

The Human Touch

by William G. Tedford

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One

Many believe we are alone in the universe, that we see all there is to be seen. Our science knows better. Our imagination fails us, and our courage, our very willingness to face the unknown.

Our fears blind us. We will never see all there is to see of the world.

Friday, August 13, 2014, 3:15 p.m.

Ten-year-old David Hartman scampered onto the waiting bus at the edge of town and dropped his last coins into the slot. He plopped into a back seat, exhausted by the two mile walk from school, listening to his heart pound and wondering if he would die for having overexerted himself.

The bus pulled away from the curb and roared down the

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highway that cut the small town of Eagle Junction in half. Stores and gas stations and rows of small, run-down houses with littered yards flowed quietly by through its big tinted windows. The jiggling and the steady growl of the big diesel preyed upon his fatigue and lulled him into a daze. He imagined alien beings swooping down to whisk him away to a world where his damaged heart would heal, a world in which he would live forever, but a pothole jolted him awake, and he grinned without opening his eyes.

Potholes in outer space? Yeah, right.

His sense of humor faded in the light of stark reality. He was more likely to get whisked away to the hospital and have needles stuck in his arm. Steve and Tony had cornered him during lunch period and taken all but the two quarters tucked away in his shoe. He was using those quarters to reach a destination to the north, and home was south, uphill all the way.

He hadn't planned ahead at all. Mother had warned him not to play too hard and let his defenses down.

"Will you be so lucky the next time, David?"

David brushed away tears. There had been nobody to warn Mother to be careful. It had all happened so fast. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't his father's fault that she had died.

"Are you okay, little boy?"

The sing-song voice startled him. A fat woman sitting across the isle radiated a motherly concern and earned herself his wane smile of appreciation. "I'm okay, lady. I'm just going to visit my mother is all."

She beamed back a pleased smile of her own. "How darling."

And then he saw it, a dark tombstone moving against the

dark blue sky on the crest of an approaching hill. "There she is now!" he cried, and he bolted to his feet.

A tug on the overhead cord set the brakes to chugging. Deceleration pitched him forward. He held fast to the chromed seat handles and dragged himself to the door while the noisy engine wound down to a rumbling idle. The back door sighed and folded itself open.

David jumped to the curb, but watched the bus pull away with remorse. The tinted back window framed the old woman looking down upon him in distress. The bus carried her off with a terrible racket and left him choking in swirling exhaust fumes.

Suddenly alone, he glanced furtively up and down the street in search of Tony Doran and Steve Farley. His worst two enemies lived somewhere in Eagle Junction. He'd be a sitting duck, a dead duck, if they caught him so far from home.

He saw no familiar faces. Nobody paid him any mind. He hurried across the street to the wrought-iron fence of black iron surrounding the cemetery. A scattering of tombstones on the side of the hill towered like ominous sentinels. Canopies of ancient oaks shrouded the graveyard in a twilight of gloom.

The gate in front stood open. Cars lined the narrow gravel road inside. David paused to watch a woman put flowers by a marker and kneel to weep her grief. He knew how she felt, although he had no flowers for his mother. Did she need flowers now that she was dead?

He hurried through the gate and up the gravel path with his eyes cast to the ground. The big black car that had taken his mother to her grave site had parked at the top of the hill. Men in dark suits had taken her shiny casket to the raw

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hole dug in the earth in front of the stone angel. Only at the top of the hill did he venture a glance off to his right.

And there it stood, the angel of stone who could never fly. Empty eyes looked to the sky in torment.

Mother would have thought the angel a travesty. *“If angels could make the world a better place, the world would be a better place.”*

He started off through the obstacle course of gravestones toward the angel and the hump of ground at its base. Soft spots filled the uneven lawn of rough grass. Now would be a bad time for his imagination to run away with him. He’d panic, and there would be nobody to save him.

His foot sank into a tiny sink-hole in the soft earth and pitched him to the ground before the crumbling gravestone of some man who had died in 1895. He scrambled back with a startled cry and for an instant imagined the ground giving out beneath him entirely.

His feet sink to his knees into the damp earth turned to quicksand. A skeletal hand reaches from the depths and grabs his ankle like a vice. He is sucked into the ground flailing like a trapped animal. Stifling wet earth closes over his head. Black earth ridden with worms and squirming bugs pour down his throat. He claws at tree roots that snap, crackle, and pop even as skeletal hands eagerly draw him through a hole torn through the side of a deeply buried coffin.

He tilted his face to the warm sun to break the spell, sucked cold air, and closed his eyes to still the furious hammering of his heart. His blood would turn blue if he didn’t stop. It had put him in the hospital twice this year already, and the year wasn’t even half over yet. If it got too bad, it would kill him.

He sat up and forced himself to look at the raw wound in

the earth that had tripped him. A gopher tunnel? Blushing with humiliation, he looked around to see if anyone was laughing. He then climbed to his feet and paid closer attention to the treacherous humps in the grass until he reached the stone angel that marked an end to his long journey. With tears streaming down his face, he dropped to his knees and began to tremble.

“Mom?”

The sun dazzled his eyes, but the air was like ice. The world held its breath among the gravestones, but in the tallest of the trees, the breeze whispered like angry neighbors displeased with his behavior and eager to tattle on him. He sat back on his haunches, ignoring the damp grass sponging the heat from his body. He rocked to and fro in misery and didn't care if he got sick and died.

He should never have come. There was nothing here but a crippled angel of rock and the mountain wind. His mother had warned him not to let his defenses down. Now he would die for his foolishness and be buried at her side. He would lie forever in the dark with his hands crossed on his chest, alone through the long cold winters.

It would be worse than even that. Death was far more absolute, so much so that even grown adults would not face the truth. His mother had said so. In their own sneaky way, even the adults in his life wanted to believe that she was somehow still alive. During the funeral, Reverend O'Connor had droned on about sin and salvation and what it took to get to heaven, but he had said nothing about the injustice of a mother getting killed in a stupid car accident. He had watched the curtains to either side of the coffin in hopes of seeing her pretty brown eyes peek from around a corner. It had never happened, and he had panicked when the funeral

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ended and everybody started to turn away, willing to leave his mother alone in the closed coffin covered in flowers.

