level of quiet. Kate led Derek by the hand to the couch in the parlor, almost pushing him into the soft cushions.

"Woah, what's on your mind, little lady?" Derek said in his best cowboy impersonation.

"Not what you think." She tried to force a tease into her wink, but, wanting to be taken seriously, melted to a plain look and just sat next to him. After a moment she slid a little closer. "Derek, when you left for the store today I was watching you."

"Oh. I suppose you heard Cain's loud mouth out there."

"Yes. But there's something else." Kate began to get a little edgy, wide-eyed, and, for an instant, a tremor rippled through her hands.

"What? What is it, Kate?"

"I was peeking through the curtains as you drove off this morning. Cain kept screaming until you were out of sight. The instant you were gone . . ." She reached over and put her hand on his forearm. She took a deep breath, pausing, the exhalation heavy and controlled. "As soon as you were gone he looked straight at me, pointing, as if he knew I was there all the time. The curtain was only open a little and I was behind the sheers. I don't know how he could have seen me." She shivered, recalling the vivid image of Cain's burning eyes as if he was right before her.

"Come on, you're exaggerating."

"No! I'm not!" She folded her arms across her chest, pouting for a moment.

A scowl crossed her face before she continued. "It was really weird. He kept pointing at me. I hid behind the drapes as soon as he looked at me but he kept staring, pointing. There's something strange about that man. Something really strange."

Derek put his arm around her and pulled her into him. "Listen, we know Cain acts kind of belligerent, maybe even mean, I

suppose. I hope every time you see him now you're not going to go crazy about it." He grasped her shoulder firmly. "You do have a good imagination."

The muscle at the back of Kate's jaw flexed, a sign that did not escape Derek's attention. He could tell that every molar in her mouth was squeezed tightly together. He patted the air with his hands and said, "Okay, okay. The guy might not be the ideal neighbor. But he must have noticed the curtains move when you first opened it."

"No. He was bending over the porch railing, watching you go to the car. He faced the garage, yelling at the top of his lungs. He couldn't have seen me."

Derek decided not to pursue the matter anymore. He wondered if all the stress he felt in trying to make the bookstore and construction businesses lucrative was rubbing off on Kate. It struck him that the pressure she had from being cooped up in the house with the children, and trying to get a book written and earn some money through Professor Linden might not help either.

"You know," Kate said. "I really don't think I will ever like him. God help me, and I can't explain why, but something inside me says that man is dangerous. In ways we don't even know."

Derek's face screwed up in a mocking sort of way.

"Okay," Kate said, "It's just that I keep thinking how bad he could be, how his anger could make him dangerous. Right now, I don't like him at all."

Cain choked down another three aspirin, this time without water. Added to the four he had already taken, his stomach began to curse him. Loudly. He guided his aching body to the tattered black leather easy chair in the dimly lit living room, letting its softness absorb his form.

The pain, the thing within him, however, had its own ideas about when George Cain would relax. The seed in his soul, in his being, in his mind had sprouted and grown. Now it was aiming for maturity, and its next goal--preparation for the bloom. He squeezed the sides of his head, rubbing hard enough to rip out strands of hair.

It's them, he told himself. Not me. I like those damn children--I . . . tried to like them. Pain stabbed at his brain, hard and quick with an intensity higher than any other time so soon from the onset. I wouldn't hurt them. I wouldn't . . . hurt anything. Unless they make me. The whispering started, telling him this was only a taste. For this episode was not from hate, but it did show the power that could be had. When this one came to hate him it would be nourishment unparalleled. There would be

fulfillment. Forever the ebony void. *But it . . . no them--it's them. Fuckers making me . . . this. Sons of bitches!* A glimmer of fight shone in him, useless as it was. *Stop now!"*

A dark groan eased through his lips. His eyes rolled, nearly hiding the pupils. Blood streaked whites gleamed in the narrow slit.

You'll pay.

His eyelids squeezed lower as he strained his neck to look through the window behind him. A thin pink line on the horizon was all that was left of the day. His eyes closed tight, his ragged teeth forcing their appearance through the gap formed by dry, cracked lips.

You'll all pay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kate split apart the small sheet of paper at the fold with her thumb, again checking the address written on it. Two buildings off the intersection from Highway 60 in downtown Hartford, she looked at the street sign on the opposite corner, then at the ceramic numerals above the entrance. Everything was right. The doorway, to the side of the main entryway to an antique shop, was wrinkled with curled layer after layer of dark brown paint, and most of the door was a large pane of glass. The window revealed a staircase, and Kate doubted anyone a hundred and two years old would live upstairs. But the address matched that on the paper she had received from Professor Linden, so she pushed the button under the intercom speaker and waited, kicking snow off her boot against the concrete sill below the doorframe.

The intercom crackled. "Yes?" The voice was male and younger than Kate expected, and now she was sure she had gotten something wrong.

"I'm Kate Freeman. I'm looking for Sara Deerchild."

There was a short pause, then the lock buzzed open. Kate climbed the creaking wooden stairs, and as she neared the top she noticed an earth-and-leather aroma. The door on the landing opened before she reached the last step and a broad-chested man stepped out, towering above her. His moderately lined, bronze skinned face showed no emotion. Two long black pony tails with a touch of gray hung lower than his shoulders and Kate guessed his age to be in his late forties or early fifties.

A polite smile moved the man's lips. "Hello. My name is Robert. I am Sara Deerchild's grandson." He motioned through the portal with a wave of his hand. "Won't you come in please?"

Kate entered into dim lighting, the hardwood floor beneath her feet covered by a throw rug that reached to within two feet of the room's perimeter. The place smelled of spice and soap and leather, tobacco and burning logs, and as Robert led Kate down a hallway she picked up the scent of the cedar panels walling it. There was a permanence in the bouquet, evidence the same people had lived there for a very long time.

The back room of the upper flat seemed windowless, the single thick curtain blending with the colorful wall hangings decorating the room as though one of them. The walls were heavy with masks and drawings and tools used in another age to hunt. A low fire burned in the masonry fireplace, and near it a dream-catcher at least a foot in diameter hung from the ceiling like a mobile, it's delicate webwork graced by two large white and black-tipped

feathers. Several small tables and cabinets around the edge of the room were covered with artifacts and belongings and faded sepia photographs. Kate wondered how many years ago the objects were created, and how they had been passed down through the generations.

In the center of the room sat an aged woman in a rocking chair, a dull red and yellow blanket sheltering her shoulders and back, her thin and wiry gray hair still long enough to be braided. She did not look up at them as they entered, her eyes focused on the coffee cup on the small rough-hewn table in front of her. The cup was half filled with a green colored liquid, steam rising, and she reached with frail but steady hands to lift it and take a sip. Across from the table was another wooden chair--straight-legged--and Robert pulled it back for Kate to sit.

Sara Deerchild sat in peace, looking with dreamy eyes at her hands as they rested in her lap. Still she did not lift her eyes to acknowledge her guest.

"Grandma," Robert said softly, a slight bow in his posture. "I'm going out for a while. I'll leave you with Mrs. Freeman. Will you be all right?"

Sara nodded twice, a subtle movement at best. Her head turned in the direction of her grandson until he was gone from the apartment. It was then that she finally looked up at Kate.

"Mrs. Freeman--"

"Kate. Please call me Kate, Mrs. Deerchild."

Sara's eyes hardened a bit, seemingly annoyed at the interruption. "Very well, Kate. So you want to know things about the past? My nation?" She sipped the greenish drink, all the while her attention on Kate.

"Yes," Kate said. "I'm interested in what you know about rituals your people and perhaps other cultures would have passed down from prehistory. Especially ceremonies no longer practiced."

Sara gave a glance in the direction of her departed grandson, a wistful look in her eyes. "So much has been lost already, even from recent times. If only my grandson and his generation and their children had that interest. I'm afraid there will someday be no one to pass the knowledge on to. No one will want it and it will be lost."

"Anything you can pass on to me," Kate said, "from ancient times, remembered stories, will be written on paper, saved forever." Kate opened her purse, removed a miniature tape recorder and placed it on the table. The Indian woman nodded her head.

"My father was a shaman," Sara said. "Like his father before him. It means almost nothing today, the powers, the tradition,

but as I grew up he told me a great many stories. Stories and legends and ceremonies gone from our culture long before even their time."

Kate leaned closer, spellbound by the wisdom streaming from the woman's eyes and the soft lilt of her voice, smooth as a stream polished pebble.

Sara rose to her feet in a slow, determined movement and left the room, returning a minute later with another mug and a teapot. She placed the cup in front of Kate and poured some of the mysterious green liquid into it, and refreshed hers as well. "It would please me if you would share this drink with me. These herbs are soothing, good for stories." The Indian woman went to one of the cabinets, slid open a drawer and retrieved a red clay pipe and a wooden box. Kate recognized the dull maroon as pipestone. Sara sat again, opening the box to two compartments, one of which Kate recognized as tobacco. The other, larger, was filled with another substance that was coarse-cut, but definitely not tobacco.

Kate began, "Is that?--"

"Kinnikinnick," Sara finished Kate's question with the answer. "This is from willow, the inner bark." Sara took a healthy pinch of tobacco along with two of the kinnikinnick, mixed them together and started to fill the bowl of the pipe. Sara glanced at Kate. "You do not seem surprised."

Kate explained she was aware that women as well as men smoked during ceremonies, though not as often as men. But she wasn't sure if she was supposed to smoke with her host. She touched her purse, feeling for her inhalers, and worried Sara would not go on if she did not smoke with her. Her raised eyebrow gave her away.

"To smoke is your choice, Kate. For me, telling these stories is sacred. A trust passed on to me." She tamped the mixture with her finger. "I have not smoked for many years. It might be my last." Sara lit a farmer's match by striking it off the rough table top and began to stoke the tobacco with light draws. As Kate watched her she sampled the green liquid, thinking it might be tea, but it did not taste like tea. It was sweeter, with a fragrance like wildflowers.

Smoke drifted over Sara's head as she spoke. "The first story I will share with you is from my Chippewa people, and it is not very old, perhaps you may have even heard it, but it speaks of the *windigo*--a cannibal giant of the winter woods." She puffed on the pipe, making the smoking mixture glow orange. "It is a good place to start." Kate sipped the green drink again, a wisp of smoke floated across her nostrils, and a slight feeling of light-headedness gnawed at her. She listened intently as Sara spoke,

the Native American woman's voice dropping in timbre.

The villagers realized a windigo was coming when they saw a kettle swinging back and forth over the fire. No one was brave enough or strong enough to challenge this ice creature. After they had sent for a wise old grandmother who lived at the edge of the village, the little grandchild, hearing the old woman say she was without power to do anything, asked what was wrong. While the people moaned that they would all die, the little girl asked for two sticks of peeled sumac as long as her arms; these she took home with her while the frightened villagers huddled together.

That night it turned bitter cold. The child told her grandmother to melt a kettle of tallow over the fire. As the people watched, trees began to crack open and the river froze solid. All this was caused by the windigo, as tall as a white pine tree, coming over the hill.

With a sumac stick gripped in each hand, the little girl ran out to meet him. She had two dogs which ran ahead of her and killed the windigo's dog. But still the windigo came on. The little girl got bigger and bigger until, when they met, she was as big as the windigo himself. With one sumac stick, she knocked him down and with the other she crushed his skull--the sticks had turned to copper. Then, after she killed the windigo, the little girl swallowed the hot tallow and gradually grew smaller until she was herself again.

Everyone rushed over to the windigo and began to chop him up. He was made of ice, but in the center they found the body of a man with his skull crushed in. The people were very thankful and gave the little girl everything she wanted.

Sara drank from her mug, a satisfied look on her face, then drew on the pipe, rejuvenating its smoldering contents.

Kate sipped from her cup, heady with the tobacco and the story and whatever the drink contained. She settled back in a near stupor, listening to the Indian grandmother tell her of the sky spirit *manidogisik*, the nefarious *Wabeno*, and tales built from rumors and long forgotten legends.

* * *

The desert turned to forest turned to jungle, and still they pursued him. The shouting was a muffled cacophony of angry

voices, of hating voices, and the words were unclear. Salty sweat flowed from his pores, stinging his wounds, running into his wild and bright eyes. Blood trickled over his skin, running down his twisted face, into his mouth. Another sharpened stone struck him, in the ear, and a fresh cut was opened. Overhead the sun rose and fell in an instant, replaced by a moon with a shadowy grin, and in that silvery light they captured him, tied him to a stone wall by his ankles and wrists and began to chant. Kate watched from the edge of the clearing froze in her place on the soft, wet ground. The mob turned and stared at her, pointed at her, ranting, and then it was she lashed to the cold flat rock.

Kate rolled in bed, waking, her heart throbbing, the taste of silver in her mouth, and she threw the blankets off her heated body. She wiped at her face to clear her mind, then shivered at the realness of the dream.

She thought about Sara Deerchild, and knew her nightmare came from the stories the Native American woman had told her, enhanced by the smoke laden air she had breathed those hours and subduing effects of the green drink.

The thought came to her mind again about Sara's reaction when she learned where Kate lived. A scowl had crossed the ancient woman's face and she muttered something about Indian land, and desecration and punishment, and Kate remembered wondering why that would upset her--that piece of land in particular--all land was Indian at one time, wasn't it? And the old woman had gone silent for a few minutes, looking as if she had something to say, but was holding it back.

More asleep than awake, Kate glanced at the clock and sighed soft and deep in her chest then pushed her face back into the pillow, wanting to sleep.

Without the nightmares.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Derek came out of the bathroom stroking his face, now smooth from his morning shave, and glanced outside. The stark lighting and warmth of the kitchen belied the overcast coldness loitering at the window. Melissa and Nathaniel regarded their father with smiles for a moment, then returned their attention to their mother at the kitchen counter.

"You know," Derek said, "I think I'll be able to trust Gary to run the store without me more often."

Kate, faint dark circles under her eyes, the taste of Sara Deerchild's green libation still on her tongue, paused in her breakfast-making and managed to smile at her husband's words. Derek had never actually stated the store could survive a day without him. "That would be nice," she said. She continued mixing the pancake batter and laughed. "But not today, right?"

"Well . . ."

"Any idea when?"

"In spring I have to order some topsoil for fill around the house and that garden you want, so I'll take time to move that around. I don't expect to be off too often. I've got that construction job to check the subs on, see how those guys are doing."

"I know. But at least you're thinking about it. One day here or there--"

"Fuck you!"

Kate and Derek's eyes widened simultaneously, each staring at the other in response to the rude interruption into their peace. Though buffered by dual panes of glass there was no mistake in what they heard and how close it was.

"Oh yeah? Well fuck you!"

They rushed to the kitchen window, trying to see where the hollering was coming from. They squeezed together at the glass and glimpsed Sadowski, beer in hand, standing in the driveway near the street, looking south. His face was red, most likely from the combination of cold, anger and alcohol. Then they heard the other voice, gravelly and low.

"I'll have the cops on you, ya son of a bitch!"

"Fuck you!" Sadowski's raised middle finger added a visual message, a personal touch. Sadowski wasn't very imaginative with his rebuttal, but he was at least using all of his communication skills to get his point across. "I'll kick your ass!"

Derek and Kate moved to a window in the front to get a better view. They crouched there behind the flimsy curtain, each peeling back an edge to spy.

"You go to hell!" George Cain bellowed.

Sadowski took a forceful step in Cain's direction. Cain stood his ground for a moment then retreated a dozen paces when he realized Sadowski would keep coming. Cain was screaming unintelligibly; a litany of threats, words like 'gun', 'kill', 'fucking', 'bastard' stood above the rest.

Sadowski shook a fist at Cain, then turned and walked up the duplex's driveway to his stairway. Derek hurried to the rear hall, meeting Sadowski at the foot of the stairs. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"That fucker! What an asshole." Sadowski's face was dark and brooding, his brow lined with deep furrows.

"What happened?"

"I parked my car in front of the old bitch's place. Big fucking deal. He hates his mother-in-law anyway." Sadowski began to pound his feet up the steps.

"He sure was pissed at you."

Sadowski waved his hand without turning around. "Fuck him."

At the top of the steps he turned to face Derek, taking a drink of beer before he spoke. "Listen, Freeman, I'm gonna be moving out. First of next month, I'm gone."

"It's your choice. I understand." *And if you think I'm going to try and stop you, you're crazy.*

"Nothin' against you, Freeman. I just can't take it anymore. That isn't the first time I had it out with that clown. I gotta move before I kill the bastard. He's a first class asshole. I hate that fucker. I hate him!" The door slamming shut sent a vibration throughout the building.

George Cain was back in his home, boiling with rage, when the initial bolt of pain hit him. It was worse than the last episode. Much worse. He fell to his knees, clawing at his temples. A fist struck out, hitting the floor with enough force to shake the house.

Loretta Cain stirred in her bed. A sound rumbled through her throat, a waking moan. She rolled over and sidled up to the nightstand. An open bottle of Canadian Club sat there, beckoning her. She reached for it, hands trembling, and swallowed as much as she could hold in her mouth at one time. She set the bottle back on the nightstand, almost dropping it, grunted, then wiped the overflow from her cheek. Sleep grappled at her, pulling her down, weighting her head. Her mate's fist hit the floor again and her chin lifted clumsily off her chest.

Rising too fast made the room move in a slow spin around her. She staggered into the dim living room, hunched over, one eye

nearly closed. George Cain looked up, gritting his teeth. His speech was infected with the pounding rhythm of heavy breathing. "What . . . are you . . . looking at, bitch?"

She wanted to say 'not much'. She wanted to tell him to fuck off. She wanted to leave this hell-hole of a life she had invested in, but knew she didn't have the will to change--even sour bad habits can still be addictive. Her shoulders slumped further and she turned silently away toward her bedroom, craving the bottle that waited. He vaulted to his feet and was on her before she had taken two steps.

His hand came across the side of her head with enough force to carry it into the wall. He brought his hand back and leveled a blow an inch under her left eye. He reared with closed fists, ready to hit her again when she dropped to her knees and pushed away from him.

She picked herself up and bolted to the door, stumbling over the edge of her tattered nightgown, her heart heaving in her throat, the exertion at the fringe of her ability.

He fell against the wall, holding his throbbing skull and yelling after her, the words crushed by pain. "Run Loretta, ya bitch! Run . . . to your mother. I'll take care of both ya cunts later!" Cain buckled over in agony, his vision narrowing to dark circles, the suffering intense, his consciousness drifting.

* * *

"Don't worry," Derek said, "we'll find another tenant. It'll be easy. We'll run an ad in the newspaper. You could go into Milwaukee and put a flyer up on campus." He lowered the shade against the darkening night air then sat across the kitchen table from his wife. "While you're there you could touch base with Linden, and I'm sure Professor Zydich would enjoy a visit. You know he raved about the work you did on his National Geographic piece."

Kate looked at him with doubt in her eyes. "I'm not so certain about the campus ad. This is a little farther than most students want to drive." Her lips curled down. "We could possibly make the entire mortgage payment ourselves once or twice, but we're living from month to month now. It would wipe out our bank account." She sipped at the cup of mint herbal tea in her hands. "And who will want to move in the middle of winter?"

"I said don't worry. I know Sadowski should've given us more notice. At least thirty days. But I'm kind of glad to be rid of him. Ol' George will be too." A smirk rippled over his lips, replaced by his jaw set in a firm pose. "We'll run an ad next

weekend."

She nodded her head slowly, thankful her husband had a steady view of this--it seemed she wasn't able to think clearly about this right now. "I suppose."

Derek said, "That was sort of weird this morning, wasn't it? Sadowski told me that Cain blew his stack because he parked his car in front of his mother-in-law's."

"That's a little extreme, don't you think?"

"I suppose they're getting up there in years, no kids, kind of lonely," Derek said. "Just getting crotchety."

"That's his problem," Kate said. "He's married, has a motherly type next door to him. He shouldn't be lonely. That's no excuse."

"Still--"

The muffled sound of a man yelling somewhere out in the night caught their attention. "Now what the hell is that?" Derek said, the hectic day he had showing in his voice. He snapped off the light and gingerly pulled the shade up a fraction to peer outside through the glass. Two human silhouettes--one standing, shaking a finger at someone seated--played on the shaded window of the Barber house. Kate nestled up next to Derek to share his view.

"Is that Cain?" Kate asked.

"I can't tell for sure. It must be him, though. That hoarse voice could only be his."

"God, why is he screaming like that? And who is on the receiving end of it?"

"I don't know. It must be the old lady," Derek said.

"She's not answering. I hope she's okay."

"I'd like to hear what he's saying."

Despite Kate's protest, Derek took his coat from the kitchen chair and slipped out the back door into the night, moving quietly toward the window of Mrs. Barber's house. Darkness was not total with the silver moon and a distant street lamp providing all the illumination needed to see and be seen. Derek kept himself in the ribbon of shadow reaching out several feet from the building.

Like a dog working for a treat, he cocked his head left and right, trying to understand the raspy growling of the man inside. After a minute, Derek suddenly felt awkward eavesdropping and sneaking around in the shadows. *What am I doing? This is what a voyeur must be like. But not for this kind of stuff.* He retreated to his home.

"Well, what was he screaming about?" Kate asked.

"I couldn't really tell. A lot of swearing. He kept saying 'I told you'."

"Do you think we should call the police?"

"No, no. I just think ol' George got real pissed about something and he's letting someone know it. It's none of our business."

Kate went to a drawer at the kitchen counter. "Well, I'm not just going to ignore this." She retrieved a phone book, set it on the table and began skimming through for Agnes Barber's name. When her finger found the number it rested hard on the page. She reached for the phone and began to dial in a tenacious manner, glancing at the listing between every other digit.

Kate lost count of the rings when it was finally picked up without a greeting. She strained, listening for something, any noise on the other end. In the midst of the quiet she thought she heard breathing and the faint gurgling of fluid-clogged lungs.

"Agnes? Mrs. Barber? This is Kate Freeman. Are you all right?" Kate was positive a muted groan came over the wire before the clattering sound of a sloppily placed receiver chopped off the connection. She looked at the phone book page, certain she had dialed the correct number.

George Cain gripped the telephone for several minutes, seething at the intrusion, the flesh from his neck to his forehead streaked with crimson. The skin of his knuckles whitened. He picked the receiver off the cradle and slammed it down again and again, until a sheen of sweat covered his forehead and spittle flew from his mouth. He glared straight ahead, his hollow orbs focused in mid-air at nothing, the smoky black pupils swirling. Kate Freeman's voice echoed inside his skull, imbedding in the twisted layers of his memory like a tender calf snared in a tangle of barbed wire.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

While Derek handled showing the apartment Kate stayed near the constantly nagging telephone. Many were calling for details on the upper for rent before they would travel to see it, saying they preferred not to venture out into the clear, frigid winter day unless absolutely necessary. Most people viewed the outdoors from the warmth of their homes and thought it colder than it really was--inside looking out made temperature judgement a deceptive undertaking at best.

Kate answered the same questions so many times she felt like a recording. *How many bedrooms? Do you allow pets? Is there a garage? How is the neighborhood?* Kate pushed out thoughts of George Cain on that one. *Do you take kids? How close are the schools?* On and on.

The greater percentage who called were ill-matched to the two bedroom unit. Immature men barely out of high school, maybe even a drop-out or two. *Not on your life*, Kate thought. An elderly woman with a walker. *Not on those steps*. A never-married, unemployed mother with five children, none older than nine in age. They considered the unwed mother because her welfare check was guaranteed, but the thought of that many human bodies in such a small space made visions of television news scenes parade through their minds--images of children sleeping in cardboard boxes and feces scattered on the floor.

The last prospective tenant to arrive was much like the first, except his hair hung halfway down his back whereas the first was shaved nearly bald with an unrecognizable symbol etched down to his scalp. This young gentleman drove up in a four wheel drive Blazer with its cab three feet off the ground--one of those vehicles with tires intended for Florida swamp use and a suspension system to match. The stereo in the vehicle was blaring heavy metal rock, audible with the windows rolled up, making Derek hope that there would be better candidates to choose from. It's not that he hated the music; he had envisions of concerts upstairs at two in the morning. Derek showed the unit to the man anyway, if only to practice his sales pitch. The man wanted it, ready with cash in hand for a deposit, but Derek merely took an application and told him they had more people coming and would decide in a day or two.

They were beginning to think there would be no end to the stream of undesirable would-be renters when a clean cut young couple arrived. They appeared to be in their late twenties, dressed very much in style and practical in their choice of vehicles--a plain royal blue sedan Derek thought to be Japanese.

Through the kitchen window Kate watched them speak with Derek in the driveway and she came to the back door to meet them. As the best prospects to this point climbed the steps ahead of them, Kate looked at Derek and smiled, crossing her fingers. Her smile faded a little when she saw her husband gawking up at the view of the young woman's shapely legs and buttocks her tight fitting jeans were providing. Kate poked him in the ribs and he blushed as though he thought she could read his mind.

As they went up Derek explained his plans to enclose the stairway. The younger man nodded approvingly. At the top of the stairs Derek reached to shake the man's hand. "By the way, my name is Derek. Derek Freeman. This is my wife, Kathryn. Kate."

"Chris Montoya." His grin boasted bright, straight teeth. Derek guessed from his color and features Chris had some Polynesian blood in him. Maybe Hispanic, too, judging by his family name.

The young woman smiled at Kate, her dental work being as perfect as her partner's. "Joyce. Joyce Buckner." Kate double blinked and Joyce added, "Chris and I are getting married this spring, so we thought it was about time we got a place." A grin spread easily across her face. "This is the first time for both of us."

"Will you . . . Will you be moving in right away, together?" Kate asked, a hint of red showing in her cheeks.

Chris and Joyce shared a glance. "Um, no," Chris said. "I plan on moving as soon as we find something. But Joyce would move in a few weeks before the wedding. That's not a problem, is it?"

Kate glanced at Derek, then back at Chris. "No, no," she said, feeling a little embarrassed about asking the question, the way it sounded. "I mean, the apartment will be empty by the middle of next week." Kate felt her cheeks getting warm, despite the cold air around her.

"I mean us living together," Chris said. It was obvious he wanted to make sure everything was understood.

Derek seemed to be amused watching his wife squirm. Kate said, "Oh, ah, no, that's fine. After all, you are getting married. You said that, right?"

Inside the apartment Chris flashed his salesman's smile as he scrutinized the kitchen. His bride-to-be ran her fingers along the counter top and opened the cupboards. "I feel kind of funny, like I'm nosing through someone's stuff," Joyce said.

Derek chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

The foursome moved from room to room going through the usual inquiries for the situation. *Any children? (Of course not!)* Kate winced, further embarrassed for letting that routine question slip

out. *Parking in the garage? What does the heat cost in the winter?* Derek and Kate were relieved to learn that both had decent jobs--Chris a salesman at a printing company and Joyce a registered nurse.

"How are the neighbors?" Chris said.

"Well . . ." Kate said, her eyes flickering toward Derek. She continued, "We haven't really met very many of them. We just moved in here ourselves right after Christmas."

"An average neighborhood, it seems," Derek said quickly. He cleared his throat. "I'm sure there's lots of nice people and probably some crabby ones too."

Something tugged at Kate's conscience, perhaps a sense of guilt for omitting what she knew of George Cain's conspicuous temper and how Cain made her feel. But then again, it was only speculation on her part, after all. And she knew her mate would be displeased if she shared her opinions on Cain with potential tenants--*Derek thinks I'm paranoid.*

Derek glimpsed the consternation in his wife's face. "Uh, any pets?" Derek asked, picking up the pause.

"Joyce has a cat." Chris said. It's full grown and de-clawed. Is that okay?"

"Fine," Kate answered. "We have a cat, too. Her name is Perkins."

"Perkins?"

"Like the restaurant," Kate said. Yes, it's kind of a strange name for a female. Any animal, I suppose."

Joyce smiled. "Ours is male. I call him Sass."

Derek rolled his eyes and laughed. "We'd have to keep the two of them away from each other."

"Oh, Sass has been neutered," Chris piped in.

"I'm not worried about the kittens. Just the noise," Derek said. All four snickered, and Joyce blushed a little.

"That is, of course, if we, um, if you uh . . ." He spied Kate. The slight nod of her head and flaring of her eyes told him she was thinking the same thing he was. It was pure intuition, but after what they had seen that day this couple seemed too good to be true. Derek said, "What I mean to say is, if you want the place."

Chris and Joyce almost stared at each other, showing their surprise at being offered the apartment without any further trouble. "Well, Chris said, "We'll have to talk it over. Can we call you, maybe later tonight?"

"Sure, that would be fine. But we'll have to keep showing it, you understand?"

The young couple nodded their acknowledgment, walked out then

down the steps. Kate and Derek remained behind, watching from the narrow window on the landing while Montoya and his bride-to-be headed down the driveway.

"I think they're perfect," Kate said.

"Well, no one's perfect."

"These two are close enough." She gave her husband a hug and he returned the gesture. "I hope they want it, she said. At the foot of the stairs they took a peek toward the street and saw that Chris and his fiancé were returning. Kate's expression was obvious expectation.

Chris beamed. "We talked it over. We'll take it!"

"Great!" Derek said.

In the background the Freeman's telephone rang, demanding a response. "Oh great," Kate said. "I can take that darn phone off the hook now!" She went in to answer it anyway.

After obtaining more information, such as current address and phone numbers, and, of course, the most important thing--two checks, one for a security deposit and the other for the first month's rent--Derek shook Chris Montoya's hand, smiled at Joyce, and wished the pair a good afternoon. Kate joined them again and with Derek walked their new tenants to their car, chatting every step of the way.

None of the four saw the dark slit alongside the front door of Agnes Barber's house, and missed as well the door latching shut when the blue sedan pulled away from the curb.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Saturday morning of the day Chris Montoya moved his belongings into the apartment was cool and clear. The thermometer registered a much warmer than average temperature of thirty-one degrees. Not long past noon that escalated to thirty-nine. Fools willingly eager to believe spring would soon come easily hid the truth from their conscious mind.

A rented step-van came first, making one trip to their new residence from Chris' old apartment and another from Joyce's parents' home. Then came a carload of small items and another of houseplants. The last, driven by Joyce, brought a variety of cleaning supplies and other miscellaneous items--an empty aquarium, tennis racquets, a lamp, an important looking metal box and fishing gear, to name a few. A few friends assisted, keeping the beer and rock music flowing.

"Hello!" Derek called as he came out the rear door.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Freeman," Joyce said.

Derek walked down the driveway to her car. "Please, call me Derek." She smiled in a shy sort of way. Derek continued. "Almost have Chris moved in?"

"Yes, This is kind of fun."

Wait until you start paying bills. You won't think it's so much fun then! Derek wiped the sarcasm from his mind, motioning to the odds and ends stuffed in the back seat. "Can I help you carry anything?"

"No, no, that's okay. Chris is upstairs. He should be down in a minute. You look like you're on your way somewhere."

"Yes, I'm going to my book store."

On the other side of the street Joyce noticed an older man riding an electric powered cart. Though not a wheelchair it seemed probable he needed the one-seater for mobility. The miniature vehicle appeared to be home-made.

"Who's that?" Joyce asked.

"Derek glanced quickly at the man. "I don't know, but I think he's coming our way." The man on the cart waved to them and crossed the street. The whirring sound of the electric motor became plain in the thin air as he neared them. The device fell silent when it stopped.

"Hi there, I'm Bob Matthews." His voice was warm but gritty. Strands of gray poked down from his insulated baseball cap in clumps. Whisker stubble marked his face in spots his shaver had missed and his face looked tired, bleary eyes rimmed in red. His hands displayed the bloat of edema, evidence of a lengthy sentence

in the cart. "My friends call me 'Bo'." He pointed to the other side of the road in the direction of the woods. "I live over there. 1710." Derek introduced himself and Joyce as he shook the man's hand, feeling its fleshy thickness.

Matthews continued. "I've lived in this neighborhood my whole life. Used to work for the Clement Corporation on the other side of town. Retired now." He stroked the handlebar of his cart.

Derek nodded politely while Joyce kept a smile on her face. The old man saw that Joyce couldn't stop gawking at the cart.

"Bum leg," Matthews said. "Got it in a car accident just after I retired. Right there." He pointed to the intersection at the end of the street. "You know what they say, most accidents happen within two miles of your home." He smiled wryly. "How about two blocks?" He patted the steering on the one-man vehicle. "This thing lets me get around. It's my legs."

Derek didn't know what to say to the man. He felt as though his own impairment of missing most of his ring finger non-existent in comparison to Bob Matthews' troubles. Joyce was equally silent. Derek liked how straightforward Bob was about his paralysis and decided it wasn't really much of a handicap at all.

"So, you got any pets?" Matthews said suddenly, looking from Joyce to Derek. Their answers made his eyes glaze for a moment. "Cats, huh?" His gaze intensified. "We've had some bad things happen to cats in this neighborhood."

"Like what?" Joyce said anxiously. "Mine's hardly more than a kitten." Her hands came together over her heart.

Matthews coughed and cleared his throat. "The one I remember the most happened the night of my accident." The old man leaned forward onto the handlebars toward Joyce. His voice lowered a little. "I was on my way home from work. It was dark. I put in some overtime and was really tired." He cleared his throat. "As I got closer to home, it got foggy. Real foggy. A freak thing, actually, being the middle of summer. Too hot and dry for that, I thought."

As the old man spoke his voice kept getting lower in pitch and quieter, making it hard to hear him. Derek and Joyce stepped a little closer to Matthews.

Matthews went on. "The air was soup, pure soup, just before I got to the corner. Do ya know what I'm sayin'? The fog just got thicker, like that." He snapped his fingers, making Joyce blink. "The other guy must've been surprised, too. He was heading west and went through the stop sign. Hit me in the driver's side and spun the car all the way around." His puffy hand made a smooth twirling motion in the air. He paused to

straighten himself in the seat, ran his fingers down his legs, as if to wipe away sweat or ward off some remembered pain, then folded his arms across his chest. His eyes closed for a long few seconds.

"That's horrible," Joyce said.

"Oh, that's not all. When I came to I was hurtin' real bad. It would've been worse except, well, I didn't know it but I was paralyzed down my leg. I remember how queer I felt 'cause the fog had lifted. Completely. Then I heard this screaming. I said to myself, 'Bo, that poor slob's bought the farm. It was such a high-pierced scream. I thought it was the guy in the other car.

"But it wasn't?" Derek's brow furled.

"No. It was Glenda . . . Glenda . . . oh, I can't remember her last name. Used to live on the corner." He paused for a moment, thinking hard as if the woman's last name was important to the story. Matthews looked straight into Derek's eyes, then Joyce's and fixed his gaze there. "It was her cat. What happened was, I heard this later, see, she heard the crash, came outside and her cat got out. It ran to the back of the house and then pitched a fit, hissing and howling. Then there was a yelp. Then nothing. Glenda went back there and found her cat, skull crushed by a big rock."

Joyce made a groaning-gagging sound.

Derek's eyes narrowed. "You mean someone killed her cat right after your accident?"

"Yeah. After I heard Glenda scream I musta passed out."

Joyce rubbed her stiffened arm as if a chill had rippled up it. "Ugh, who could be such a, such a, bastard!" She seemed surprised she had cursed.

"I don't know," Matthews said, apparently sympathetic to the anguish on Joyce's face. "Listen, that was a long time ago. Sorry if I scared you."

"No. It's just kinda creepy," Joyce said with a rush of breath as if it were her last.

"I think it could've been George Cain," Matthews said, thumbing at Cain's house." Derek's eyebrows went up and Joyce glanced behind her. Matthews spoke with his jaw clenched. "He's always getting into arguments with someone, even the cops." He forced a smile, his lips thin and pulled tight across his teeth. "The guy's loony. Dangerous." His tone approached ranting. "I think he wants his mother-in-law dead, for her property." Matthews squinted. "I don't like him at all. In fact, I out and out *hate* the guy."

George Cain smashed the small clay planter onto the basement floor, sending potting soil flying every which way. The shards of

clay pointed in odd directions, lying in a tight pattern around the wilted plant it had contained.

He gripped the sides of his head and fell to his knees. A long, sharp piece of the shattered container aiming straight up caught Cain's knee, tearing his baggy work pants and gouging into his flesh. The pain from the fresh wound added almost nothing to the blizzard of cruelty already engulfing his brain.

The residue from his last episode was still there, if faintly, and now this onslaught overlapped it, intensified it, the sum sending Cain to a new height of rage. He had a sudden urge to vomit, couldn't hold it back, and in rhythmic spasms the acidic contents of his stomach sprayed out through his mouth and nose, wetting the floor before him with thick bile. A strand of yellow-green spittle hung from his chin to the concrete, gathered then broke off and another began to form.

The voice inside him told him it was happening. And it would happen again. Not merely this pain, this enraging pain that terrorized him, but what it released from him. And there was something new. Be it that this had happened often enough throughout his life it now finally began to evolve on its own, or in his waning years he desired it to--whatever the reason--it was changing, gaining strength, stretching out for permanence. Cain didn't yet comprehend the biggest reason something was different--that the thing had sensed Kate Freeman and was blooming with a passionate urging for the fulfillment it knew she could bestow. What Cain did know was that he both feared and hoped for the torment, the void. The fear was a remnant of his human side, the hope a transformation of the confusion into the belief he wanted the change, needed the change--the thing had let him see just enough. He saw a solution, a new dimension. A change that would last.

A faint ragged grin slid across his teeth.

* * *

Melissa lifted her head from the pillow to give her mother the usual good-night kiss and hug. Derek received one as well, tucked the thin sheet snugly around his daughter's chin and did the same with the thicker quilt over the top of that.

Derek swung the door nearly closed, leaving enough space to let a fraction of light into the room. Kate took a quick check into Nathan's room, studying his tiny body to make sure his chest was moving up and down. It was, with a slowness almost imperceptible. From his room she went to lock the front door, pausing to glance at the weather outside. "A touch of fog out

there," she said idly.