She was gone. He had come all this way and risked everything to be comforted and reassured without stopping to think about how his dead mother could accomplish any of that. Horror movies were his only experience with graves. In movies, the dead could come back to life as beautiful ghosts, or half rotted corpses hungry for the taste of human flesh. It all started with dirt stirring on the grave.

A patch of grass ruptured on the ground before him. Like a broken frame of film, the world came to a standstill. From the black dirt beneath, a pink nose and whiskers poked out into the open. He recognized the innocent gopher too late to stop the ear-piercing shriek that galvanized him to his feet. He turned to flee in mindless panic.

A dark figure blocked his way. He rebounded against legs like tree trunks, reeled back, and staggered to keep his balance. A powerful hand caught him and held him fast. David shrieked again, convinced that he had fallen prey to the bad strangers his father had warned him about.

“David! David, snap out of it!”

He was shaken until his teeth rattled. The broken and husky voice and the fact that he was being shaken by only one hand identified his assailant in an instant. His panic shattered like broken glass.

“Dad?”

“David, what in God’s name are you doing here?”

He was yanked closer and embraced by strong arms. He choked on alcohol fumes spewing from his father’s mouth like dragon’s breath. John Hartman’s eyes were bloodshot, and his face twisted with indecipherable emotion. David thought at first that it was rage.

“Don’t hit me! Mother said never to hit me!”

His father’s expression turned to helpless surprise, like flames doused by ice water. “Nobody has ever hit you, David. I told you we would pay Mom a visit together when the time was right.” His father tried to blink away tears of his own. “I told you never to come here alone.”

“But how did you know I was here?”

“Late coming home from school? Where else would you go?”

“But I don’t want her in the ground! Dad, it’s cold out here!”

John Hartman shook his head frantically. “It’s not like that. David, your mother is in heaven.”

“No!” David pushed away in rebellion. “Mother never believed in that stuff and neither do I!”

John rose to his full height. He mulled over the challenge to his authority with a darkening expression. He looked around nervously to see if anyone was watching, then took notice of something in the near distance and sighed as if having made a reluctant decision. “Come here, David. I want you to see this.”

His father hurried away with strides three times the length of his own. David trotted after him, thankful for the timely rescue and vowing never to venture out on his own ever again.

His father stopped. David drew up at his side and scanned the gravel path. Something about the road was supposed to catch his attention. The squirrel, maybe? The squirrel had been run over by a car and flattened days ago. Only its fluffy tail sticking in the air identified it for what it had been. That and one tiny, uninjured paw, like it had

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been trying to signal surrender to the violence being wrought upon it.

David looked up at his father. "I don't get it."

"Your mother was a strong woman, David, but strength can be a burden and truth can be hard to bear. If heaven is too much for you to accept, is that poor little guy cold and uncomfortable do you think, or just plain dead?"

The squirrel was dead. It was nothing. "Dead," he said aloud. "It's just a squirrel. Or was."

"That's the point exactly. he Reverend and a lot of people believe people are special and go to a special place when they die."

David knew what his mother believed, but he wondered what his father believed. His father never talked about these things.

"I'm not trying to tell you how things are," John said, voicing the thought as if reading his mind. "I'm just telling you that your mother didn't have all the answers. Neither does Reverend O'Connor. But if we have to live with our ignorance, we're entitled to a little elbow room when we think about these things. If your mother was right about anything, it's the need to question the source of our beliefs, whether we believe because we have clear reason to, or because we want to."

The most futile and desperate of his secret hopes and fears sprang to life and made good its escape from his lips before he could stop it. "But she might come back and there won't be anybody here to help her!"

That sounded really foolish. The dead were left alone in cemetery because nobody was *ever* coming back.

His father stared down at him in dismay. "I knew something like this would happen."

Mother had called his imagination a gift. His father thought it a curse. David stared despairingly at the dead squirrel and thought about how really crazy it would be for it to suddenly get up and run away.

His father spoke in a gentler tone of voice. "Is there anything more you need here?"

David looked back at his mother's grave, and then used the toe of his shoe to push the dried-up squirrel into the grass where it wouldn't be run over again. "No. I want to go home now."

His father led the way down to the car parked just inside the gate. David followed close behind, acutely aware of his father's stagger. His father had lost his driver's license after the accident that had killed his mother. His father had been drunk that day. He was just as drunk now. If Sheriff Gene Packerson stopped him on the way home, he would go to jail.

David Hartman stared nervously into his lap on the long drive back. The heater blew hot air and someone on the radio sang a pretty song, but he felt embedded in gloom like a fly trapped in tar. Things were bad. It would take so much to make his ruined heart better and to make his father stop drinking that if it happened, it would be like watching the smashed squirrel actually come back to life and run up a tree.

And that would be a horror, not a wonder, because no matter how hard he pretended, he knew in his heart the things that were possible and those that were not.

Two

John Hartman drove at five miles an hour below the speed limit. He trembled in the aftermath of his panic and clenched his jaw to silence his chattering teeth. Even so, he couldn't hope to hide from the boy the fact that he had been drinking.

His right hand, the hand mangled in the accident that had killed Marlene, rested in his lap and gently throbbed with pain. Waking nightmares roamed his thoughts like predators. Sheriff Gene Packerson and his deputies knew his face all too well. After all, he had been one of their number not too long ago. They'd jail him if they saw him driving with a suspended license. They'd take David away.

The drinking had to stop. David had been pleading for days to visit the cemetery. Sober, he would have tended the

boy's needs. He couldn't fault David for exercising some initiative. If his drinking went on, his luck would run out sooner or later and doom the both of them.

He glanced at his son in concern. "Are you okay, do you think?"

David glanced at him fearfully. "I won't get sick again, will I?"

"Don't overdo it, son, and you'll be fine. Sooner or later you'll get new parts for your heart like Dr. Varley promised and everything will be okay."

David looked anxious. "When?"

"When I can get Uncle Sam to help foot the bill, and when Dr. Varley thinks he can pull it off."

John wondered if the boy ever heard the reservation in his tone of voice. The astronomical cost of the operation and Dr. Varley's ability to pull off a veritable miracle relegated hope to the distant reaches of improbability.

David stared out the side window with moist eyes. "It's not fair."

John tried to lighten David's mood. "That squirrel back at the cemetery would agree. Gather nuts for winter, and look where it gets you."

"And Mom?"

He had left himself wide open for that one. The knot in his throat hurt with an intensity that in itself brought tears to his eyes. "I guess you're right. It's not at all fair."

Eagle Junction was a town of several thousand servicing a rare east-west traffic route along the Pacific coast. Civilization passed quickly behind them. The blacktop bordered a dense pine forest covering the western slope of Spruce Valley. John turned onto a gravel road that climbed

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an even steeper part of the slope to its crest. The road dead-ended just past a row of thirteen houses.

The inhabitants of the asbestos-sided bungalows called themselves the Ridge. They had no official status. The houses had been built to take advantage of the magnificent view of the twenty-mile-wide, crater-like Spruce Valley sprawling to the east in forested magnificence. The original inhabitants of the Ridge had been dirt poor. The newest members had put up quarter-million dollar homes with picture windows looking out onto the scenery, including the home of Orville Kahl, the wealthy financial investor who had recently purchased the entire valley from the federal government for industrial development.

John pulled into the drive of his own picturesque cottage. The scrolled fencing and trim had been his birthday present to Marlene two years ago. Flower gardens had added even more of a woman's touch to the house. It wasn't at all his personal style, although John felt an obligation to maintain the house and garden as it had been, one of few tasks he could accomplish to his satisfaction with his one good hand.

He shut off the engine of his old Volvo sedan, leaned back in his seat, and closed his eyes. "I wasn't trying to be a tyrant," he said to the silent boy sitting glumly at his side. "I just think it best that we visit Mom together."

"We never do."

"Yeah, I know. I'll try to do something about it."

David left the car and started out across the grass-covered slope of the outer valley wall. John watched him wander sullenly away. David had been an incorrigible bookworm and computer addict before the accident. He and Marlene had worried that the boy would ruin his eyesight

and undermine his feeble social skills spending so much time in his own world.

Things had changed since her death. It had been almost a year and David had not once opened a book or switched on his computer. John hadn't said anything to the boy hoping the quiet of nature would soothe his terrible grieving and heal him in the end.

John went inside the house wondering what his own fate would be. Forty thousand dollars of microsurgery hadn't fixed his smashed right hand. He had been warned that the finger joints would fuse if he didn't stick with the rehabilitation. He had stopped when the pain became too high a price to pay for the poor progress he had been making. Inadequate circulation rendered frostbite a constant hazard during the winter months. The slightest bump sent sharp pain shooting up his arm.

He fetched a beer from the refrigerator and went down to the basement den. He switched on the lights and sat at his desk. Marlene's desk. He stared at the steel-gray computer screen, sipped the beer, and eyed the bottle of whiskey he had left behind. He pushed the offending bottle out of reach. He had thought it safe to drink at certain times of the day. That rationalization no longer washed.

His head throbbed. As a distraction, he switched on the computer and watched it boot and loaded the free-lance magazine article he had been working on. The left-handed Dvorak keyboard was working out fine. His writing skills sucked. Strange that he could suffer so much after having achieved everything in life he had ever wanted. He had insurance money to buy more than he needed, and time to do anything he wanted, or go anywhere, all in exchange for a

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dead wife, a mangled right hand, and nightmares to last a lifetime.

John set his innocent beer aside. He reached instead for the bottle of whiskey. It had been necessary to blot out unendurable magnitudes of suffering long before the accident. It was needed now.

“John, I wish you would slow down.”

Memory of the accident replayed itself despite the psychological agony. He couldn't help but dwell on it. He had been drinking that afternoon as well, although he harbored the secret conviction that something else had gone wrong to cause the accident. He allowed the torment of the memory to replay itself in search of that subtle factor. Each time it did, he studied the sequence of events for some clue as to what could have gone wrong

He smiled at his wife's concern and swung the van into a S-shaped curve that sent it rocking gently one way, then the other. The south-bound lane of the highway followed the coastline with the evergreen forests to the left and the Pacific Ocean glittering beneath a setting sun to the right.

Marlene glanced at David asleep in the back seat and then around at him in protest. “Why do you have to drink so much? John, I simply don't understand.”

He would never have sullied her life with an answer. She knew little of his past, he would never tell her and, therefore, she would never understand. That stain on his soul was his alone to bear.

Mounting anguish whitened his knuckles on the steering wheel. The amount of drink needed to suppress the pain completely would kill. It was never enough.

A curve came into view ahead. He touched the brake.

The brake went slowly to the floor.

Air in the line? That would have to be looked at first thing in the morning.

Except that he was already in trouble. Alcohol had slowed his reflexes. The van shot into the curve and began immediately to broad-slide. He knew in an instant he would have to roll it into the trees rather than risk sliding off the cliff to the Pacific beach far below. Marlene and David were both screaming when the van toppled.

The van came to rest on its side amidst the terrible shriek of metal tearing against concrete. John disengaged his seatbelt when the violence settled, confident that he had the situation under control. A quick glance at Marlene and David assured him that neither had been injured. He reached up past Marlene and pushed her door open. He pulled himself up and out. On his belly, he reached back inside the vehicle to extract his family from danger.