Derek joined her at the door. He put his hands on her neck and kissed her nape. She recoiled. "Your hands are cold!" She exclaimed, then turned to take them in hers, rubbing them. "That reminds me," she said, kissing his fingers. "I've got to go in the basement to get some bread from the freezer."

She snapped on the single bulb to illuminate the back hall, then swung open the cellar door into the black void below. Her fingers instinctively found the switch for the stair light and she felt relief when the darkness had been vanquished. Hard heels clopped on the bare planks of the steps as she descended, one hand on the rail to guide herself.

At the foot of the steps she stood in a pool of light thrown by the single bare bulb over her head. The walls of the several small rooms prevented the light from penetrating to the end of the cellar where the freezer waited for her. She flicked another switch on a wall but nothing happened. Her lips pursed in disgust at the inoperable light switch. Derek would have to look at that, she thought. She moved toward the other side of the basement, slow enough so her eyes could adjust to what little illumination there was, shuffling her feet so she wouldn't trip over anything lying on the floor.

A few paces into the dark her foot struck a nearly used up gallon sized paint can, making it bounce and rattle along the concrete. The hollow, tinny echo seemed larger in the emptiness. She paused, a warmth flushing over her arms and cheeks, silently cursing her husband for leaving the can there. She looked down, staring at the blackness where her shoes would be to search for other obstacles before continuing. The metal band around a paint brush caught the dim glow from the obscured bulb. She couldn't tell which direction the invisible black handle pointed. She pushed it out of her path with the tip of her foot.

Near the freezer she took a step out of her way to avoid walking on the grate over the sewer drain. The faint scent of decay wafted past her nostrils. Punctured by dozens of holes, the dirty round of iron held bits of unidentified hairlike strands and clumps of lint. A collector of filth in the lowest part of the house. She knew its location by memory.

The door on the freezer at first resisted opening, but with a persuasive tug it finally yielded, shedding light from its tiny service bulb onto the concrete at Kate's feet. She bent over to search the chilly compartment for the loaf of bread. The wave of air that flowed around her at first made her face and arms tingle with objection. A frozen food smell, familiar and welcome, greeted her nostrils, but there was something else there besides.

She sniffed a few times, sensing something slightly foul, and wondered if food had spoiled. It was a rotting garbage kind of odor, the kind made by meat--stifled by the cold, but obviously present. She suddenly felt the chill from the freezer reach up around her neck and slide down her back along her spine. She shivered. *What the hell was that? It felt like ice-water.* At once a feeling prodded the center of her mind, a sense that she was not alone.

She turned, expecting to see Derek; finding no one there. The shine from the tiny bulb behind her made the darkness before her all that more deep, yet in that depth she thought she saw movement, like dust or the vapor exhaled on a frigid day. Her warm breath in the air from the freezer, she decided. Her hand reached in to retrieve the bread.

With the door closed she was again plunged into nothingness and she waited for her eyes to get used to the black wall before her. The light bulb at the foot of the stairs, out of sight behind the furnace and a wall, was merely a dim suggestion. As she stood there another feeling of coolness swept over her, like the air from the freezer yet not exactly the same. Dense, surrounding, and moving on its own. There was almost a pressure to it, a groping of her body.

She took a single step, placing her heel squarely on the drain grate. The hard, dirt-muffled clank made her stop. The coolness intensified to cold, making her entire body quiver. The small bit of brightness making its way to her seemed as though behind a faint haze. She could only think of fog.

Her brain told her to move away from there, as did the rising hairs on her nape and arms. She obeyed, her stiff limbs moving her swiftly to the staircase. Then, curiosity got the best of her anxiety. She stopped, looking behind her into the void then put the bread on the stairway three stairs from the bottom. *I'm not going to let my imagination get the best of me,* she thought. *I must have caught a chill from the cold draft. I must be coming down with something.* She went into Derek's workroom to retrieve a flashlight. To her dismay the batteries were dead. She spied a box of farmer's matches on a shelf and took them.

She stroked the match head across the rough patch of sandpaper on the box. A rushing sound of ignition and blaze of flame greeted her. She shielded the flame from her sight with her free hand, squinted into the dark and began to walk back to the freezer. Now she had light along her entire path--a light that cast dancing shadows behind the litter of objects surrounding her. After a dozen steps she was again very close to the sewer grate.

The silence was itself its own eerie sound, forcing her to

stand motionless and listen. She swept her eyes back and forth and realized she was warm, almost sweaty, and her heart was beating in her ears. *A whisper? Is that--? Must be the television upstairs.* She began to feel a wave of coolness rise from her feet and was about to take a step backward when a misty grayness seemed to whisk up to her hand and blow out the flame on the match. A gasp escaped from her lips and she dropped the stick. Darkness regained its footing.

Nearly tripping, panicking, hitting the empty paint can again, she made her way back to the sanctuary of the light at the stairs. Her fingers snatched up the bread from the stair as she took her first step in ascension. At the top, she snapped off the light and pulled the door after her. She leaned back on it a second to catch her breath, let her pulse slow. A deep cough erupted from her lungs. She continued, closing the door between the hallway and the kitchen to seal the basement behind her. She hurriedly dropped the bread on the kitchen counter. Her breathing was tight, punctuated with explosive coughing. She went to a kitchen drawer for her asthma medicine and took two shots from one of her inhalers. She clutched the other one in a fist and went to find Derek.

Derek sat on the living room couch, complacently poring over the Reader's Digest. She came to stand by his side. "Did you have the T.V. on?" She asked.

"No, why?"

"Well, I was downstairs, and . . ."

"And what?"

"It was really strange." She sat on the sofa next to him. "I must be getting sick with the flu. I felt cold and it was, well, there was kind of a mist down there, then this rush of air, and--"

"A mist? Like the fog outside?"

"Well . . ."

"Come on." He shook his head, glanced at the pages before him, then looked up at her. "This place is kind of old, drafts come in, the freezer throws a cold draft when you open it--"

"It wasn't that! It was different."

"Hmmm." The doubt on his face annoyed her. He put the back of his hand on her forehead, saying, "Maybe you should eat some aspirin and take a nap. You don't have a fever but maybe you are getting sick."

She would have continued with the argument but Perkins, behind the couch, hissed loudly.

"What the hell?" Derek flinched, rolled off the couch and peered behind it. "Hey, you old cat, what's the matter with you?"

Perkins hissed again. She was staring at a heating vent near the end of the couch. The cat swiped at the vent and cocked its head. "You are strange, Perkins old girl."

Derek returned to his place next to Kate. "She must've seen a spider or something," he said. "That cat gets weirder every day." He laughed a little, somewhat bothered that Kate did not do the same.

*Creatures of the winter
lie still in their sleep.
Dawn to dusk slips by unnoticed,
the night a dream buried deep.
In the thick of the cold
man is such a creature,
biding its time,
lusting for spring,
renewal.
Lethargy advances,
boredom wins its share,
the clock turns its endless advance
an unmeasured pace.
Tedium the order of the day.
Each species takes pause
in its own manner.
For the animal human, hibernation claims the mind.
Time passes.*

PART TWO
The Gathering

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After having the same air sealed in the house for so many months it lifted Kate Freeman's spirits to again be able to open a window. Though she knew it would cool off somewhat after this warm spell--typical for late March--she was happy that the first signs of spring were showing. Elbows on the windowsill, reveling in the mild breeze billowing out the curtains, she took a deep drink of sweet, fresh air, admiring the yellow crocuses, then sat at the computer again to continue with her work. A book describing Aztec religious rituals--animal sacrifices in particular--lay open on the desk, a page flipping back and forth in the air currents as though plied by an invisible hand.

She typed a few words then turned away from the computer screen to look outside. She saw a robin land on a brownish patch of grass in the front yard. The bird hopped onto greener turf, cocking its head from side to side in search of insects on which to dine.

From her perch on the sill of the front living room window Perkins saw the bird too. With her sight trained on the robin, the feline stood nearly motionless, looking like the work of a good taxidermist, ancient instincts controlling every muscle. Only the quick jerking movements of its eyes and occasional bob of its head gave away the cat as flesh and blood.

Derek entered the bedroom whistling 'California Girls' under his breath. He patted Nathan on the head.

"Beach Boys, right?" Kate laughed.

Derek nodded. "Heard it on the radio yesterday and I can't get it out of my mind."

Kate rose to him, putting her hands on his shoulders. "You better not be thinking about any bikinied beach blondes." She wrapped her fingers around his neck and jiggled it softly in a mock strangulation.

He kissed her palms and ran his hand up her thigh. "You're the only girl I fantasize about."

"Oh stop that," she giggled. She looked outside at the orange pallor of light tainting the landscape, the work of the bright morning sun as it licked its last of the horizon. "It's too bad you have to go in today. It's supposed to get into the low fifties."

"Yeah. Pretty nice for this time of year. The rest of the snow should melt. Most of it, anyway."

"Don't worry," Kate sighed, "It'll get cold again."

"And I bet there'll be one last blizzard."

He dallied as long as he could, knowing that Gary would get

the till ready and open up if he arrived first. Derek used to feel guilty if he didn't get there before his assistant manager. Well, maybe not guilty, but it hadn't been exactly a comfortable feeling he got from the example he thought was setting. Lately, however, he had a relaxed sense about it and guilt didn't even occur to him. When he kissed Kate good-bye it was longer, more passionate than usual. Spring fever, he thought, most likely amplified by that other northern winter illness-cabin fever.

After Derek was gone and Kate was sitting back at the computer, her gaze drifted again to the stirring of nature beyond the window. *A wonderful day, she thought. I can't just sit here. Maybe I should hang laundry outside today.*

She watched her son. Nathan leaned against the bed, testing his legs, looking like he was feeling fine and neither knew nor cared that it was the clean air doing it to him. Kate crouched to tickle her son's tummy. "Maybe we should go for a walk, big fella. Go for a walk?"

The boy gurgled and smiled. "Ow-tide?"

"Okay Nate, that's what we will do!"

The stroller, an out-of-style buggy type, had collected a thin layer of dust from being stored in the garage all winter, but a wipe-down with a damp rag quickly brought it back to acceptable shape. Snow pants and a sweater were added to Nathan's apparel--Kate thought it might still be a bit too cool for her son--and together they ventured out into the neighborhood. The boy's face seemed scrunched in the tight circle formed by the draw-strings of the jacket's hood.

George Cain sat in his living room hunched over a weathered wood box, rummaging through it at a slow, determined pace. One small lamp at the other side of the room gave him barely enough light to see. A fresh pack of cigarettes waited next to him on a coffee table. His hands worked through the collection of odds and ends in a calm fashion. So deep in concentration was he that the faint snoring of Loretta Cain failed to disturb him. Every now and then, an item would catch his affection, and the hint of a smile would turn the corner of his mouth.

Strolling toward Thickett, three houses down, Kate and Nathaniel met a plump, wrinkled lady sweeping twigs on her sidewalk into neat little piles. The gray haired woman smiled. "Hello. I'm Molly. Molly Wasburg. You must be the new people on the block, in the Pastorik house."

"Yes. I'm Kate Freeman. This is Nathaniel. Or Nathan."

"Glad to meet you." She bent over to get the tot's attention. "What a cute little boy. That's a nice name, yes it is." She gently pinched at the boy's rosy cheek, making him

smile. "How old are you, Nathaniel?"

Nathan stuck out up his hand, trying to get just a few fingers to stay up. He succeeded in showing three, with a fourth struggling to raise itself.

Kate translated. "He's two."

Nathan's feet kicked at the air as if he wanted them to touch the ground so he could run.

"I have a daughter, too," Kate said. "Melissa. She's in school today."

The conversation was bluntly interrupted by the yipping of a pair of tiny dogs inside Molly's small home. They bounced off the window screen then disappeared, only to repeat the show a few seconds later. "Those are my boys," Molly said. "My poodles. Brownie and Shake."

Kate kept smiling. *Great. Poodles. My favorite dog.* She hoped the sarcasm didn't show. *I hope she keeps the little things inside all the time.* "Cute dogs." She tried to sound sincere. Despite how Kate's childhood on the farm had imbued a love for animals in her, poodles were the single beast that never had found a spot in her heart.

"Do you have any pets?" Molly asked.

"Yes. A female cat named Perkins."

The smiled on Molly's face melted. "A cat. I see. Did anyone tell you what happened to the Pastorik's cat? And several others over the years?"

"Well, no." Kate's forehead wrinkled.

"Disappeared. It was nailed to a tree in the woods at the end of the street. Children found it." She shook her head, lifting a withered, arthritic hand to point a finger at the dead end of the street. "And quite a while ago one had its brains smashed with a big rock. Behind Glenda Braxton's home. On the corner. The night Bob Matthews had an accident. Did you know about that? A terrible thing. There's been others."

Kate's palm came up to cover her open mouth, her mind racing to digest all the information. *Nailed to a tree? Good God! Others? What kind of cruelty are people capable of? Is this neighborhood safe? And who's Bob Matthews?*

"Some say it was kids. Boys." Molly shook her head. "I don't think so. The cat nailed to the tree was found by a group of boys and girls together. The boys were just as upset as the girls, at least when it happened. That's what I heard." She shook her head again as Kate listened with her eyes fixed in a stare at the woods.

Molly continued. "The last time this went on, several cats getting killed, being found dead, in such a short period, was when

my Artie was alive, around fifteen years ago. Every other home had a cat or two. Then, one by one, they started disappearing. Seems a dog was found too. It was . . . well . . . its head was cut off, and . . . uh, its belly was slit from end to end. Molly coughed and swallowed as though bile had risen to her tongue. "Some simply disappeared. Never found a trace."

Kate took a study of the woman's eyes, and felt at once that she spoke the truth. Or at least Molly thought she was. Kate wanted a reason not to believe Molly. *Time often blurs reality for old folks.* Kate's impulse to smile was drowned by images of tortured animals. Childhood scenes of butchering livestock on the family farm flashed through her mind. A sledgehammer smashing through the forehead of a cow, blood and bone splattering. The disembowelment of a huge sow. She forced those thoughts out.

"Have you met anyone else?" Molly asked.

"Mercy De Ville . . . My husband, Derek, met the man two doors south from us. George Cain."

Molly scowled, her voice bitter as she spoke. "I know him. He's mean. Especially to kids. Keeps their toys if they land on his precious grass." A sneer crossed her face. "He gives us retired folks a bad name."

Kate reached out and touched Molly on the arm. "Now Mrs. Wasburg, I know he's kind of gruff, but he can't be all that bad."

"Please, call me Molly, and yes, he can." Her lips thinned and her eyes narrowed. "Listen to me. You watch yourself around that man, I tell you. There's something wrong with him. He yells at his mother-in-law, Agnes Barber." Molly motioned with her hand. "She lives between you and Cain."

Kate nodded. "Yes, we know who Mrs. Barber is. We've both met her, by the way."

"My God, the woman is in her nineties," Molly said. "Cain is gonna kill her!" She paused, as though studying Kate's expression. "I think he could've killed those cats." She became silent, gazing across the yards to Cain's house, her eyes taking on a look of reminiscence. "He wasn't always that way. When Artie and I were young, a few years into our marriage, George and his wife, Loretta, would come and play bridge. George had all these funny stories about things that happened when he was in the Navy. We had some good times." Molly stood in peace for a few seconds then her features suddenly tightened into an expression of anger. "Now I hate George Cain."

A jolt of pain in his skull made George Cain squint and slowly roll his head. The small amount of light filtering in past the lowered shades in his dimly lit living room at once seemed to him as though he was looking at the sun through a magnifying

glass. The pack of Camels in his hand buckled under the pressure of his grasp, crumpling into a useless mess of paper and tobacco.

His voice was hushed, raspy, like sandpaper against concrete. "No! Not again. Leave . . . me . . . alone. I want to be left alone. I never hurt . . . Never wanted to . . . You all . . . make me want to do it. Make me do it. Fuckers. I never want you . . . to hate me. You make me be bad."

The pain pulsed through him, cresting white like the core of a blast-furnace, then abated, became mild, almost subsiding after a long few minutes, leaving Cain tired and hazy. This time he would only sleep, the strength of the tired old woman's hate being too weak to transform him. He had spent the depths of winter in peace but now they would be out there, scheming to get him, or so the thing in his mind was telling him. After the short nap he would wake and hunger would drive him to eat, voraciously, as always, almost as if the metamorphosis had actually taken place again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

James Sadowski tipped back the last of the beer, let it gush down his throat and motioned for the bartender to bring him another. Luck was with him, for a change in shift had removed the bartender that knew he had sat there long enough to be cut off. A belch rumbled out from deep in Sadowski's gut as he nodded his gratitude for his tenth serving in three hours. The bartender drew a little more than was needed from Sadowski's heap of cash on the bar and deposited it in the cash register with a slight, leering grin decorating his face. The involuntary tip went unnoticed--Sadowski's glazed mind was on other things.

Sadowski's stool near the end of the bar was close enough to the men's room that the commingled odors of yesterday's vomit and today's urine and excrement would have offended him had not his senses been numbed by alcohol. He was too far from the open front door to feel the gentle hint of rising temperatures the change of seasons offered. His eyes were red and bleary and his ample belly gurgled from its liquid diet. He had the unkempt appearance of not caring.

Another patron stumbled to the bar to order a drink, fumbling with crumpled dollar bills and muttering to himself. Sadowski looked beyond him, through the big glass pane fronting the tiny corner tavern, into the bleak night air, watching the traffic signals on the corner go through their repetitious cycle of colors. A patrol car rolled without hurry past the establishment, its main objective apparently the consumption of fuel.

Sadowski could not rid his mind of his former neighbor. George Cain was stuck in this man's throat like a cracked chicken bone. A large gulp of beer and the glass came to rest on the bar top, producing a thick plastic click against the Formica. His hand squeezed tighter around the glass without him realizing until he was a few pounds of pressure away from shattering it.

He knew he would get even with Cain. The idea of going back to face Cain pleased him. He thought he should have taken him on a long time ago.

This was better, though. Now he could plan, take his time. And really get George Cain good. Really make him pay for all the bullshit he had put him through. And because he didn't think he would sleep peacefully until Cain got what was coming to him.

Maybe after another brew he would drive by his old neighborhood, take a gander at Cain's house. Maybe stop for a while, study it, make his plans. His jaw clenched. He wondered if he could control his hate if he was sitting in front of the old bastard's house. Could he wait, hold himself back? He wanted to

take time, do it right, make a good plan. Maybe just a quick drive past Cain's place. Five minutes. Sit and think about how much he hated the bastard and what he had coming.

Right.

He would get even with Cain.

At least.

* * *

The warm spring sun, blazing through the open kitchen window, warmed the floor around Kate's bare feet as she stood at the counter beating two eggs in a stoneware bowl. The air drifting in had its own special, delicious smell, moist and fresh, heavy with impending bloom and laced with the kiss of sunshine. Two weeks had passed since fair weather had made its first, and only other, showing of the season, an appearance smothered the next evening by a spring snow--a temporary situation that melted within a day.

In this new taste of life renewed, a few sparrows outside near the window were arguing over something, perhaps a morsel of food or a scrap of string for a nest. The buzzing drone of Derek's razor from the bathroom, in its communion with the birds, was signaling the beginning of another day.

When Derek came out of the bathroom he went to his wife and with ease circled her waist with his arms, giving her a mild, suggestive squeeze. One hand slipped inside her bathrobe to cover a breast while the other stroked along her side over her hip to the top of her leg. The front of him pressed slightly into the firmness of her backside. Together they made the same soft sound, like they were tasting gourmet cuisine after months of famine.

"I suppose you're going to leave for work now?" Kate whispered, knowing the answer.

He kissed her on the back of her neck, playing the tip of his tongue as he moved upward to nibble at her ear with his lips.

"Unfortunately," he replied, his tone a match for her look of disappointment. He moved away from her with apparent hesitation and straightened his tie.

"I thought you were going to trust Gary to run the store once in a while."

"Well, that topsoil I've ordered should come today so I'll be taking a Saturday off soon to shovel it. Probably next week."

* * *

In the late afternoon, the ding-dong of the dump truck's backup bell caught Nathan's attention. He toddled across the

carpet in his clumsy way toward the front window as fast as his chubby legs would allow.

"It's here," Kate said into the telephone. "Fifteen cubic yards of topsoil. Where do you want them to put it, Derek?" He told her he wanted it on the strip of grass between the street and the sidewalk, and didn't want that heavy truck on the driveway.

Kate let her husband return to work. She retrieved the checkbook, scooped up her son and went outside to meet the driver of the truck. She noticed George Cain, two houses down, spraying something from a rusted container onto the weeds in the cracks of his driveway. Her nose wrinkled from the faint, bitter odor of poison tainting the air. She thought Cain looked her way and she almost waved, a habitual impulse that stopped before her hand moved more than a twitch. Surprise rippled through her, a sense of wonder that even a fraction of her could be friendly with that man. She couldn't wipe away what she sensed as an aura of danger surrounding him. Something about Cain was so wrong to her. Yet she also felt an urge to bridge the gap between them she knew she had created, possibly from her imagination, as Derek had said. Hoping Cain hadn't seen her, she tightened her grasp around Nathaniel's tiny frame and continued to the waiting truck driver.

The tan and lean young man didn't say much, the extent of the conversation being mostly him nodding his head as Kate told him where to dump the rich black dirt and what to write on the check.

The loamy soil flowed to the ground, a hint of moisture providing cohesion, the pungently sweet aroma of damp earth at once permeating the air. Kate was amazed at the size of the pile made by fifteen cubic yards. It spilled over onto the sidewalk where she was standing and into the road by at least a foot. The man thanked her for the business and the payment, then drove away leaving twin streaks of jet black dirt behind his rear tires.

"What do you say, Nate? How would you like to play in that?" The child thought the invitation real, Kate judged, by the excited sounds and single syllable words bubbling from his mouth and motions his little stubby fingers made at the pile. She knew she didn't dare put him down.

The urgent ring of a bicycle bell approaching made Kate turn and step out of the way of Peter Boyd and Jamie De Ville. They appeared to be racing, and Peter, winning at the moment, carried a baseball in his hand.

"Hi!" Jamie called loudly. Kate returned the greeting. Peter lifted his hand with the baseball in it to wave as he passed her. His hand remained in the air until he traveled as far as the middle of Cain's yard, and as he brought it down the ball struck the handlebar, jarring it from the youngster's grip. It bobbed

for a second, and, amid a cry from the boy, careened off his front tire and shot over Cain's weedy lawn, not three paces from the man's feet.

Cain said nothing, moving fluidly to pick the ball from the grass without a glance in their direction. He spun on his heels and walked down his driveway into his garage.

"Hey! Hey, that's my ball!" Peter jammed on his brakes, as did Jamie--though he still managed to ram his friend's rear tire. Both bikes left thin, short skid marks on the concrete.

"I told you not to go past him. You should've crossed back there," Jamie said, pointing over his shoulder.

"Shut up."

The boys waited a minute, straddling the frames of their bikes, grumbling and muttering to themselves. Cain did not return. They glanced up and down the street, saw that Kate had been watching the entire incident, then maneuvered their bicycles around and slowly pedaled to her.

"Didja see that, Mrs. Freeman?"

"That was kind of mean of Mr. Cain," Kate said, sympathy etching her words. "Why is he angry with you?"

"I dunno," Jamie said.

Peter shrugged his shoulders and added, "He's a jerk. He's taken stuff before."

"I hate him," Jamie said matter-of-factly, without the conviction of anger shading his speech. Peter nodded his head in agreement.

Kate shifted Nathan to her other arm, resting her free hand on her hip. "Well, I know he does seem kind of odd . . ." Both boys rolled their eyes. Kate continued. "Did you ever go and talk to him? Ask him why he keeps your stuff? Did you ever ask for it back?"

Jamie and Peter shook their heads, looking at each other with screwed up faces, as if the most ridiculous thing they had ever heard had been said to them or Kate was speaking the language of another planet.

Kate placed Nathan on the ground and he immediately tried to scramble his way to the inviting black mountain. She asked the boys to watch him, keep him away from the mound of dirt and they dismounted their bikes, setting the kickstands. "Wait here," Kate said as she began walking briskly toward Cain's property. She glanced back to make sure her son was out of trouble, was tinged for a instant by the feeling she shouldn't leave him with the boys, but erased that thought when she thought of where she was going. At Cain's lot she went around to the side door of his house and pushed the button for the bell. A second and third

ring, then the door opened a crack, with nothing but blackness visible inside.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cain? I'm Kate Freeman." She waited for a reply, but received none. Through the slit in the door, one shadowy eye of George Cain met her, drilled her, unblinking. Kate swallowed. "The boys didn't mean anything. Could they please have their ball back?"

Kate thought she held her breath in the ensuing pause, a span that seemed like minutes to her. Cain's response finally came as the door slammed in her face. She exhaled, standing there for a moment, feeling embarrassed, but also as if a challenge had been put before her. *No one can really be this bad.* She walked back to Jamie and Peter, her empty palms to the sky.

The boys looked at her, smirking, as if to say "I told you so." Kate snatched up Nathan, still struggling to dodge the protection of the dirt pile. The two young lads re-saddled their bikes, relief apparent on their faces.

Jamie, spying the mound of soil, asked, "What's gonna happen with all that dirt?"

"We'll have a garden in back, and Mr. Freeman thought he should fill in a little around the house."

"Oh."

Kate could tell the children didn't really care what the black soil would be used for. In their eyes she saw the look of wandering minds, day-dreams inventing a mountain climbing adventure on the dirt pile. She wondered about the extent of their imagination. "Do you like to read?"

"Sometimes, when it's raining."

"Or if we have to, for school."

"Derek owns a bookstore. It's on Highway Sixty, downtown, a block east of Highway Eighty-Three."

The boys glanced at each other, eyebrows raising. Peter backed up his bike first. "We gotta go." Jamie followed. "See ya, Mrs. Freeman." The two lads pedaled off in only a slightly better mood. They sneered at Cain's place as they went past, mumbling threats full of juvenile bravado.

Kate also glanced toward Cain's empty lawn. She frowned, wondering why he had been so mean. *It's going to be hard to get to like that man.*

The voice of Molly Wasburg interrupted Kate's thoughts. "Oh, Kate, have you seen Shake?"

Kate turned to her approaching neighbor. "No Molly, I haven't. Did he get away?"

"I can't find him anywhere. My gate's been locked the whole time." Her eyebrows were tightly knitted under her wrinkled

forehead. "At least I think so. I let my dogs out last night, at their usual time, and Shake didn't come back. Oh dear. I hope nothing happened to him. Where could he be?"

"Maybe hiding behind a bush in your yard?"

"I don't think so. They always come when I call. They're such good little dogs." Her fingertips stroked across her lips. "I got so mad that he didn't come, after a while I gave up. I hollered that he could stay out all night for all I care. Oh dear. I hope the fog didn't confuse him."

"Fog?"

"Didn't you look outside last night? There was a thick fog, like a blanket, you know, low to the ground. Maybe he stayed in the back when I called and somehow the gate got opened. Maybe I left it open. Oh dear!"

Kate didn't recall seeing fog the night before. She knew she had glimpsed the moon just before going to bed and remembered that the sky was clear. She began to wonder if Molly was feeling okay. *Perhaps becoming forgetful in her years.*

Without warning the vision of fog creeping along the ground, encircling the poodle, thrust itself into Kate's mind. Even with her distaste of that canine breed she was stunned that such a foreboding image would so easily be volunteered up from her imagination.

Cain winced, fearing a worse surge of pain. Behind his eye a throbbing made itself known. As he studied the shelves in his basement, his gnarled fingers pinched the baseball tightly, making the leather squeak. A short lapse of time and the hurt began to subside. His muscles relaxed, his eyes could focus again.

A single bare light bulb illuminated his collection. Items he had picked up on his property. Things that children had carelessly allowed to cross the boundaries of his domain. Jars and bottles and tubes containing items saved--Cain's biography--with some specimens so old they floated in a yellowish liquid as an undefinable, gelatinous mass. Others were fresh and surely just as dead in the suffocating fluid, but with the peacefulness of mere sleep that prompted questioning their portrayed absence of life. These were his treasures, taken mostly during the void of his transformed entity as proof of his power, its power. Now they were his.

I'll teach you. I'll teach you one way or another.

His tired brain was a mixture of confusion and understanding, desire and loathing. Kate's request for the return of the baseball puzzled him immensely. Nothing like that had happened to him before. It was easy for him to accept the hate that had

always been directed at him. Everyone that had crossed his path in his life treated him that way. But now this Kate Freeman had the audacity to ignore the comfortable expectations to which he had become accustomed. She was the first that did not react with hatred as a primary impulse to his actions.

This maddened him.

And threatened him.

He wanted her out of his life, away from his domain if intrusion with this impossible *goodness* was all she could give him. If she despised him, hated him, that would be different.

He could use that.

It could use that.

He took a few minutes to choose a place for the baseball on the aged pine shelving. It had to be in just the right spot. With reasoning only understood by him, he decided to put it next to his other new thing--a formaldehyde filled jar accommodating a white, curly-haired miniature poodle. He stepped back, admiring his recent additions, almost smiling, then pulled the string on the light to bring back the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Saturday morning Joyce Buckner moved herself and her possessions in to the apartment to live with her fiancé was cool and clear. The forecast called for a taste of the approaching summer heat by noon-time. Derek, busy since sun-up moving the dirt pile, was a third of the way through it by nine when Joyce arrived. He was happy to take a break. A streak of the black earth had somehow managed to smudge his blonde hair and sweat glistened off his shirtless top half. Despite nearing forty the muscle of his youth was still evident, though softer.

In Joyce's car were clothing and other personal items and Sass, her cat, trembling under the front seat.

Joyce gently coaxed the caramel and white feline from its sanctuary, cradling him in her arms beneath her breasts, stroking him around the ears to give comfort. The animal enjoyed the attention, but its twitching head and nervous eyes showed it remained on full alert in its unfamiliar surroundings.

"Good morning," Derek greeted his new tenant.

"Oh, hello, Derek," Joyce said.

He noticed the flimsy sheerness of her summer top, the brisk morning air caressing her nipples into a beckoning firmness. He looked away with a quick blink, returning his attention to her eyes, hoping his observation went undetected. A slight smile graced her ample, pink lips, yet she gave no clear indication she knew what he had been looking at. He thought her brave for wearing such delicate clothing before its season. He mused at the warm blooded nature of people her age, remembering. It made him feel just a little older at that moment and glad he had Kate--having a wife kept him from taking stupid chances, wasting time on infatuation and rejection. Of course, there was always that chance that carnal urges would take over, so it helped that Kate was still in very good shape--the natural attraction to and lust for his wife's body kept temptation at bay.

"Do you need help with anything?" Derek asked.

"No, no, that's okay," Joyce said. "Chris will be along. He was right behind me with a piece of furniture from my mother's house."

Derek put his fingers on Sass' head and rubbed gently, careful not to bump into Joyce's breast. "So this is Sass?" Derek asked. "Perkins is going to be glad to meet you."

Joyce began to shift her arms so that Derek could get a better look at Sass when the animal saw George Cain standing two houses away, watching. The cat's ears went straight up into

points, followed by a rise of the hair along his spine and a loud, fang-exposing hiss. Sass leaped from Joyce's grasp and charged toward Cain, coming to a cold stop when it had gone a few feet onto Agnes Barber's property. The cat hunched its back and hissed again, punctuating that with a whiny growl.

"Sass!" Joyce stared at her pet.

"Get that goddamn cat outta my yard!" Cain hollered.

Derek whispered, "That's his mother-in-law's yard. His name is George Cain."

"Get that goddamn cat outta my yard right now or I'm gonna call the cops!" Cain raised a fist above his head.

Joyce scampered onto Mrs. Barber's lawn, whisking Sass up and quickly retreating. "God, what's wrong with that old goat?"

"I don't know," Derek said. "He pretty much stays to himself, but he is kind of grumpy."

"Grumpy? I think the guy's a moron. And I don't think he likes cats."

"Sass didn't like him either, it seems," Derek said. The image of Perkins in the window hissing at what must have been Cain the day they moved in flashed through his mind along with Jack Winston speaking of supernatural beliefs and Jamaican witchcraft. "Come to think of it, Perkins didn't have a friendly reaction to Cain either. Cats." He quickly excused the coincidence on the finicky nature of felines, and totally dismissed Jack's words, burying them again in his memory.

"Is Mr. Cain dangerous?" Joyce said, a pained squint etching lines in her smooth, tan skin at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm positive he'll leave you alone," Derek said. "He's perfectly harmless." *I'm sure as hell not going to upset my new tenant. Well, anyway, I don't think ol' George would really hurt anyone. He's just a loud old fool.*

Joyce cuddled Sass and nuzzled his ear. "You be a good boy, Sass." She gave Derek a serious look. "I hope the other neighbors aren't mean."

"Oh, no. I'm certain you'll get along fine with everyone. My wife--Kate--has met some of them and she's very . . . uh . . . happy. I've talked with some of the kids. They're not delinquent types at all."

They glanced toward Cain's house--he was nowhere in sight.

"My cat didn't care for him," Joyce said, looking down at Sass, holding him a little tighter. She left Derek at the curb to take her pet upstairs to his new home.

Derek returned to his topsoil moving task with renewed strength. It took him a mere few minutes to work up a sweat again and he paused time after time to wipe the glistening moisture from

his forehead, occasionally adding another streak of grime to his hair or flesh. He repeated the pattern over and over--shovel, fill, walk, dump, walk, shovel--until he felt robotic.

Derek threw another scoop full of topsoil into the wheelbarrow, straightening his back after the load had slipped off the tool. He rubbed at his sweaty brow and studied the mound of rich earth before him. He wondered how long it was going to take him to move it all. He realized he had allowed eagerness and ambition to color his judgement.

Preoccupied with his repetitive and now automatic procedure he did not see Agnes Barber, doddering precariously on worn feet, coming up behind him. She was only a step away from him and still he did not sense the presence of the person at his back.

Again, for what was probably his hundredth, boring time, Derek turned over the shovel, dumping the scoop that filled the wheelbarrow, threw the tool onto the pile and bent to pick up the handles so he could roll the cargo to the back yard. He turned to make his trip and then he saw her, his face below hers, only a foot or so apart.

The ancient face didn't startle him like it had in their first encounter, though he noticed there was the added repulsive feature of a bruise above her left eye. He wondered how she got it, if her son-in-law had done it. He rejected the latter possibility, telling himself that the elderly bruise easily. He decided that she looked kind of sweet, standing there with her musty eyes magnified in size by her thick glasses and thinning, gray hair pulled back in a bun--even though strands stuck out in random clumps.

His first thought was that she had come to yell at him for the snow blower incident, although that was months ago and he hadn't seen her since. He hovered over his wheelbarrow, not releasing the handles, waiting for the old woman to tell him what she wanted.

"I see you have plenty of dirt," Barber finally said, her voice creaking.

"Yes. There's a lot here." Derek glanced askew at the woman, still perplexed by what she wanted.

Mrs. Barber clacked her dentures together. "If it's not too much trouble, could you spare some? I can use it in my tiny garden. It's between my house and my daughter's." She coughed lightly, and even that much exertion seemed extreme for her.

"Sure, sure. I've got more than I need," Derek said. "I'll dump a couple of loads there." Her pleasantness in light of the snow blower incident made him wonder if she had Alzheimer's, forgetting about the confrontation entirely. If not that then

perhaps she was a forgiving sort of person.

"Ma!" George Cain's raspy voice pierced the air.

Derek turned in Cain's direction. Agnes Barber did not. She seemed to wince from the harsh growl of her son-in-law and lowered her head, looking at the ground.

"Ma! Go inside!" Cain yelled with all his might. "Right now, goddammit!"

Freeman raised an eyebrow. *What is this guy's problem?*

"Mrs. Barber, are you all right?" Derek said.

She did not respond. Derek watched in silence as the old lady carefully made her way back to her house. Cain disappeared into his dwelling, slamming the door behind him. Derek shook his head and quickly walked the wheelbarrow over to Agnes Barber's garden. A second trip completed the promise. He didn't feel comfortable being so close to Cain's place after that show of anger. He felt it best to minimize contact--and therefore the chance of clashing--with his neighbor.

The madness Cain felt drove him to seek solace from his collection of treasures in his basement. The accumulation of anger from the day made him hot and bitter, yet he did not feel the sting of hate. Hate directed at him.

The bare bulb snapped on, the bleakness of the light casting dim shadows off the objects on the shelving. Hairy, fat-legged spiders ran for cover in the protected corner tunnel of their webs. Peter Boyd's baseball had already gathered a thin layer of dust, as did the cap on the three gallon specimen jar that sat next to it. The container's glass was still clean, however, revealing its contents with clarity.

Cain ran his finger along the ragged pine boards, unflinching when a snag drove a tiny sliver into his skin. A thin streak of blood trailed for a few inches, then dried up. His palm came to rest on the base of the new jar, his other hand coming up to the other side. He stroked the smooth glass, caressing its roundness as if it were a woman's breast, loving the thing inside it.

Almost floating in the thick formaldehyde, the little poodle's face pressed against the inside of the jar. The small tag on the animal's collar proclaimed him to have been named 'Shake', with the address of Molly Wasburg beneath it.

The dog's broken jaw displayed a mouth missing teeth, ripped from the gums with an incredible force. One rear leg was twisted, nearly torn from the body, with clotted blood and tissue still weeping from the injury. Unseen were the myriad of cracked bones within the carcass. Several puncture marks in the belly of the animal were of the size and placement of fingers on a human hand.

A whisper moved through Cain's mind with the soft touch of

fog.

George Cain smiled a ragged smile; a comfort contained him. He remembered part of what had happened during his trip into the void, saw what he had been, saw he was able to maim the dog with human abilities while in his transformed state.

Part of him wanted the void, the mutation again--that part embraced the truth he was starting to see. Another part refused to believe--what had he done to deserve the hatred? He knew they would utter their hate for him in coming days, and then he would Become. The small desire in him to have Kate Freeman hate him was gaining strength, because the knowledge of what her hate would do to him--could hate be gotten from that woman--was becoming clear in his mind and should be what he needed to make the transformation permanent.

Of this he was certain.

The whispering told him so.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Damn it!

Kate's whispered words escaped through clenched teeth as Perkins whisked out the front door between her legs, eluding her grasp. The cat bounded down the steps and paused, looking back at Kate as if scolding her for trying to prohibit her freedom. "Perkins, you get back here!" Kate tossed the handful of mail she had just retrieved from the mailbox into the living room, scurried outside and came very close to nabbing her pet at the foot of the steps. But again the animal outdistanced the catch.

The cat scurried across the driveway and disappeared under the peonies separating the Freeman yard from Agnes Barber's property. "Damn," Kate muttered, this louder than the first time. She strode to the cat's hiding place, her hard soled shoes whacking noisily on the concrete. Perkins took off on a run toward the evergreen bushes protecting the front of George Cain's place.

Kate stopped at the lot line, that invisible border, feeling funny about trespassing. She couldn't see her pet and didn't want to wander aimlessly in Cain's yard, poking under the shrubbery and around the sun-faded plastic yard decorations.

Agnes Barber appeared from the side of her house, shuffling along the sidewalk, looking down in front of her. Kate called to her. "Hello Agnes. How are you? Are you okay?"

The old woman lifted her head, a tired hint of a smile playing across her lips. "Oh, I'm fine." She paused, chewing at her teeth as she approached Kate, looking like something was on her mind. Barber took a deep breath and sighed. "Could you spare some bread?"

Kate stumbled over her words. "Well, uh, sure, of course. I uh . . . "

"I'm all out of groceries." Barber's dentures clacked together. "I've been waiting since yesterday for my daughter to take me to the market or bring me something. She's asleep and can't take me."

Kate silently wondered why Cain wouldn't help her. "Well, I could take you."

Mrs. Barber pursed her lips, glancing at her son-in-law's house. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"It's no trouble at all," Kate said. "Please, let me do this for you."

From behind the curtains in a window of George Cain's house the two women could not see Cain watching them, seething, focusing

on Kate. Through the screen he heard everything they said, and his nostrils flared when Kate offered the help. He mumbled, his voice grainy and low. ". . . talking to her. Get away!" He clenched his hands into tight fists hard enough for his nails to draw blood from his palms. He stared at Kate as though his vision could burn a hole through her.

Mrs. Barber turned from Kate without another word, as if in a trance, and began walking back to her house, her feet tottering in short baby-like steps. Kate watched her, wondering why her neighbor hesitated to accept her help and the odd, blunt fashion in which she ended the conversation.

The honk of a car horn made Kate turn abruptly. Derek waved at her through the windshield as he passed her on his way to the garage. Kate folded her arms on her chest and walked sullenly to her husband.

Out of the car, Derek came up to her and wrapped his arms around her, caressing her cheek with a kiss. When he moved his lips down her neck her frown lifted stubbornly into a weak grin.

"What's bothering you, Kate?" Derek asked. "You're pouting."

"What? Huh?" She feigned unawareness, trying to ward off his concern, and tried to laugh. A frown dispelled that.

"I saw that look on your face when I drove in. What's up?"

"Oh, it's Perkins. She scooted out the door. Over to his yard." Her thumb jerked toward Cain's house.

"Did you go after her?" Derek glanced across his neighbors' yards.

"No." Kate's voice had a nervous edge. "I didn't want to come face to face with that old crab. You know I think there's something weird about him."

Derek pursed his lips. "Yeah, he is kind of different, but I can't believe he's dangerous or anything."

"I'm not so sure."

"Oh, right. Mean old Mr. Cain, local Frankenstein, terrorizes neighborhood." Derek raised his lanky arms above him and walked stilted for a few steps. "Film at eleven." Kate's sullen composure broke into a giggle and she poked her husband in the ribs. He lowered his elbows to her shoulders, resting there. "I'm sure ol' Perk will be back in a little while. Probably went to catch a mouse or bird for you. Or to sow a few wild oats."

"I thought only the boys did that."

He slid his hands to her shoulders, pausing at her arms, then nudged subtly closer to her breasts. "I know better than that," Derek said, his tone a notch softer. Kate shook her head at her husband's playfulness, grasped his hand and led him into the

house.

They stopped in the rear hall, embracing, their tongues meeting. Derek's hands moved with a deft touch over the thin blouse covering her breast, feeling for the edges of her bra. "What are the kids doing?" he asked.

"Nathan's in his playpen and I think Melissa is watching television." Her eyes shot a glance at the basement door. "If we go inside, they'll be all over us, you know. We'll never make it to the bedroom."

Derek grinned. He reached for the doorknob to the basement entrance and began to roll it in his palm. Before he had it completely turned the kitchen door opened.

"Hi daddy," Melissa smiled at Derek. "When's supper, mom?"

Inside the house Kate stayed in the kitchen while Derek went into the living room. Nathan, secure in his playpen, gurgled and pointed at his father. "Dadda." The boy stamped his feet, shaking himself and the bars of the pen. Derek went to his son and lifted the boy from his cage, high above him.

"What's up, soldier?" Derek had a cartoon quality to his voice--a combination of gruff and silly.

Nathan, grinning ear to ear, stared at his father below him. He pointed to his mother and spoke a mixture of real words and word-like sounds recognizable only to those who had raised him. A line of drool running down the boy's chin targeted for Derek's nose made the proud father evade the spit, lowering the boy. When a frown and whiny sound came from Nathan, Derek gave him to Kate. Parents, of course, always understood their young. "He wants you to change his diaper," Derek said.

"I just did," Kate scoffed. "A little while ago." She peeked down the back of Nathan's pants, just to be sure. "I think he's hungry and wants you to feed him." As an afterthought, she added, "I can't wait until he starts understanding what the toilet is for."

The table was set and the assortment of pots on the stove held promise for yet another night of culinary delights. Kate had always been a good cook, like her mother. Although she prepared meals from basic foods, she had a touch that made anything a feast. The inviting scent of chicken with some mysterious spice was swept away by the next wafting aroma of fresh green beans with almonds.

The four of them dined at a leisurely rate. Kate, because she needed a break from housewiving and she wanted to savor the food it had taken so long to prepare, Derek because the day was long and he needed time to unwind--a glass of wine helped, too. Melissa, as usual, was slow because there was always something on

her plate she didn't like, as though she thought eating it cold would help. Nathaniel took a while to eat because only a portion of each handful of food made it into his mouth. The floor around the young boy's high-chair contained enough droppings to feed a small dog. Perkins took that chore, barely a help in cleaning it up, being choosy about what she ate.

The meal was followed by the customary dish washing ceremony. Providing Derek was home, the only thing that changed from night to night was who washed and who wiped. Nathan was content enough after eating to spend a few minutes playing with his toys on the floor of the living room. His sister split her time between playing with her brother, reading or television. Before Derek and Kate finished the dishes dusk had settled its cloak over their home.

At the front window, Derek pulled back the curtains to peer outside. "I wonder where that stupid cat is," he mumbled to himself, as if he could see the tiny animal in the darkness.

Kate sat on the couch, her book manuscript resting on her lap. "I'm surprised Perkins ran into Cain's yard. Remember how he acted the day we moved in? You know he doesn't like Cain."

"Yeah," Derek said, sighing. "I guess not. I didn't tell you about Joyce's cat, did I. Went nuts hissing at Cain, almost ran at him."

Kate paused, looking thoughtful. "Cats in general don't seem to like him, do they?"

"I guess not. Maybe it's that sixth sense that animals have."

"Ancient cultures revered cats," Kate said. "The Egyptians, the Mayans. Believed they were mystical, had special powers." Her eyes took on a soft glaze.

"I suppose," Derek said.

"Maybe cats sense that, well, it could be something like they feel Cain wants to destroy them."

Derek grunted and returned his attention to the view through the window. He stared outside for a short time, then turned to his wife. "Hey, come here and look at this."

Kate put her manuscript on the end table and slid off the couch to join her husband at the window, one hand against his side. Her forehead wrinkled. "Well that's odd, Derek. I didn't hear any forecast of rain or fog."

"I didn't either." Derek glanced up and down the street. "Well, it's not raining, but the fog is fairly heavy. I can't see much farther than the end of our yard." With a shrug of his shoulders Derek went to the couch to sit.

Kate stepped to the front door, breathing in the night air

through the screen. "It sure has cooled off a lot. But this is about right for the Memorial Day weekend." She rubbed the goose bumpy ivory flesh of her arms. "It's too chilly to be out there like this."

She was starting to close the door when the sharp, grating whine of a cat made her jerk. The animal howled again and Kate realized it was Perkins, and close by. She couldn't see him through the blanket of fog layering the ground. The third howl, louder and rising in volume as it scarred the night, ended with the sound of scratching wood. Looking down, Kate could see Perkins, front paws up on the door as though demanding to be let in, her tiny head snapping from side to side. As soon as the entryway was open just wide enough for her to fit, the cat shot into the house, stopped after a few feet and looked over its shoulder, letting out a hiss.

"Where have you been?" Kate mock scolded her pet. Perkins jumped up on the couch and stood near an arm rest, bowing and mewling, her well known act for begging Kate to join her. Kate turned to close the inside door and Perkins, apparently impatient, climbed onto Derek's lap.

As Kate locked out the damp night air she looked through the window at the top of the door and thought she glimpsed the grayish outline of a leg, walking away on the sidewalk through the fog. She sucked in a quick breath. She saw a translucent limb, like a phantom, she thought, seeing through it to the grass and concrete behind. She blinked once, then again, and it was gone, as though it melted into the vapor of the fog. She decided it must have merely been a reflection of something on the window.

* * *

Kate Freeman, confused by the total blackness around her, knowing only the spot of light she stood in. Beyond the circle of illumination she could see no end to the darkness, no horizon to focus on. She began to feel cold, as though a winter wind was swirling around the flesh of her naked shoulders. Outside? Sleepwalking? *Impossible*, she thought. She wouldn't go outdoors completely stripped. *Where am I?* She wrapped her arms around her exposed breasts, partially from modesty, partially to protect her skin from the iciness in the air, but also to fend off that sensation of vulnerability, the childhood memory of her uncle--a flashed scene of the rape sent a spike through her brain. She stood on the cold concrete floor with her legs close together, the heel of one foot resting on the top of the other, unable to do anything else to hide the lower half of her body. She wanted to

crouch, to bend over, anything to hide the untanned triangle between her legs. Her brain refused to give the order. A chill stroked her skin, making her exhale with an involuntary force. The resulting plume of vapor from her mouth hung stiffly in the air, then disappeared, sucked away by a vacuum unseen. Her breathing became punctuated by the shivering that racked her body.

The circle of light slowly began to enlarge, and as it did a pure white mist rose from the ground itself, covering her feet and licking at the flesh of her thighs. She pressed her knees firmly together and with great effort somehow willed herself to stoop, if slightly. One hand managed to slip down, stroking against her hip as if to wipe away the damp, invisible fingers caressing them.

Despite the chill surrounding her, droplets of sweat began to blister from her forehead. The fog steadily climbed higher, reaching for the soft patch of hair nestled between her thighs. A bead of perspiration rolled from her chin and disappeared into the cloudiness at her feet. As the wispy haze rolled slowly along the ground it pushed out at the edges of the light, making the universe around her grow. Now she realized she was in the basement of her home. There was the furnace at the edge of the dim light, still and quiet. The water heater, the dryer and washing machine all in their places. Or so it seemed. There was the sense those large, cold steel shapes were ready to move at any moment. Ready to crowd in around her, breathing. She couldn't remember exactly how things were supposed to be. Somewhere in the void the creak of expanding metal ticked off the seconds with an irregular beat. Kate didn't remember going there, or why she was there. She simply knew she didn't want to be there any longer.

Fear began to rip her gut, intensify, crush at her lungs, force her heart to beat in huge pounding strokes. She wanted to move--her feet would not obey. She froze, her entire body refusing to let her mind escape the prison enveloping her. With much purpose and forced strength she began to move her arms and turn her head, slowly, as though she was in a pit of mud. She forced her heavy eyelids to open wide in their sockets and they felt like iron weights hung from them. Her gaping mouth wanted to scream, tried to scream, but it was as if a brick wall at the back of her throat kept the sound captive in her chest.

The light now reached out a dozen yards and the basement seemed larger than it really was. The furnace and the water heater, the washing machine and dryer all now completely within the perimeter of visibility, facing her, their odd dials, knobs, orifices and appendages taking on living attributes, oppressive, seemingly watching, moving toward her. Had they been that close? She hadn't seen them move.

At the edge of the darkness a figure began to materialize, first a pair of dark legs, clad in torn, dirty clothing, moving in through the mist, then a torso, translucent at best, arms raised as though floating on the top edge of the fog. No, its legs melding with the fog. Solidifying now. It stopped its advance before a face became visible. The human thing stood motionless, seeming to be studying, lusting. Kate tried to scream again but only her mind could blare out the noise of terror.

A low, raspy cackling sound from the gray entity facing her. It was as if he were reaching into her brain, knowing her thoughts. Deep in her consciousness she yelled out. *Who? Why? Who the hell, oh my God, who are you? Please God help me.*

The shape glided forward, its death-hued features sliding into the light. Kate felt a stab of pain race icily through her skull, a rage enhanced by fear and what she knew was hatred, a feeling she couldn't stop from taking her. George Cain stood there, looking at her naked breasts, down now at the soft hair guarding her vagina. His face broke into a thin, red-lipped smile stretching across yellowed, broken teeth. A visage more wrinkled and scarred than she had known. It was Cain, and it was not Cain. Blisters marked his bluish skin, some broken and oozing a yellow-greenish thick liquid. The stench of rotting meat pooled around him, seeming to come from both his open sores and mouth. As he came closer she saw bone exposed on several of his fingers, and part of one cheek was moving, sliding off his skull.

At the end of his arm, in bloodied fingers, he gripped a cat, limp and twisted, the color and markings of Perkins, missing parts of its face. He let it drop to the floor, its side hitting first. The cat tumbled, rolled over once, stopped, stirred and looked up at Kate. It bared its fangs with a hiss like a rattlesnake then began to choke, its body convulsing, heaving forward up out of its torn belly into its throat a mass of living tissue, wetting the floor. The new thing wiped ooze from its form. A human fetus.

Kate pulled and twisted with all her might. She couldn't retreat, couldn't raise a hand to protect her smooth white skin from Cain's approaching, scaly fingers. He was within reach of her, his stringy gray hair coming out of his scalp a few strands at a time, falling slowly down his cheek, sticking to the pus from the flowing blisters, landing on his bony shoulders. He was deteriorating with each motion toward her, bloody wounds appearing everywhere on his flesh. His clothing began to shred on its own, as though being eaten by spirit moths. A hissing, catlike sound came from the gaping darkness of his mouth.

The hairs on the back of Kate's neck jolted to attention, almost ripping themselves from her pores.

Cain's fingers reached up toward her breast, closer, an inch from her, opening to hold her. Scarlet blood dripped off the exposed bone of his ragged flesh. Her soul raged at him, wailing hatred at the impossible, insane violation she knew was about to happen. She concentrated, fought, pulled her leg backward, feeling skin tear across some jagged edge. A low, forced moan came in place of the scream she wanted.

"Kate!"

"Kate!" Derek shook his wife. "Kate! Wake up!"

She sat upright instantly in the bed, her eyes snapping open, rolling forward in their sockets. Her jittery hands came up to cover her face and the air rushed out of her lungs in a single burst and cry of anguish. She wiped sweat from her brow and coughed, choking, as though she was going to cry.

"God, Kate, what is it?"

She sat motionless for a second, looked around the room then rattled her head to clear it. She shivered. The darkness of the bedroom did something other than ease her mind--not knowing in her half-awake state if she was safe from intruders lurking in the room, hiding in the darkness, standing near the doorway. She slid under the sheet and huddled up to Derek as close as she could.

Kate was more awake now. "It was terrible." Her voice was clogged and hoarse. She licked her parched lips. "I was having a nightmare. God. Cain was there, after me. But he was different, like he was dead." She quivered and exhaled, a weird sort of moan coming with the breath.

"You're sweating." Derek wiped her temple with the back of his hand. "Maybe your anthropology project is getting to you. I saw that book on animal sacrifices next to your computer."

She shook her head. "It seemed so real. Like the nightmares I had when I was a child." She forced herself to swallow the dryness in her mouth back into her throat. "Even the furnace . . . I hated going in the basement at night when I was a kid. When I turned off the lights at the bottom of the steps I always ran up them because I thought the furnace or the water heater was going to get me. They were so big and I was so small."

Derek laughed slightly, tilting his head back into the pillow. "I know what you mean. I used to have nightmares about the tiny toy soldiers I played with. They would come and attack me in my sleep."

"Gulliver's travels."

"Yeah. Like that. But these guys had bazookas and tanks."

Now Kate laughed, metallic and staccato from nerves. It felt good to get the blood flowing again. She squeezed Derek around the middle and kissed him. "I don't know what Cain had to do with

it. And the fog."

"Fog?"

"Yes. He came out of this cold fog."

"I think you're starting to get a little bit uptight about Cain."

"Maybe because he's such a jerk. No one in the neighborhood likes him. We've got to keep an eye on him."

"I think you're just exaggerating."

"Maybe." She rolled over, remembering the hissing sound Cain had made in her bad dream. She swallowed hard, feeling uneasy, cold, wary. There was another feeling there, too. Hate. She didn't really want it, but there it was pushing in all by itself and she knew it. A small seed was there now, centered in her gut, a definite sense of the dark, vile grip of hate.

* * *

Late in the morning, when she dropped her robe to shower, Kate noticed the dark red crust on her calf. Her fingers crumbled the maroon-black, dry blood away from her skin and she stared at it dumbly. A thin, sharp-edged gash cut across her leg in a straight line for a few inches above her ankle. The coagulated wound looked fresh, perhaps a few hours old. Pain only came at the touch of it. She couldn't remember how she had done that. No memory of brushing against anything that had ripped her. No accidents. No clumsiness.

Then the crushing realization hit her.

The dream.

The vivid panoramic scene of her bad dream exploded into her brain. The nightmare became the focus of all her senses, her thoughts and all she could remember. A coldness ran through her from the idea it could have really happened. For an instant the camera in her mind played back snapshots of her uncle raping her. Her hands went up to press against her temples, fighting the dizzy, suffocating sensation playing through her head. Doubts of being sane crept into her thoughts. To consider the terror she experienced in her sleep as reality would be pure madness. Her hands pushed at the air in front of her as though repelling something she could physically touch. Her sole rational thought was knowing she could not tell this to Derek.

She put these thoughts out, forcing them to leave her conscious mind, making herself believe none of it was real, stuffing it all deep in her subconscious. Along with that went the vivid, surreal image of George Cain.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the long shadows at the rear of the duplex, Chris Montoya popped open the lid of the large cooler, proudly displaying his catch. Three large Chinook salmon lay on a bed of ice. A line of blood trickled from the gills of one. Derek admired the tasty looking fish, though he was glad he wouldn't be involved in the cleaning.

"We'll have more than we can use, and our freezer isn't all that big," Chris said. "You want some of it?"

Kate, standing behind Chris at the clothesline, turned, looked her husband square in the eyes, and with pursed lips and glaring eyes shook her head in short, vigorous, movements.

Derek pretended not to see her. "That would be real nice," Derek said, "Though I don't have any idea how to prepare it."

"I like it smoked," Montoya said.

"Well, I don't have any special equipment. Do you?"

"Just use your Weber," Chris said. "Get a bag of wood chips--white oak is good--and soak those in water for a day or so. Cut the fish up into sections about six inches long. Soak the meat overnight in salt water. Get a real good hot fire going, put some chips on--you gotta keep adding them once in a while--then close off the vents pretty far and put the chunks on the grill. Takes about four hours."

"Sounds pretty easy."

"It is." Chris smiled, the pride of teaching his older landlord obvious on his face. "I'll clean them for you, right after I get supper." He lifted the cooler and trudged up the steps to his apartment.

Kate, her jaw set, put her hands on her hips. "I'm not going to eat those smelly things."

"It isn't any different than buying fresh fish at the market."

"I don't care. These have heads and tails and he's going to clean them in his *kitchen!* Fish guts all over the place. It's just the thought of it. Fish guts in the garbage cans, rotting in the hot sun."

Derek laughed. "Oh, come on. It's not that bad." An impish look spread on his face. "I might ask if I can go with him next time. His buddy has a nice boat. He lives in Milwaukee and they fish Lake Michigan and--"

Kate groaned loudly, tucked the clothes basket under her arm and walked back into the house. Derek chuckled to himself and returned to cutting the grass, noting the setting sun's level above the horizon.

Bob Matthews, guiding his cart down a driveway apron and into the street, rolled across the road and began to aim for a driveway on the other side. A screech of tires, coupled with a blast from a car horn, made him twitch, but failed to force his eyes off his destination. Ignoring the warning seemed to only infuriate the driver more--an adolescent male with hair cropped to his skull, loud bass-dominated music thumping through the steel of the vehicle as if it were paper. The young man leaned out his window, ready to shout at the top of his lungs. It must have been the sight of Matthews's handicap that tempered the rage in the teenager's eyes. "Hey, old man, watch where you're goin'. You coulda been killed."

"Punks," Matthews fumed under his breath. He turned toward the car, growling, "Don't drive so damn fast. There are kids in this neighborhood!"

"Yeah, yeah." The driver shook his head and drove off toward Thickett. At the intersection he slowed, turned right and squealed his tires, the music fading seconds later.

Derek stopped his mower as Matthews approached. "Hey, Bo, how are you this evening?"

"Damn kids. Almost ran my ass over."

"Are they always like that?"

"No, just a couple of 'em are jerks. That one lives in another block near here. His buddy lives on Harper, close to the woods."

Derek looked down the road at the trees bordering the dead end. "Is that city property?"

"Yeah. Part of it is owned by the state too, or the federal government. It's bigger than it looks from here. Maybe ten square miles or more. Lots of swamp. There's a drainage creek that runs through there. It connects to the storm sewer."

"Has it ever overflowed?"

"Did once. In '72. Eight inches of rain in four hours. One of those freak storms late in summer."

"Basements flooded, I suppose."

"Only the ones near the woods. Some older homes around here don't have sump pumps. Yours probably don't."

"Come to think of it, you're right."

"Does your basement leak?"

"It hasn't yet."

"Don't worry about it then. See, there's an underground spring that runs through the area. When they dug basements for these homes you could see water run down the walls of the hole. Your drain tiles carry that water to the storm sewer. So would any water in your basement. Right down the drain, into the

sewer."

"I see."

"It's all one huge system. Every house is connected to it."

"Right." Derek eyed the remaining section of lawn and the deep orange half sun at the tree line. He was becoming bored with his neighbor's lesson.

Matthews went on. "Gotta keep that Palmer valve workin'. Drain tiles gotta stay clear. Tree roots clog 'em up." He looked up at the large, sprawling tree in Derek's front yard. "Boxelder. Yep. Good thing this ain't a willow. Roots go right for those tiles." Matthews pointed at the long outstretched limbs and few brittle, dead branches. "Needs a trim. Some of that could break loose in a good storm. Fall right on your house."

"So what about the woods? Anything interesting down there?" Derek asked. He grasped the mower's push-bar.

Matthews straightened in his seat, his eyes narrowing on Derek, his voice becoming stern. "No. Sometimes the kids play there."

"Is it safe?"

The old man's lips thinned and his eyelids drooped. "Maybe. Your daughter's probably been there."

"Melissa? I don't think so. She's only played at Kristin De Ville's. I don't know if she plays with the older kids. She's kind of young to be going off into the woods."

"Don't count on it. It's like a magnet to those kids. They get together and go there, or meet there, like it's the thing to do. Adventure, ya know."

Derek nodded, fingering the pull-cord on the mower. "Well, I should get back to it."

"Okay." Matthews paused. "Oh, by the way, how's your cat?"

"Huh? Perkins? Fine, why?"

"I seen Cain settin' rabbit traps in his bushes. I know your cat got out a couple times. Better watch her. I think that asshole is out to get her." He scratched at the two day whisker growth on his cheek. "Maybe he likes to kill animals."

Derek was bothered by the glassy look Matthew's eyes took on, the look of malice burning there. "Yeah, okay, Bob." The words rolled slowly off his tongue.

Matthews waved once. "See ya, Freeman." He squeezed the accelerator lever on his cart, whirring away from Derek.

Derek watched the old man roll down the sidewalk and around the corner. He gazed toward the woods, pausing for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, resuming the task before him.

In the worn black cushion of his easy chair George Cain fed

on Bob Matthews' hate. It was only a morsel, a quick taste of that vile feeling, neither potent enough or long enough to transform him. The part of him that wanted the mutation strained for it, fought for it, but could not by force or willpower attain the powerful thing it wished him to be. This was something not available on command. Not yet. It knew that some greater source, a higher energy of hate was needed.

Kate Freeman.

It would linger for a while, smoldering in the blackest corners of his heart.

* * *

After the Mine Shaft closed and the bouncer pushed Sadowski out into the street he wandered the roads and alleys in his beat up Chevy, working on consuming the twelve-pack of Miller Genuine Draft he had stashed in a cooler on the floor next to him. Five hand crushed empties littered the carpet behind his seat. The stench from his breath and spilled beer on his lap was too strong to be pushed out by the warm air rushing in through the cracked open windows. No matter--his numbed senses could not detect the odor.

Another can, empty--'soldiers' as Sadowski called them--crumpled in his chubby fingers as he tossed it over his shoulder. He reached over to retrieve another from the cooler, unconsciously rolling the steering wheel with his leaning movement. The car weaved to the right and back, settling on the center line as Sadowski righted himself. He edged the vehicle into its proper lane, too drunk to realize he was lucky a cop was nowhere in sight.

Halfway into his current beer, the urge to urinate presented itself with a rude and unrelenting expansion of his bladder. It was strong, but Sadowski knew how long he could hold back a good beer piss.

His mind was working now, filling with images and thoughts of George Cain. Confrontations. Arguments. Those times the police were called on him left an angering, burning mark. *Time to pay 'ol George a visit.*

His bladder, squeezing, twisting, would not be ignored.

His car picked up speed, heading for his old neighborhood. As he turned onto Harper, his bladder sent the message to his brain that it can't wait much longer. The urge to burst was coming on real strong.

Sadowski reached to dim the vehicle's lights, coasting to a stop across the street from Cain's house, several addresses down.

No lights on. The clock on the dashboard read three A.M..

His bladder said now.

Sadowski stared at Cain's abode, filling with memories and rage and hate, not quite sure what to do. To Cain. He tried to concentrate but the pain above his groin finally won. He stumbled out of his car with a beer in his hand, easing the door to rest against the latch, then pushed it to catch with his hip.

In the dim shadows of the moonless night he stepped into Cain's yard, stood with feet apart, and unzipped his fly. He pulled himself out, sipped on his brew and tried to let go, to release the pent up waste.

Now his bladder is a little stubborn.

"Come on. Christ!"

Sadowski studied Cain's house, trying to picture the old man inside sleeping a restless sleep. He sucked hard on the can then belched. His voice is a biting whisper. "God, I hate that fucker."

The idea struck him that it would be better if he pissed on Cain's front steps. He stumbled toward the front door, careful not to snag his penis in his zipper.

The urine started to flow, drops at first, a weak dribble and Sadowski willed himself to relax. The stream widened, strengthening with each heartbeat, every muscle loosening in his lower torso. The relief bordered on sexual ecstasy. The splashing on the concrete sounded like a driving rain in the quiet air. A sour smell, heavy like warm yeast, entered his nostrils. With his body functioning automatically, Sadowski trained his thoughts on his hate for Cain.

As the last drops fell from him, Sadowski tilted his head to finish off his beer. He crinkled the can, a loud snapping sound that cracked the silence, and tossed it onto the grass and weeds near his feet. Two shakes got the last of the urine out of him. A mild belch rumbled over his lips as he tucked himself back in, and the sound of his labored breathing was interrupted by the clacking of his zipper as he yanked it up.

The sting in his bladder subsiding, he decided another night would be better for revenge against Cain. He started walking back toward his car without hurrying. In the middle of the road a familiar, metallic crunch came from behind him. He spun, seeing fog spreading across the ground, and his beer can flat.

His mind raced, searching for a trace recollection of stepping on the can. He couldn't remember, but *knew* he must have flattened it. Who else could have done it? He forgot about the can, bothered more about the fog. It was flowing from around the corner of Cain's house in a thick rivulet like a huge white

finger.

Sadowski looked all over, up and down the block, expecting to see fog all around. It was nowhere but oozing from Cain's property.

The thought that the alcohol is making him hallucinate crushed in on him and he muttered a promise to never drink again. His sweaty hands grappled with the car's door latch, taking too long, and finally inside, heavy on the seat, he fumbled with the keys, dropping them once on the rubber floor mats. The thick vapor enveloped the automobile. Sadowski smacked the door lock down, bent and groped for the keys in the dark, his arm between his fat legs. Folding his belly made him huff and grunt. He sensed the dryness of his lips. The key went in the ignition. Turn. A slow whining.

"Come on you bastard, start!"

He looked up. The end of the car hood was hidden in a shroud of fog denser than any he had ever seen. Was that a click at the door handle? Sadowski's brain ached.

The engine finally roared to life, Sadowski punched it and rocketed along the street, erupting from the pocket of mist twenty feet before a parked van. He swerved to miss the vehicle near the wooded dead end and slammed on the brakes, turning the wheel to spin around on the concrete. The fog lay before him, rising. He rammmed the gas pedal, aiming for the intersection. And the thick gray-white wall of vapor.

His car hit the fog and Sadowski was sure he heard the muted thumping sound of striking a soft, touchable object. A sick feeling that some unlucky person was standing hidden in the fog rolled his stomach. The vehicle slowed, like it was being held back and he thought he saw the faint, nearly invisible outline of a human form. His gut wretched and he almost puked.

His car roared out of the mist, raced the remainder of Harper to Thickett and skidded around the corner in a screeching wail of tires, Sadowski never touching his brakes.

"Damn."

Three blocks away from Harper, Sadowski still was looking in his rear view mirror. The car settled into a speed within the law.

"God damn!"

Sadowski reached for his cooler, out of habit, but stopped. His shaking hands told him he had enough.

During the weaving ride home the self-protecting nature of the human mind worked on blurring Sadowski's experience. The fact that he was legally drunk by a huge margin helped in that regard.

By the time he reached his apartment he wasn't really sure

what had happened. Or what could have happened. Part of him refused to believe what he had seen. Or thought he had seen, and yet he had this eerie, glad feeling that he had escaped some sort of harm. That some thing did not get him. Did not, or could not, overtake him.

He hoped by morning he would forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kate Freeman's voice was fierce for a whisper.

"That damn cat!"

She took the package from the UPS delivery man and watched helplessly as Perkins scampered down the driveway, racing a scattering of dried grass clippings being pushed by the wind. The man handed Kate a clipboard, pointing to the next empty line. "Sign here please, ma'am." He lifted his cap and wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his cuff, squinting at the deep yellow of the late afternoon sun.

Kate scribbled on the sheet and looked around for her pet. "Oh, damn her!"

"Animals can be a fuss, can't they ma'am?"

"Well, at times this one can be a real pain." Kate grimaced and bid the driver a good day. The package was from Columbia University--two anthropology publications she was expecting that a professor at the college had been kind enough to recommend and ship to her. The out-of-print books contained descriptions of purported religious rituals of extinct Amazonian cultures. She set the parcel on top of the television then cocked an ear to listen for any sign of Nathan waking from his nap. Not even the sound of rustling bed sheets.

Kate closed the inside door behind her and went out to stand on the landing at the top of the stairs, her thumbs hitched in the front belt loops of her white shorts. Perkins was nowhere in sight. Kate sighed and checked her watch to see how soon until Melissa was due home for supper. It was a few minutes past four-thirty now. Melissa had been told to be home before quarter-to-five. Kate hoped her daughter had remembered to tell Mercy De Ville when she had to leave. Kate eased her frame onto the sun-baked concrete steps to wait, perched so she could see the De Ville place and would be ready to walk Melissa across the street if Mercy forgot to bring her home.

Loud barking, a sort of unintelligible growling--no it was yelling, a human sound, only a man could be so loud--filled the air of the neighborhood. Kate stood up and turned southward in the direction of the clamor. She listened to the words echoing off the houses, disturbed at what she thought she had heard. Another shout--yes, it was definitely cursing assaulting her ears.

In a streak Perkins came bounding around the corner of George Cain's house, charging at full gait, limbs stretching for all the distance she could muster. Cain appeared, shaking a fist, waving a yellow-handled screwdriver in the air, moving quicker than Kate thought his old legs would allow. Rage spilled from Cain's mouth

faster than his tongue could handle.

"Yougoddamncat! I'm gonnakillyougoddammit!"

Kate moved swiftly, her eyes wide as if ready to burst, bent and gathered Perkins up in her arms the moment the animal made it to her home turf. Cain stopped half way into his mother-in-law's yard, pointing a finger and screaming. The veins on each side of his neck were stretched tight as clothesline. "You keep that God damn cat outta my yard! You hear?"

Perkins exposed her fangs and hissed at Cain, who reacted with clenched teeth and an exhalation that shot spittle from his wet lips. The feline's eyes glowed like a snake's. Kate spun around and began to walk away from Cain.

"God damn cat shit all over the place!" Cain raved.

Kate moved with a little more swiftness in her step.

"Digs the fuckin' yard up! God damn it!"

A flash recollection of Cain's disintegrating face from the nightmare exploded through Kate's brain. She tried to push it out. Her pulse edged up, her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

Kate hastened to the rear entrance of the duplex while Cain kept on shouting, even though he could not possibly see her. Even with the kitchen door closed behind her his deep raspy voice was still audible, and she leaned back against the wall for a moment to rest. Her chest crushed in on her, and she thought about using her asthma inhalers. She put her hand against her throat to feel the rhythm of her heart. *God, what is wrong with that man?* She gave Perkins' head a few strokes and placed the animal on the floor. Her hands were coated with shed hair. Kate felt winded and light between her eyes, the shared product of adrenalin and the struggle to rationalize the episode of reality tinged with dark imagination.

The first ring of the telephone snapped Kate out of her haze and she answered it with a nervous edge in her voice.

"This is Elizabeth Boyd. Peter's mother."

Kate exhaled forcibly. "Oh, hi yes. How are you?"

"Fine. Listen. I heard that awful Cain yelling at you. What's the matter?"

Kate's eyes rolled and she chuckled inside. *Molly was right. Elizabeth Boyd is the neighborhood gossip. It didn't take long for Mrs. Snoopy to get to work.* Kate let her emotions run. "I don't believe it! That jerk almost popped a cork because Perkins was on his precious grass."

"Your cat, that is?"

"Yes. She got out again."

There was an unexpected pause from Elizabeth's end. "Keep an eye on your cat." Another short gap in the conversation. "You

know how I feel about that mean old bastard."

"He's not made a very good impression on me so far, I can tell you that much," Kate said.

"Ooh, listen. I could tell you stories about George Cain."

Kate looked at the clock on the wall. "Yes, let's talk about that sometime, but my daughter is due home pretty soon--"

"He gets mad so easy. One time my husband went to tell Cain he left his car lights on. Can you believe that Cain nearly jumped on my Charlie? I mean really, actually *jumped* him! Cain told him to mind his own business. Waved his fists and everything."

"Really? Sounds pretty--"

"Yelled at him 'till Charlie got off his property. Charlie was only trying to help that creep. I hate that George Cain, ya know?"

"Yes, well, I don't think I'm too fond of him either, but sometimes I wonder if he simply needs someone to reach out to him, make him feel--."

"What?! Not me. I hate him. I just *hate* him!"

Cain clutched the sides of his head, digging his fingers into his scalp. He scraped his nails down his cheeks, his body whirling slowly in a dizzied fashion. He lost his balance, fell against the kitchen wall, pushed away from it then struck out at it with enough force to crack the plaster.

Loretta Cain stumbled out of her bedroom and stood for a moment watching him. It took a second to focus on him--she was still drunk from all the whiskey she had swallowed since waking a little before noon--and she wavered with her head tilted to the side. Almost too late she realized he was coming at her.

She began to step sideways when his hands wrapped around her neck. His fingers tightened, compressing the plump, mottled flesh into her throat. As he dug deeper, blocking her windpipe, a squishing, choking sound bubbled from her mouth. Her defense was a pointless flailing at the air. She knew she could not escape.

He suddenly flung her to the ground, and she landed hard on her shoulder. He kicked her in the right thigh with all his might and began to reload for another blow. A bolt of pain extending from the center of his skull to the tail of his spine stopped him cold. He froze in the clutches of agony, allowing his wife to crawl away in that brief respite. She struggled to her knees at the kitchen door and frantically turned the doorknob to exit the house.

"That's right, bitch. Run . . . to your mother. Run to your mother, you cunt!"

His arm spun around with his twisting body, swept over the top of the counter and brushed several glasses and a bottle of bourbon to the floor. The shattering glass and sudden astringent stench of alcohol stabbed his senses like a dull needle in an open wound. He charged across the room, slamming his torso and skull against the door his wife had escaped through. "Go ahead, bitch, Run to momma!" He brought his head back, then his body and crashed at the door again.

He fell to his knees as the kitchen grew dark around him. A tunnel narrowed the sight of his yellow, bloodshot eyes, and he fought with all his strength to remain conscious. It was better that Loretta left. Cain felt the transformation coming on. The basement. I . . . Gotta . . . make it to the basement.