David's hand groped in his field of vision, so David was first to emerge. Only when he lowered David to the ground did he look down to see why he was only using his left hand. His right hand had flailed out the shattered window when the van turned over. The mass of the vehicle must have crushed it against pavement. He ignored it. Bones could be reset. Wounds would heal as they had healed countless times in the past, at least the physical ones.

He reached back into the van for Marlene's hand and soothed her mounting panic. She fought to disengage her seat belt. Years of military service and combat had taught him not to panic in times of crisis, three with the Marines, three as a private mercenary and about the same with the county's sheriff's department. In another few seconds, she would be free.

A whiff of raw gasoline reached him the same instant he

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heard it ignite with a gentle whump. He hoped against hope itself that the fire was on the outside, that he would have a moment longer to pull Marlene from the interior of the van, but a sudden wave of incandescence exploded from within and the shock wave sent him toppling backward. He cart-wheeled peacefully through empty space, then slammed brutally into the ground.

Marlene's horrified expression hovered inches away on the other side of the van's windshield. Raging flames and coiling smoke framed her soft beauty. Struggling to his hands and knees, he saw her hair smolder. An instant later, a raging hell of incandescence engulfed her, and flames emerged from the open door like a blowtorch.

David clawed at him, shrieking for him to stop the nightmare. He leaped to his feet to do so at any cost. It was at that moment that the gas tank ruptured, blowing the windshield into his face and his consciousness into oblivion.

Air in the brake line meant a break in a line and a loss of brake fluid. How? He had inspected the undercarriage meticulously for corrosion when he had purchased the five-year-old vehicle. Had his drinking fogged more than just his memory? Certainly his reflexes hadn't been up to the task of dealing with the split second challenge.

Sleep dragged the last of his memories into distorted and unpleasant dreams that would be all too easily remembered when he awoke.

Three

David awoke in his darkened bedroom to moving shadows. Pale green light shown through his window.

He padded from his bedroom on bare feet and paused at the top of the basement stairs in the kitchen. The stench of alcohol warned against going down for help. He continued on his way to the patio door, peeking through parted curtains.

A glass egg the size of an apartment building hung suspended in the night sky, centered in its depths by an emerald glimmer like green fire that left afterimages swirling in his field of vision. The airborne jewel moved out over the slope and stopped above a towering stand of young spruce. There, a white light dribbled downward, a wiggly, crawling line of brilliance like something alive, moving faster

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as it descended, piercing the trees to the ground, then ascending back into the object and vanishing.

And then the egg itself began to ascend, slowly at first. It shot to a higher altitude at an angle and paused for a time. David gazed up at it, dimly wishing it would stay put long enough for him to wake his father. Even as he considered the challenge, the object darted vertically and disappeared into a sky full of stars.

He glanced in dread at the dark stand of spruce, then turned away on shaky legs. Once in flight, fear pursued him through the darkened house.

Four

A hand shook John Hartman painfully awake. He jerked away from the touch and floundered until he oriented himself and remembered that along with Marlene's life he had forever lost his son's trust. He was drunk again. He had sipped the bottle until he had dropped off to sleep at the computer.

"Whatsamatter," he murmured through lips still thickened by sleep and alcohol.

"Dad, there's a green light outside."

John sat up and paused to wait out a knife stabbing at his skull. He cradled his head in his hands, his right hand a mass of pain of at least equal intensity. David waited patiently in a dim shaft of light cast down the stairs from the kitchen.

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A green light. Traffic signals? He chuckled at his sluggish thought processes. “Green lights are no big deal,” he murmured. “Keep an eye out for the red ones.”

David remained stubbornly silent. John looked up and the boy and saw fear in his eyes. “Dreaming?” John said.

David shook his head emphatically.

“A light, you say?”

“Something woke me up and I saw it outside the window. It was a big glass egg with a green light in the middle. You could see the shadows of the trees moving and everything. It was really spooky.”

John thought a dream far more likely. “What’s it doing now?”

“I watched it until it went away.”

John carefully selected a strategy for dealing with David’s upset. “I can’t imagine what it may have been. What do you suggest we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, so if it comes back, wake me up. We’ll fetch the camera and take some pictures. Just don’t go out alone. How does that sound?”

David gave the suggestion a moment’s thought. “I guess.” He then turned away and labored his way back up the stairs looking far older than his ten innocent years.

John waited until he heard the boy’s bedroom door close, then groaned his way to his feet. He sidestepped a few yards and dropped to the cot he kept in the basement den for just this sort of emergency. He drifted to sleep feeling guilty for having failed the boy twice in one day, sensing in some strange manner that he was going to pay a high price for his betrayal.

Five

David understood that his father's order not to go out onto the slope only held during hours of darkness. He waited for the first light of dawn before slipping out into the gray morning.

He walked a half mile to a ridge of rock overlooking the ancient volcanic valley. Clouds hid the forest within. Down the barren exterior slope stood an isolated stand of spruce. The trees had stood like a brightly-lit church cathedral beneath the green glass egg in the night sky. He was still leery about going down to investigate alone, but curiosity nibbled at his cowardice like mice.

He walked down the field of grass at a measured pace, so filled with energy in the cool dawn that he wanted to fly with the breeze. Experience had taught him he'd only exhaust

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himself and ruin the day. He checked his fingernails often and paused whenever the pink started to darken. Blue fingernails meant too much oxygen-poor blood leaking past his damaged heart valves.

He sat on a flat boulder to rest when he reached the island of trees. If he went in and looked, he supposed that he'd find nothing. His father would insist that the thing he had seen had been something ordinary. He'd never find the words to describe how incredible it had really been. He tried not to fantasize his darkest desires, although he thought that the dense underbrush would be the perfect place for something from another world to creep and hide.

David rose to his feet to block off the thought and avoid scaring himself. A walk around the few acres of trees would take a half-hour at most. He'd make it home in time for breakfast. He could imagine any spooky thing he wanted once in the safety of his own house.

He didn't get very far around the trees before he found what he had hoped he would not find, something strangely out of the ordinary. He paused at the edge of a bare patch of earth and tried to make sense of exactly what it was he was seeing.