Cain dragged his body to the cellar door, fumbled with the latch and pulled himself onto the landing above the stairway. He slipped down two steps, tumbled forward, almost head over heels, then slithered the rest of the way to the bottom on his back. *It's their . . . God damn children. All the children. Fuck 'em. Fuck their . . . fucking toys. Fuck them all.* The tunnel became smaller and darker. He stumbled into a small windowless room without lights, locking the door behind him, sinking to the floor. *Fuck their parents. Fuck . . . them . . . all.*

The hate of Elizabeth Boyd was potent enough to bring about the change, transform him, and the room would shield the manifestation of the fog-thing from the burning sun until the episode passed. Evening was approaching and it wouldn't have to wait long--if the loathing was strong enough and the evil entity was patient enough to stay, it could roam the neighborhood in the ebony night, questing for a kill.

This sanctuary served it well when Cain became the power, the beast, at inopportune times. Daylight was such a time. It was a self-imposed confinement the vile thing churning beneath Cain's flesh could not stand but tolerated, using the span to fuel its thirst for power, its desire for that special, strong hatred--the hate of someone for whom that common, dark emotion is buried deep or is not naturally of their character at all.

Indeed, the strongest potential for hate is lurking in those who have only loved, have always forgiven their enemies, have invested in the continuance of life--no matter the creature. Change innocence to evil, love to hate, the intensity remains the same. To turn such a soul over to the black path of hate is to create a fountain of power for the beast of destruction.

Kate Freeman had this goodness, this love.

And vulnerability.

This it knew, and it hungered.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Even as the sun cleared the horizon the fog from the previous night lingered as lush, humid air. The scent of suffocating heat rose from the ground, thickening in the lungs of early risers partaking in the innocence of the morning. Two hours had lapsed since sunrise, and Derek was nearly complete with his first task of the weekend. He aimed his hose sprayer at the planting of straw covered grass adjoining the driveway side of the house, wetting it with long, even strokes. He hoped it would not be the record setting hot day this late spring blip of high temperature was promising it could be.

In the front yard Kate sat under the canopy of the boxelder reading a book to Melissa and Nathan in a moment of post-breakfast relaxation. Kate had an arm around Melissa's middle, seated next to her, while Nathan was strapped into his stroller, squirming as though the heat was making him sticky in his seat.

Hearing his wife exchange a greeting, Derek looked up to see his tenant coming up from the road. Chris Montoya carried two fishing rods tucked into his armpit while one hand grappled with a large tackle box and the other with a cooler--empty judging from the ease in which Chris carried it. Derek released his fingers from the sprayer's trigger to greet Montoya.

"How did you do?" Derek asked. He believed he already knew the answer to that question--no harm in being polite.

"Got skunked this time." Montoya put the cooler down and rested his gear against the duplex, stretching tall and repositioning the baseball cap on his head. He blinked twice and rubbed a knuckle into his eyelid as though trying to erase the sleepy, pink color from it. "My buddy got a Coho. I had a nice one on but couldn't land it."

"Is this a good time of year for fishing?"

Montoya shrugged. "Spring is pretty decent, but it's not the best. October can be great for this kind of fishing. Just not great for fishermen."

Derek chuckled. "I guess I really don't know that much about it. I remember going with my father on warm Sunday afternoons when I was very young, floating on calm water, my dad sipping a beer."

"Uh-huh." Montoya picked up the wet cooler, opened the lid and moved it into a patch of sunlight on the concrete. "Spring and fall are the best times for fishing. Your old man took you when he knew you wouldn't bitch about being cold."

Derek nodded his head. "I suppose. Are you going to go out

again soon?"

"I don't think so. The wife gets a little mad if I overdo the sports stuff."

"Wait until you have kids."

Montoya smirked. "Yeah, well, that won't be for a while."

"So how does Joyce like being Mrs. Montoya?" Derek asked.

"Fine, I guess. This married stuff takes awhile to get used to." Chris had a look in his eyes that spoke volumes about what he was learning these days.

Derek sighed. "You're right, it does take time. There are rewards, though. It's just been three weeks for you, hasn't it?"

"Right. Like they say, the honeymoon's over."

Derek smiled, thinking to himself how Chris would most likely experience a lot of self-imposed reduction of free-time for hobbies and interests as the years went by. Lots more to learn. *All for the better, if he knows what's was good for him.*

Montoya grasped the fishing rods with his free hand and bent to pick up the tackle box, leaving the cooler in the sun. "See ya later."

Derek opened the door for him. "Yeah. Later."

A scream cut the dense air, piercing it like a machete. Montoya jerked, nearly dropping his gear, and both men shot wide-eyed looks at each other. Another shriek followed on the first's heels, but was abruptly cut off, clean and cold.

"What the hell was that?" Chris exclaimed.

Derek, shaking his head, was already down the driveway toward the road. Chris put his paraphernalia on the ground and followed him. Another neighbor down the block in the opposite direction from the scream had stopped her chores and stepped to the sidewalk in front of her home, looking but not moving toward them. Ahead of Derek and Chris, trotting toward Thickett, was Kate. Melissa stood over Nathan under the big tree, dutiful as the guardian big sister.

As Kate jogged down the street she turned her head from side to side, looking for something out of place, listening for another cry of anguish or any odd noise. She was sure the sound came from the north end of the street, toward Molly Wasburg's place. As she approached Molly's house she slowed to a walk. She saw nothing until she came even with Molly's driveway. Protruding from behind the rear of the building were two legs, lying flat, toes pointed up. Kate rushed to the gate, unlatched it and ran to Molly's back yard.

Molly lay on her back, eyes shut, still as ice. Kate dropped to her knees and put her fingers on Molly's neck to feel for a pulse. She put her ear against the old woman's chest, straining,

hoping, to hear a heartbeat.

Derek came pounding up the driveway just as Kate jumped to her feet. She stared at him with wild eyes.

"Derek, call 911! I think she's had a heart attack! There's a faint pulse. Hurry!" Kate's own heart slapped at her rib cage, forcing blood through her veins in pounding beats.

Derek spun around and went into Molly's house. Chris stepped closer to the fallen body, standing, staring. Kate crouched over Molly, stroking her neighbor's arm, wishing she could do more. "Stay with us, Molly. We're getting help."

Kate studied Molly's face, looking for a twitch of life and wondering why her neighbor had screamed. Whatever it was had given her a scare big enough to interrupt her heart. Kate looked around the yard, seeing nothing unusual. The bird bath was upright, no broken or obviously misplaced objects. The lawn chairs and picnic table were spotless and orderly. Then she saw it. A smear of red out of the corner of her eye. She stood and took a step toward it. It was the bloodied rag-like body of Molly's dog Brownie splayed out near the garden. Kate's stomach pushed against her throat and a feeling like snow sliding down her spine crested over her.

She started walking slowly to the dog. It was as motionless as his master. As Kate neared the animal she could see that its chest was torn open, ripped straight up the sternum and pried apart, its sticky red body cavity open to the sun. Already flies had found it, and were leaving eggs for their next generation.

Kate's gut rolled, bile soared to the back of her mouth and she gasped, unable to scream as her mind had instructed. A controlled growl slipped from somewhere deep inside her. Standing over the dog, she saw that its small heart and lungs had been ripped out. She whirled away, bending over, losing her breakfast into the grass.

She could not comprehend what could have killed Brownie with such savagery. *What beast could shred another animal so easily? What creature roamed the neighborhood?* There was no trace of blood past the remains of the animal, no devouring of flesh for a meal other than the missing organs--the carcass still had its meat. Her head began to spin. *Is this what happened to Molly's other dog? What hideous thing did this, purely for the joy of killing?*

A new jar rested on the top shelf of Cain's trophy room. It was clean and shiny on the outside, with only a bloody fingerprint marring the lid. In the formaldehyde a tiny pair of lungs were suspended in neutral buoyancy, floating exactly halfway between top and bottom. Nestled between the severed windpipe, little

strands of vein and artery dangled aimlessly where the heart should have been.

George Cain dozed on the floor of the room, naked and wet, oblivious to the cool, hard concrete against his face. In sleep this complete he did not stir. At the corner of his mouth a line of dried blood ran to his chin, evidence of his small feast. Raw heart, he discovered, tasted pretty good.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

For the next week Kate remained in the house, isolating herself from the outside world as best she could. When the telephone rang, and Derek was home, Kate ignored it, letting him pick it up. If he was away, she let it ring until she could not stand the nagging, relentless sound. Thankfully, the caller usually gave up and on the few times she had to answer it, those calls involved little more than turning away salesmen.

She busied herself by caring for her children, doing the usual household chores and the seemingly never-ending research for her book. Work on the manuscript was no longer proceeding at a steady and fast rate. Still, the phone charges for modem use dialing into Infonet and long distance directly to universities would be expensive for the small amount of information she was gleaning. Reaching the University of Wisconsin computers in Madison, Milwaukee and Stevens Point would cost enough. The real budget-killers were the calls to Berkeley, Columbia and other colleges. Her object was to scour anthropological databases, library catalogs and online reference articles for information pertinent for her book--anything she could associate with extinct Indian cultures of the region. The data she extracted was saved on her computer's hard drive for subsequent referral.

Lately, the ratio of time spent actually downloading files to total time spent at the computer was pretty low. There were lengthy periods of her just staring at the screen, pausing without absorbing. The episode with Molly Wasburg and Brownie would not easily be washed from her mind and soul. It wasn't fair to her family, she knew, yet it was as if she had to fight to overcome her instinct of self-preservation.

Kate's attitude did not improve until Derek learned from talking to Molly's son that Molly was out of intensive care. Molly was scheduled for open heart surgery to repair two moderately blocked valves, followed by a long period of rehabilitation. The physical condition of her heart, the doctors had told them, was not enough to cause the heart attack. It would have taken an extended amount of exertion she was not used to, a huge surge of adrenalin or a shock so great her brain interrupted normal functioning of the organ.

Kate knew which it was.

With the hopeful news of Molly's expected recovery, and aided by the natural flow of life, such as knowing her children desperately wanted to be outdoors, playing in the warmth, Kate finally pushed her fears and anxieties to a corner of her mind. It was time to move forward again.

Kate wheeled the stroller down the driveway, letting the near-perfect mid-eighties temperature wash over her, enjoying it immensely. Having Nathan ride would give Kate a lot more exercise than her son's slow walk afforded. It felt good to stretch her muscles. Melissa skipped ahead of her mother, a display of unmitigated joy. She would race forward a few steps then come back and behind her mother, then around in front again, like a satellite disobeying gravity.

At the end of the driveway Kate made a conscious decision to cross the street to avoid going past George Cain's place. Her stomach flip-flopped as she thought of him. A small part of her felt shame for thinking Cain could be responsible for Molly's dog--she simply refused to believe her grouchy neighbor could be as bad as others, and sometimes she herself--thought him to be. Kate glanced in the direction of Cain's house, hoping he wasn't outside, watching her. A sigh accompanied relief as she realized he was nowhere to be seen.

Halfway down the block on the other side of the street Elizabeth Boyd, hanging wash on a clothesline in her side-yard, waved to Kate. "Hello Kate, great day!"

"Yes, Elizabeth. I see you're taking advantage of it."

"Isn't this great?" Elizabeth dropped a handful of clothespins into the wicker basket on the ground near her feet and joined Kate on the sidewalk. "Makes you wish it was like this all the time, doesn't it?"

"Yes it does," Kate said. A light breeze pushed a few strands of fine, black hair across the bridge of her nose and she promptly stroked them back into place behind her ear.

Elizabeth bent to tickle Nathan's chin. "The little guy seems to like it, too." She stood erect, arms crossing over her chest.

"Hi there!" A woman's voice behind them called. Mrs. Boyd turned to greet the young woman coming toward them. Kate thought that she was in her early twenties, no older. Very attractive, too--lots of smooth curves and large breasts set up high. Derek would notice. Kate made a mental note to not allow that tiny speck of jealousy to grow.

"Hi, I'm Lisa Fontanna. I live in that light green house three doors that way." She pointed off past Mrs. Boyd's home, close to the woods.

"Nice to meet you," Kate said. Nathan, as if sensing a pause in their journey, began to struggle with the straps keeping him tied down.

"Isn't this cool!" Lisa exclaimed. "I love summer. Swimming, picnics, camping." Her eyes rolled in obvious delight.

Kate thought her young neighbor's rapture similar to how she remembered feeling about chocolate at that age. Not quite as strong or the same as sex, but prominent on the list.

It took only a few minutes before the three were joined by Winnifred Mayweather and Mercy De Ville, a cigarette between her fingers. Nathaniel's show of impatience with staying in the same place finally won him freedom from the stroller. Kate kept a watchful eye on her son, careful to keep him from the road while his pent up energy was released. The neighbor women cooed and stroked the boy, the attention helping to soothe him.

"You know what we should do?" Lisa said. "We should get everyone together and have a block party. Close off the street and set up a stereo. Grill out. Get a quarter-barrel. Play some Frisbee. Clear out the cars and the guys could play football."

"Sounds like fun to me," Elizabeth agreed. Winnifred and Mercy nodded their approval.

"We can each bring a dish, get out a couple of folding chairs in the middle of the block," Winnifred Mayweather said.

"But let's bring our own meat," Elizabeth said.

Kate and the other women nodded. There was that common understanding that the item costing the most would not be shared. Some had budgets for hot dogs, while others could afford chicken or splurge on steaks or Cornish hens for a once-in-a-summer event. Put out meat in a pot-luck environment and the best is sure to go first, with, of course, the provider of the extravagance left with none of it, eating someone else's hot dogs.

"Someone will have to call the city for a permit to block off the street," Mercy said. "We don't want outsiders driving up and down the block with the kids and everything." She took a draw of her cigarette and blew smoke in the air.

"Listen," Elizabeth said, "We can all chip in for the beer." She giggled. "Let's get a half-barrel."

Ideas were spoken at random, each suggesting a few things, like stronger drinks, and soda for the kids--which could be purchased at case prices if they pooled their money.

"You've got my vote," Kate added. "I'd like to meet everyone in the neighborhood. There's a lot of people I haven't met."

"There's a new couple moving in soon, too," Mercy said. "Next to Lisa. I think they're religious; the man was wearing a crucifix on a gold chain. In their twenties, I guess."

"Yes, I saw them," Lisa said. "That'll be a nice welcome to the neighborhood for them."

"And someone new for all of us to meet," Kate said.

"Have you met George Cain?" Winnifred scowled.

"I've . . . seen him," Kate said, a cautious tone in her

voice. "Would you invite him?"

The four other women looked at Kate with a mixture of surprised expressions, each tossing out a comment in a spontaneous eruption.

"Are you kidding?"

"That mean old bastard. No way."

"Not to mention his drunken wife."

"Haven't seen her for at least a month. Not much of him either, thank God."

George Cain held his throbbing temples in his hands, his frame limp in the worn easy chair in the front room, protected from the sun by shades and thick drapes. Coming out of what passed for sleep for him, he recognized the pain and knew. Knew what could come over him. His body began to go rigid, his mind prepared to welcome its guest. Welcome it with open arms.

A whisper.

He lifted himself from the chair and staggered to a window at the front of the house. His calloused fingers peeled back a dusty curtain and frayed window shade, allowing in a sliver of daylight, enough to make him squint, a stabbing dullness rising behind his eyes. He saw the women standing together in front of the Boyd place and he knew. He *knew* they were talking about him. He staggered to the lumpy couch and lay on it, pulling himself into a fetal position. A line of yellowish drool ran from the corner of his mouth and gathered on his cheek, a drop of it falling to the black leather sofa.

"Well . . . ," Kate said, following the eyes of the others. "Maybe Mr. Cain just needs someone to reach out to him. Maybe he would turn friendly if everyone tried to be nice to him, made an effort to get to know him."

Each woman stared at Kate with disbelief. The dead pause in the conversation was broken by Lisa Fontanna. "Not cool. I've only lived in this neighborhood for two months and even I know to stay away from him. I can just feel it. He's like, evil, ya know."

"Lordy, I hate that man," Winnifred said.

"Me too. Every neighborhood has a creep, and he's it," Elizabeth said.

Mercy added her distaste for Cain as well, and all but Kate nodded in unison.

Kate was disturbed by the livid animosity in the group. She knew nothing good could come of it. Yet she felt a certain amount of relief--she wasn't the only one around that had misgivings about George Cain. Some of her paranoia was justified, she thought. *Not really paranoia at all.*

But at the same time, conflicting with her fears, was this feeling that George Cain could be helped. Should be helped. And maybe she was the one who had to do it. It would be a challenge, a battle within, but in her mind and heart, bringing out the good in George Cain was solidifying as a goal.

George Cain spilled from the couch, twisting and squirming in agony. He fell to his side convulsing, pounding the floor with his fists, screaming full bore. The hate from each woman united as a force stronger than the individual sum. *Bitches. Fuckin' bitch cunts!* His eyes reversed in their sockets, showing all white, then snapped back into place, his ebony pupils clouded with a gray mist. *Time to pay. Real soon. Yeah, pay. I'll bring hell to you.*

His scarred mind now fully accepted what he would become and what he was. Accepted the control of the fog-thing that dominated him. He could no longer ignore the reality of his destiny, and would absorb this gathering of hate, savoring it, using it, long after this coming transformation.

This time however, there was a difference.

This time, he welcomed it, wanted it. Fully, unconditionally. Wanted what was happening to him. He was fully addicted to the pain, not merely because he knew he could not fight it. No, he found pleasure in the suffering now. The black-out would come, transform him, release him unto his fate, and now he welcomed it.

Something about . . . that Freeman bitch. With her, I could . . . Become. Be it, forever. Now . . . I . . . I want it! Yes, I . . . want . . . it!

His understanding was complete.

He reached out to the phantasmic entity, succumbing, begging it to come into him, take him and become one with him again. And stay. That it would forever lock its blackness into the heart of his soul was now his driving desire.

His howling changed, subtly at first, then clarified into an enraged, maniacal laughter. Cackling, growling, almost spewing bits of lung in the deep convulsive laughter, the irony did not escape him. It was his neighbor's fault, he now understood. *It's their fault. They're the . . . ones, doing this to me. It's . . . all them, talking about . . . me, making their plans against me, hating me. Now they'll pay! It's their fault and they're . . . going to . . . pay!*

Now he welcomed it.

But first there was the matter of Loretta.

The darkness inside Cain made it clear to him she was now just a useless obstacle in the quest of its becoming. Her purpose

had been served, her resource fully extracted. All the hate Loretta ever felt for him had been absorbed by the evil thing within him.

He would have to take care of his wife before the transformation. He knew it did not yet have all the power necessary for this deed. This would have to be done in his human form.

Pain smashed into his skull as though trying to tear his brain from his head. He bit down hard on his lip, drawing blood, and let out a muted growl of anguish.

Loretta Cain, in her bedroom sleeping, stirred unconsciously in response to the sound. An empty bottle of Seagram's on the nightstand next to her stood over her like a sentinel.

George Cain stumbled from the parlor, falling to his knees, crawling into the kitchen. The room had a moldy smell, as though not washed anywhere in months, mainly because it truly had not been cleaned in a period far longer than that.

He lifted his hurting body up to the counter and flung open a cabinet. The meager supply of dishes, many with cracks and chips, hid the object he was searching for. He groped over the plates, pulling one out so it crashed on the floor into dozens of sharp pieces, then found his prize--a large vial of Tylenol 3, gripping it with a shaking hand. He needed to subdue the torment, at least temporarily, if he could, to complete this act.

He unscrewed the cap and shook several pills into his mouth straight from bottle. He chewed quickly, enjoying the bitter, chalky taste. A few more followed. He salivated heavily, white paste oozing against his tongue. A cloudy rivulet of drool ran over his lip to his chin.

The pain, hardly affected by the attempt at relief, continued to claw at the cells of his mind, digging out thoughts of bad things, dirty things. It ripped at his essence, uncovering the prehistoric seed buried within the human soul, a thing so well covered for so long a time. He pounded the cabinet door shut with a closed fist.

Loretta's thick voice called loudly from her room, "Hey, damnit, what's goin' on?" She, still more asleep than awake.

Pain ripped deeper into Cain, his eyes rolling to white-hot, blood streaked orbs, lingering, and his lips pulled tight into a thin stretched line, like a vagina does in giving birth. His fingers dug into his cheek, blood appeared, dribbled, then the fingernail pierced completely through the soft tissue into his mouth. His tongue licked at the ragged hole and he cried out louder than he ever had before, a mixture of terror and agony direct from the center of his being. He shook his head like a

feral beast, splattering drops of red onto the wall and floor. Crimson stained his hands and clothing and the metallic tang of blood coated his tongue. He spied a bottle of cheap brandy on the counter, reached for it and downed the remaining third.

"What the hell is goin' on out there?" Loretta yelled, waking up.

He pulled open the drawer in front of him and plunged his hand into it with abandon. A shriek raced from his throat when his palm slid on the edge of a long, serrated bread knife. He pulled back, staring at the blood running from the new wound, then reached in again to retrieve a different knife, just as long as the bread knife, but with a blade straight and smooth. Its chromed steel gleamed in his hand. Had there been sunlight in the kitchen, it would have reflected off the razor sharpness of the blade in a star-like fashion. He admired it, knowing it was *his* work that had keened its edge. *Not hers, no. Damn useless bitch!* She had long since abandoned such chores, a thought which increased his rage and prodded his memory.

The sudden recollection of earlier days shocked him, and the agony within drew back, subsiding. A vision of his wife, their wedding night, her beautiful strawberry shaped face and loving ways. He softened, seeing in his mind's eye her former youth. All the love and warmth she had bestowed on him early in their lives rushed in at him. Wetness began to swell in the corner of each eye, wetting his lashes. The knife loosened in his grip as his brain churned, the scenes changed. Then her father's death from cancer, the miscarriage, her love turning to bitterness and pure hate in a few short years. A hate directed at him, blaming him. It was never the same.

The resemblance of his young bride to Kate Freeman clarified in his mind, freezing all his faculties. Then, like the crack of a starter's pistol, his mood changed, a sudden firing of his rage.

An immediate explosion of agony at the core of his skull returned him at once to the influence of his dominator. His bloodied fingers wrapped around the wooden handle of the knife, caressing it, lifting it above his shoulder, tip forward. His lips managed to curl in mimicry of a smile.

Cain entered his wife's room quickly, silently, thinking she must have passed out. He stood over her and raised the knife as high as he could reach. A pause for only a split-second, and as the blade plunged she rolled, face up, and opened her eyes to the descending glimmer of steel. Her face contorted with the flushed horror of disbelief.

She opened her mouth to scream, the sound too late. The point of the blade pierced her face above her lip, smashing through bone

and the roots of her teeth, driving straight down through the center of her cranium to the base of her brain, cracking through the back of her skull. Her entire body convulsed, jerking wildly for seconds, then stiffened, falling slack against the sheets. Cain tugged hard on the knife to extract it, bringing bits of flesh and blood up and splattering them on the ceiling as the blade freed itself of the wound. His breathing was staccato and raspy, gurgling with the fluid in his throat, a sheen of sweat on his skin. He touched the knife to his tongue, sampling the viscous red liquid, then raised it, bringing the blade home again and again, slicing into her until he had consumed all his human strength.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Chris Montoya clambered down the steps from his apartment, sandals slapping at the wood, his wife following in a more civilized manner. Derek, near the garage, scrubbing the soapy hood of the Checker with a sponge, looked up and waved to them.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Derek asked.

"Beautiful," Joyce offered.

"Yeah," Chris agreed. "Get's me thinkin' about a day on the lake."

"Salmon, right?" Derek asked. Montoya nodded, a grin spicing his face. Derek continued, "I thought you didn't fish that much in the summer."

"Well, I do go pretty much in the summer, just a lot more in the spring and fall," Chris said. "This is a good time to take Joyce, too."

Derek tossed the sponge in a pail full of dingy water. "When does the season close?"

"In the late fall. I'd be out all season if I had my own boat." Joyce shot her husband a glance, an eyebrow raised. Chris stammered, "Well, uh, I am cutting back. Besides, my buddy doesn't like to get cold. He stays off the last month."

"I see."

"Maybe this year I can talk him into it going later in the season, 'till the end. Buy him a bottle of Yukon. That'll keep him warm."

Derek laughed. "I suppose it would."

The Montoyas left Derek at his task, playfully poking at each other as they walked the driveway to the street and their car. Derek checked his watch, knowing that noon would arrive sooner than he liked. He had to be at the book store soon in order to open on time--Gary was taking this Sunday off.

Derek picked the hose off the concrete and began rinsing the suds from the top of the car. He couldn't help but notice George Cain, in a far corner of his yard, digging a hole. Derek reasoned that he was planting a tree. *That hole already seems deep enough. It must be a huge tree.*

Derek watched Cain out of the corner of his eye for a little while, amazed that a man his age could work non-stop. Cain attacked the ground as though mesmerized by the dark earth. There was not even a pause to wipe sweat from his brow.

The screen door behind Derek squeaked, announcing he had company. He turned to see Kate with a basket of laundry under one arm, and Melissa with a doll under hers. "Hi, daddy," the

youngster called with glee, running to her father. Derek managed to crouch in time to intercept the incoming hug.

"What's he up to?" Kate whispered, pointing in Cain's direction with her thumb hidden by her chest. Derek glanced at Cain, noting that he had abruptly stopped digging, his head cocked and shoulders raised as though wincing in pain. Kate saw it too. Derek said, "Probably got a muscle spasm, the old fool." Cain suddenly reached up and rubbed his temple.

"He must be planting something," Kate whispered. "Something big."

* * *

Perkins stood on her hind legs, looking through the screen into the night and pawing at the edge of the door. Derek, moving in a slow, hunched fashion, took a pillow from the sofa and pitched it at the cat, beaming her on the head. The animal jumped straight up, landed, jiggled itself as though shaking off water then licked at its whiskers. It looked back at Derek, paused, then calmly slinked away behind an easy chair. "Dumb cat," Derek mumbled.

"What's the matter?" Kate asked from the bathroom.

"That stupid cat is trying to get outdoors again."

"Just what we need. There's probably a male loose in the neighborhood. Maybe the Montoyas' cat. Those animals would be howling until three in the morning."

Derek collected the Sunday newspaper from the couch and leaned toward the light to resume reading the editorial section. A few paragraphs into an article his concentration was interrupted by Perkins again, her low raspy whining coming from another room. Derek pushed the paper aside and went to the kitchen, ready to chase the feline. He found her there, standing on the table, staring out the window and hissing at the night air. The sound made the small hairs on Derek's forearms tingle. "Hey," he barked softly, "Get off there. We eat on that table, you stupid cat!" The animal sniffed arrogantly at the air. Derek raised a hand at Perkins and she cowered, showing she understood her master meant business, then leaped off the table and scampered away.

"Now what?" Kate said as she entered the kitchen.

"Perkins was on the table, looking out and complaining again." Derek reached up to pull down the shade over the window and glanced outside. The half moon shed just enough light for him to see a darkened human form moving across Cain's back yard, straining to haul something trailing him. *Must be old George. But what is he dragging?* Only an occasional shimmer of moonlight

off the top of the black object kept it from blending in with the shadows. Derek thought there was a smooth or slick surface to it, like a plastic bag, and judged by the lean of Cain's body the cargo was fairly heavy.

Derek, not wanting to be seen, extinguished the light in the kitchen then returned to the window. He watched the person he thought, knew, was Cain, drag the thing to the freshly dug hole, kneel and push it in. Cain then picked up a shovel and began to fill the crater.

"Peeping tom?" Kate joined him, jabbing him in the ribs. Perkins strolled up to Kate's leg, pushing against her with a grumbling noise.

"This is really weird," Derek said. Cain is burying something in that hole. It's pretty large, and bulky, I'd say."

Kate peered out through the glass and shivered. "God, what is he doing? He wouldn't be planting a tree, would he?"

"I don't see any trunk or branches sticking from the ground. And I think that's a leaf bag, not burlap like you'd use for a tree. He left the bag in there, too, from what I can tell."

Kate's stomach suddenly churned. Before she could stop herself she blurted out her first thought. "Oh, God, maybe he killed his wife. I haven't seen her around." She lifted Perkins off the floor, clutching her pet firm against her chest. "He's burying her!"

"Oh, come on!" Derek frowned. "You're being ridiculous. The rumor is she's an alcoholic, remember? We hardly ever see her and I wouldn't expect to."

"Then what is he doing?"

Derek shrugged. "Maybe he's planting some kind of big, exotic bulb. You know, plant by the light of the moon and all that. A few old timers still believe in those old wives' tales. Maybe he's burying garbage. A real ecological kind of guy."

Kate's face filled with sarcasm. She wanted to be soothed by her husband's words, believe that a theory Derek could conjure up was what Cain was really doing. Then it would be easy to keep thinking of ways to bring Cain around to having a better attitude, to try and reach him, help him become a good neighbor.

But she couldn't. A gripping sensation pulled at her insides, calling for her paranoia to come out and play.

Something is wrong here. Terribly wrong. She tried to erase that type of thinking, but, then again, she didn't believe she was really being paranoid. She pushed away at the feelings of suspicion, wanting to ignore the thought that Cain did such a dirty deed, worrying that allowing dislike for him would fabricate fear from her imagination. Or something worse.

Hatred.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

"Damn," muttered Kate as Perkins slipped through her fingers and the crack in the door. Stronger language would have come from her mouth had Melissa not been in the living room with her. Kate had merely opened the screen door for a moment to check the mailbox when the cat acted on its chance for temporary freedom and exploration.

Again.

Kate flung the screen door open hard enough for it to bang against the house and went out onto the landing. The feline had already disappeared. "Damn!" Kate was getting plenty sick of this.

"Mommy, what's wrong?" Melissa leaned against the edge of the inner door, toying with the doorknob.

"Oh, it's that Perkins. She got out again."

"Will she come back, mommy?"

"Of course, dear. She just gets a little frisky, smelling all that fresh air. The house must seem so small to her because she knows what it's like to be outside."

"I hope she won't get hurt," Melissa said softly, almost whimpering.

"Oh, she won't." In Kate's chest, a pang of worry heightened.

"I love Perkins, mommy."

"I know, dear. Me too." She stroked her daughter's silky blondish hair across the top of her head and bent to kiss the same spot. She was glad Melissa had a warm place for animals in her heart. The part of Kate that was the little girl on the farm with her miniature animal hospital in the barn was also in Melissa.

Kate went to the kitchen and gazed out the window looking for a sign of Perkins. She scanned Cain's yard carefully, a tingle sneaking its way up her spine, a creeping sort of tension like she had consumed too much caffeine. Somehow she knew her pet was over there, poking around in places she shouldn't.

Kate understood that cats had a predatory nature and perhaps satisfied some sort of requirement to keep the cosmos in balance--rodent extermination most of all. They also needed to fulfill the urge to kill. And there was that occasional ache to mate. Those were good reasons for the animal's desire to escape the confines of the house. But she couldn't explain why her pet kept going in Cain's yard when the feline obviously disliked or feared the man.

If a friendly neighbor lived there Kate probably would go over to get the cat. Her dominant thought was that there was no

way she could go in that man's yard alone. Right now. But retrieving her pet gave her an excuse to talk to Cain didn't it? Apologize for her pet's behavior, let him have a chance to respond to that. Maybe get him to put his traps away.

And there was the matter of Loretta Cain. Kate wanted to satisfy her curiosity, prove her wild imagination wrong--she needed to see Loretta Cain.

In the blink of an eye Perkins appeared before her, streaking after a grey and brown sparrow in Cain's yard. The bird escaped the animal's claws by a narrow margin, bringing Perkins to an instant halt. The cat looked around nonchalantly, as if to say "I meant to stop. I didn't really want to catch that stupid bird anyway." She continued on, stalking her way over Cain's sparse, dry lawn, heading directly toward the odd mound of dirt where the moon-lit planting had taken place.

Kate felt small hairs stand up as Perkins climbed to the top of the dirt pile, the crest of the mound just shy of two feet above ground level, her pet standing regal as though enjoying the enhanced view, queen of her domain. The feline sniffed a few times at the raw black soil, then started pawing it, digging away small bits at a time.

The sound of hard wood slapping together somewhere out of Kate's sight broke the calm and Perkins jerked her head toward it. The cat stared at Cain's dwelling, freezing for a second, then shot off in the direction of Mrs. Barber's back porch. Kate didn't see exactly where Perkins had gone but reasoned she had scooted under the porch to hide. *Probably from Cain. It sounded like he slammed his back door.* She didn't want to believe Cain had done that on purpose to frighten Perkins.

Any idea about talking to Cain at this moment vanished from her mind.

* * *

Derek patted Gary on the shoulder. "I think I'll let you lock up for the day. I'm going to cut out a little early."

Gary feigned resentment. "Oh, sure, boss man gonna leave me ta clean up da place. Yes Massa." Both laughed, knowing full well that Derek treated his assistant like a brother. Gary's voice switched into his best attempt at the accent of an English gentleman. "I say, have a good night Derek, old boy."

Derek shook his head at the clowning. "Okay, you too." He picked up the telephone from the desk at the front counter, dialed home and put the receiver to his ear.

"Hi Kate, it's me. I'm going to leave the store now. Want

me to pick anything up on the way?"

"No . . . No. That's all right," Kate said. Derek noted the raised, haggard tone in his wife's voice.

"What's the matter, Kate?"

"Nothing."

"Kate?"

There was a small, anxious pause before Kate spoke. "Well . . . It's Perkins. She got out again this morning. She hasn't been back all day."

"She probably found something worth staying out for."

"Derek--"

"Hey, I'm sure she's okay."

"She was in Cain's yard. I think Cain saw her and tried to scare her away."

"You keep tying yourself into knots when you think about Cain. You don't know whether to try and be his pal or try and have him locked up." The blast of air from Kate's mouth gave Derek a signal. "Listen, Kate, when I get there I'll look for her, all right?"

"Yes. Please." She sounded calmer than when she had answered the phone. Derek said good-bye and hung up. He grunted softly to himself. *I'll never find that stupid cat. If she wants to stay hidden, she will. She'll come home when she wants to, when she realizes where the good food is.* He frowned, knowing that he would at least have to attempt to find Perkins just to appease Kate. It bothered him to know how much Kate would worry about this. *I hope the cat comes back before dark. It's not used to being out at night. There are larger animals out there, and Perkins isn't a street fighter. She better come back to her nice, safe, dry home.*

There was rain in the forecast.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Kate stared out the kitchen window, dreaming Perkins would come into sight, bounding toward her home turf, their back door. Just imagining it made her feel good. Instead, all she had to view was the soggy aftermath from last night's rainfall--droplets of water still coming off the ends of the rain gutters, a mist visible when gazing a distance, a gray cover hiding the sun. A few stranded nightcrawlers littered the driveway, providing an easy feast for several robins. The cool dreariness outside made it that much more difficult to overcome the sick feeling she had from her still-missing cat.

"I don't know how much rain we got last night, but it sure came down steady," Derek said, standing near her as he draped a tie around his raised collar.

"Did you have any trouble getting home from the store last night in that fog?"

"I just had to drive a little slower. It was kind of strange, the way the fog became thicker as I got closer to the neighborhood."

A sudden shot of her repressed basement nightmare burst into Kate's head. She shivered with the image of George Cain, his flesh disintegrating, coming after her naked body in that cold heavy mist, the basement walls at first a hundred feet away, then closing in. Her mind pushed back farther, to the damp, cool fingers she felt that time at the freezer.

"Kate?"

Her face twitched a little and she blinked. "Huh?"

Derek shook his head. "Nothing." He went to the bathroom mirror, made the final loop in his tie, knotted and centered it at the collar. He returned to the kitchen. "I thought I would dress up a little today for work," he said in an off-hand way. Fixing his gaze directly into Kate's, he said, "Worried about Perkins?"

"Yes." The corners of her mouth turned down and she sidled up to her husband, tucking her head under his chin, against his neck. He stroked the hair on the back of her neck and kissed her. Kate said, "Maybe I should go look for her."

"Don't worry, Kate. She'll show up. She always does."

* * *

By the time Melissa had eaten her breakfast and dressed, and Nathaniel was fed and changed, the sun had emerged, burning off any remaining hint of fog in the air. The prior damp chilliness of the morning had given way to a pleasant, comfortable

temperature. The concrete was nearly dry, only showing patches of moisture at the corners of each square. A few of the nightcrawlers that had not made it back to the safety of their holes and were bypassed in the robin's feasting were dead, shriveling like crusty sections of thick brown leather shoelaces.

A light warm breeze, faintly perfumed by unknown blossoms, lifted Kate's spirits a notch and she thought it would be good to take her children for a walk, perhaps chat with anyone else in the neighborhood who might be out savoring the day. And ask if they had seen Perkins.

Melissa helped with the chore of securing Nathan into the stroller by holding on to the buggy from behind. The young girl piped up in a sudden, but calm way. "Are we going to look for Perkins, mommy? Please?"

"Of course, Melissa." Kate reached over and touched her daughter's cheek. "She'll come back, don't worry."

It made Kate happy to see many of her neighbors were doing as she was--taking in the nice day--and she enjoyed the stops they made, conversing with those who had the time, calling out a greeting to some who busily went on with their yard work and other chores. There was, however, no word on her pet's whereabouts.

As they traveled down the sidewalk, just past the De Ville place and toward the woods, Kate became aware of a whirring sound approaching her from behind. She guessed at what it was before she turned around and felt a certain satisfaction from being right. Bob Matthews was coming her way, tooling along with his cart's throttle at full speed as though he were trying to catch her. Or pass her on some important mission, mused Kate.

As the whirring of the cart's motor tapered, Kate greeted her neighbor. "Bob. Nice to see you."

"And you too, young lady."

Kate felt a slight blush at being called young, but she did appreciate being thought of in that way. "How are you today?"

"Oh, fine. You know, just a little ache here and there. Christ. Wish I could get out of this goddamn cart and walk on the beach. In Hawaii." He glanced at the children, wincing, then back at Kate. "Sorry. Forgot about the tykes. I try to watch my language around the young ones."

"Thanks," Kate said, smiling stiffly. "Are you coming to the block party tomorrow?"

"I plan on it. It should be a beautiful Saturday, by the weather report I heard."

Matthews tickled Nathan under the chin, making the boy giggle and then brushed Melissa on the arm. "Are you helpin' your mom out, there?"

Melissa lowered her head, seemingly unsure of what to make of the whiskery old man in the funny looking wheelchair, its odd gadgets and noises. She glanced back and forth from the cart to its rider, and cautiously reached out to touch it for a second. She turned toward her mother and pressed her cheek against Kate's thigh.

"Oh, don't be so shy," Kate admonished her daughter.

"That's okay," Matthews said. "Kids sometimes wonder why I ride around in this thing. It's just different for 'em, I guess." He ran his hand over the smooth gray plastic steering wheel and wistfully surveyed the neighborhood. "Got lots of rain last night. Still kinda damp. Gonna get humid."

"It's drying up pretty fast."

"Yeah." He gazed down, a thoughtful look gracing his features. After a moment he stared directly into Kate's eyes. "See how foggy it was last night?"

"Yes I did." A sudden coldness flushed through her, an icy feeling deep at the center of her being.

"There wasn't any report of fog on the weather." His eyes narrowed a bit and Kate felt like they were drilling straight through to the back of her head.

She said, "No, I guess there wasn't. Rain, but . . . I don't recall." She began to stammer. "Um, I don't remember watching the news--"

"I did. Nothing at all about fog in the weather report. Strange. Real strange." His eyes became mere slits. "How's your cat?"

Kate shook, nearly jumping, the question drove into her so severely. She trembled, grasping the stroller's push bar hard enough to whiten her knuckles. "What do you mean?"

Matthew's lips stretched thin, quivering as though he was fighting to keep a smile from his lips. Kate caught the motion, and it made the iciness inside her spread to her extremities. Matthews' eyes widened, his face became stiff as rock, glaring, unblinking. "I know your cat gets out sometimes. She shouldn't be out, you know." He glanced at Nathan and Melissa--who looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment--then straight at Kate. "Not when there's fog."

Kate tried to turn the stroller, to point it in the other direction in preparation to end the conversation and leave, but she cut the radius too sharp, catching the stroller's bumper on Matthews' game leg. His expression remained stony, not even a flutter in his eyes.

"Um, I should be going," Kate said, her cheeks reddening. "I, uh . . . I should . . . I have to get some laundry done."

Melissa, a wary watch on Matthews, tugged at Kate's blouse. "Aren't we going to look for Perkins, mom?"

Matthews appeared as though he might snicker. "What's the matter, is your kitty lost?" Melissa's lower lip curled and her chin began to quaver.

Kate didn't like the way Matthews was talking--what he said and how he said it. She was unable to look him in the eye, but was aware of his expression in her peripheral vision--he raised one eyebrow as the other lowered in a squint. Matthews leaned back in his seat, not speaking a word, sight on Kate as she pushed Nathan's stroller around him. His thumb clicked the cart's throttle and he turned the steering wheel, rotating so Kate was in front of him as she hurried along the street. Kate heard the whirring sound and added speed to her already good stride, almost pulling Melissa faster than she was able to walk. She passed several houses before she could resist no longer and glimpsed over her shoulder. Her neck bristled with the chill that flowed over her flesh when she saw Matthews continued to watch her.

* * *

At the back of his house, Derek sniffed at the warm summer late afternoon air. Something was fouling it, making him wrinkle his nose. Something very bad. He walked toward the garbage cans--still warm from baking in the hot sun all day--and the closer he came to them the more acute the odor. *Montoya must've left a bag of fish guts in there. He's going to hear about this.* It was a dense, rotting smell that penetrated his nostrils even without inhaling. He pinched his nose against the heavy stench, breathing through his mouth, and yet he continued to sense the wicked pungency. There was no mistaking the stink of rotting meat. His stomach turned at the thought of those putrid fumes entering his lungs, his body.

With his free hand he lifted the lid off one garbage can. It was empty, save for the tiny portion of discarded plum that had stuck to the bottom, and the dozen or so flies and tiny white larvae dining on it. *Not enough here to cause that smell.*

He picked up the cover of the other can, and an unavoidable wave of yet thicker odor enveloped him, seeping into every place that his body could sense such a terrible, fetid thing, making him want to wretch. Without breathing, his lungs were filled, the smell potent in his nose, tears formed and his tongue was roiled with its taste. His head jerked back, his watery eyes rolled and he pushed his breath against his closed mouth, puffing his cheeks. He forced himself to peer into the container. At the bottom lay a

white paper bag, translucent from the greasy composition of its contents. A spot of dark red colored the underside of the sack. Whatever was inside the bag was grayish in color, and when Derek focused on the mass it seemed to move--the effect provided by the squirming of thousands of maggots under the surface of the paper. His gut rolled and convulsed and he slammed the lid down on the can. He stepped away from the receptacle, swallowing bitter saliva, grateful for the full, cleaner breath he could finally take.

Chris Montoya. Derek did not want to get any bad blood going between them, but he knew he would have to speak to his renter about leaving fish entrails and cleaning scraps so loosely packed in the trash. A plastic bag--no, two, possibly even three, would be needed to contain the stench.

Kate joined him outside then and caught wind of the decaying tissue. "What in the name of God is that, Derek?"

"Chris must've gone fishing. Pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Awful. Funny he didn't take better care to wrap his garbage up. This hasn't happened before."

"I know." Derek described what he had found and looked at his wife inquisitively. "You didn't throw anything away like a turkey carcass, did you?"

She scrutinized his face. "Of course not." Then, with a twisted grin, "Could it be that pig I butchered yesterday?"

Derek frowned, not appreciating her humor. His brow pinched down over his eyes. "I'll talk to Chris. I'm sure it won't cause any trouble."

* * *

Before evening lowered its purple cloak, Derek encountered Chris Montoya, and in that time the rotting stench in the garbage can seemed to grow stronger still. Strong enough to penetrate the cracks around the rear door and into the Freeman residence. Strong enough to make flies follow it, wherever the odor weaved its trail, as they stupidly sought out its origin. Kate thought about the day the trash collectors would come, telling Derek she was worried that the men would complain about the foul thing in their garbage and leave the mess, or not come back without some sort of official inspection. Even far away from it, the bouquet of death lingered, as if it had stamped itself into everything it had touched in the same way cigarette smoke infects clothing after a visit to a nightclub.

As his renter started up the stairway, Derek intercepted him,

with Kate a step behind him. "So, Chris, do any fishing lately?"

"No," Montoya said. "Not for at least two weeks. Real bummer. My buddy's got a problem with his boat. Something with the lower unit. We'll get out some more this year." He grinned.

"You haven't been fishing?" Derek and Kate glanced at each other.

Montoya shook his head, his leering expression seemingly asking if his landlord was deaf or stupid.

"I thought you left fish guts in the garbage can. It's pretty wicked," Derek said.

"Tell me about it. I thought it was you guys. I was gonna say something but I figured, well, you own the place."

"No, it wasn't us either," Kate said, studying Chris's face, concluding he wasn't lying.

"That's weird." Montoya took a step up. "That smells like something dead."

"I know." Derek stroked his chin. "Maybe it was something left from the week before and the trash men missed it."

"Maybe."

They all stood silently for a minute in the common endeavor of figuring a reason for the rancid mess. Montoya walked up a few more steps, breaking the silence. "Well, if ya figure it out, let me know. I hope the garbage men don't miss us."

Kate and Derek again exchanged looks, Kate shrugging her shoulders. She realized they weren't going to figure out this puzzle right now and besides, it would be gone soon. Whatever it was. *One of the boys could have left it there*, she thought. A *prank*. Derek sauntered off into the house, leaving Kate outside to ponder the mystery.

Kate walked to the back yard, each baby step producing more thought. She pinched her nose against the smell. *If it wasn't the leftovers from one of Montoya's fishing trips and we didn't put anything out there . . . Montoya's wife? No, Chris probably would have known if Joyce put something like that in the trash.* Her lips pinched together toward the side of her face. Maybe not.

At the door of her mind, something gnawed, and she ignored it.

Knock knock.

Maybe, she thought, someone is playing a little practical joke on me.

Knock knock.

Or it's possible it was the trash collectors--they had been carrying this smelly thing around--picked it up somewhere along the way--and grew sick of having it travel with them and dumped it in my garbage can, hoping someone else would deal with it. We

should have given them a tip for Christmas.

Knock knock. Such persistence. Go away.

Maybe Chris is lying.

KNOCK KNOCK!

Maybe it was . . . She paused, stone faced, staring at the ground, then in an instant her mind's door crashed open, the cruel probability of the idea flooding in, a thought never hitting her so hard. Her gut wrenched and her throat squeezed tight in an asthmatic hitch. *Oh God, it couldn't be. How could . . . No! Not that. Who would do that? Oh shit, not my Perkins . . .*

A quick, sharp bolt of anger ran through her, even at the mere supposition Perkins' remains lay in that greasy bag. The vision of her pet racing through Cain's yard spun through her brain, and with it her belief that Perkins was in the trash gained strength, and she blamed Cain. It was a thought she could not erase, and she knew she lacked proof--but she certainly didn't want to accept it, either. She didn't really know it was Perkins in the garbage can, and she wouldn't unwrap that disgusting package under any circumstance.

Doubt raked her mind. *No, it couldn't be Perkins. Cain didn't do anything.*

Cain!

The now strained part of her that dealt with rational matters shouted, telling her that it had to be Perkins in there--the same size, the grayness of the object, her pet missing for days. All the evidence added up.

Confusion and outrage worked on her together. *Is it really Perkins? Why? George Cain, could he kill my cat? Did he? How could he?*

Anger germinated the subliminal seed in her. Though a small seed, it was nonetheless a beginning. She could deny it with her conscious mind, but it was there. The dirty emotion that had now sprouted in her.

Hate.

For George Cain.

Though the quick jab of animosity aimed at George Cain would not normally be long enough to transform him, coming from Kate Freeman made this entirely different. Even though it was not true, focused hatred--just a mere taste--it was enough.

He knew this could only be from Kate--the vigor, the fresh, biting edge of these rancorous feelings. The pain was as special as he had expected it to be. Like a sacrifice at a pagan altar, he placed it before the den of his god.

The smoldering rage ran through him quickly, and as the beast emerged he--it--waited for dark.

* * *

James Sadowski rolled to a stop three houses past George Cain's residence. A hundred feet ahead of his car the coal blackness of the woods taunted him. He tossed the empty beer can among the others on the floor beside him, belched, fumbled with the door and then staggered out onto the dimly lit street. A black, sweat stained tank-top hung from his hairy shoulders, partially tucked into his grimy bluejeans. He looked up at the lone street lamp and the moon, wishing both were extinguished, then leveled his gaze at Cain's residence, his bloodshot eyes riveted in hostility. Moving forward, somewhat hunched over, zigzagging drunkenly toward his target, the malice in his soul grew with each step. His lips were hard and wet and cool, each muscle in his face pulling them taut.

As he stepped onto Cain's property the familiar feeling of despisement for his ex-neighbor took hold of his soul. There would be no easy release, no turning back. Now would be the time to settle the score.

Cast from the moon and streetlight, gemini shadows moved in unison before him at odd angles one to the other. He glanced down at them, liking their dark form. The image energized him, filled him with confidence. His posture lifted almost erect and he strode forward with bold steps.

In a heartbeat the street light behind him blanked, and he stopped with a shoe in the air. He completed the step with hesitation and turned, feeling his larynx squeeze upward at the sight of the fog rolling at him. His arms came up from his sides, as if he were ready to push himself up and above the advancing vaporous layer.

In a flash it was now clear to him his last trip to Harper Street had been no bad dream, no product of a drunken imagination. The fog *had* been real, *had* gone after him. He retreated a step, eyeing his car down the road, doubting there was anything but a slim chance to make it around the pool of mist. Only the liquid courage provided by the beer and several shots of Jack Daniel's told him otherwise. He bolted as best his stocky form would allow, cutting across the front yards, and a glimpse from the corner of his eye told him the mist had shifted with him, moving as he moved.

Sadowski, hampered by his ample belly and blocky legs, quickly broke into a sweat from the effort. Each breath he took came short and labored. A sudden, dense, pain began to warm his chest. He stumbled, knocking the wind out of himself, and rising was no small task for his alcohol-corrupted body. Plodding

forward, he gasped for air, feeling a coolness licking at his neck. He fell again, his head smacking off the concrete like a heavy leather sack. He rose, groaning, dazed, in agony. A drop of blood fell from his ear as he used his little remaining energy to pull at the car's door handle.

Sadowski, weakened and drunk, possessed little more strength and mental capacity than a small, mortally wounded animal. He could not present much challenge to the fog-thing, invigorated as it now was with the promise of Kate Freeman's hatred. A power now multiplied.

A thickening blanket of vapor slid across the moon.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Saturday morning turned out to be a spectacular show of how good Wisconsin weather could be early in summer. Humidity had abated, Harper Street was lush and green, each tree and bush fat with the abundant rainfall provided since snowmelt. Almost every home sported some sort of multi-colored flower display, from dwindling tulips to early daisies and marigolds. Most lawns had been recently cut. Shorts and thin-strapped tops were the order of the day, along with sheer pastel dresses draped loosely over tanned flesh.

A good day for a neighborhood block party.

Regular chores were postponed. A faint breeze kept the high-eighties temperature from forcing a sweat, provided anything particularly strenuous was avoided, like mowing the lawn or playing basketball. For some of the men in the neighborhood, however, at their age throwing a football around was enough to wet dark circles under their arms and the center of their T-shirts. The middle-aged men pushed themselves to keep up with their younger counterparts. Competition, though friendly, was adequately intense to strain muscles and dry throats. Smooth, long, draws of ice cold beer cured that.

"God, this is gorgeous," Elizabeth Boyd remarked as she sipped on a wine cooler.

"Should've done this sooner," Bob Matthews said. He was grouped with the women, obviously relishing the companionship of all the females present and the attention he was getting.

The sound of hard leather whapping on the concrete startled the women. The subsequent bounce of a football onto one of the beverage laden folding tables made Elizabeth Boyd and Mercy De Ville scurried to balance it and catch tipped paper cups. "Ooops, sorry," said a clean-cut, athletic young man as he retrieved the ball, the tone of apology earnest in his voice. He paused to take a cup of beer from one of the tables and drained half the remainder, then tossed the ball into the midst of a group of men and trotted down the road toward them.

"Who's that?" Elizabeth asked.

"That's my husband Tom," said a woman apparently about the same age as the man. She reached out to shake Elizabeth's hand. "Francine Cummings. We moved in last week, the duplex next to Mercy De Ville, upstairs, 1740A. Tom is going to be a Reverend at our church." Pride was everywhere on her face. "I'm so glad you all planned this gathering."

"Listen," Winnifred Mayweather said, "We should've done this

earlier, like Bob said. It's a good way for everyone to stay in touch and get acquainted with the new people on the block." Nods of agreement went around.

Still in her home, Kate moved around the kitchen with brisk steps getting food together for the party. As she set a picnic basket on the kitchen table, she spied one chapter from her book manuscript and felt guilty she had not worked on it recently as much as she felt she should have. She took the typed pages with their pen-scrawled corrections into the bedroom, promising herself she would return to work on it soon. But at the moment the demand on her time was for the party, and she was behind in preparing her family's basket of sustenance. There was much more to do in the kitchen.

She slid open the meat drawer at the bottom of the refrigerator and retrieved a white paper package. She peeled off the adhesive strip, unwrapping the bratwurst to check them with a sniff close under her nose. The sausage meat was firm and fresh in their intestinal casings, and the spicy raw pork aroma filled her nostrils. Like the trip of a trigger, Kate's mind was assaulted unexpectedly by the picture of the greasy white bag in the garbage. She shuddered, the sensation of electrical charges running along her arms and spinal column in waves, a feeling so strong that she physically perceived her skin to be *moving*. Her fingertips rubbed the bare flesh of her triceps, trying to stroke the goose pimples back in place, and now she was aware her restless night of sleep had made her joints ache.

She had decided she wouldn't tell Derek she was sure it was Perkins butchered in their trash. Not just yet. She did not want her husband to think she was losing touch, speculating Perkins was killed, accusing Cain. There had been too many outbursts of paranoia from her since they moved in, she knew, and she worried Derek would eventually tire of it. *She knew she was fine. It probably was Cain. Who else could it be? He killed Perkins and stuffed her in my trash as if to say-"here ya go you assholes, here's your fuckin' cat!"*

She shook her head to expel the thoughts bouncing around in her brain, scolding herself for the sailor's language she had spoken in her imagined scene as if her children could hear her--though she knew Cain *would* talk like that.

Kate gathered up her picnic basket, and with Melissa and Nathan in tow, joined the party, wishing Derek could be with them. He would not arrive for a few hours--after leaving the bookstore in Gary's hands to finish out the day, he had to see Jack Winston to make sure the Swenson's remodeling project had been completed satisfactorily so final payment could be collected.

Kate mingled with the women near the food tables on the sidewalk in front of Mercy De Ville's house, keeping her distance from Bob Matthews. She noticed that buxom Lisa Fontanna was not wearing a bra, every feature of her breasts fully evident. Kate made a mental note to check Derek's reaction to that. Melissa ran off gleefully to play with the other children in and around their various homes. With the street barricaded at the intersection with the red and white striped 'horses' that looked much like horizontal barber poles, Kate felt secure enough to let Nathan roam on his own, but she kept glancing over to him to make sure he did not get too far from her or into any trouble.

Small talk and pleasantries absorbed the time--nothing controversial was discussed. Elizabeth Boyd had some gossip to share, but there wasn't a whole lot she could say with so many of the neighborhood present. One topic of mutual interest was Molly Wasburg's condition and all were glad to learn her recuperation in the nursing home was going well.

Some time later, the blatt of a car horn drew attention to the barricade, and the second, longer, blast from the horn seemed as if it would not end. Before it completed its tirade, everyone had paused, staring at George Cain's dirty old Buick nosed against the other side of the barricade. The driver was invisible behind the dark glass surrounding the vehicle's interior, but whispers went through the crowd; it had to be George Cain--Loretta hadn't been seen behind the wheel of a car in years. And when did he get those blackened windows?

Another blast from the horn. Tom Cummings and Chris Montoya ambled over to move the red and white striped barriers from the Buick's path. The car rolled slowly forward. It drove through the middle of the bunched group in the road, creeping along, the smoked glass on all the windows of the vehicle preventing the driver from being seen. As the vehicle brushed past, every person there tried to peer past the shiny, impenetrable glass, each only seeing their reflection. Kate wondered if Cain was watching them, leering at them, or were his eyes just aimed straight ahead, ignoring his neighbors around him? Kate felt queasy, seeing the man move through them, and yet part of her wanted to confront him, ask him about her cat. *Have you seen her? Do you know where she is? Did you cut her into pieces?* As the Buick rolled past her it slowed as the driver's window came even with her and her breathing hitched.

All ideas of bringing about a friendlier George Cain were smothered at the moment somewhere in her subconscious.

Cain's garage door opened with lurching movements before his car turned into his driveway and was not quite completely up when

the Buick eased into the structure. The engine continued to rumble as the door descended. Kate wasn't sure even when the door had dropped those last two inches onto the concrete that Cain had shut his car off.

Perkins.

Kate shook off the surge of anger and directed her attention back to the picnic. She glanced around until she spied Nathan chugging on a cup of soda. Her boy was safe and content. Scanning the neighborhood showed no sign of Melissa, but Kate was sure her daughter was with the other kids, running in and out between the houses and back yards.

Within a half-hour the bleat of a siren at the barricade demanded attention. The patrol car had come up unobserved, registering surprise on many faces in the group. A lone cop in a white squad car with navy blue markings waited patiently to be let in. The officer gazed at the throng of neighbors, emotion absent from his countenance.

Ray De Ville and Zachary Smith--who had to scold son Abraham into getting out of the way--moved the barricade respectfully to the side and the squad car rolled down the road, parking on the wrong side of the street in front of Cain's house. Everyone watched in silence as the young policeman approached Cain's front steps. Before his finger touched the doorbell, the inner door swung open with a wave of unintelligible screams from Cain. The cop stepped down off the concrete porch and Cain whipped open the screen door, coming out into the shade under the soffit, his eyes hidden by the small dark ovals of sunglasses.

"They can't block the street!" Cain yelled, his arms animated with violent gestures.

"Sir, they have a permit." The officer's voice was calm and even.

"Goddamn ball's goin' on my grass." Cain's hands were clenched into fists. "I know it!" Frothy spittle flew from his mouth. "Dumb shits!"

"I'll ask them to be careful, sir. Now if you'll just go back inside--"

"Fuckers!" Cain's face was mottled with crimson and the dark purple of bruises. "They're out to get me!"

"Watch your language, Mr. Cain. There's no need for that."

The gravelly edge to Cain's voice worsened. "Fuck you! I can say what I want. Do something about them!" Cain pointed straight at Kate, his black sunglasses joined across the space to her eyes as if he were a foot away. "Especially her!" Kate felt as if an icicle pierced her heart. It missed a beat, pounding hard once, then again and her lungs seemed to collapse without

air. She was struck with the sudden desire for her asthma inhalers.

Bob Matthews yelled at Cain, "Why don't you leave this neighborhood, you prick!"

Cain's reply was an unimaginative, predictable curse.

"I bet you killed her cat, didn't ya," Matthews taunted.

A guttural growl rumbled from Cain. "Damn cat kept digging up my yard! That shit had to stop! Fucking had to stop!"

Kate's eyes widened. *Did he just admit it? Really admit it?* Her mouth opened in a downward turn, her face screwed up as if in the embrace of pain.

Cain seemed to enjoy Kate's reaction, his lip curling up at the corner. He spat past the officer, his dark lenses still focused on Kate. "Cunt!"

The cop's voice elevated, stern and commanding, a pinkness rising from his neck to his cheeks. "Now settle down, Mr. Cain. I'm not going to warn you again."

"Warn me? Fuck you! Fucking cops! Pigs!" A quick maniacal laugh exploded from deep in his chest. "I can handle you. I'm not scared of your gun. I can hurt you too!" Cain made a move toward the entryway, one arm disappearing behind the inside wall to his left. The cop instinctively took a step back, unbuckled his holster and settled his hand on the grip of his sidearm. "Mr. Cain, bring your hand out where I can see it. Now!"

"Fuck you!"

The policeman's hand began to withdraw his weapon. Kate saw the action in slow motion, not believing what was happening. Before the gun cleared the cop's holster, Cain retreated into the protective shadows of his living room and slammed shut the door with another curse.

Facing Cain's house, the officer withdrew to his vehicle, his face flushed and sweaty. He buckled his weapon back in place and without a word to the neighborhood group he climbed into his vehicle, started it and lifted his radio to his mouth. With his other hand he wheeled the squad in a tight U-turn, drove down Harper Street and around the corner onto Thickett, moving off at high speed.

A murmur went through the crowd. Finally Bob Matthews spoke up. "Hey, that ain't gonna spoil our party, is it? C'mon, forget it."

Kate couldn't let it all go. Now she realized that Cain had killed Perkins. She had been right. *He just said as much, didn't he?* Anger simmered in her gut, a boiling, burning feeling, as if she were holding a volcano at bay. She could feel her muscles tighten, and a tug deep in her mind began to unfold the wrapping

on years of suppressed bitterness, the rage she had bottled from when her uncle raped her, the black emotion stored away from the disavowal her father had for the shady mess. Every incident in her life where she dismissed and buried anger and hate surfaced, magnifying the loathing that was growing inside her for Cain. All the love that had entombed any reason to hate began to crack, splinter, no longer able to contain the stowed venom.

It seemed right to release this on George Cain.

Kate's mind diffused the scene around her, clouding out the party, suspending her awareness of reality. The struggle for comprehension and the containment of hate consumed her. She became oblivious everything that was happening, and remained in this trance for a while, not noticing how much time passed.

Another errant football pass wide of the street bounced on the sidewalk in front of George Cain's place, flipped end over end and bobbed halfway up his yard toward his dwelling. Chris Montoya sauntered onto Cain's weedy grass to retrieve it. In a flash Cain bolted from his door, sunglasses in place and a dirty, large-visored baseball cap now on his head. He came after the ball, halfway to the sidewalk, and Kate focused in on him, daggers in her eyes.

"Goddamnit! That's mine now!" Cain yelled, pitching forward.

Chris dashed for the ball, snatched it from the grass and sprinted back to the street. Cain stumbled, falling to his knees and his sunglasses popped loose onto the sidewalk. He grabbed them up quickly, shoving them onto his face, stood, then backed up to his door, all the while cursing and hollering. He paused before going inside, waving a fist and spitting onto the ground.

"Nice job," Nick Fontanna shouted to Montoya. "You sure showed the old man who's faster. Barely." Nick laughed heartily as Chris flashed a gesture with his middle finger.

"Geeze," Mercy De Ville said, "He didn't look so good. Did you see how dark his face looked?"

"Kind of purplish," Lisa Fontanna said, a tone of amazement in her voice.

"I thought I saw black shadows under his eyes," Francine Cummings chimed in. "He must not be sleeping too well."

Kate ignored her impulse to contribute her thoughts. To her eyes, aided by her imagination, Cain appeared hideous, different, contorted in a way that reminded her of his disintegrating flesh in her never-to-be-forgotten nightmare.

Tom Cummings touched his gray T-shirt where a crucifix on a gold chain lay hidden. He fingered the metal through the cloth, staring at Cain's house for nearly a minute. "I've heard stories about him. That man needs help. I think I should go talk to

him."

Despite the admonition from the others, the young Reverend-in-training approached Cain's front door. Kate's heart beat with a huge, galloping rhythm. Tom rang the doorbell persistently, and finally it cracked open. Kate gasped and a soft chatter rose from the others. Cain was not visible in the dark slit. Judging by Tom's hand gestures Cain was at least listening to what seemed to be a few quiet words. The door opened wider and Tom entered.

The gathering of neighbors stood in near silence, watching, waiting. Consumption of beverages slowed. Looks of concern were common, shared between pairs of eyes again and again. More time than actually passed seemed to go by as they waited for Tom to return.

The inside of Cain's living room was in near total darkness, the only light being the small amount from the gaps between the windows and the shades, which were sloppily fastened against the framing woodwork with duct tape. Cain was seated on the black leather couch, his head lowered. Somewhere an old clock ticked off the seconds, slower than accuracy would call for, as if the batteries were dying down. Tom Cummings stood in the dim emptiness, trying to discern his neighbor's features, as they were little more than a silhouette. He finally sat on the edge of the tattered black easy chair, several steps from Cain.

"Mr. Cain, George, may I call you George?"

Cain did not respond.

"I'm Tom Cummings. We moved in recently. Um . . . I'll be Reverend Cummings soon." He leaned forward, extending his arm for a handshake, a gesture unanswered.

"Mr. Cain, I'm sorry if anything we did upset you," Cummings said.

Cain's hands began to tremble, becoming a vibration that crept up his arms, shoulders, to his skull. Cummings watched in awe as the silhouette of Cain shuddered.

"Mr. Cain, can I help you? I think I can help you. You seem to be so upset, my friend. What is wrong?"

Cain's breathing increased and Cummings sniffed the odor of rotting meat. As Cummings reached for the light on the end table to turn it on, Cain lifted his head. Between the ticks of the clock, Cain leaped up toward Cummings, who jerked backward in surprise. Cain stood over him, saliva running from his mouth, his unblinking eyes bottomless, foggy pupils in a sea of vivid red, past bloodshot, as if wounded. His lips pulled back, revealing the hideous condition of his mouth. Cain reached out toward Cummings, fingers spread, a growl rolling from deep inside him. Cummings felt his short hairs rise, stimulating every follicle,

and terror gripped his soul like a barb-wired noose.

As Cummings stared at him, Cain's tremble became a shaking and it appeared his eyes grew redder still, iridescent, as though the orbs were hollow glass. The young man was sure it was his vision that blurred when Cain's body seemed to thin at the edges, a kind of smoky halo forming around him, his face moving as if it were melting. He blinked, squeezing his eyelids shut for a second, but the image remained.

Cummings let out a short shriek, bolting sideways for the door, flinging it inward then thrusting himself at the screen door, nearly tearing it off its hinges as he surged out. After a few rapid steps he slowed, plodding forward as if his legs had turned to lead and he stumbled into the street.

His wife ran to him. "Tom! Are you all right? What happened in there?"

Cummings collapsed to the curb, repeatedly glancing over his shoulder at Cain's front door. He did not speak right away, catching his heaving breath, halfway through which he leaned into the gutter, vomiting hard and quick. He wiped the thick fluid from his lips and shook his head in sluggish, abbreviated strokes.

Finally his voice came, weak and low. "God almighty, I don't know what I just saw." He made a sign-of-the-cross over his heart. "Cain is, he's . . . I . . . can't say. I . . . don't know." He grasped the crucifix through his shirt, then clutched at his stomach, groaning. "Maybe I had too much beer."

Tom staggered to his feet, with help from his wife and Ray De Ville. Francine ushered her husband along the sidewalk toward their end of the block. Everyone watched the couple until they were nearly home.

Bob Matthews raised an eyebrow. "Bunch of wimps," he sneered.

After a while, everybody settled down. A short, vitriolic discussion on George Cain followed, therapeutic as it was, comments being thrown out at random.

"Tom looked like he saw a ghost."

"He looked like shit."

"That Cain is unbelievable."

"So cruel."

"I hope he gets what he deserves someday."

"Right."

Finally, the men returned to their football and the women to entertaining Bob Matthews, although they weren't aware of all the ways they were delighting him--his eyes never lingered too long as he sneaked glimpses of their female qualities. Within a half hour the incident was no longer discussed, for the most part, as if

largely forgotten.

But not for Kate.

Her mind wandered again, thinking about Perkins.

She did not see Nick Fontanna throw the football to Chris Montoya much too high, much too far. She was oblivious to the sound of the ball hitting the rubble at the end of the road by the woods, where it bounced and rolled into the tree line by a dozen feet.

Chris went to retrieve the ball but stopped when he saw a red blotch on the soft ground under the canopy of the trees. He looked at it, bent to examine it closer, then stood, his face contorting into puzzlement. He looked around for signs of a skirmish, perhaps animal fur or feathers, but no remains were in sight. Nothing but the blood.

Chris held the football against his belly and as he stood there a large red drop of blood splatted on the ball. He jerked, looked up and froze. High in the foliage of the trees hung the bloated body of a man, his midsection punctured by a broken branch, his jaw ripped from his head, eyes wide and glassy as if he had been staring down the devil at the moment of his death.

Chris, open mouthed, unable to speak or respond to his friend's call to toss the ball back, stood dumbly looking up. The football fell from his limp hands, bounced twice and came to rest.

"Hey! C'mon Chris," Nick Fontanna called. "Let's get with it!"

Elizabeth Boyd glanced over and saw Chris there, her brow furrowing and she walked to him. She joined Chris in his gaze upward and jolted as if struck by a cattle prod. Her chin dropped, she drawing a slow, wheezing breath that stopped abruptly, lingered then exploded with a scream loud enough for both of them. Nick Fontanna and Ray De Ville ran to them, followed closely by Charlie Boyd. The other neighbors swarmed around them, gasping and exclaiming at the sight. Lisa Fontanna threw up, backing away with one hand bracing her gut and the other covering her mouth, fingers dripping with bile.

"Call the cops!" Ray instructed his wife. "Now!" Mercy plodded off, glimpsing over her shoulder with dark, wild eyes.

"Oh my God," Kate panted. "That's Sadowski!" Her mind spun in a blinding carousel and she was gripped with the aching urge that Derek should be there.

Elizabeth was crying, choking, stumbling away, nearly fainting. Charlie clutched her around her shoulders, walking her a few steps away.

Winnifred Mayweather coughed up something thick, spitting it onto the dirt. Extreme disgust riddled her features. She took

another look at Sadowski's mutilated body, then looked away, retreating from the group.

"The children!"

"Oh God, don't let them see this," Kate groaned. She and Winnifred walked up the street, corralling the few curious looking youngsters heading their way that were not partaking in the adventuring in the neighborhood yards and moved them back a hundred paces from the others.

"He had a lot of run-ins with Cain, didn't he?" Ray De Ville asked, seemingly to himself.

Kate stared at her former tenant, feeling dizzy and hollow between her eyes and feverish in her stomach. A cold feeling shivered over her, and her skin told her she was being stroked by icy, damp fingers. She had the sudden perception that they were being watched, and she looked into the woods, sensing a presence. Something in the woods. She glanced around and saw glazed expressions on the faces of the others, a dream-like state which she knew was in her own mind. She knew they felt it too.

Murmurs rippled through the gathering, low, only understood by the speaker and their God, with whispers coming on the heels of those dark prayers.

Someone spoke in a loud whisper.

"How did the body get up there?"

"Don't know. Somehow . . ."

Without a spoken command to lead them, they moved together, as though directed by a common thought. One by one, they turned in the direction of Cain's house.

Vengeance began to speak.

"I bet he did it."

"Yeah, Cain did it."

"It had to be him."

A few started walking slowly toward Cain's sanctuary and the entire group followed, Kate in the middle of the pack. They stopped in the street in front of Cain's residence, standing quiet, save for guttural cursing and muttered threats. Minutes ticked off, a silent fury passing among them, a communal sense of fear and outrage.

Now voices spoke with a livid fervor, yet thick as if drugged, and the level and pitch of each succeeding voice rose, adding to the one before it.

"Cain did it. Who else could've?"

"Cain's gotta pay for this."

"Yeah. Gotta pay."

"Cain!"

"More than that. We have to protect our families."

"Cops won't do anything!"

In a rising tempest of voices and emotion so dark and deep that the air itself inexplicably felt charged with tension, all but one in the mob outwardly proclaimed hatred for George Cain.

Kate was as yet silent, holding back the flood, weak fingers in the dam.

"Killer's gotta die!"

Cain's gotta die!"

On the brink of control lost, the promise of malice from the throng came at first disjointed, then combined, flowing together into waves, increasing to chanting that crested with a cyclonic intensity. Their voices beat as one in time with their pounding hearts.

"Cain!"

"Cain!"

"Cain!"

The embodiment of the mob blossomed as a coherent force screaming for Cain's demise. This call to the primordial spirit summoned the dormant instincts of hunter and killer within them, that feral nature within all humans. They pressed forward, tenacious yet afraid, anxious with the anticipated triggering, the releasing of their contempt. From the back of the group a rock flew, gashing Cain's garage door. Hate for Cain within the assembly peaked as an accumulated entity.

They hovered like wasps expunged from their nest, calculating, readying the strike, a moment of hesitation to focus on their target.

In the pause at the edge of insanity they stopped.

And waited.

With no further leading action among them, their emotions began to ebb, words faded to bitter murmurs, muttered threats, lingering on their lips, repeated, trailing to soft, unintelligible sounds. Yet in their hearts and aloud to each other all vowed to help bring Cain to justice--though promises of this kind seldom are kept the morning after the heat of rage diminishes.

In the heart of this storm Kate felt something inside her break, like a levee bursting from the burgeoning floodwater, and in the core of her soul hate erupted, full, coursing, its new, vile beginning ready for harvest. In communion with the others.

The commingled hate of the gathering.

*The storm quickens,
once out of the eye.
The fury at the swirling edge peaks.
Anger swells, rage is vast,
when numbers dare to hate.
The whole being greater than the sum of it's parts,
with dead love, is catalyst for dark change,
The Becoming can be realized,
from the Gathering_*

PART THREE
TEMPEST UNLEASHED

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Kate said good-bye to Winnifred Mayweather, hung up, paused, then dialed Elizabeth Boyd's number, tapping her foot on the floor while she waited for an answer. Derek came into the kitchen from outside shaking his head. The look of concern on his face seemed to add an edge to Kate's anxiousness. Derek said, mostly to himself, "Where could she have gone?"

"Derek, I don't--oh hello, Elizabeth, this is Kate Freeman." Kate looked away from Derek, nodding while she listened politely to Elizabeth's greeting, then spoke to her neighbor with a direct tone. "Yes, I'm--" Kate's eyes rolled and she put her hand over the mouthpiece, whispering to Derek, "Liz Boyd. She wants to gossip." Kate removed her hand from the phone, forcing the issue, her outwardly pleasant tone a mask for her distress. "Elizabeth, I'm calling about Melissa. Is she over there?" Kate's flicked a nervous glance at Derek, then away, looking at nothing. "It's supertime here and we can't find her. Is she with Peter?"

Elizabeth told Kate, "I don't know. He's out and about, too. Listen, I think a couple of the kids are still playing together. I don't think we have to worry. I guess with all the commotion this afternoon our kids were able to sneak off. God, I wish the police would've believed us about Cain. All they did was ring his doorbell--you know he was there--they just left!"

"Melissa should be home," Kate said firmly.

"I'm sure she's okay," Elizabeth said. "The boys know their way around."

"But it's getting dark," Kate protested.

"And," Derek mumbled, "foggy, too."

Kate shot a look at him, the word 'fog' hitting her eardrum like a sledgehammer against an anvil.

Derek leaned toward her, whispering, "It's going to get dark early with those clouds." Kate's eyes narrowed at him, glowering. He shrugged his shoulders and went back outside.

Elizabeth continued. "I just hope they're not down by the woods."

"We've told Melissa not to go there," Kate said.

Elizabeth chuckled. "Listen. You know kids. Their friends can be pretty convincing. I don't want Peter hanging out down there either, it's . . . not safe--I mean, not totally safe--but hey, you can't be watching them all the time."

Kate sighed. "It's just that, well . . . with Sadowski and . . . Cain, I, uh . . ." Kate's hand raised to cover her moist eyes. Choked up, she could not speak.

"Kate?" Elizabeth said. "Kate? Are you all right?"

Kate cleared her throat. "If you see Melissa will you please tell her to come home right away?"

"Oh, yes. Sure will." Elizabeth said her good-byes and hung up.

With her fingers still clutching the telephone, Kate heard Derek's voice, long and muffled, crying out his daughter's name. Kate made certain Nathaniel was still napping then joined her husband. Derek's words seemed to be echoing off the dense air itself. The cool vapor made the streetlight's beacon as diffused as his shouting. Kate stood next to Derek with her arms folded across her chest.