Bugs crawled in the dirt. The ground absolutely swarmed with bugs.

"What the heck?"

All kinds of bugs. Ants, spiders, silverfish, flies, gnats, maggots, grubs and moths, more bugs than he had seen in one place in his entire life. Even bugs with wings crawled back and forth along the ground rather than flew. It hardly made any sense at all.

David sidestepped to another rock and sat down to think.

Bugs?

A little brown mouse rushed excitedly into rodent heaven to feed. It spun about in a frenzy and bit at everything in sight.

It failed to catch a single bug. It should have snatched one up in an instant. The mouse vanished into the underbrush in frustrated pursuit of bugs.

A quiet moment passed.

Mice emerged from the underbrush. Three, four, five brown mice, each identical to the one mouse that had gone in. Behaving much as had the first mouse, they ran about in frantic circles and missed even the wiggling grubs that would have made the easiest targets.

Garter snakes, too, emerged into the morning's first light. A half dozen came out all at once, and David was willing to bet that just one snake had gone into the bushes unseen.

Hackles rose along his back. Curiosity, though, overpowered his fear. He postponed a panicky retreat to see what would happen next.

Toads. He should have guessed. Within fifteen minutes or so, toads hopped from the underbrush and spread out in all directions. A speckled starling came swooping in for the kill, attracted by the all the creepy movement along the ground. It landed and cocked his head to take inventory before pecking at a tasty morsel. It missed, pecked again and again, drawn by a strange, coordinated movement of the insects closer and closer to the wall of vegetation.

"Oh, no."

David rose to his feet. He knew what was going to happen next. The starling hopped into the grass and vanished from view.

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David held his breath.

A flock of starlings fluttered skyward from the underbrush. A dozen maybe, all circling overhead in a tight, dizzy arc, going nowhere as fast as their wings could carry them.

Startled, breathing hard, his heart pounding dangerously in his chest, David ventured closer to the trees, curious as to where the creatures lured into the bushes were going and how they managed to multiply in number and reemerge all at once. He waded waste deep through the weeds and bushes, came upon a small clearing, and looked down to see the sky reflected back up at him.

At first he thought the reflection a pool of water. He then thought it a mirror because it didn't ripple like water in the breeze, except that bugs continued to flow in and out unimpeded. They crawled over one another in their haste to either come or go. He thought maybe that it might be quicksilver until he remembered that mercury was poisonous. Nothing about a pool of quicksilver would attract so many bugs and critters. There had to be another explanation.

Another explanation came quickly to mind, or at least an explanation for the origin of the mystery, if not the mystery itself. The snaky white light had deposited this thing among the trees. This was the first of two overpowering fantasies that had ruled his entire life. He had dreamed about it for as long as he could remember, something eerie from the stars visiting the Earth.

Fear bloomed to unmanageable proportions. He backed away and all too easily imagined blue blood building up in his body. Weakened by the excitement, he turned away on rubbery legs and began the long walk home.

His dad could deal with the mirror, or maybe Sheriff Packerson.

“Hey, pip-squeak! Where do you think you’re going?”

David looked up in horror. His two worst nightmares came racing up the hill at the worst possible time. Tony Doran was a sixth grader at his own school. Steven Farley was the mayor’s son and a junior high student. He had forgotten about the risk of encountering others his own age on a Saturday morning. The two descended upon him like vultures.

“Hey, you scrawny little bugger,” Tony said with a broad grin. “What you doing out here?”

Both boys carried BB guns. They wouldn’t dare shoot him. Hopefully. He couldn’t possibly outrun them.

Tony came up to him and shoved him to the ground. David fell back on his rump and stayed safely put. David looked to Steven, the older of the two, for some hint of mercy.

“Don’t hurt him,” Steven said mildly.

“Don’t kick the pip-squeak’s butt? Why not? His old man is probably soused to the gills. Betcha he can’t stagger any faster than this little creep can run.”

To his everlasting humiliation, David felt tears stain his cheeks.

“Ah, the pip-squeak is bawling. Poor little wimp. Wuzbucket.” Tony reached out with a foot to shove him down flat on his back.

Steven caught Tony’s arm. “You put a mark on the little dude and we’ll get into trouble again.”

Tony wrinkled his nose in disgust. “So what? You don’t see the way he gets treated at school. Teacher’s pet. Knows

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all the answers. Gets out of gym. They give him anything he wants, being a runt and all.”

“What you doing out here?” Steven demanded in more reasonable tone of voice. Steven didn’t like him any better than Tony, but they had gotten themselves in trouble punching him in the face once, and Steven was old enough to take a hint. “You spying on us or something?”

David wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, trying to think up a reasonable explanation on short notice. “None of your business,” he said, knowing he’d never lie convincingly to the two older boys.

“Whatcha got to give us today?” Tony said with a grin. “Got any money on you?”

David felt himself trembling. He didn’t see how he could ever make it back home under his own power now. He stared defiantly at Tony in lieu of any other strategy, wishing the two would just go away and leave him be.

Steven, though, was curious. He looked back the way David had come. His gaze fell on the starlings circling the trees in silence. He cocked his BB gun. “What the hell, let’s shoot some birds.”

“Let’s shoot pip-squeak here,” Tony said, then reached out and kicked David’s shoe.

Steven punched Tony’s shoulder in a flare of sudden anger. “I said don’t screw with him!”

Tony rubbed his arm with a hurt look. “Damn, you don’t have to hit so hard.”

“I don’t want to catch hell from my old man again. Leave the nerd alone and let’s go shoot some fricking birds.”

David opened his mouth to warn the two that something funny was going on in the stand of trees. He closed it, not because he wished either boy harm, but because they’d not

believe him. He scrambled to his feet, absently brushed himself off, and followed the two at a safe distance.