"MEL-IS-SA!" Derek cupped his hands around his mouth and called again. He shook his head. "Damn it. Where is she?"

"Elizabeth Boyd thinks some of the kids got together and might have gone to the woods to play."

"Christ! We told her not to go there."

"I know, but, well . . ."

"I suppose I'm going to have to go down there and find her," Derek said.

"If she's there."

"It's as good of a place to look as any."

Their eyes met and mutual concern was understood. They both knew full well what kind of creeps the world harbored these days. Kate's worry had the additional terror provided by her thoughts about Cain.

They kissed gently, holding nervous hands together between them, then separated and Derek headed down the sidewalk toward the woods. Kate watched him for a few seconds, then turned to go back inside.

As Derek began to walk by Cain's house he looked out of the corner of his eye at the building. The place was dark and still, as though it held its own atmosphere. *Early to bed, early to rise. But this old fool is not too wise. What an oddball.* He scolded himself for being so critical. For a moment he pondered Kate's suspicions about Cain and Perkins, and thought his wife would believe Cain capable of anything. He considered for a moment his neighbors' shared accusation that Cain somehow murdered Sadowski and was able to get his portly body up in that tree. *Impossible.* He recalled that he had arrived after the cops had been there for a while, and when they interviewed him, they didn't seem too concerned that anyone in the neighborhood could've done that to Sadowski. Derek decided Kate's paranoia must be contagious.

Derek's apprehension grew with each unanswered call for his

daughter. He was sure Melissa was only out playing somewhere-- even if it was in the woods. He knew Kate feared worse, but he wouldn't allow himself to believe anything like that. He fought to keep his emotions at mere disappointment.

As he neared the end of the long street it occurred to him that he had stepped over some invisible threshold into a darker place. The absence of streetlights at the wooded dead-end made him realize it was not his imagination. He clicked on his flashlight and swept it across the front line of trees, a portion of the beam reflecting off the hint of fog permeating the air. In the ebony overtones of the night, the woods looked like a gnarled mesh of impossible passage. He aimed his light up into the foliage, where Sadowski's body had been-- maroon stains still colored the branches. A beating rush of wings and flying shape startled him; an owl screeched, protesting the disturbance.

Kate closed the door behind her and tried to shake off the chill that was invading her bones. Not that the weather had anything to do with it--it was in the high seventies. No, this chill came from within. She rubbed her hands together and went to the stove to check on the potatoes boiling in the big copper-bottomed pot. She lifted the cover, performing the task robotically, her mind juggling reality with images of Cain and Sadowski. And Perkins. Her hand trembled and the cover slipped loose, clanging to the floor.

A tiny whimper followed by a short little cry made her pause to listen for more. A groggy utterance from Nathan. "Momma." Responsibility called.

Kate snuffled her swollen, wet nose, wiped a tear from her cheek and went to Nathan's room, lifting her son from his bed. "Well there, young man, how was your nap?" Having the child to console made her feel things around her were more normal than they were. Nathan rubbed his eyes and yawned, whined softly then cuddled his head into his mother's neck.

"Are you hungry, Nate?" The child bobbed his head slowly one time. "We'll be eating just as soon as your daddy brings Melissa home." The child began to whimper again.

A few steps in from the edge of the wooded area Derek was at a standstill, trying to decide which way to go. He didn't want to get lost in there. He called his daughter's name and waited for a response. None came.

He picked his way through the trees, reconnoitering with his light, carefully pushing away brush and watching for large fallen

limbs that might trip him. His hearing was dominated by the crunching of twigs under his feet and sloppy shushing of wet leaves.

"Melissa! MEL-IS-SA! ARE YOU HERE?" He stopped to listen.

No response.

He walked for fifteen minutes through the tangled woods, crossing the drainage creek into an area virgin to man's machinery. A short distance more and he struggled his way into a clearing, an area protected by the canopy of many ancient oaks and dry, thorny brush. The fog was thicker in here and the air was absolutely still. Even so, the mist moved ever so slightly. It was a weird sight to him and he studied it for a few seconds, watching it roll. He followed a finger of the mist with his beam as it moved, and it drew his attention to the center of the clearing where a tall, almost rectangular rock protruded from the earth. A tentacle of fog rose up against the stone, flowing over it as if caressing it, then slipped away, falling back into the body of white nothingness blanketing the ground. Derek's eyes narrowed, his mouth gaped open--a look of true bewilderment. He shook it off.

The rock, like a huge rough-hewn monolith, was several feet taller than Derek and jacketed by a mass of vines and brush. He went to the other side of it and saw that part was flatter, though not very smooth, as though roughly chipped by some simple method with hand tools. Possibly chisels, he thought, but the workers were not very skilled. The word 'primitive' entered his mind. Curious, he tugged some vines out of the way and saw notches at each top corner. Examination of the bottom corners revealed similar notches. He scratched his chin, wondering what they could have held. Further clearing of the overgrowth exposed a weather-worn diagram in the center of the stone. Though eroded, to Derek it looked like seven arrows pointing at a stick-man with a storm cloud above him, a zigzag line representing lightning at the center of it. The figure of the man was sprawled in the shape of an 'X'. Derek put his finger in the rough lines.

A girl's shriek cut the air and Derek stiffened.

Melissa!

He ran in the direction he thought the scream came from, twisting his head from side to side, negligent in his care of the flashlight--it struck a low stump, knocking it from his grasp and extinguishing the beam. His momentum carried him forward, he tripped over a log and tumbled to the ground, striking his knee on a jagged rock. "Shit!" The blackness was pure at first, his pupils not yet adjusted. He waited, totally disoriented.

When he was able to make out dim silhouettes of the trees, he rose from the damp earth with a grunt, massaging his knee with vigor, and looked around to get his bearings. He had no idea where the flashlight was.

In the distance through the myriad of trees and vegetation he thought he caught a glimpse of illumination bouncing through the air close to the ground. He took a step sideways to eliminate a thick birch cluster from blocking his view. There it was again, coming toward him. *Must be a flashlight. It's coming pretty fast. Whoever is carrying it is jumping over deadfall.* Another beam became visible in tandem with the first.

Again a scream, this a higher-pitched, longer wailing. He moved toward the light as fast as he could, being careful to avoid obstacles, at times feeling his way with his hands. Once, his cheek scraped against a tall bush as he careened forward, making him recoil as though he was being whipped.

The twin beams met him in a small open spot, an oblong clearing covered by rocks and small stones, and he held up his hand to block the shaft of light aimed at his face. Out of breath and gasping, he was unable to speak. As the lights maneuvered, he saw pairs of small legs.

"Daddy!" The relief in his daughter's voice also swept away his anxiety.

"Melissa! Thank God!"

"Daddy!" She wrapped her arms around her father's legs and squeezed tight.

"Melissa, we've been worried crazy about you. Your mother's really upset. What have you been doing?" He knelt to be at her level, a twinge of pain in his knee making him groan.

Melissa's soft face was moist with tears. "A deer. Over there. It's dead." She pointed in the direction of the drainage ditch. A fresh tear rolled down her cheek as she sobbed, her head hanging down.

Derek blinked, squinting at the brightness. "Get that light out of my eyes." The owner of the flashlight complied, pointing it up onto his face under his chin. "Oh, it's you Peter." In the tiny frame of pale yellow illumination Derek could see other children. Franklin Mayweather had the other flashlight.

"Hi Mr. Freeman," Peter said, his voice sullen.

"What happened?" Derek asked.

"We found this deer all chopped up," Peter said.

"Yeah, in pieces," chimed in Jamie De Ville. "It was gross." He pointed.

"Show me," Derek said. Peter began leading the group in the

direction he had indicated.

"Just a head and guts," said a small male voice, cracking. In the dark it was sometimes hard to tell which child was talking.

"I'm scared."

"I'll bet," Derek said.

"Not just because of the deer," Abraham Smith said. "The wind, too."

"The wind?" Derek didn't remember even a breeze since he had been outside that evening.

Franklin sounded like he was shivering. "Yeah, just as we found the deer--"

"I screamed," Melissa interjected.

--"This cold wind went past us."

"Real cold," Abraham said, the whites of his wide, circular eyes standing out against the coal background.

Quiet thunder rumbled in the distance.

"The wind went right past me," Peter said. "Like the fog-- there was all this fog around us--it was moving. I got goose bumps. It like, grabbed me, tripped me, sorta pulled me down."

"Then I screamed," Melissa said, beginning to cry. Derek pulled her in, hugging her against his legs.

"It went right down into the drainage ditch."

"Yeah. Into the sewer."

"Come on, you guys," Derek said. "I think you watch too many horror movies."

Several steps before they came upon the remains of the deer the group fell silent with the mannerism of reverence.

There was more than just a head and guts, but with so much blood it was an easy mistake to make. Its abdomen had been ripped open and its entrails and organs splayed on top of the animal's side. He stared at Melissa, wondering how this might affect her. As far as the animal's demise, he immediately suspected poachers, but saw no arrow or gunshot wound. A large V-shaped notch was cut in the skull, with the brain exposed and a portion of it cut away, and Derek thought the deer had been slaughtered merely for a large set of antlers--except that at this time of year they would be velvet covered; not exactly trophy room stuff. There was no way, however, he was going to investigate what had brought the deer down--the means of death--if it involved putting his hands into the bloody mess.

Something caught his attention. An unnaturally straight piece of what had to be bone or tissue, wet and crimson, approximately the thickness of his thumb, protruded from the deer's body cavity and that didn't seem right. Shiny, curved

points at the end of it. Derek bent, wiped away blood with the tip of his finger and saw that the shine was from claws. His stomach churned. He yanked at the small paw and a cat's body came out with a slick, tacky sucking noise. Bile rose to his tongue and the children gasped, backing up. Melissa whelped and turned away. Bridgid De Ville screamed and buried her face in Jamie's ribs.

Derek licked at the sour taste in his mouth. *Poachers? What kind of sick-o did this?*

Derek took some relief in seeing the cat's fur was not gray, but tan and some other color camouflaged by blood--he was still holding out hope for Perkins' return. Two thoughts dominated his mind. One being that this cat could be Joyce Montoya's, the other was wonder as to what kind of person could have done this. He exercised his mind for a theory. *Maybe poachers killed the cat for their sick fun, then heard the kids coming their way, so they hid the cat and took off.* It was a weak explanation, he realized, but it was the only way he could explain it right now.

Derek put his arm around Melissa. "Come on, we better go home." He turned to the others. "You kids better get home, too. Your mothers are looking for you." Derek led his daughter away, looking over his shoulder into the density of trees, trying to imagine the icy fog in the way he thought they had imagined.

The sound of thunder rolled again, this time a little closer.

Kate settled Nathaniel onto a chair and returned to the stove, her hands jittering. She frowned, looking at the kettle of potatoes. The water was no longer boiling. She tested the control for the heating coil the pot rested on, confused by its lack of response. The light on the kitchen ceiling flickered, making her look up. The bulbs flickered again, stayed off for a few seconds, came on for only an instant with a brownish hue then went off for good.

"Oh great!" She groped for Nathan in the void and gathered him into her arms, holding him close, listening to her heart and their commingled breathing. The child giggled as though thinking his mother was playing some sort of game.

The house was still and quiet, and Kate feared moving lest she trip over some ill-placed toy with her son in her arms. A fever spread across her forehead and under her arms. Only the sound of her and the young boy's breathing came to her ears. She blinked repeatedly, hoping light from the street or moonlight would filter in, providing enough illumination for her eyes to adjust to.

A thin, sharp sound caught her ear, the squeak of steel on steel. Soft metallic clacking came from the doorknob on the kitchen door to the back hall. The door swung open slowly, a hinge creaking, its rubber weatherizing strip scraping the floor. Kate turned slowly, squeezing Nathan tighter, and fought the tingle rising on her shoulders and neck.

"What's going on here?"

Derek's voice came as the lifting of a weight from Kate's senses. "Oh, God, Derek," she gasped, "You scared me!"

"Sorry. I have Melissa."

A sharp exhalation exploded from Kate. Words would not come as she dropped to one knee and pulled her daughter into her. Kate sniffled, her breathing spiced with an occasional pant.

Finally she was able to speak, her throat thick with joy. "I'm so glad you're home, Melissa. You're okay." She squeezed her daughter tight, holding her for a minute. Then, to Derek, "The power went out. It just happened a minute ago."

"I better go downstairs and check the fuse box," Derek said. "I need something to see with. I lost my flashlight."

Kate wiped tears from her face and stood, fishing out a candle and matches from a drawer, handing them to her husband. "Here. Use this. I don't know where the other flashlight is. I'll look for it."

Derek struck a match and lit the candle. Its soft glow cast an orange hue on their skin. Derek tried to smile at Kate. "This is sort of romantic, isn't it?" he said. She glared at him, her pink-tinged eyes rimmed with moisture. Melissa sat on a chair at the table and watched her father leave, and again the room was thrown into darkness. Kate returned to the drawer to feel around for another candle.

Kate listened to the sound of Derek's shoes clomp down the basement steps. Clomp, clomp clomp, then nothing, as if he disappeared. *He's on the concrete now. That's why I can't hear him.* Her nervous fingers tried to light a match but she only succeeded in grinding several into wads of cardboard. At the instant she finally managed to coax one into flame, the lights flickered again and came back on. "There we go kids," Kate said. "Daddy saves the day." She managed to laugh in a high-strung, tension-relieving sort of way.

Derek returned upstairs, shaking his head and talking to himself. "That's funny."

"What? You fixed it, didn't you?"

"None of the fuses were blown. Everything was okay."

Kate's face was a marquee for the puzzlement her mind

contained. "How could that happen?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to call an electrician in the morning. Eddie Harbander does a lot of our construction wiring. I'll check with Jack and see if he can arrange it--fit it into Eddie's schedule for us. I don't know how soon he can get here. But I want that checked." He focused on the candle in his hand, puckered and blew out the flame with one short burst of air.

After supper and bedtime stories, the children being tucked under the covers and kissed, Kate and Derek sat together on the living room couch. Kate stared straight ahead at the opposite wall. Her fingers had an occasional twitch.

A flash of lightning made Kate cringe. Several seconds later loud, rolling thunder shook the windows.

Derek saw his wife's nervous behavior. "I know how that thing with Sadowski had to upset you." Her pleading eyes, moist deep pools, answered him. Derek said, "It bothers me too." He didn't mention the slaughtered animals in the woods. "Maybe wine would help," he offered. She nodded and he went to the kitchen to get them both a large, full glass of cabernet sauvignon.

They sat without speaking for awhile, drinking, Kate almost gulping hers. After she consumed the wine in the first glass and was nearly finished with the second she began to weep. "Derek, I don't think this neighborhood is safe. Something bad is going to happen to us. I just know it."

Delicate rain began to patter at the panes of the front window.

Derek pursed his lips. He sighed and stroked a few errant hairs away from her forehead. "Kate, you heard the cops. They figured Sadowski fell from the top of that tree. He was climbing, doing something he shouldn't have."

"Oh sure! How did his jaw get ripped off?" she challenged.

"They thought maybe his open mouth caught on a branch and broke it, then some animal tore it off. Raccoons climb trees, you know."

"Bullshit," Kate said. Derek's eyes widened. Kate took a long drink from her glass, finishing it. Her words were beginning to slur at the edges. She went to the kitchen for a refill, muttering something about Sadowski having no reason for being up in the tree. "Cain did it. We all think so."

Derek gritted his teeth. "Cain! Cain! Cain! I'm so damn sick of you obsessing over that man! I thought you were trying to be his pal." Then, in an angry, mimicking voice, "I thought you wanted to reach out to him!"

Kate returned to the living room, standing in front of her

husband, her eyes livid, limbs tensed, fingers clenched. "He killed Perkins, too! I'm sure of that." She was near shouting.

A simultaneous explosion of lightning and thunder shook the house. Both jumped as the lamps went out, staying off for a few seconds before reclaiming the darkness. Rain began to beat heavily against the house.

Kate continued, more in control. "Cain killed my cat. He admitted it." With her hand shaking, she guzzled a good portion of wine.

"Maybe he did, but we can't--"

"No maybe about it. He did it to piss me off. It's almost as if he wants me to hate him." Her face was glowing with perspiration.

"Kate--"

"Well, he does. And I'll tell you what." She downed the remainder of her third glass. "That bastard got his wish. I hate that man for all I'm worth."

In its basement lair the entity of fog absorbed the hatred emanating from Kate, ravenously consuming the nourishment, filling with its power-giving. It grew in strength, in density. Feeding on the gathering of hate from the neighborhood and Kate's special, great animosity had now given it the life force it needed. Now it could extend, control things it had never controlled before, at distances beyond its direct grasp. In a short time it would complete the process, devouring all the hate Kate and the others had offered, everything they had to give. It would insure that all the loathing would be squeezed out, extracted and lapped up like a starving alley cat does when given a saucer of milk.

Then they would have all served their purpose. It could be rid of them--her--for good.

At the center of the fog a delicate image of George Cain's visage flickered for an instant, its flesh disintegrating like hot wax. Kate would recognize that face, the face that she had first seen in a nightmare she could not forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

"Yeah, that's right. Nothin's wrong." Eddie Harbander gave the bill to Derek.

Derek grimaced as he took the carbon-copy from Eddie. He trusted the man--he had done a lot of electrical work for Derek's construction business and had proved himself to be honorable and knowledgeable, but the experience they had with the power two days ago told him *something* was wrong with the wiring or the electrical box. "I find that hard to believe."

Eddie glanced out the rear door, watching the wind driven rain splatter into the flow of water raging down the driveway. "Well, believe it. It all checks out. There was a little corrosion in your box. From damp air in the basement. Run a dehumidifier. But that wouldn't do what you said. The contacts were fine. No ground faults. The current's good. From what you told me there must have been a brownout in the neighborhood."

"No. Nobody else had problems."

"Then you'll have to check with the power company. They handle everything before the meter. What can I say?"

A crack of thunder made both men blink.

"Maybe a lightning strike did it," the electrician offered.

"No, the power was out last night before the storm hit. I was downstairs checking fuses when the electricity came back on by itself." Derek snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

The onslaught of raindrops against the storm door protecting the rear entrance to the house became noticeably louder. Eddie said, "Man, what strange weather. Dark for this time of day. And that fog! Swirling like that. Never seen that before. Gotta drive kinda slow, know what I mean?" He looked at his watch. "Two-thirty already. This day's goin' by."

"Daddy! Daddy!" Melissa came through the kitchen door into the hall wearing a ballerina costume. The electrician smiled at the young girl. "You're a little early for Halloween." Then, to Derek, "Remember when we were kids and they let us do Trick or Treat at night?"

Derek handed the man a check and nodded. "That was great fun."

The electrician opened the door and paused, studying the intensity of the weather. "Too many weirdos out there now. Even in Hartford." He waved appreciation at Derek and made a dash for his van. Derek watched the man's clothing collect the fierce rain, a splotchy pattern of wide drops which quickly merged into

an overall drenching. He himself was being struck by water penetrating the slim opening in the doorway. Eddie's vehicle backed down the driveway, vanishing into the mist as it reached the street. Derek thought it odd that there was fog in the air considering the active wind. And at this time of day, too.

Lightning arched through the sky above their home and before the bluish-white radiance faded a booming explosion of thunder rocked the place. Derek winced and closed the door, shutting out the rain.

In the living room Derek found Kate pacing in front of the television. A tiny red 'S' in the upper left hand corner of the screen overlaid the image of some talk show program that Derek was not familiar with. Kate's hands repeatedly went up to wipe at her lips or run through her hair. Derek went to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She looked at him with eyes wide and glassy.

"Kate, you've got to settle down," Derek said. He grasped her other shoulder and squared her body to his. "Kate, it's just another storm."

She shook her head and pointed at the television. "No, on T.V. they said light rain was moving through the area. No mention of fog."

"So? Those weathermen aren't exactly rocket scientists."

"Don't you get it? The fog is just around here. And the storm is worse around here too." She pointed fiercely at the television set. "They don't even know about it!" Her breathing began to sound thick. A dry cough rattled through her chest.

Derek pulled Kate in toward him gently, trying to put her head against his chest. She pushed away from him waving her hands. "Derek! We are in danger!" She pointed toward Cain's house. "He's going to get us!"

"Kate . . . " Derek's face was drawn with the pallor of concern.

"Don't you see? Every time there's fog something around here dies. You've heard the stories--Bob Matthews for one. Way back then. Cain's part of it. He's . . . well, I think the fog . . . makes him do things. Like some psychopath, it triggers him, turns him on." She stomped to the kitchen, coughing hard. She retrieved her Ventolin and took one puff from the inhaler.

Derek sat on the couch, putting his head in his hands. "Kate, you've been under a lot of stress. You hardly slept the last couple of nights. You've been brooding ever since the neighborhood gathering. I'll admit, some pretty bizarre things have happened lately."

"We've got to get out of here," Kate said. She took her

second draw of asthma medicine, holding her breath again for the prescribed ten seconds. It would be minutes before the drug acted, dissipating the slight wheeze from her breathing.

"Maybe you should work on your book," Derek said.

"I can't. I can't concentrate."

"I think you need to get something. A tranquilizer, maybe." He stood. "I'm going to call our doctor." With her loud protests following him, he went to the kitchen and put the phone to his ear. Within a second he pulled the phone away, scowled at it, tapped the dial-hook several times and returned the receiver to his head. Still no sound. "Aww damn, the phone's out," he said. "The thunderstorm must've knocked some lines out somewhere."

Kate entered the kitchen, and the phone rang.

She grit her teeth as their eyes met. The looks on their faces were quite different--Derek surprised, Kate moments from a nervous breakdown. They turned in unison to stare at the telephone.

It rang again.

Derek reached for the receiver. "Hello?" A rushing static, like a television tuned to an off-station channel, met his ear. "Hello? Hello?" Relentless static. He hung up.

"What?" Kate's voice brimmed with exasperation.

"Nothing. Just noise."

"Let's pack some stuff and get out of here," Kate pleaded. "Now."

"Oh come on, nothing's going to happen."

A bolt of lightning and its thunderous companion split the sky together, striking the tree in their front yard as blinding light encased the house, a white-hot brilliance at every window, the concussion so forceful the front panes shattered and the duplex seemed to move on its foundation.

"Holy Christ!" Derek exclaimed. Kate moaned in a low, inhuman tone. They had both instinctively ducked.

Nathaniel began to bawl at the top of his lungs and Melissa ran into the kitchen screaming. Kate inhaled in one quick, deep breath and her knees wobbled, as though she was going to fall. Derek was already in the front room, standing on broken glass, staring in awe at the tree. A large branch halfway up was severed most of the way from the trunk, pitched over straight to the ground.

"Thank God that didn't hit the house!" Derek exclaimed. "Or catch fire. Damn." He expelled a low whistle. Several large shards of glass littered the floor, with some jagged fragments remaining in the frame. "Jesus, what a mess!" He studied the

demolished panes, speaking to himself in a dazed sort of way. "I'll have to put up some plywood until I can get some glass."

Derek went to the kitchen, but Kate was not there. He saw that the light in their bedroom was on and he peeked in. Kate was throwing clothes into a suitcase. Nathan lay howling on the bed while Melissa, looking confused and afraid, clung to her mother's leg. Unfolded clothing draped over the sides of another suitcase. Derek's shoulders drooped.

He approached Kate using slow, careful steps, and with a soft touch embraced her quivering body. He felt the moistness of her skin coming through her blouse. A tear rolled down her cheek as she wrapped her arms around him in a tight squeeze, and it seemed she didn't breathe for a while. Derek finally guided Kate to the living room, the children trailing, and sat her on the couch. He scooped up a whimpering Nathan, putting him on Kate's lap and she began to comfort him. Melissa stayed glued to her mother, her face showing she was on the borderline of letting the tears flow.

Derek knelt on the carpeting, selecting one of Melissa's dolls. He spoke to Melissa in a falsetto imitation of Malibu Barbie, prancing the doll around. "Ohh, bad, bad storm, wasn't that?" He picked up Bridal Barbie. "Spoiled my wedding day. Boo hoo!" Melissa first smiled then began to laugh, the crystal brightness coming back into her eyes. After a few more clowning lines from her father, the girl jumped in and resumed directing the dolls in her pretend world.

"I'm going to fix us a good strong drink," he said. "We both need one." Kate nodded, staring at the floor.

In the kitchen he poured orange juice into two stout glasses, followed by a shot of vodka. For good measure he added another half shot to hers. As he handed it to Kate she attempted a smile.

"Screwdrivers?" Kate said, her voice showing its fading strength. "We haven't had these for a long time. Since we were dating or just married, right?"

"Used to drink them all the time, remember?"

His thoughts roamed back to a winter in Kentucky. A huge freak snowstorm hit in March, closing the bookstore and keeping any sane person without a four-wheel drive vehicle penned up in their homes until the few plows available did their work. He had always thought--Kate said she knew--that was the exact day when Melissa was conceived, their wild desire throwing caution to the wind. One of the few times Kate didn't--or couldn't--stop their lovemaking to go through the condom and spermicide ritual.

Derek's mind snapped back to the present at the urging of Kate's sniffing. Her drink, close to being finished, seemed to

already be serving its intended purpose. Her fingers no longer trembled. By the time she drank down the contents of the first glass and began a second she was obviously calmer, if not actually sullen. After she consumed that second screwdriver, Derek promptly brought her a refill, this with two full shots of vodka, and he started his second drink. Her eyes began to droop as she worked on swallowing it down, any trace of caring gone from her face.

Derek didn't know what to say to her, in fact thought it best that saying nothing, allowing her to relax, was the right thing to do. The alcohol assisted her in yielding to exhaustion and she drifted into sleep before Derek returned with her fourth drink. He looked at it, knowing he was already feeling it more than he cared to. He set the full glass and his nearly empty one onto the end table next to the couch, then lifted his wife's legs onto the cushions.

Outside, a blast of wind howled between the houses, its low pitched whistling as rhythmic as soft laughter.

As the afternoon waned the fog-thing's appetite, its thirst for destruction expanded. It hungered for killing, anxious to flex its new power--a slaughter to prove by virtue of its ease that it had gained a new dimension. The ill weather it had conjured up would serve it well as a distraction. As it moved through the sewer, sniffing for a victim, the fresh, bestial scent of Mercy De Ville's cat reached it, enticed it.

This one had escaped before.

Rising through the grate of the drain in Mercy De Ville's basement, the fog-creature sensed the animal was nearby, hunting for a mouse. Now the predator become the prey. The fog closed in, the cat unaware. The animal turned, seeing it was being stalked, howled and frantically jerked its head from side to side. The thick mist enveloped the feline, sucking the air from its lungs. The cat thrashed on the floor, ripping at its throat, drawing blood with its claws. In a short time it was still.

The vaporous entity saw no need to shred the animal's flesh or tear pieces from it. There would be no more trophies for George Cain's shelves. This was a mere test, as it had mostly tired of killing small things for mere pleasure or elimination of competition, evolved as it now was with the greater power it had desired for so long.

There were better reasons to kill.

It returned to the sewer to wait, and ponder. The challenge of inflicting revenge lay before it.

After endless millennia, it would now have it's turn.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Corrugated cardboard covered the inside front window frame, held in place by a few staples and wide masking tape--it was the only thing Derek had found in the house to patch the hole with for now. When the wind blew, the cardboard puffed inward, straining at the tape as if it were breathing.

Kate awoke in the evening with a groggy headache and queasy stomach. Aspirin helped with the headache. She had missed supper but didn't care. Derek, now sitting on the rock chair in the living room, reading, had put the kids to bed a half hour before. Though subdued from her alcohol induced misery, Kate's previous thoughts and feelings began to creep back into her mind, and soon the nervous pessimism returned.

The storm tapered to a steady rain absent of wind. In this abatement of the harsh weather Derek cracked open a few windows on the driveway side of the house and the soft patter of raindrops filtered in. Kate stared outside, wringing her hands at the veil of fog fixed in the approaching night's air. Despite the lack of a noticeable breeze now, the fog was not still, instead it shifted--slow, billowing, formless.

Kate began to pace again in front of the silent television, with the added routine of walking back and forth between the kitchen and front room window every few minutes. The slightest noise outdoors made her stop and listen, freezing like a statue for a few seconds before resuming her pacing, her keen monitoring of conditions outside.

Derek observed Kate with intermittent glimpses away from his magazine. "How are you feeling," he finally asked. Kate grunted and Derek, in a soft tone said, "Why don't you work on your book?"

"I wouldn't be very productive right now," Kate answered tersely, stopping in front of him. "Maybe later." She returned to her nervous pacing routine.

A sound outside caught Kate's attention. Somewhere on the driveway side of the house. She cocked her head to listen. There it was again. *Was that a footstep? Like a hard heel on concrete.* She went to the kitchen, yanked open a drawer, rummaging through it with quick, anxious gestures. The odor of the greasy canned hash Derek had made for supper lingered in the room, and it made her stomach flip-flop. Within seconds she found and retrieved the flashlight she was looking for, then crept with small, cautious steps to the back hallway.

She snapped on the small service light in the hall and moved

to the storm door. The glare of the single, strong bulb filled the small space, making the outside appear all the more black to her light-sensitized eyes. A pale, ghostly reflection in the full length panes mimicked her every move. She leaned forward, her nose almost touching the glass, straining in an effort to see anything other than the absolute void beyond the barrier of the window. She cupped her hands to the side of her head and against the pane, shielding away the glare, but it did nothing to help.

She turned on the flashlight, its beam only bouncing off the glass into her face. She raised a trembling hand to the door latch, holding it with a delicate grasp to avoid making any noise. She pushed slowly, carefully, clearing the latch from the strike and she continued with that same even pressure to swing open the door as far as her courage would allow. She tried to wet her dry lips but her tongue and throat lacked moisture to spare. With the protection of the door removed, she had the sudden expectation of something wild and loud bursting up at her from the night. It was a feeling she could not shake.

Soft, quiet rainfall whispered to her. Tiny drops fell at random intervals on her face, teasing her eyelashes, her nose, her lips.

She aimed the ray from the flashlight at the back yard, seeing nothing but a trace of fog. A shiver ran over her shoulders to her fingertips. She turned to direct the beam at the garage then swept it along the driveway toward the road.

As the light came parallel with the side of the duplex, almost to the edge of the range it could cover, white eyes embedded in flesh the color of the night were suddenly within arms length. Kate jumped and the flashlight fell from her grip, a loud gasp rushing from her lungs. Her hand withdrew to her chest, and she froze.

A deep, low laughter came out of the night.

The flashlight, tumbling on the ground, came to rest against the house, its beam pointing straight up into the air. A black hand entered the beam. Jack Winston stepped forward, his face becoming illuminated from beneath. "I'm sorry if I frightened you, Kathryn." said the Jamaican. He bent to pick up the light, placing it in her shaking hands.

Jack followed Kate inside. Derek greeted his expeditor in the living room with a handshake. "This is a surprise, my friend."

"I have the Bathaven plans from the architect," Jack said. "I tried to call, mon, but the line was always busy."

"Busy? It's been out--broke--since before supper," Derek

said. "How could you get a busy signal?"

"I do not know, Derek. That is what happened."

Kate resumed her pacing.

"Well, anyway, I had time to run these over," Jack said, giving Derek a long, blue plastic tube. The Jamaican glanced at Kate. "How are you, Kathryn? That must have upset you terribly, that accident of your former tenant."

Kate paused. "That was no accident." There was a glare in her eyes. Jack's eyebrow raised.

Derek motioned Jack into the kitchen, where he took a cap from one end of the tube and spread the blueprints out on the table. He began studying the drawings, his fingers stroking his chin.

With a jittery, struggling edge to her voice, Kate announced, "I'm going to work on my book." She had decided that working on her manuscript might take her mind off things. Derek nodded, a thin smile tracing his lips, and Kate retreated to the bedroom.

"This is some strange weather, hey mon?" Jack said.

"Yeah," Derek replied. "It's bothering Kate."

"I'm afraid I gave her a scare, too. She met me at the rear door."

Derek frowned. "She's been real jumpy--disturbed--the last couple of days."

"Understandable, from what you told me," Jack said. "And this weather can be distressing to some. You know, it's only foggy right around here. Very odd."

Derek eyed Jack. "Now you're starting to sound like Kate."

"She's upset about your old tenant, of course. Not every day you find a corpse hangin' in a tree. And your cat. What a pity."

"Well, that's Kate's version on Perkins. I'm still not convinced. But Kate's gone overboard on this. I told you about George Cain, our neighbor. Now she's thinking he's some sort of bogeyman."

Jack's voice dropped. "Be careful, my friend. Where I come from a woman's intuition is taken seriously. Many females are sensitive to the portends of evil."

Derek raised his brow at Jack then returned his attention to the blueprints. He checked them over for a minute then the two men discussed the plans, with Derek pointing out a few necessary changes.

As Derek rolled the blueprints up for storage in the tube, a gust of wind blew the kitchen curtains out in billowing waves.

"Well," Jack said. "I think I'll be going then. There's much to do tomorrow." They shook hands before the Jamaican made

an exit through the back door.

The fog-thing, still lurking in the sewer, waiting, was finally rewarded with Mercy De Ville's cry of anguish when she found her cat. The vaporous entity slithered away, with additional pleasure derived from the knowledge of Mercy's pain.

It saw its next action very clearly.

Selective extermination.

Two purposes would be served by the elimination of all animals within its domain.

Competition for predation would be removed. This was especially true of cats, natural born killers, predator common to every corner of the planet. There was also that other reason felines had to be killed--their special contact with the spiritual world, something mankind now viewed merely as Egyptian myth and religion, which made possible the chance that good forces from the other side could interfere.

Cats could simply not be allowed to share the territory.

Then there was the needs of the ritual.

With lesser creatures extinguished, a more advanced species could be used for the sacrifice. This was in keeping with the order of the universe, the mandate of survival of the fittest. Furthermore, if hate could be gotten from killing their pets, sacrificing a human loved one when the time of judgement was nigh, at the climax of the ceremony, would insure driving their hating force to its extreme limit. The final sweet nectar in its quest for permanence.

To that end it went about with great stealth, massacring the non-human creatures of the neighborhood. Some were executed with a prodigious amount of blood and commotion--for extra pleasure, while others were merely snuffed out by silent suffocation.

Whereas no one cried for the wild animals, the phantasm took joy from the agony each person felt upon discovery of their pets. It was a tasting, a savoring of the grief each human felt from the loss. And it fed on their newest eruption of hatred, absorbing, growing.

Derek was surprised by a knock at the rear door, this followed by Jack Winston's return. The Jamaican's shoulders and back were drenched. His face carried a frown.

"What's wrong?" Derek asked.

"That damn car. It would not start."

"You replaced the battery last month, didn't you?"

"Yes. That garage is going to get a piece of my mind. It is completely dead. Not so much as a whimper."

Derek checked the telephone again, shaking his head. "Still

out." He went to a closet, retrieving two raincoats and an umbrella. He gave one coat to Jack and said, "Let's see if my car can give yours a jump."

Lightning shimmered outside in blue and gold hues. Thunder came in cascading, crackling rips, like a giant serrated knife slashing open the sky. A repeat came on the heels of that, and a downpour began.

"Damn," Jack said. "She's comin' down now."

Derek took the flashlight from the counter top where Kate had left it, handing it to Jack, then led the way through the back hall. As they left the house into the night a gust of wind tore the storm door from Derek's grip. He struggled to contain it, pushing hard to force it closed.

The two men ran across the rain-pocked driveway to the garage, lifted the overhead door and ducked inside. Even with the protection of the umbrella their pant legs below the knee were heavily spotted with water. Jack shined the flashlight around to get their bearings.

Derek sat in the Checker to start it. Not even a click from the solenoid. He stared dumbfounded at the instrument panel. "Relic," he muttered under his breath as he eased the key from the ignition. He went to the Caravan, happy that the dome light came on when he opened the door. When he turned the key the tiny bulb over his head dimmed and went out.

"What the hell?" There was more anger in Derek's voice than surprise. Jack met Derek's dark look with a scowl of his own.

"Derek, this is not a good sign."

A snap of lightning and thunder together rattled the garage with seismic intensity and rain pummeled the roof.

The flashlight in Jack's hand went out.

Kate sat at her desk, poking at the computer keyboard, lacking ambition and the ability to complete a sentence without her mind drifting off to things she was trying to ignore. She could almost feel the softness of Perkins on her lap.

A blast from the heavens rattled the house, snuffing out the lights on the ceiling and desk. The computer screen remained on but had gone to snow, setting the room in gloomy shadows, and harsh, tinny static rushed from the speaker, a condition Kate couldn't recall ever seeing on the machine. Or any computer monitor. She listened for her children, for screaming. Nothing.

Her brow knotted as she squinted at the monitor, further confused by the odd fact that the LED power indicator was out, then she looked over her shoulder. The kitchen light was extinguished too. She thought the computer was on the same

circuit as the kitchen lighting. The static clawed at her brain as she remembered Derek trying to use the phone. She looked down and saw her hands were shaking.

As she slowly raised her head, turning back to the computer, a shot of white heat spiked through her nerves at the sight on the screen. Entwined in the electrical snow on the monitor, barely visible, was the image of George Cain's disfigured face, flesh melting, running off bone in pink, festering clumps.

Kate, her fingers numb, pushed away from the table, mouth wide with no air to scream. The chair tipped and still she pushed, tried to stand, tripped and spilled to the floor, smacking her skull against the side of the armoire. A scream burst from her lungs, shrill and long. She pulled herself up at the edge of the bed, feeling locked in place, fearing to look again at the screen. She forced herself to calm down, having the thought it was only in her mind--wanted to believe that dearly. *Maybe Derek was right. It's stress and paranoia.* Static, scraping at her eardrums. Her muscles tightened, courage rising, and she turned to the computer.

The screen was jet black, the speaker silent.

Derek slapped at the flashlight trying to make it work. As it met his palm for what must have been the tenth time it burst into light at the very moment Kate's long, muffled scream assaulted his hearing, and his fragile sense of well being.

He burst from the garage, followed closely by Jack, both ignoring the hail pelting their skin in all the places it was exposed. The air smelled of ozone, the stench of an electrical short. Anguish clutched at Derek when he saw his home in complete darkness and he sprinted to the back door and flung it open.

The lights came on.

Derek stopped in his tracks, standing in the rain and the hail, looking dumbly at the hall light. Jack prodded him from behind and they went in.

Kate stood in the kitchen with her asthma inhaler in her mouth, her eyes white with fear. The children were crying in their rooms.

"My God, Kate! What happened?" Derek said, his voice pitched high.

Between hard breaths she said, "It's him. He's coming."

"Him? Who?"

Kate, raked by harsh coughing, pointed toward the bedroom. The children's agonized cries elevated to howling.

Derek's cheeks flushed red, his veins rose in his neck and his hands clenched into fists. Kate went to her computer with

Derek and Jack only a step behind her. Melissa came padding out of her bedroom in tears, tagging after her father.

Derek crouched to be at eye level with his daughter, forcing himself to act composed for her. "Go see if you can quiet Nate down, okay? Everything's all right. It was just thunder."

Melissa wiped at one eye. "I heard mommy scream."

"Yes, she did. She gets scared of the thunder, too, sometimes." Derek tapped Melissa on her butt and with obvious reluctance she went to check on her brother.

"He was on the screen," Kate gasped.

"Who?" Derek asked bitterly.

"Cain. When the power was out." She was wheezing--the Ventolin was only partially successful at subduing her attack.

"God damn it, Kate!" Derek exploded, stepping toward her then stopping, settling on the bed with his face in his palms. Jack stared at Kate's eyes, watching them dart about.

"He's coming!" Kate blurted, wheezing, sniffing. "Cain's coming!"

Derek jumped to his feet. "This has got to stop!" He slammed his fist on the desk, picked up one of her research books and flung it against the wall between the computer and the bed. "It's just got to stop!" The book flip-flopped down the wall, over a pillow onto the carpet, coming to rest open at Derek's feet. He hung his head, taking a deep breath, lips pinching together, jaw clenching. Kate exclaimed with a noise of disgust, raising her arms like she wanted to hit Derek. Derek stared down, his sight resting on the book, then he suddenly froze. His eyes were riveted to the drawing on the open page. His jaw slacked. Open mouthed, he couldn't look away.

In a slow, jerky motion he lifted the publication from the floor, his demeanor instantly settled, almost stupefied. His eyes were transfixed on the illustration.

Kate's angry fervor had diminished, too, as she watched her husband. "Derek?"

"What is this?" Derek asked Kate, the pitch of his voice monotone. He pointed to the sketch of a large rectangular rock, flat on one side, with rough notches cut in each corner, a drawing carved in its surface.

It was identical to the one he had seen in the woods.

She looked at the picture and the text next to it, and searched her memory to recall what she knew. Reaching into her anthropological background calmed her further. The professional attitude she had acquired in school took over. "That was used in a ceremony by early Woodland Indians of the upper Midwest. And in

a few other locations in Central America, come to think of it. Two of those have been found in Wisconsin and one in Minnesota."

"What ceremony?" Derek asked.

"About 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. Based on bones found near each of these stones--obviously sacrificial, mostly animal but some human, too--and hieroglyphic drawings found in Mayan ruins."

"What did they do, exactly?" Derek asked.

"It's called a 'judgement' stone. Pagan type of ritual." Jack's eyes widened, huge dark brown spots set in shiny white, and he sat on the chair by the desk, focused on Kate.

Kate tapped her thigh as if trying to drum the stored knowledge out of herself. "Let's see what I remember. As far as what's been determined of the ritual, it's something like this. A member of a community charged with some crime or thought to be a witch was tied, hands and feet, to this stone in a remote area, a sacred place, overnight. The notches were for rope or vine to secure their limbs. A small animal, at least one, was tethered or tied up nearby. Now, their belief was that if enough members of the tribe thought he was guilty, their hatred would act as a call, a beacon, for an evil spirit, called *Wandiga* by the Midwest Indians, and, uh, *Wan-kah-tor* by the Mayans, to come in the night to the accused.

Derek coughed, sat slowly on the bed again and stared at Kate. His face held a mixture of confusion, doubt and interest. He interrupted. "Kate, do you believe this?"

"Well, it's a legend in several cultures. Mythology, but . . . " She trembled, looking out the window. "In this legend, the translation of the spirit's name today would be the 'Beast of Judgement'."

Jack cleared his throat. "Please, Kathryn, go on. What of the ceremony?"

Kate continued. "Okay. Well, if that person were guilty, evil as *Wandiga* itself, the spirit would possess the accused. *Wandiga* enabled the suspect, through some sort of transformation, to slip the bonds and kill the animal. There's something about a great storm, too. I forget exactly what. Anyway, before dawn, the tribe would gather at the site. If the accused was still tied up and the animal safe, they knew he was innocent. But if they found him untied and asleep, naked, and the animal was dead, they knew the spirit had possessed him and allowed him to escape and kill the animal. They stoned him nearly to death, and left him for predators.

"They get all this from bones and pictures?" Jack said dubiously.

Kate managed a wan smile. "And what we understand from findings like hieroglyphics. Anthropological studies of cultures in remote parts of the world today link us to beliefs in the past. There are stories passed down." Kate thought of Sara Deerchild, and wondered what she knew of Wandiga. "These are myths, I . . . guess. Along with that and the physical evidence a conclusion, a theory is devised. It's like prehistoric forensics."

Derek was still staring at the picture. "I saw this."

"What do you mean, you 'saw this'?" Kate said.

Derek drew a deep breath. "In the woods at the dead end."

There was silence for a few seconds before Jack spoke. "I told you, Derek. There are bad signs."

Derek wasn't as quick as before to raise an eyebrow at Jack. He looked at his wife. Kate's level of wariness seemed to be rising by the second. She licked her lips and her fingers twitched, pupils dilated as if drugged.

"If what you say is true, Kathryn," Jack said, "The stone in the woods makes this whole area sacred ground. Evil ground."

Derek looked from Jack to Kate, his head twisting slowly, as if he had spent the last hour smoking marijuana laced with something stronger.

Kate, a sheen of sweat on her forehead, shook her fingers as if flinging water from them, exhaled forcibly and went to Nathan's room to check on her children.

A crack of thunder toyed with the lights once more.

Wandiga licked at the notches in the stone, aching for the rekindling of times long past. Across the rough cut flat surface it flowed, caressing the raggedness where flesh had once lain, where humans detained waited bound for judgement, the inevitable nighttime encounter, the terror of possession.

As it circled and touched the wet, dark rock, it became fervent in its need for reclamation of its past, for vengeance, and the crusade for permanence.

That time was at hand.

The brief manifestations it had enjoyed over time and especially the last half century had been a glorious taste--but agonizingly infrequent. The power it now felt was pure, limitless, burning like an ethereal orgasm.

It had become.

It was here to stay.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Bob Matthews sat at his front window, watching the rain cascade down the glass in sheets. At each crash of lightning and thunder he smiled. Watching thunderstorms, particularly those at night, was among his small pleasures. He especially appreciated the brutal ones, heavy rolling thunder, more felt than heard, like the display he was currently viewing. It reminded him of his wheelchair-free childhood, what little he could remember of those long ago years. As a boy, after each rainfall, he would scour the sidewalk for nightcrawlers to use for fishing. And there was always something about the smell in the air after a summer vacation storm.

He wheeled his motorized cart through the extra wide passage to the kitchen, deciding he needed a snack. As he opened the refrigerator door simultaneous lightning and thunder rocked the house, making the lights flicker. Matthews chuckled.

"Yeah, come on, bring all you've got."

Low, rolling thunder beat at the air as if answering his challenge.

He laughed again. As he rummaged for food the light at the back of the refrigerator faded to a brownish hue, returned to normal, shimmered, then started to glow brighter. Matthews shook his head, knowing that this usually meant the bulb had been jolted somehow, weakening the filament, and it was getting ready to burn out. But this bulb was protected by the steel and plastic cage around it, and he questioned himself on how it could have been jarred. He watched as the light grew in brilliance, to a level he had never seen a bulb achieve. It was mesmerizing to him, hypnotic, he couldn't force himself to look away. Within a few seconds he had to bring his hand up to his face to partly shield his eyes with his spread fingers. "Holy Christ, that damn thing's--"

The bulb flared with such an intense radiance that it took Matthews' breath away. In that instant it entered his mind that he had died, probably with his face in the pie on the shelf, and the light he was seeing was that tunnel they always talked about in those after-life experiences.

The bulb exploded like a grenade sending shards of thin, razor sharp glass flying in all directions. Pieces struck Matthews everywhere his flesh was exposed, with only luck keeping the jagged fragments from sailing through the gaps between his fingers into his eyes. His head jerked back and away.

"Shit! God damn it!"

With eyelids closed tight he fumbled for the lever to back up his cart and as he cleared the door he slammed it shut. He opened his eyes, blinking away the spots floating across his vision, staring dumbfounded at the small gashes in his hands. Blood was already bulging from the wounds, forming drops not quite full enough to run. He stared at the door, half expecting it to burst open, the image and likeness of his Maker there, calling him. Sweat began to seep from his temples, and he shook those odd thoughts from his mind.

He rolled into the bathroom to examine himself in the mirror. Marks similar to those on his hands were spaced randomly about his chin and neck. A straight cut at the side of his jaw still held a fragment of glass, which he pulled out gingerly and with a curse.

After he cleaned himself and stuck tiny, ragged pieces of facial tissue on the largest cuts, he returned to the kitchen. He gazed at the refrigerator, realizing that his appetite had disappeared, and thought about cleaning up the mess inside--the food he would have to throw away. With a wave of his hand decided to leave it until the morning. The event had tired him--a little more storm watching then off to bed.

He went into the living room and stopped cold. He stared at the drapes covering the front window. He *knew* he hadn't closed them. But now they were. A rush of anxiety scorched his insides. *I'm not alone.*

Bob Matthews wasn't easily frightened but the thought of a break-in on a night like this chilled him to the bone. Only a desperate man would be out in that fury, a man who could bring nothing but bad things into Matthews' life. His eyes darted about, looking for the intruder.

Not a thing out of place.

No dark form in the shadows.

Matthews knew his survival might depend on getting to the gun he had tucked away in the nightstand next to his bed. He would have to make it all the way through the kitchen and across his bedroom. He *had* to get to the weapon before the outlaw got to him. He would feel a whole lot safer holding the loaded Smith and Wesson while he dialed 911 and waited for the police to arrive. He spun the cart around and pushed the throttle forward, leaning as if that would make the wheelchair move faster.

Behind him, the curtains schussed open with one quick movement.

He let go of the speed control, sure that some blunt object was going to fracture his skull any second.

Silence.

He turned slowly to face the window, and the drapes whipped closed. His jaw fell open--no one was standing at the curtain pull.

The curtains split apart with excruciating slowness.

Matthews felt his brain relinquish control of less important functions, saving its strength for his heart. A large wet spot spread out between his legs. He knew he should be repulsed by the weakness of his bladder muscle, and not being so frightened him further. Perhaps later he would be angry he wet himself, but right now the warmth trickling down his good leg, turning to damp coolness at his ankle, was the least of his worries. The muscles in his shoulders weakened, his arms slumped in his lap. He thought he might be going insane, and wondered if this might be the first sign of Alzheimer's.

The curtains snapped closed. Then open again. Three more times they opened and closed in impossibly rapid succession, the last closure ripping the outermost rings clear out of the track.

Matthews' mouth hung open. His tongue felt thick and slack. Surely he was asleep. Or dead. That would be a good explanation for what he was seeing.

He thought he heard his name being whispered, and the stench of putrefied meat came with it. Near by. No, not just close. The words were in his head. It was a voice he recognized. A ragged, hoarse, gritty voice. *It sounds like, yeah, that's right, it sounds like . . . like George Cain? How could . . . ?*

--Matthews. Matthews you old fuck. I never did like you.--

Matthews spoke aloud and from that he knew he was losing his sanity. "Cain? Where the hell are ya, you bastard!"

From behind the curtains and the couch, up from between the planks of the floor itself, fog entered the room and circled Matthews. It moved in on him steadily and when Matthews tried to activate the throttle on his cart it would not respond.

Matthews shook his head, pulling at his hair, trying to wake from his nightmare. Only it wouldn't go away. He pushed up on the arms of his chair trying to lift himself away from the fog but could only manage a few meaningless inches.

Wandiga--Wan-kah-tor--reached him, covered him, its clammy coldness wetting his skin. Matthews wanted to scream but his tongue was caught in his throat, fighting a spasm. The vapor swirled around him, under his arms, around his neck, between his legs.

--So you wanna get outta that chair, do you?--

Matthews felt himself rising, coming up out of the wheelchair. The fog lifted him over the cart, taking him behind

it to a standing position yet his feet did not touch the floor. Matthews' eyes were filled with shock and terror as his arms lifted, then one leg after another, like a marionette. Laughter pelted his mind.

Matthews managed a hoarse whisper, thoughts from a memory. "We were friends, Cain. A long time ago . . ."

In a quick sudden movement Matthews' body was flung across the room, crashing over a table lamp and into the wall.

Before he hit the floor the fog lifted him again and made his hurting body dance across the carpet. It threw him into his wheelchair then pulled him out, slapping him at the ceiling and letting him drop. Inches before striking the floor the fog stopped Matthews' fall with a soft catch, placing his broken body in the wheelchair with a mother's tenderness.

Matthews coughed, blood appearing at the corner of his mouth. Another rivulet of blood ran from his nose. At the brink of unconsciousness his mind swirled too rapidly for speech or lucid thought. Broken bones made it impossible to do much more than breathe. His chin touched his chest.

--This is for all the shit you ever gave me, Matthews--

Matthews felt more pain than he had ever known. But the worst was the fragmented condition of his mind. In bits of thought scattered like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle his brain struggled to understand. *Not a dream! Real. Oh God, I'm dying! So much pain. How could . . .? Cain . . .* He smelled the coppery aroma of his own blood, its salty taste viscous on his tongue. An image of Sadowski in the tree flashed through his mind and Matthews now realized how he got there. There was an agonizing sadness in Matthews' heart that he was finished, a feeling only eclipsed by the terror of imagining how he might die.

Pushed by the fog, the wheelchair rolled toward the kitchen. Past Matthews' bedroom, next to the rear entrance, Wandiga stopped the cart by the door to the basement steps. A finger-like wisp of vapor rolled the doorknob, pushing the door open, and it creaked on neglected hinges. Matthews managed to look with one eye into the dark void before him, the orb rolling back to all white. The unused basement stairs descended through wisps of cobwebs laced from wall to wall. A quick shove and the cart went over the first step, then end over end to the landing halfway down, colliding with the wall, tipping sideways, spilling the rest of the way to the concrete basement floor.

Fending off the clutches of that final darkness, Matthews gasped in wild bursts. Except for the raw tingling in the fingers of his left hand, he felt nothing from his neck down. There was

plenty of agony from the smashed teeth and bones of his face.

The vaporous entity covered him, seeping into his lungs, sucking the air from him at a slow, calculated pace. Blackness reached out to welcome Matthews. He struggled for a breath against the powerful vacuum.

A hollow, raspy sound played from Matthews' windpipe, the last exhalation of his life.

Elizabeth Boyd couldn't put Bob Matthews out of her mind. She was sure she had seen the drapes in his front window snap back and forth. She rinsed a handful of silverware under the tap water, plopped it all into their special place in the drain caddy and went to her front window again to see if there was anything obvious going on at Matthews' home. Ripples of rainwater on the glass gave everything a sense of movement. Matthews' curtains were still. But the lights were on. And the drapes were closed--she thought she remembered they had been open. She looked at the clock on the VCR. Ten-thirty. She knew Matthews normally went to bed earlier than this. She hoped the old man was all right and convinced herself her neighbor was being kept awake by the storm.

After a while, Elizabeth checked the lights at Matthews' again and, seeing they were still on, could no longer resist the urge to speak to him. She lifted her telephone receiver ready to dial his number.

Static greeted her ear.

She gawked at the phone, a helpless feeling coming over her. Having no telephone meant she was cut off from the rest of the neighborhood. That meant being cut off from the gossip grapevine. The pretense of isolation touched off a bout of claustrophobia in her. Without the weather trapping her she would have gone right over to Matthews' house to check things out.

As if to emphasize its power of detainment, a fleeting barrage of hail crackled at the front window.

She returned to the kitchen sink, pondering over her course of action, if any. She picked up a greasy plate from the sudsy dishwater, thinking about asking her husband to come upstairs from his workshop to go with her to Matthews' house. She wanted to see about Matthews--it itched at her--but, for some reason, a feeling she didn't quite understand, she knew she shouldn't go over there alone. Charlie should be up from the basement soon anyway, so she would wait.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Although the lights throughout the house seemed to be working fine, Kate lit a candle on the kitchen table, her trembling fingers barely able to hold the match steady on the wick. Derek didn't bother to question the act.

A knock at the door separating the kitchen from the back hall startled Kate. She was closer to the entrance than either Derek or Jack, but she stood rock still, staring at the entryway. The two men looked at each other, unblinking. The knocking came again and Derek moved past Kate to answer it. He gripped the knob and swung the door open in a quick, sharp move.

Joyce Montoya, a forced, bleak smile adorning her pale face, held up her hand in a limp, halfhearted greeting. "Um, hi--" Thunder cracked behind her with a flash of bluish luminescence. She yelped, taking a quick step forward, as if dodging the teeth of some beast behind her, then let out a short, tense laugh. "Can I come in?"

Derek motioned Joyce into the kitchen, looking past her at the night beyond the panes of the storm door. "Anything wrong? The roof's not leaking, is it?"

"No, no," Joyce said. "It's just that this storm has me really wired. See, Chris went down to Milwaukee to fish with his buddies this morning. I told him not to go, but they called, saying it was only drizzling there, and . . ." She grimaced, looking embarrassed. "He's not back." Her fingers met together over her chest. "I'm sorry, it's just that, uh, this storm is so loud and, well . . . to tell you the truth, I'm upset because Sass is missing. I haven't seen him for three days." She looked to Kate. "After all that stuff at the block party and the way Cain acted, I . . . do you think Cain could really hurt Sass?"

Derek's mind was bombarded with the bloody image of the tan and unknown-other-color cat he had seen in the woods. He was positive now it was Joyce's pet. He didn't want to tell her what happened to the animal. He didn't see any point to it--it wouldn't change anything, and she would ask for details. The sickening, gruesome details. He knew he would have to tell her sometime, but not now. Now was definitely not the time. Besides, he hadn't really seen how that cat was colored with all that blood and gore. Maybe it was some other cat. Could he really be sure? *Why upset her without being certain?*

"I'm glad you came down," Kate said, her voice dry. "Something is . . . wrong. Very wrong. That's more than just a

storm out there." She shot a quick glance at Derek, fire blazing in her eyes as if she expected to be contradicted, then said to Joyce with conviction, "We're all in danger."

Derek pursed his lips, looking as though he might sneer, perhaps out of habit, but the skepticism for his wife's beliefs was waning. He had been running all this through his mind, asking himself about the unknown. Didn't he believe in things he had never seen in person, couldn't explain or prove? Men walking on the moon, the roundness of Earth, the science of electronics, God? Was this really any different? He accepted the possibility.

"Danger?" Joyce said, her voice laden with confusion and the pang of sudden anxiety. "What do you mean? Is there a tornado warning?" She bent over the kitchen table, looking up out of the window. "I didn't hear anything about a tornado." A black and swirling sky appeared in the flashes of lightning. Her hands started to twitch, and she seemed to be blinking too much now. Her voice sounded agitated. "Maybe we should all get in the basement."

"It's not that. It's" Kate took a deep breath. "Listen, I know this is going to sound hard to believe, but . . . it's Cain."

"Cain? George Cain? What do you mean?"

"He's become . . . He's changed, been taken over."

Derek thought about Kate's anthropology lesson, her dissertation on Wandiga, knowing she and Jack believed the stone in the woods and Cain were somehow connected. It was only a myth. Still . . .

"Taken over?" Joyce said. "What do you mean, 'taken over'?" Her forehead wrinkled. "Like, I know he's weird and might be able to hurt someone, but--"

Kate interrupted with determination. "This area was once used for an Indian ceremony. A ritual of judgement. Somewhere in the woods. Cain's become . . . He's been taken . . . over." Kate was beginning to look woozy. "An ancient Indian spirit that possessed the guilty, the hated."

Joyce's face screwed up, a chuckle rolling from her throat. "You guys been smokin' something? I never figured you people for pot-heads. Possessed? Come on."

"Listen," Jack said, his voice low and purposeful, his Jamaican accent thick. "There are things in this world, and the next world, that cannot be explained. Evil is a real thing, just as real as you and me."

Derek looked back and forth between Jack and Kate, wondering when he was going to wake up. None of this should be real, he

knew, yet the irrational, illogical happenings were starting to accumulate. When Joyce looked at Derek he turned his palms skyward and shrugged.

"I don't believe this," Joyce said. "You people are nuts."

"You've got to," Kate said tersely, grasping Joyce by her forearm.

"This is crazy," Joyce insisted, pulling away.

A searing blast of lightning shot down the driveway and back up into the air. Deafening thunder raced the fireball to some heavenly finish line.

The lights went out before the thunder ended.

All four flinched, ducking from the window. Joyce gasped. "Shit! Did you see that?" Each felt their heart skip a beat, pounding hard in recovery. Derek rushed to the window, eyes narrow, sweat beading on his forehead. In the sudden dim glow of the single candle, they froze in their positions. Kate didn't seem to be any more affected than she already was. She drilled Joyce with her eyes.

"There," Jack said to Joyce in an overstated way, as if he couldn't control his vocal cords. "Do you believe now?"

"My God!" Joyce panted from a crouch on the floor when her mouth was able to start working again. "I've never had . . ."

The children were crying again.

Kate looked around the counter top, squinting in the near darkness. "Where's that damn flashlight?" she said, voice filled with anger, her fingertips groping for the edge of a drawer. Jack brought a tiny bit more light into the room with the Zippo he retrieved from his pocket. Kate fumbled around in the drawer and found the stiff slickness of a candle. Kate's hand shook so much Jack had to steady it as he applied the lighter's flame to the wax. It increased the level of illumination by only a small margin. Pale, orange hued shadows danced off the walls. Another candle was retrieved and lit by Derek.

Joyce watched them with flickering eyes, twitching like a caged, wild rabbit. Rain beat steadily against the duplex and the burning wax was beginning to give the air in the room a thick feel.

Kate rushed out of the kitchen, collected a crying Melissa from her bedroom and brought her into Nathan's. The boy's voice was becoming ragged from the terrorized screaming he had done that evening. Kate stroked the hair of her offspring, hugging them, nuzzling against them, kissing their heads. She murmured soft words close into their ears, a tear rolling down her own cheek.

Elizabeth Boyd's concern grew with each ring of Matthews'

doorbell, each knock against the aluminum panel at the bottom of the screen door's frame. Chuck Boyd, not looking particularly pleased, stood behind his wife with a large red and white golf umbrella above their heads. He had a smirk on his face but knew better than to argue with Elizabeth. Despite the umbrella, rain had soaked everything below their knees and, because of the wind, had begun to leave its mark in places above their waist.

Finally, with her nosy curiosity leading the way, Elizabeth tried the doorknob on the inner door. To her surprise, the door opened, and, with a look back at her husband, she slipped in. Chuck Boyd remained outside, standing in the pouring rain, looking sheepish. "I feel like we're breaking the law," he complained. A crack of thunder seemed to convince him to follow his wife.

"Bob?" Elizabeth called.

"Hey Bo! You okay?" her husband added.

Only the storm answered their queries.

"God," Elizabeth said. "You know he's not out anywhere." They looked around the front room in the dimness of the single low-watt lamp on the end table. Nothing seemed amiss, except for the broken rings on the ends of the curtain rod. Then Elizabeth saw the smashed lamp on the floor against the wall. "Oh Charlie, he might be in here hurting somewhere. Maybe he was trying to signal with the drapes. We've got to find him. I hope it's not too late."

They looked for other signs, clues as to any trouble, hints as to Matthews' whereabouts. They turned on another light, this one much brighter, and that's when they saw the streak of blood on the carpeting.

"Oh God," Elizabeth moaned. Chuck knelt to examine the blood and his knee dipped in a cold wet spot, colorless on the tan and brown carpeting. He pressed his finger into the dampness, taking some to his nose. "Christ!" he exclaimed, wiping his palm on his trousers. "That's piss!"

Chuck examined the blood stain and pointed out to his wife the inch wide line trailing away from it toward the kitchen. A few feet in that direction and another spot of blood, this one thinner, almost a narrow line. In the kitchen they stepped on a few fragments of the shattered refrigerator bulb, and saw the bloodstain was now a solid streak, thin lines within it and drops splattered randomly aside it.

"That looks like a track a wheelchair would make," Chuck said. Elizabeth groaned. The blood trail led to the rear of the house, where it turned and went under the basement door.

"Good Lord," Elizabeth cried. "You don't think he went down

those stairs in his cart?"

Chuck turned the doorknob in a smooth motion, swung in the door and clicked on the light. Blood was splattered on the wall facing the landing in a broad pattern and wiped to the side as though a raggedy mop had been used as a paintbrush.

Elizabeth repeated herself. "I hope we're not too late." They rushed down the steps, using their hands to brush back the cobwebs.

"Oh God, please, not too late."

It was, of course, much too late. Seeing Matthews' broken and twisted body, Elizabeth screamed loud enough to block out the sound of the raging weather. Her husband could only gape at what he saw--some of Matthews' injuries bewildered him. He understood the bruises, Matthews' bad leg wrenched under his torso, knee bent backwards, and the bone sticking through the skin of his arm--after all, Matthews took a tumble down a flight of stairs. A tough ride for someone of that age. Some of the other injuries didn't make any sense, though. One of Matthews' eyes was wide to the point of bulging from its socket, dozens of straight-lined cuts on his face, as if inflicted by a razor or knife, the sheer volume of blood around his skull. And the fingers. Matthews' fingers on one hand curled like a claw, as though he had tried to take hold of the concrete floor, or dig his way through it.

In the Freeman's kitchen a half dozen candles radiated pallid yellow light onto the faces of the four adults. Fuzzy-edged shadows wavered on the walls. Derek held Kate's hand, while Jack clasped a glass of black rum, straight. Joyce stared at the flames, obviously deep in thought. Melissa and Nathan were now sharing a bed in the young girl's room. The boy refused to be without his sister.

"Someone should go for help," Jack finally said. Kate nodded in agreement.

"Let's not get carried away," Derek said. "This will blow over. Wait until it calms down. I . . . I'm not saying I don't believe you, but--"

Thunder cracked all around the house.

Kate, knuckles whitening, groaned and shot a searing look at her husband.

"I believe Kathryn," Jack said. "She has a sense for what's happening." He drew a stubborn breath, meeting Derek's gaze. "I'll go."

Derek shook his head. "Listen to that weather out there. Are you crazy?"

"I must go," Jack said, standing.

Derek stood with him, putting his hand on Jack's shoulder. "Where would you go?" he demanded.

"To the authorities."

"Right," Derek said scornfully. "You think they're going to come out here, especially with that story of that Wandiga character?"

The storm tore at the sky above the duplex, a destructive tempest of immeasurable strength. Dishes in the cupboards rattled as though in the midst of an earthquake.

Joyce shivered first, followed by Kate. Their eyes shot open wide and met. "Did you feel that?" Joyce whispered in a harsh, screeching tone. The two men looked with puzzlement at the women before they themselves were touched by cool, almost cold, fingers of clammy air. A short spasm ran through Derek, rippling through every muscle with a tiny shudder, making his eyelids throb.

An audible whoosh blew out every candle.

A shaky, rising moan came from Kate. Joyce howled in a way that could be mistaken as orgasmic and Derek and Jack swore. Kate touched the skin on her arms--it was wet. It all happened so fast there was no time to say anything.

The wind began to shriek between the houses, building into a continuous roar. Within seconds it sounded as though freight trains at full throttle were speeding along both sides of the duplex.

"Holy shit!" Joyce hollered, "That's gotta be a tornado!" Before she could rise to her feet a great crashing sound began outside. Melissa came running from the bedroom, Nathan padding after her, both wailing, one child going into the arms of each parent. They all hurried into the back hall and down into the basement, careful not to trip over each other.

The terrible clamor of splitting trees and howling wind filled their senses. The children cried and screamed and the adults could only moan as though they had seen their last day, making promises to their Gods should He would save them, expecting as much when some had not kept their faith.

In the anticipation of destruction, even sinners prayed.

They huddled together close to the floor in a corner against the aging concrete block, the children collapsing into driven whimpering, with Melissa holding her father especially tight.

Chuck Boyd escorted his wife to the De Ville's front door, leaving her there, returning home to check on their children. Elizabeth had rung the De Ville's doorbell twice and was about to push the button for the third time when the door opened and she

was greeted by Ray De Ville.

It was then that the crest of the storm hit.

As Elizabeth began to step across the threshold, the roaring gale screamed at her back and she glanced over her shoulder, staring in amazement at the sight of trees being torn from the ground, snapped and tossed about as if they had no weight to them at all. The vision made her move inside the De Ville's home with near athletic speed. At Ray's hollered command Mercy gathered up their children and all scurried to the basement.

Jamie and Kristen De Ville cried out together.

"What's wrong?"

"What's happening?"

Bridgid De Ville could only cry in loud, terrible tones.

As the gale howled outside, with the cracking of huge tree limbs like rifle shots, the adults stared at the flooring above them as if expecting the structure to be torn away any moment. The resonance from the noise made every beam of the house vibrate with a low buzzing, and dust fell from the joists, filling the air with a musty odor. The children cowered next to their parents, sobbing with the ache of fear.

"God, I wish I could go see if Chuck made it to the basement with the kids," Elizabeth shouted over the clamor, eyeing the staircase.

"No, you've got to stay here," Ray countered above the din, touching Elizabeth on the arm. Mercy nodded.

Elizabeth looked from Ray to Mercy and back, swallowing hard. "Bob Matthews is dead," she hollered, redness rimming her eyes. "We went to check on him and found him sprawled on his basement floor, the most horrible look on his face."

"Oh no!" Mercy exclaimed, clutching at her throat. "He was such a nice man. Heart attack? I guess he was getting up there in years."

"Yeah, probably his heart," Ray De Ville agreed, looking intently at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's voice was getting ragged from yelling. "Maybe. But he was cut up, too. And in the basement, where he doesn't go with that cart. Kind of weird. There was that look on his face . . ." As the De Villes gazed at Elizabeth, her eyes took on a faraway look.

Elizabeth's head drooped and her sight fell on the red stained concrete near her feet. She focused on it for a moment, finally shouting to Mercy. "What the hell is that?"

The intensity of the storm increased, and they all had to yell with a violent passion to be heard.

Mercy swallowed. "That's were I found our cat."

Elizabeth pulled her legs into a fetal position, staring at the crimson blotch. "Good God, what happened?"

"She's dead," Mercy said flatly, almost too quiet to be heard. She looked away for a moment, then again spoke to Elizabeth, louder. "Thing was, her claws were stuck in her throat." She held her fingernails to her neck to demonstrate. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"I think we should call the police," Elizabeth said. "About Bob Matthews." She paused to catch her breath. "Right away. I tried to use his phone and it was out. Mine was, too."

"Can't call from here," Ray yelled. "Ours has been broke for hours. Nothing but static."

An exchange of glances went around, but nothing was said. Mercy held her children tight. A sullen mood descended on the two women and Ray as if the raging storm had finally won the debate and silenced them. Their minds focused on the raging temper of the weather-beast outside, and they prayed to their gods that they might be spared.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Within a half hour the high winds subsided to a level normal of an average thunderstorm. Derek and Jack left the basement first. Kate and Joyce didn't wait too long in the dim candle-lit cellar before they followed. Kate was mumbling to herself and shaking, though she was able to hold herself together enough to guide Melissa upstairs to the kitchen, with Nathan against her chest and a candle in her free hand. She took both children into her daughter's bedroom. Melissa's eyelids drooped heavily and she appeared to be struggling to keep them open long enough to reach her bed. Nathan lifted his head from his mother's shoulder, pointing toward Melissa. Kate settled the two exhausted youngsters into the double bed together and was certain they were fast asleep before she left the room.

Derek and Jack, rainfall drenching every inch of their bodies, stood outside the front door at the top of the porch steps. The lone working streetlight on Harper shone dimly on the intersection with Thickett. "Jesus Christ," Derek said. "Will you look at that!"

Jack made a sign of the cross.

Kate and Joyce came to stand behind the men, staring through the thin fog in disbelief at the twisted trees piled up at the end of and across the entire width of Harper Street. The intersection to Thickett was completely blocked. Limbs and brush were stacked in a jagged, torn fashion at least ten feet high in a barrier that stretched to houses on both sides of the road.

"A tornado wouldn't . . ." Joyce began, her voice fading to a whisper.

"Sure as there's a God," Kate said, "Something is trying to stop us from leaving here."

"It would be unwise to try," Jack added, locking eyes with Derek.

Lightning illuminated Harper Street north of the intersection and all four took a quick breath. In that brief flash of light it became evident that trees were down for blocks around them, jagged stumps remaining in every place where there had been a tree. Yet apparently not a single home was damaged.

"Nobody's going to get to us too quick, either," Kate said, her voice cracking. Derek reached over to take her hand.

Chuck Boyd was approaching the De Ville's front door just as Ray, Mercy, Elizabeth and the children came outside. Elizabeth and Chuck embraced under his umbrella, then Elizabeth crouched to

hug Peter. Her son Gregory, even though seventeen, appeared relieved rather than embarrassed to receive a hug from his mother.

"Phone's still out at our place," Chuck Boyd said. "That same queer static like Matthews' phone had."

"Ours is like that, too," Ray De Ville said, his voice trailing off. The Boyds and De Villes stared at each other in the dwindling rain, seemingly mesmerized in thought.

A low rumble of thunder broke their concentration.

Mercy De Ville pointed toward the Freeman place, seeing they weren't the only ones who had come out to brave the rain and view the damage. As they moved toward the sidewalk, they saw the Fontannas, Smiths and others going in the same direction, some carrying somber looking black umbrellas, a few with nothing at all to protect them from the rain. There were faraway looks in the eyes of many, like the shock induced trance of people unable to cope with a surreal scene around them--victims of fires, floods and tornadoes.

They gathered at the Freeman house, each relating their experience of the raging wind--the deafening, shaking thunder, trees ripped out of their yards--they shared thoughts on the things they knew had happened to all of them. They viewed the blockade cutting their neighborhood off from the rest of Hartford, and the rest of the world, with a fearful kind of awe. Reverend-to-be Tom Cummings licked his lips, clutching a Bible in one hand and his wife's in the other. Glimpsing the heavens, he made a slow, wandering turn, fixing a gaze on George Cain's house, and seemed to be mumbling a prayer to himself. He brought his Bible-laden hand to his chest, stroking a finger against his shirt, tracing an outline around his crucifix.

"Tell them about Bob Matthews," Mercy urged Elizabeth. The Boyds described how they found Matthews, sparing no details. Some reacted by shaking their head in disbelief, others with claims of disgust. Kate, Jack, and to some extent, Derek, felt their insides ripping out.

"I . . . I don't know if this means anything, but, our cat is dead," Mercy said. "It looks like it, well, like it killed itself." A sob hung in her throat.

Lisa Fontanna, her eyes glazed over, arms hanging limply at her sides, spoke in an even, monotone voice. "My dog is dead, too." She began to cry. "He was all torn apart. In the basement."

Shock spread through the group from the realization that they had shared more in this experience than the weather and what it had produced. They spoke of finding their pets dead, some

mutilated, some just still with the appearance of sleeping but dead all the same, as if their hearts had stopped for no reason. Derek watched the expression on Joyce Montoya's face. Her look of concern told him that she thought her missing pet had met its end, too. He still couldn't tell her what he had seen in the woods.

Those damn woods!

The wind suddenly picked up again, with the dual sounds of low howling and high whistling edging through the air, cascading over the houses, scraping at the nerves of the assembly. Kate, her hair hanging in wet strings down her face, began to breathe rapidly. Soon she was almost panting.

The delicate mist permeating the neighborhood began to thicken, moving in a slow, swirling fashion, licking at the legs of those standing at the fringe of the gathering. Everyone moved closer together, stepping toward the Freeman home in unison. In the distance that same, train-like sound present at the peak of the storm began building again, and a jangle of terror raced through them all--quick turns of the head, eyes darting, nervous limbs, restless feet.

The noise grew quickly and the group clustered in a tight circle, the children at the center, crying out, anguish in their tiny voices. The rain picked up, with sleet adding a cutting edge, and they stood as though anchored, frozen by fear.

Tom Cummings shouted something unintelligible in the din, pointing at Cain's lair. Every window in the dwelling emanated a soft, pulsing glow. The brightness grew until it seemed as though the sun was trapped inside. Hands came up to shield squinting eyes mesmerized by the sight. For seconds the brilliance remained unchanging, then without warning a deafening explosion filled the air, yet nothing moved, and in that moment the radiance from Cain's windows flashed and went out.

The ground began to vibrate in the manner of a minor earthquake, setting teeth to rattling and panic to rising. With a sharp popping sound, Cain's front yard lifted in slow jerking movements a few feet, and like the crest of a wave it began to roll toward them an inch at a time. It's speed increased as it came. The slabs of the sidewalk rippled up and over like dominoes, spilling in random directions, falling on each other.

No one could move, the sight so oddly fantastic, mere gasps their only comment. Lisa Fontanna fainted into her husband's arms.