Both boys cried out in amazement at all the tiny bugs and animals crawling about the patch of ground near the trees. The two cocked and fired their BB guns, first at the birds, then at the animals on the ground. Over and over they fired. Not once did David see a bird fall, and he would have bet they hit nothing on the ground either.

David had already begun to suspect the nature of the trick. Anything lured into the silver pond reemerged to bait something higher up the food chain. Bugs attracted mice, and mice attracted birds, but they didn't seem to be real. "You'd better stay back!" he called out, but the emptiness of the slope swallowed his voice.

Steven and Tony's initial excitement turned to perplexity and then outright fear. They began cocking and popping their BB guns in frantic earnestness.

A girl's shrill voice shrieked from directly behind David. "What are you boys doing? You stop that this very instant! How dare you!"

David swung around in surprise. The girl charged him. He didn't know her name, but he had run across her once before in school and he knew for certain that she was the nastiest girl he had ever met. She wore a pink lacy dress that came to her knees, a pink ribbon that held up her hair, and patent leather shoes. She had a face that reminded him of a horse, chubby legs, and a shrill voice that grated on David's nerves.

Both Steven and Tony looked around with irritated frowns and then sighed with exasperation. "Go home, Jackie!" Tony called out.

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“I will do no such thing! You quit shooting those horrid guns this very instant!”

David stepped out of her way. His eyes widened in horror when he saw the fluffy black cat following on her heels.

“And you, you little creep,” the nasty girl said, taking notice of him for the first time. “What are you doing here?”

Confused by the pace of events, David said nothing.

She stomped her foot. “I asked you a question! You’re on my father’s property! I’ll have you arrested, you and your alcoholic father both!”

She was a grade ahead of him and a lot smarter, although she was about his own age. He had once traded insults with her at school and had been soundly defeated. He had no intention of risking another.

“I asked you a question, you trespasser!”

David’s temper flared. He held his middle finger up at her.

Her eyes widened. “You cripple! Don’t think I haven’t heard about you and your worthless father! He’s a drunkard, and he killed his own wife!”

David lost it. He would have denied the notion that suppressed anger was building inside him. Anger meant loss of control and that invariably meant getting sick. But there was no stopping it once his rage was unleashed. He charged the nasty girl with a grimace of sheer hatred. Her eyes went wide with surprise. She screamed once, then turned and ran.

She waddled. He would never have caught her otherwise. He raced down the slope on the girl’s heels, grabbed a blonde curl, and pulled her over backwards. He weakly plummeted her head and shoulders with his fists even as they fell together to the ground, desperate to get in as

many blows as he could before he was dragged away by Tony and Steven.

They took him by the arms and laughingly threw him aside. David rolled across the ground and had scrambled halfway to his feet before he realized that no amount of rage could defeat the two larger boys. Tony gestured for him to come closer. "Try a real man, you little snot. Just try it."

Steven bellowed laughter. "Wait until old man Kahl hears about this. Kid, your ass is grass."

Kahl? A man named Orville Kahl had recently bought the whole of Spruce Valley. Kahl was the man who had built the big house a quarter of the way around the rim of the valley. Putting two and two together, the nasty girl was Jackie Kahl, Orville Kahl's daughter.

Blood ran from her nose and stained her pink dress. She wept hysterically. David burst into tears as well, knowing he had probably doomed himself and his father both.

The nasty girl paused in the middle of her heart-rending tears. Her eyes rose to the morning sky. David thought at first that she held her head up to keep the blood from running onto her dress. But the two bullies looked up as well.

David looked up in time to see a hawk diving toward them. Around and around it swooped with its wings tucked back and its talons extended. It hit ground in a cloud of dust a few short yards away.

And missed the little mouse it had been after.

As David would have guessed.

The hawk flapped its wings hard and circled at low altitude, then glided to a graceful landing and pounced again. It followed a zigzagging rodent into the underbrush with single-minded persistence.

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“No, don’t go in there!” David cried.

The hawk vanished. Oblivious to her bleeding nose, Jackie Kahn remained quietly awestruck. The hawk reappeared dragging an injured wing. The cat at Jackie’s feet came instantly alert and then bounded across the ground toward its own certain prey.

“No!” Jackie Kahl cried. “Kitty, don’t you dare hurt that poor birdie!”

The hawk fluttered into the air. The cat leaped and twisted and spun about. Black fur and brown wings became a blur moving inexorably into the underbrush.

David remained transfixed with horror, starkly aware of what was happening. Jackie rushed toward the weeds to rescue the cat from injury. Tony and Steven went after her with their BB guns at ready. All three came to a sudden stop near the bushes.

Only one hawk emerged from the underbrush and flew away, maybe even the original hawk having escaped its all but certain fate, but more than one cat reappeared. Tony and Steven’s BB guns began popping as fast as they could be cocked. Steven Farley threw his BB gun into the air a moment later, then wheeled about and ran off in a wild panic. Tony fled at his heels without making a sound, dropping his own gun at David’s feet as he went by.

Jackie Kahl remained frozen in place murmuring, “Here, kitty, kitty. Kitty?”

“Get away!” David cried. He scooped up Tony’s discarded rifle, cocked the gun on the run, and drew up alongside the girl.

Three black cats sat staring up at her. They turned their heads in unison as David approached. Bright yellow eyes widened in feral rage. They arched their backs and hissed at

him with sharp white fangs lining the pink gums of their round little mouths.

David fired the gun at point blank range. He cocked and shot again and then a third time in rapid succession.

“No! Don’t kill the pussy cats!” Jackie lashed out and knocked the gun aside.

David would not have been able to do so in any case. The cats were not real as he had suspected was true of the bugs and mice and toads and birds crawling and fluttering all around them. The BBs had punched holes in leaves and kicked up dirt, but passed clean through their solid-looking bodies without the slightest resistance. Their yellow eyes burned with more sharply focused awareness than any cat had a right to.

Jackie Kahl reached for one of the animals. All three mewed fetchingly and backed into the underbrush.

“No! Don’t go in there!”

Jackie Kahl vanished from sight bent over with her underwear showing and her nose still dripping blood.

The morning fell quiet. Bugs, mice, toads, snakes, and birds all vanished without a trace. David sensed, though, that it wasn’t over. The worst of it hadn’t even started yet.

“Don’t fall in the mirror!” he cried out, and he rushed forward to keep it from happening. He pushed through the bushes again, looked around once for the girl and then down at the sky and passing clouds reflected from the mirror.

It had grown, a puddle more than a yard wide now, plenty large enough to have swallowed up the nasty girl. Where else could she have gone?

Something rose from within the opaque surface. At first, David thought that it was Jackie Kahl emerging as had bugs

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and snakes and birds, and he backed away with more hackles rising along the back of his neck.

In was only a pink corner of her bloodstained dress. White cotton underwear peeked from beneath lace trim. More abruptly, a pair of shiny shoes with socks still inside them popped to the surface.

David turned away on wobbling legs. He dropped to his knees in the open. Unconcerned by the handicap, he began to crawl.

“David.”

And this was the second overpowering fantasy that had dominated his life, fear of the dead returning to life. His father called it obsession. His mother had taken pride in his imagination. Why hadn't they known? It had been this all along. He had foreseen the approach of this single moment in time for as long as he had lived. And now it was upon him at last.

“Don't go away!” she cried in a far-away sounding voice.

“Help me!”

He jammed his eyes closed, ducked his head, and scurried away on hands and knees. When he could crawl no further, he lay flat on his face to rest and refused to look up.

The nasty girl came up close behind him. In his mind's eye, he saw her squat at his feet. *“You silly boy,”* she whispered among the privacy of his thoughts. *“Where are you going?”*

The only thing that kept him from panicking was knowing that she had become a ghost like the bugs and birds and cats. He couldn't really touch her, which meant that she couldn't touch him.

He opened his eyes and judged the remaining distance to the house. He certainly couldn't crawl all that way, so he

pushed himself to his feet. Focusing all of his attention on keeping his balance, he put one foot in front of the other. A single step was satisfactory as long as he could manage just one more.

“David?”

He sensed her confusion. She knew something terrible had happened to her. She followed like a lost puppy, except that she wanted something far more sinister than an innocent scratch behind the ear.

“Come back with me,” she said.

Yeah, right.

“I don’t want to be alone.”

David shared the sentiment, but he didn’t want to share the moment with the likes of her.

“David, I have something to do.”

David didn’t want to know what.

“I can’t do it all by myself. I need help. I really do.”

David believed her, except that she wasn’t Jackie Kahl any more. Like the creatures luring others of their kind into the mirror, she had a new purpose to life.

“Please, come back with me. You’ll be sorry if you don’t.”

She followed like a haunting apparition. The others followed, too. Bugs swarmed at his feet. Overhead, the hawk’s shrill cry echoed. It hadn’t, he suspected, escaped after all.

Six

Joyce Blair parted the Venetian blinds in her bedroom at dawn and watched perplexed as the son of her next door neighbor wandered off across the slope. She couldn't imagine why David should be up and about so early, but it left his hunk of a father alone in the house.

She stood gazing out into the hazy morning assessing the moves open to her on the chessboard of life. John and David Hartman had just buried their wife and mother. They still grieved terribly. How could she even think of making a play for John so soon?

The throbbing bruise on the side of her face was sufficient motivation to try. She was going to get the shit kicked of her again in about four hours otherwise. What else

could she do? She needed help. Who else but John Hartman fit the bill?

Roy Rockingham was a trucker and came home weekends to drink and sleep. He had his way with her from Friday night to Monday morning, that in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter. It had been an equitable arrangement for the past two years. The hitting, though, was something new. It was getting worse, and it had to stop.

She thought of simply asking John in polite fashion for help, except he'd be a fool to get involved for no good reason. He'd just send her to the sheriff, and they'd just tell her to leave, except that she had nowhere to go.

John would need considerable motivation to stand up to a man of Roy's size and temperament. Could she give him that? She had turned his head now and then, even as a happily married man. As an expert at gauging the intensity with which a man's hormones percolated, she guessed John's to be near the boiling point after a long hot summer without a soft body in his bed at night.

Would he be up to it? John had been a local deputy sheriff himself not so long ago, but he had a drinking problem of his own, and he had been hurt in the accident that had killed Marlene. Joyce knew about psychological injuries that showed no wounds to the world. She had incurred more than her share of those herself. Those kinds of hurts may have taken a lot of the wind out of John's sails.

She turned away from the window with her pulse beating a bit quicker. She could do nothing but try, although Marlene would be a tough act to follow. Regardless, a freshly scrubbed feminine body smelling of jasmine would be hard for even grief and self-recrimination to held at bay. She turned away from the window to dress down to the occasion.

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She hummed tunelessly as her bathwater ran, thinking that any move she made to wile her way into John's grace in this manner would be patently transparent, although it would not pay to be coy. Given but a single opportunity, John must not misconstrue her intent. It was bad enough that he felt pity for her. He could not have helped but hear her screams and Roy's boisterous roaring Saturday night.

It was as likely, though, that he loathed her weakness. Marlene Hartman had told her time and time again to simply walk away from the relationship. John would reason the same way. Neither had understood the subtle ways Roy had undermined her independence and how effective his strategy had worked over the long haul. He had given her everything she needed. She had never held a job, or balanced a checking account. She knew nothing of how to function in the world, skills most people took for granted.

She had developed but one skill in life. She knew how to keep a man from getting bored with her. John's wife was gone and he was hers for the taking. She had no recourse but to make the cold-blooded attempt, and she slid naked into the soapy water hoping that Roy would get his at long last. Alcoholics tended to hate one another. Pitting one against another had to be something of a stroke of genius.