The swell, moving faster, rushed across Agnes Barber's lawn toward her home, diminishing in width as its earth-rocking power multiplied. The quivering ground knocked the smallest of the

children off their feet.

Kate's arm rose in the direction of the Barber place, beginning to point. "Agnes . . ." The words came faintly off her lips, unheard by anyone in the roar around them.

The wave seemed to dive under Agnes Barber's home, then the blush of the sun brimmed from each window. The glow and clamor increased, held in a pause measured by heartbeats, then the roof of the place exploded from the rest of the structure in book-sized fragments, a geyser of smoky vapor and debris spraying toward the black sky. In an instant the lower half of the building began to cave in, as if imploding, and with a tumultuous, crashing roar was sucked beneath the earth with only the dust of demolition and fog in its place.

The heaving wave burst forth, rising, and raced toward the Freeman home.

The Freeman's driveway snapped upward with ease, the large concrete slabs cracking, and in the calamitous flashing of lightning and rain and hail Kate was driving her body up the front steps of her home. Derek, feeling as though ice water coursed through his veins, forced his resisting body to follow his mate.

The children!

As Kate pushed open the inner door the wave disappeared under the house, detonating in a huge blast that buckled her over, driving her backward, away from the door and off the top step. The inside of the house burst into light and wind and the insidious tormenting cry of a cyclonic locomotive. Buried within the impossible, blinding, cataclysmic fury a dense fog spun untouched, revolving slower than the speeding mist and whirling objects around it. Broken lamps and books and odd pieces of loose things flew around the living room as though tethered on a string to the heart of the beast.

The inner door slammed shut, the wood splintering down the middle.

Derek forced his way past a stunned and off-balance Kate to fight against the unyielding pressure behind the door. Kate's mouth moved with the unheard screams for her children, the words lost in the ear-numbing decibels screeching from their home. She willed herself forward to join her husband, both heaving their combined strength into the door. Jack added his muscle and it began to budge.

Within a snap of fingers the tornadic rage vanished and Derek and Kate rushed into the darkened parlor with Jack behind them. The room was thoroughly trashed, and a musty, foul-smelling trace of mist embraced them, wetting their flesh. The eerie silence

left in the wake of the ordeal made the steady rain outside seem distant and soft. Derek rubbed his ears as if that would restore his hearing to normal.

A flick of the wall switches proved fruitless--the wiring was dead. Jack sparked his Zippo, affording them a tiny beacon of light.

Derek and Kate bolted through the house toward Melissa's room, Jack at their heels, hearts hammering, their neighbors not far behind. Outside Melissa's bedroom window lightning flickered like a strobe light, taunting, beckoning.

At the doorway they stopped, eyes wide enough to burst, Kate's face twisting with the agony of incredible loss. The room was no longer a room. A gaping hole had replaced the furniture and carpeting. A fetid stench rose from the cavity, licking at the back of their throats.

Melissa and Nathan were gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Derek and Kate stood at the edge of the gaping, dirty hole, staring down. The aperture descended through the concrete basement floor, its width the same as the destroyed room, and the stench of death rose up from it. All of the furniture, flooring and carpeting were gone, sucked away. Only the tiny sailing-ship wheel lights remained on the walls, and they no longer worked, though the bulbs were intact. Timber from the floor joists, in shredded, battered lengths, lay across the basement floor, over the edge of the hole and at the bottom of the pit itself. Beneath the basement a cavernous dark opening in the earth disappeared under the house, a tunnel with a diameter large enough for a man to walk through. Kate wrapped her arms around Derek, wailing with desperate fear and rage. Minutes went by before she was able to gain some control, and even then she panted in an asthmatic wheeze, barely able to bring in enough air to stay conscious. Derek could only stare at the sight before him, a tear rolling down his cheek.

Derek's voice finally came, soft and weak. "I . . . I should've believed you."

Kate lifted her head from his shoulder, her eyes overflowing, hands clenched into fists. "No," she said firmly. "They're alive. I know it." She sniffled. "They have to be."

Derek, Kate and Jack moved apart from the others to the opposite corner of the kitchen, where they re-lit the candles on the table. Each of the neighbors crowded around Melissa's bedroom door, taking a passing look--their turn to see what no one could explain. Tom Cummings was mumbling about Satan and Armageddon.

Derek spoke to Kate and Jack. "I'm going down there to find them."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "I understand how you feel, that you must, but are you sure you won't find something down there you would rather not face?"

Kate wasn't sure if Jack meant he thought they would find their children in a unspeakable condition--if they were even in the tunnel, or what monster Derek might encounter. *Wandiga*. Either prospect seemed to be equally horrific.

Derek took the flashlight from the counter, snapped it on and, with Jack, went to the basement. Kate went to Melissa's bedroom doorway, parting her neighbors from their vigil, stepping to the edge of the precipice to watch.

Derek retrieved a thick yellow nylon rope from his workroom. Jack took one end of the rope and tied it off at the main drain

pipe stack with a triple knot, pulling the rope taut on its path back to Derek. Derek handed the flashlight to the Jamaican, then tugged on the rope, testing it, leaning back over the rim of the pit. He looked up to the floor above him, his eyes locking with Kate's. There was no need to say anything.

Derek put one foot back into thin air, easing himself lower at an angle, working his way down with his feet against the slimy wall. It was perhaps fifteen feet to the bottom and as he moved the slim light Jack shined on him from above dwindled quickly. With each yard he descended, the air temperature decreased, and dampness invaded his bones. At the bottom he let go of the rope and called to Jack to toss him the flashlight, which sailed down to him, out of his reach, jamming into the damp clay at his feet, extinguishing the beam. He groped in the dark frantically and found it, cleaning the mud from the lens to restore his sight.

Derek moved forward into the tunnel, shining his beam off the wet, slick walls, probing for a trace of his children. Clothes and bits of wood from furniture and flooring littered the cavern. He crept as though stalking, and a scant ten yards in he came to a tangle of earth and concrete blocks. He knew he was where Agnes Barber's house would be, and now his path was obstructed. He moved the light around, looking for a way past the barrier.

At the top of the hole, Kate looked down from the upstairs, Jack from the basement level. Elizabeth Boyd stood next to Kate, rubbing Kate's back and peering into the abyss with her.

The sudden impact of George Cain's voice struck Kate's mind.

--Now you'll pay for trying to help, trying to save me. Live knowing it was your hate that brought this--

Kate pressed hard at her temples, unsure if it was Wandiga reaching her or whether her brain was making it up, an act of insanity. She shouted into the hole. "Derek! Come up! Now!"

Jack looked up at Kate then turned to the rope, grabbing it and bracing himself as though ready to yank it, and Derek, out of the cavern.

From somewhere outside, a deep and heavy booming noise filtered in to them, like explosives being detonated underground. Lightning and thunder crackled over the duplex and a hollow, siren-like sound replaced the thunder as it faded away. Kate turned her head, as though it called to her.

Derek was at the base of the pit, climbing out, Jack ready to heave on the rope. Kate watched Derek lift himself from the hole. Alone.

"Did you hear that, Derek?" Jack said loudly as they clambered up the stairs. Back in the kitchen, Derek put the

flashlight on the table.

The reedy wailing continued unabated. Derek listened to the sound, and one by one, they all turned in the approximate direction it was coming from, becoming mesmerized by the odd pitch.

"That is not a police siren," Jack said, his face long and sulky. "There is something here. Out there." He gestured with a long, black finger. A shiver ran through Kate the entire length of her body. She began to pace the kitchen floor. Derek and Jack stood near her in quiet reflection.

Finally Kate groaned loud enough to make everyone stop and watch her. "I'm not just going to stand around here!" she bellowed. "Melissa and Nathan have got to be somewhere!"

Jack touched Kate on the shoulder and looked at Derek and said, "They can only be one place."

"Wandiga!" Kate hissed.

Jack said to Derek, "You have to take us to the stone in the woods." Kate nodded. The others looked confused.

"What are you talking about?" Nick Fontanna asked.

Kate and Derek, with Jack interjecting his thoughts, including tales of Jamaican voodoo, began to explain to the others about the ceremonial stone lying deep in the woods. When Kate spoke of Wandiga, she was interrupted.

"Oh, really!" Ray De Ville said, almost laughing. "Are you nuts?"

Kate said, "I know it seems impossible, but you have to believe this. Our lives are at stake!" Her face pinched together, her throat bulged. "Melissa and Nathan, their lives . . ." She was starting to break down, sobbing. "The neighborhood . . . a tribe. We have to be together."

Too many of the others shook their heads in obvious disbelief.

Mercy De Ville spoke up, eyeing her husband with hard eyes. "Our cat, they way it died. It was so strange. There is something weird going on!"

Elizabeth and Chuck nodded, telling about Matthews' drapes, and what he looked like when they found him.

Tom Cummings stepped forward, massaging his crucifix. "I've seen Cain . . . in a different way. A way I thought was . . . I thought I was losing my mind, and I thought I was with Satan." He clutched his Bible to his lips, kissing it, his head drooping, mumbling to himself again. "Maybe I was . . ."

Even with the affirmation of those who came to believe through their experiences, a few lingered as doubters.

Derek stomped to Melissa's bedroom door, pointing at the hole, his face red, voice barking. "What the hell do you think did *that?*"

There was silence at first, but another glance into Melissa's bedroom, along with the rehashing of every hideous, unexplained event that had ever taken place in the neighborhood, made them all mostly accept the conclusion that Kate and Jack had reached hours before. A conclusion that Derek now fully embraced.

Kate scanned everyone's eyes. "Look," she said, "I know some of you don't want to join us." She glanced at Derek, then back to the others. "It's our children out there." Only a few in the group wavered from their meeting of eyes with Kate.

"We'll do this together," Chuck Boyd said.

Mercy De Ville stepped forward, taking Kate's hand. "This is for all of us," Mercy said. "This is our neighborhood."

"Then we'll go," Kate said. "We'll need more than those candles." She took the flashlight from the table and thumbed the switch, but it refused to give light. She knew it was working when Derek came up from the basement, and wondered if the batteries had gone dead or the bulb burned out. She unscrewed the end cap, tilting the light to pour the batteries from it. Instead, sandy gray dust flowed into her cupped palm and with the last grains a cockroach slid out on its shell, legs pumping furiously at the air, and it righted itself and scurried onto her wrist. She shrieked, slapped the insect off, recoiling, then crushed it under her foot. A tremor ran through her and she rubbed at the nervous twitch at her eye. She shook her head and pushed her chin up high.

All the others stood dumbfounded at the scene, not quite sure what they had seen in the dim candlelight.

Kate slid open a drawer in a quick, sharp move, nearly pulling it completely from the cabinet. She studied the knives, searching for the longest and sharpest. A boning knife was her choice.

"I do not think that will help, Kathryn," Jack said in a low, level tone. Kate ignored Jack's comment, slapping the flat of the blade against her palm. She began walking toward the front door. Jack took Derek aside, whispering in his ear. A look of puzzlement at first spread across Derek's face, but it rapidly melted away.

"Kate," Derek said. "We have to prepare for this." She stopped and watched him, wondering what plan, what preparation could possibly make any difference.

Derek led the group to his garage, lifting the big door to let all of them inside. Because each candle was extinguished by either the wind or rain, all had to be lit again. To make space

for everybody, they pushed the lifeless Caravan onto the driveway.

From a cardboard box Derek retrieved several old bed-sheets cut in pieces he kept there for work rags and handed them to Jack, pointing to a spot on the concrete floor. "Put them out there, Jack." Derek instructed Kate to find some large plastic trash bags as he went to a shelf for a box containing a dozen plastic bottles of motor oil. He also took two large tubs of bearing grease.

Jack began to scatter the cloth on the floor and spread the grease on the material while Derek looked for long, narrow scraps of lumber. Ray De Ville helped Jack arrange the cloth. Jack said, "We'll need some wire, too." Derek found a coil of baling wire tucked behind a roll of tar paper.

At Jack's instruction, Ray poured the motor oil on the rags and Derek and Jack rolled the cloth into bundles around the sticks, tying them tightly with wire. Another three layers of dry cloth was bound over that. A splash of gasoline on each completed the torches.

Jack picked one torch from the floor and Derek put trash bags over the others. Derek said, "This will keep them dry until we need them." He glanced at Kate and her cold observance of their actions. "That's if we need them," he added, wiping his fingers on a clean rag and taking a bagged torch from the floor. Jack and Ray and most of the other men picked up a torch as well. Derek took a few more bottles of oil from the shelves and stuffed them into the cardboard box with the remainder of the original dozen. He found a smaller tub of grease and added that as well. Derek gave the box to Nick Fontanna, lifted the five gallon gas can, looking around at his neighbors. "Let's go."

The air was oddly calm now, with only a drizzle of rain falling from the sky. The mist had thinned, and two more streetlights on Harper shone now, leading to the dead end.

The hollow, shrill, grating cry came from the distance again, and it was now obvious it was coming from the woods.

"I think we should take all the children to my house," Mercy De Ville said. "This is too dangerous for them."

"No," Kate said emphatically. "The entire neighborhood has to be together. It's the only way we can defeat this . . . this . . . thing."

"Wandiga," Derek said, his eyes locking with Kate's.

Jack nodded in agreement. "If judgment is to be passed, this neighborhood, a tribe, must be a single voice."

They moved along the street, Derek and Kate in front, the boning knife clenched in her hand. Jack followed closely with Joyce Montoya at his side. Behind them, a dozen candles flickered

in the grip of the others.

As they went past Cain's house, Tom Cummings and Joyce turned their heads, staring at it, and the group unconsciously tightened their spacing. The building seemed as cold and black as a place could be, with darkness strong enough to suck in and hold captive light itself.

They stopped at the mouth to the woods, seeing nothing a dozen feet past the boundary but the coal bleakness of night. Jack stepped away from the group with his lighter raised to his torch. Aided by the gasoline, the mix of thick fuels burst into a harsh flame. Black smoke wandered upward into the night and the acrid bouquet of burning petroleum scented the air.

Behind them, the two street lamps went out.

Beyond the barrier of the tree line the presence of the fog intensified. Solemn looks were exchanged. Kate took several deep breaths. She stepped over the threshold into the woods with Derek at her side. Jack went in behind them, the torch raised above his head, off to the side. The rest followed.

In the distance, thunder rumbled, plodding like the slow awakening of some un-heavenly beast.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

The only way Derek could remember the route to the stone was to back-track over the path he had taken in searching for Melissa the previous evening. This meant going past the slaughtered deer and the cat he was convinced belonged to Joyce Montoya. When he saw the torn remains of the animals he pretended not to, and tried to avert the others' attention away from the mess. But Peter Boyd and some of the other children remembered, actively seeking the spot of the massacre. When Derek heard Joyce cry out behind him he knew he had been right all along, and wished he had been wrong. The group stopped, watching with respect as Joyce bent over the bloodied, stiff cat, a candle glimmering pale yellow in her trembling hand.

Mercy De Ville finally rested her hand on Joyce's shoulder, leaving it there for a moment, then prodded the younger woman to leave her mutilated pet by gently lifting her by the arm, helping her up. The party continued on, with Joyce walking mechanically, eyes glossed over.

The shrieking, double-toned howl came again, filtering through the trees, striking each of them in disturbing ways--as fingernails scraping a chalkboard or aluminum foil bitten between two fillings. But more than that, it spoke to their souls, portending danger, yet inviting, beckoning.

Jack added oil to his torch, rolling it as he poured, and its flame leapt higher in a gush of oily smoke. Chuck Boyd removed the plastic bags from the two home-made flares he held, touching both against Jack's to ignite them, and this increased the influence of the circle of light around them--their security blanket. Kate shifted the boning knife into her left hand and took one of the torches from Chuck.

Everyone stayed close together, with just enough space between them to keep safe from the flames of the torches and candles. Children clung to their parents. The going was slow and careful in the treacherous, tangled growth of trees and brush illuminated barely by the fire they carried. Soot and smoke from the burning oil and grease thickened the air above their heads and left a blackish haze behind them. As they moved closer to their destination, the fog became dense and cool, and a trace odor of rotting meat wafted around them.

Unexpectedly, Mercy De Ville jumped forward, driving her legs before her torso, then Lisa Fontanna made a similar awkward movement, shrieking, looking behind her, swatting at the air.

Fingers of mist roiled around the two women, pulling, caressing their legs. A wave of mist reached up at Lisa, licking at her breasts, and her nipples hardened from the cold. She screamed violently, waving her candle at the air and its flame blew out. Nick Fontanna lunged forward, slapping at the vapor with his torch and the white fingers receded into the brush. All eyes in the group darted from side to side, watching listening, stepping gingerly on the moist, loamy soil. Joyce Montoya groaned involuntarily, and the children began to whine.

A few minutes later Derek stopped, staring at the terrain, featureless for its lack of variation. Every tree looked like the other, dusty chocolate bark, bent at angles in the tangle of brush with only an occasional birch or pine to break the sameness. He looked from side to side as though searching for the right way to go.

"Derek?" Jack whispered. "Do you know the way?" Derek didn't answer, nor did he move.

The forest at night is an easy place to be lost.

Kate watched her husband, seeing the puzzlement in his eyes.

--Kate--

A whisper.

Kate snapped her head to the right. The voice was there again, taunting her, beckoning her.

--Kate--

She looked around and saw that no one else was reacting to the voice. But she knew it was there, whispering to her. She stared hard in the direction she thought the words came from, squinting, peering into the void beyond the trees. A low thorn bush in line with her sight bent over in a quick move away from her, its sparse leaves flowing as if ruffled by a harsh breeze, a few of its thin brittle branches cracking. Another look at her companions and Kate was certain she was the only one to notice it. She pointed toward the bush, her voice clear and commanding. "We'll go that way. That's the way. That's where they are."

Derek, obviously no longer certain of the path to guide them, and seeing Jack nod his head at Kate's directive, fell in line behind his wife. She walked straight and sure, as though guided by a star, only diverting from her course when a tree or bush became an obstacle.

Around a stand of pine trees they came upon a mound of dirt, several feet high, its creation fresh, the black soil without the same carpet of ferns and decaying vegetation covering the rest of the forest floor. They moved around the bulge of earth and saw that the mound was the backside of a huge crater, a hole like the

entrance to some giant burrowing creature's home, deep into the ground, and milled lumber and odd bits of material were scattered within it. Some of this debris trailed away from it in the direction they had been travelling.

"Dear God!" Ray De Ville exclaimed, looking at Kate, a hot fever in his eyes. "It's . . . it's just like the hole in your daughter's bedroom." It seemed as though Ray had become a believer in the legend of Wandiga.

After a hundred yards more had been traversed, Derek's face brightened at the sight of a clump of birch trees. He reached to take hold of Kate's arm. "This is it, up ahead," he said. "I'm sure of it." His finger shook as he pointed at the thick greenery before them. "It's a few hundred feet more."

"Light the rest of the torches," Jack directed. Nick Fontanna set down the box of motor oil and grease, unwrapped the bag from a torch and lit it against Jack's. The other flares were set to burning and the woods around them glowed yellow with the added light, the beacon now penetrating the foliage to a greater depth. The stench of oil hung in the air, taken in with every breath. Kate coughed, flinching away from the thickest part of the haze. Jack and Chuck poured fresh oil on their torches, emptying one of the bottles and starting another. Nick grabbed the edge of the box with his free hand and they moved on.

Thunder rolled several miles closer than the last time, and the rain became stronger than a drizzle.

The vegetation was becoming thicker with every step, and their rate of advancement slowed. Derek and Jack began to sweat lightly from removing the tangle in their way.

"It wasn't this thick when I came here before," Derek said, grunting as he stomped down a sapling with his shoe.

"Maybe you came in a different way," Jack said. "Or we are lost."

"No. I'm sure this is the same way," Derek replied. "All those birch trees."

"It would be nice to have a machete," Jack mumbled.

The double-edged howling came again.

Goose bumps rose on the Kate's arms. Lisa rubbed her shoulders and shivered. A whistling sound, a quick draft moved through them.

"Did you feel that?" Elizabeth moaned.

"Cold air," Ray said, his voice dull.

Kate was swept with the sudden, horrid feeling of oxygen being tugged from her lungs, and she forced a deep breath, coughing.

At last the brush thinned, the clearing becoming evident. Jack and Ray took oil containers and drizzled a portion onto each torch. The assembly stepped into the open area, holding fast to its edge. Nick set the oil box on the soft, damp earth.

A thick fog layered the ground, staying in the confinement of trees lining the perimeter of the open patch. Enough light spread from them to see the stone, vines draped over it and bulging away from its flat surface as though it held something invisible against it.

Derek stepped forward, increasing the range of their vision with his flame.

Across the open area, completely on the other side, two pairs of eyes reflected the torchlight. Kate stepped closer, then a few others, and enough light reached the other side of the clearing so that the shape of human faces could be seen. A crack of lightning overhead removed any doubt--Kate recognized her children. A harsh exhalation exploded from her lungs.

"Mommy!" Melissa cried. Nathan simply whimpered.

Melissa and Nathan were sitting on the ground, back to back, bound with vines against a tree.

"No!" Kate yelled, rushing toward them. A reedy howling filled her ears and three steps from her offspring the vines tightened against her children. She took another step forward and the vines around their neck snugged up. Melissa began to choke and Nathan grappled with the cord around his neck. Hail began to fall from the sky, pelting everything in the open area. Kate took a small step back and the vines slacked, the hail trickled, and stopped.

--Now you'll watch. Watch your children die!--

"No! Kate screamed. She dropped to her knees, letting the fog drift between her legs, the torch and knife falling from her hands. On all fours, a cry burst out from her shallow lungs. "The ritual, Derek!" She coughed violently twice, struggling to force the words from her swollen throat. "It's going to sacrifice them!"

Derek bolted toward his children, and again the life threatening constriction of vines pinched their throats, and he halted, twitching, clenching muscle.

Rain began to fall harder.

"It's all the hate," Kate cried, beginning to understand. "Everyone hating Cain made this happen." She coughed again and thick, sputum ran from her mouth. "I made this happen." She was inches from hysteria.

Tom Cummings stepped forward, open Bible raised in his

outstretched hand. Rain splattered on the frail pages. He called out in his best preacher's voice, looking upward. "See the word of God, evil thing, creature of Satan." He advanced to the center of the clearing, standing alone. "The power of God shall vanquish you to Hell, back to where you came from!" He lifted both arms toward the heavens. "Oh God, take Satan's child from us."

The air was cut with an abrupt slicing blue-white bolt from the sky. Before he could blink, Cummings was struck, enveloped by the lightning with a roaring, thunderous clap, as though the air itself had cracked in half. His body an instant silhouette in flames, fell to the ground in a heap blazing ten feet high.

Everyone lurched forward in a first impulse to help, cries of horror spilling from them. It was obviously too late to do anything. Francine Cummings screamed, rushing from the back of the group toward her husband, but Jack and Chuck Boyd stopped her. As she sagged to the ground, wailing and broken, she threw her torch in anger at the fog, and the vapor parted from the fire. Derek and Jack looked at each other.

"It has a weakness," Jack whispered. Derek nodded.

Nathan bellowed, as if in pain. Kate raised her head, groaning from that torment. She jumped to her feet, seething with rage. "We've got to stop it!" She held a fist in the air.

"Wandiga!"

The name spewed over Kate's lips like sour vomit.

Everyone looked to her, expectation in their eyes.

Kate screamed, "This happened because we hated Cain! We have to take that out of us." Bewildered faces stared back at her.

Thunder and lightning throbbed above their heads, the rain intensified and tiny, sharp pellets of ice began to fall. Hands came up to shield flesh from the jagged crystals.

"Don't you see?" Kate yelled, tears running down her cheeks, her voice elevating in the rising gale. "Remember? The accused is possessed by Wandiga if the tribe--we--hate him." She glanced at her children, her body shaking, then back to the group. "Try to think what Cain must've been like before we hated him. Anything good he did." She knelt in front of Kristen and Jamie De Ville. "Pretend Mr. Cain is a nice man. Pretend you like him." She looked around at the other children, her eyes pleading with them.

One by one, they bowed their heads or looked up, some closing their eyes, all struck with the challenge of reaching into their memories for good thoughts of Cain.

With a sudden shriek, Lisa Fontanna cried out, slapping at her face and arms. Joyce Montoya followed suit. Both women

dropped their torches. Derek's head twisted and he wiped at his skin, looking toward the sky. Something other than rain was falling on them. He lowered his torch toward his arm. A spider, long thin hairy legs and plump yellow body, scurried away. Many of the creatures came down, landing on them all. Lisa and Joyce were the worst, nearly covered, and no matter how hard they tried they couldn't cleanse themselves.

Without warning, a dozen snakes came from under the thick brush, and the men waved at them with their torches, driving them back into hiding.

Lisa and Joyce bolted from the group, toward the edge of the clearing.

"Don't go away from the group!" Jack shouted.

Kate hollered, "It's only trying to drive you away, make you hate."

Lisa and Joyce ran through the path they had entered from, disappearing into the darkness, shouting their disgust in terror-driven shrieks and howls. Their torches remained, burning on the ground. Nick Fontanna and Ray De Ville picked them up.

"Concentrate!" Kate screamed. "You must remember something!"

There were glimpses of possible goodness in Cain in the memories of all of them. Small, short events, but nonetheless windows of opportunity for change. It was a path Cain never took, yet it could have been that way--there was a chance at one time. The group concentrated on those things, trying to picture Cain as a young man, even imagining the possibilities that never were. Kate thought about the time she tried to get the boys' baseball from Cain, the fragment of softening she had seen in him then. She tried to put all the other bad things she knew about him out of her mind, tried to reach for forgiveness.

On the flat, rough face of the stone, an image began to take shape under the bulge of the vines--the thin, translucent outline of a human form, barely visible, strapped down by the vines.

--No!--

The fog began to roll and swirl, agitating the soil beneath it. The gathering thought hard, seeing in their minds Cain as a young man--some who actually knew him then, others who could only imagine. The image on the stone continued to gain its shape, materializing. The faint impression of George Cain appeared, flickered, melted back to fog, then again strengthened.

--No!--

"It is weakening!" Jack shouted.

"Keep on!" Kate yelled. "Remember the good!"

The vines around Melissa and Nathan tightened again. Melissa

started to cough. Nathan's stubby fingers tried to pry the vines from his neck.

Kate faltered, letting anger rise in her, hands clenching around the handles of the knife and torch. The image of Cain on the stone began shimmering, fading.

--Yes! Hate me! Give me all the hatred you have!--

Kate focused her thoughts, shutting her eyes, pushing out the hostility, picturing George Cain as an eager groom at his wedding. How beautiful Loretta must have looked to him. Love must have been in his heart.

--No!--

And then George Cain saw his bride again, and saw her in Kate's face. A flickering instant where he remembered himself being good. And the image on the stone gained substance.

--No!--

Lightning struck the tops of several trees and spots fifty yards outside the perimeter of the clearing, where small fires sprung up. Burning twigs and branches with dead, dry leaves fell into Wandiga's altar of sacrifice, and the fog cowered away from it. Derek and Jack exchanged glances, then both eyed the gasoline can.

The wind howled outside the circle of the trees, low and wicked, yet inside the clearing there was nothing that intense.

Derek picked up the five gallon can, leaning forward to whisper in Jack's ear. "I'll spread this around outside the clearing. When it ignites, it should burn the trees and brush."

"What of the water?" Jack asked. "Everything is soaked."

Derek answered, "The flames from the gas should dry out just enough so the wood can catch." Jack nodded once, and Derek handed his torch to him. "Try and distract it." Derek retreated, slipping away through the tangle of brush into the darkness.

As Kate and the others stood with eyes closed, in a trance-like state, driving out their hatred, Jack moved forward, waving both torches at the mist, making it move away from him, around him. He approached the stone, threatening the wavering image of Cain with the flames. Cain's face materialized, then metamorphosed to that of Jack's long-deceased mother, frowning in pain, tears streaming down her wrinkled cheeks.

Jack froze, his eyes white and round in his sweaty black skin.

His mother smiled and opened her mouth, her lips stretching like she was gagging, and a snake slithered from her gaping maw, undulating around her face before it dropped to the forest floor. Jack yelled a syllable of terror, stepping back, thrusting a torch

down at the venomous serpent. He retreated to the group, eyes wide, lips taut against his glimmering teeth. With a rush of disgust and anguish he turned away.

Derek came up behind him. "Let's light it!"

Jack paused, staring wildly at Derek. Derek grabbed his friend by the shoulders and shook him, and for a second Jack teetered as though he would pass out, then stumbled, recovering with a hand from Derek. A haze seemed to clear from the Jamaican's eyes and he handed Derek one of the torches. They left the clearing touching flames to the gas-soaked brush and ground. The fuel ignited easily and the fire quickly spread around the outside of the open patch of land. A gap remained where Derek had left a place for them to escape. Jack ran around the opposite side, swiping his torch at the ground in search of gasoline.

Derek called to the others, "Get out! We're gonna burn it!"

As flames circled the clearing and began licking up the trunks of trees, everyone except Kate backed up. In their retreat, the throng managed to keep their hate at bay, enough to keep Wandiga weakened. Cain's image solidified, becoming almost physical. The group stopped just past the edge of the flames, waving their torches at the gap to keep the vaporous entity from escaping. The dual-toned howling split the air, biting at their eardrums.

--No!--

Kate opened her eyes and saw the stone before her. Despite the cries from her children she could not help going to the rock, drawn to it as though hypnotized. The features of Cain's visage were clearly visible now, and his eyes held a look of sadness, of pleading. His lips moved to speak, his voice a hoarse, ragged whisper.

". . . didn't want to . . . be that way. Not always. Not . . . born that way." Cain's face seemed to be bleeding through the pores of his skin. His being was caught in the midst of the transformation, between this and another world, and it was tearing him apart.

--No! *This cannot stop!*--

The wind and rain picked up. Thunder and lightning clattered ceaselessly above them as red hail plunged from the skies. The fog thickened in the center of the open area, flowing toward Melissa and Nathan.

Cain cried out in agony, a tear rolling from his eye. The gathering's diminishing hate was affecting Cain inside, too.

Kate stepped toward him, torch in one hand, knife in the other. He drilled her with his dark, hollow eyes, gasping. His

flesh appeared to bubble, as though searing, his voice dry. "I'm . . . sorry . . ."

Derek rushed past Kate toward Melissa and Nathan. The fog pushed at him, knocking him on to his back. His torch catapulted from his hand, flying out of his reach and Wandiga rolled over him, pinning him down.

Kate raised her knife above Cain's chest, wheezing from her asthma, thinking of the Indian ceremony, the stoning to death of the accused, the possessed. She hesitated, trying to force herself to plunge the blade into him.

She could not.

She cursed, imploring God to pass judgement.

Her children screamed.

Jack rushed back into the clearing, waving his torch at the fog above Derek's body, keeping it from his face. Bits of cloth and burning oil came off the torch, landing on Derek. He slapped maniacally at himself to snuff out the flames.

Kate spun at Melissa and Nathan, horrified at the sight of the fog shrouding them, licking at their faces. They screamed in ways Kate had never heard from them. The frantic resistance of the children--jerking heads, mouths clamped tight--was making it difficult for the vapor to slither into their mouth, their nostrils. Their lungs.

Kate dashed to them.

The fire outside the perimeter was advancing into the clearing, consuming the brush and trees at an ever increasing rate. The fog drew back from the edges of the fire, becoming denser still in the center of the opening.

Kate waved her torch over her children, driving Wandiga back, panting from the effort. Her asthma made her struggle to supply her lungs with air. Drops of flaming oil splashed toward the children, their hair, some landing on their clothing, scorching small spots, smoldering. Kate moved in, wielding the knife, looking quickly, carefully, at the vines for safe places to cut. She could not slash freely for fear of hurting her children. Each slice of the blade had to be cautiously positioned.

The mist wrapped around Kate's legs, chilling her flesh with the sickening clamminess of death. It stroked up her body, moving over her belly. She found a spot for the blade between her children and she plunged the knife in and up, slicing through a vine. Her cutting became frenzied, one flick of the blade nicking Melissa's arm, and the girl's feverish wailing heightened. The fog ripped at Kate's blouse, tearing it open at the front. Finally, the last of the vines came loose and Kate yanked her

children away from the tree.

Derek and Jack struggled against the fog, reaching Kate as she freed the children. Each man took a child in his arms. They ran from the clearing as hard as they could, but the fog acted like waist deep water, slowing them. They waved their torches at the ground before them, driving away enough of the vapor to keep moving.

Just before they reached the perimeter Derek threw his torch toward the gap. Jack did the same. The fog averted the flame, leaving a path just wide enough for their feet. The space in the wall of flames was narrow, almost breached by the fire, and they leapt through it in single file. Wandiga rolled after them, licking at their heels. Derek put Melissa down, turned for the gas can, and splashed the remainder of the fuel into the gap.

Flames closed the opening, completing a circle around the clearing. Derek flung the can as hard as he could toward the ceremonial stone, and with one bounce it landed at its base. They backed up, and watched the pyre grow.

The last image of Cain they saw before he became hidden by the fire was his struggling against the vines holding him fast to the flat of the rock.

The canopy of trees above the clearing was engulfed now, and everything flammable burned in the center of it. The bouquet of burning oak and steam filled the air. The double-toned howling came on, pure and strong, unrelenting, as an unimaginable cry of pain. In the middle of that noise Cain's materializing body suffered from the inferno, his own screams of agony mixing in discordance with the howling of Wandiga.

The group continued moving back from the blaze as it grew more severe, and were soon a hundred yards away. The fire was moving out now, seeping from the clearing into the woods, engulfing trees at an alarming rate.

They stood at a distance, watching with faces painted yellow-orange, reflections of the blaze, solemn, heat kissing their skin, listening.

A sudden bang filled the air--the explosion of the fumes in the gas can, and at that same instant, a thunderous bolt of lightning, half as wide as the clearing, seared the air, blasting into the stone with white, sun-like intensity.

The wind, and rain and sound of fire remained.

No black harmony.

The howling was gone.

Cain's cries had ended.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

(EPILOGUE)

When the fire-fighters arrived at Harper Street they had to wait for a bulldozer to clear away the blockade of trees. Every available unit from Hartford and three from the surrounding communities answered the call. A second, then a third bulldozer was brought in to help make quick work of cutting a swath around the blaze. All they could really do was cut the fire-break and let the inferno run its course. The firemen trained their efforts on stamping out small flare-ups from wind blown burning debris, using hand held extinguishers, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the homes bordering the woods for wandering sparks.

In the center of the burned out area the investigators found what they assumed to be Tom Cummings' remains--even dental records might be useless in proving that--the shredded gas can and traces of the foil caps from the oil containers. Finding that evidence overruled their initial theory that lightning was to blame. From this they thought Cummings to be an arsonist, despite the record showing he was studying to be a clergyman.

Sometimes things like this are done by people you least expect would.

Cummings' was the only body they found.

As the break of day approached, drab and gray, steam still rising to the sky from the charred section of woods, the firefighters were just about done, finishing the details and cleaning up, loading equipment into their trucks, talking--trying to talk--to the people on Harper Street. Ignorance seemed the common reaction in the neighborhood.

Although there had been no official confirmation of a tornado touchdown--indeed there had been no indication on radar that anything more than a light rain had gone through the area--the firefighters figured that could be the only explanation for the downed trees, Agnes Barber's destroyed house and all the scattered chunks of sidewalk and driveway between Cain's house and the Freeman's.

They were never shown the cavernous hole in Melissa's bedroom. That would be impossible to explain--the truth would not be believed by outsiders.

None of the firemen had ever heard of concrete rippling up like that in a tornado, but, then again, none of them had ever seen one before. The tornado theory was an acceptable reason for only part of the things they encountered. They lacked an

explanation for why Tom Cummings would have torched the woods and himself. His widow was no help at all, being sedated and babbling the way she was. No one else on Harper Street had anything to say about Tom Cummings. Anything at all.

By the end of that day the Fontannas were packed up, taking residence in a hotel until their home could be sold. Joyce Montoya couldn't make Chris see the need to move--he wouldn't believe anything she said--and she left him to go live at her mother's place.

Most of the rest of the neighborhood didn't want to talk about what had happened, didn't want to believe what they had experienced. A little time and denial and conjuring up reasons that weren't true and most of them would forget, or remember something different from reality, or claim it was a dream, a nightmare. Those people would stay on Harper Street. Some would remember and believe, but, after all, what were the chances that anything like this could happen to this neighborhood again?

Kate and Derek put the last few items in the back of the rented trailer, each swinging closed a door. Derek slid the safety bolts in place and slipped the lock through the latch. They looked at each other, the house that used to be their home, then down the road at the woods. The coal black smudge of the blighted earth stood out like a surreal, war-torn wasteland.

"When we get settled, Jack and I will come back for the rest," Derek said. He took his wife's hand. "It's time to go."

"We have to get the kids from Mercy," Kate said plainly.

Derek dropped the keys to the duplex into Cynthia Bliant's palm. The real estate agent's gum cracked and she smiled weakly. "I'm so sorry the place didn't work out for you, after all. I was so sure it was just right, ya know?" She chewed at her gum for a second. "I'm sure we can get a good price for it. Too bad you tore down that room in back and filled in that part of the basement." She shook her head. "A fire, you said, right? That must've been some storm." Bliant shook her head, staring where Agnes Barber's home had been.

Kate and Derek walked down the street, all the while watching the blackened trees at the dead end. They hesitated at the De Ville's sidewalk, and without any words being spoken, continued on to the charred, wet woods. Without pausing, they walked in, travelling to the spot where the clearing had been.

"My God," Derek said. "Look at that."

The ceremonial stone had split down the center, a jagged fracture inches wide at the top and a mere hairline at the bottom. All the vines that had been draped over it were black, wispy

threads.

"Well," Kate said. "That should put an end to that."

Derek nodded. They stood in silence for a moment, a kind of reverence, then turned and walked away.

When they were out of sight, out of earshot, a crackling sound came from the stone, and a short length of the hairline crack at the bottom healed.

THE END