She finished her bath and donned her skimpiest bikini and a whispering satin robe with a loosely tied sash. She then wandered the house in search of an appropriate and believable strategy with which to present herself to her next door neighbor. First impressions counted for everything. She needed a touch of drama to pull off the most important seduction of her life.

She eyed Roy's half bottle of whiskey on the kitchen counter. She rushed to the counter and swiped it aside in a

surge of anger, leaping out of harm's way as it toppled off the counter and shattered on the torn linoleum floor in a shiny glitter of broken glass. She then crouched and selected a shard of tinted glass between thumb and forefinger.

Desperation called for desperate measures. She splayed a trembling hand, lined up a clear edge of glass, and made a quick slice across the fleshy heel just above the wrist. She watched blood ooze from the wound and drip to the floor with a trembling smile.

"Goodness gracious, I seem to have cut myself." She mocked a sigh of exasperation. "And I'm darned if I can find a bandage anywhere. I guess I'll just have to borrow one from the nice man next door."

She trotted out the back door in bare feet and across the lawn between the houses. A tap at the back door fetched the bare-chested specimen of masculinity from the deeper shadows of the house. He had pulled on a pair of pants and sneakers, but his laces were undone.

John Hartman had a rugged face and short hair peppered with gray. His athletic body stirred the passions of the most inveterate spinsters on the Ridge. She tried to ignore the evidence of drinking in his disheveled appearance. "John, hello," she murmured in her most melodic tone of voice.

"Joyce." He said her name a bit too curtly. At least he remembered it. "What can I do for you?"

She held up her bleeding hand. "Got a Band-Aid?"

He eyed the wound with suspicion, then shoved the door open the rest of the way. "I think I can fix you up."

Be my guest, John Hartman. Fix me up good.

She followed him to the kitchen sink. He placed her hand on his right arm, moistened a paper towel with his good

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hand, and dabbed at the wound. He then fetched a tin of bandages featuring Taz and Bugs Bunny from the cupboard and dumped its contents onto the counter.

John caught her studying the clever sequence of moves that enabled him to work with one hand. She turned beet red with embarrassment. "Is it getting any better?" she asked clumsily.

His held his mangled hand to view. "It's not going to get any better."

He peeled the backing off the bandage with his teeth. When she raised her hand for him to apply the bandage to the cut, her sash slipped. The red satin robe parted, and John Hartman's paused in reaction to the sight of a nicely contoured torso exposed to the glow of morning filtering from outside.

"Whoops." She said it with a conspiring whisper and a smile. She fought valiantly with one hand to close the robe, all to no avail. "Sorry. I was planning on doing some sunbathing."

He applied the Band-Aid and patted it in place with a flourish. "You'll have to wait until the sun comes out, won't you?"

He gave her a strained smile. It could go either way from here despite her oversight. She shucked the robe entirely and draped it over one arm. "I was just trying to be modest, but all the girls run around in these outfits nowadays." She looked down at herself. "Aren't they outrageous?"

"It's never the clothing," John said with a wane smile. "It's always the content."

Joyce basked in the compliment. "I'm glad you think so."

Their eyes met, and his smile faded. "That's a nasty bruise you have there."

She turned her face to one side to show him the full array of abuse she had suffered. "Roy hit me last night."

John ran his fingers along her cheek, frowning as he evaluated the severity of the injury. "You know what they say. The first time, shame on him. The second time, shame on you."

"Trite," Joyce spat. "It's not that easy."

"How so? A restraining order usually works."

A surge of humiliation brought tears to her eyes. "It's his house. He won't give me any money. He won't let me work to save any. Where would I go?"

John had only to give the challenge a moment's thought. "You'll have to try for a shelter in Portland."

She knew about the shelter, a place of strangers in a strange town. "I called once. They didn't have room for me."

His expression hardened. "They'll make room, if you show up on their doorstep. They'll help get you settled somewhere."

She nodded reluctant agreement and looked down at the floor. The shelter wasn't what she wanted. It would have to do if she had no alternative. What she really wanted was somebody to take Roy's place. John, perhaps.

John surprised her by snatching a paper towel from a roll on the wall and dabbing at the tears on her cheeks. She stepped away from him, too filled with shame to continue with her charade. "I'm not fooling you a bit, am I?"

"That's a nice tan you have there," he said quietly. "You shouldn't toast yourself in the sun so much. I hear it's not good for the skin."

She burst into laughter that he could treat her so kindly. "Oh, I know, but I hate white boobs and butts!" She

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pulled down a strap of her bikini top to show her shoulder. "See? No white marks."

John met her gaze and said nothing.

Joyce lifted a strap of her bottom to show the curve of her hip. "None down there either."

Someone burst into the kitchen. The screen door slammed against the wall, and she lunged into John's arms for protection.

"Dad! There's a monster on the slope!"

David Hartman stared at her in astonishment. To be caught red-handed in the middle of her tasteless seduction by John's son was more humiliation than she could bear. She turned and brushed past the boy, fleeing the house sobbing.

Racing across the lawn between the houses and through the side door, she made it halfway across the kitchen before a sharp edge of broken glass bit into her right foot. She had forgotten about the shattered bottle. She fell screaming, certain she was about to lacerate her naked body from head to foot on shards of razor-edged glass.

Impact knocked the wind from her lungs. She lay gasping, not daring to move. She waited for a twinge of pain to register, or the warm sensation of blood flooding beneath her.

Time hung suspended in the deathly stillness. A hand slipped beneath her arm. John Hartman gently hauled her to her feet. "Watch the glass," he murmured.

She looked down at her bare midriff in a horrified search of injury. John scooped her effortlessly into his arms, carried her into the living room, and sat her on the couch. Only when she put her foot down did a stab of pain remind her of

the injury to her foot. She crossed her leg over her knee and extracted the offending shard of glass from her skin.

Her habit of going barefoot in the world had paid a modest dividend. The sliver had buried itself in callused skin without drawing blood. She dropped the shard in an ashtray and looked at John then, surprised and more than a bit pleased that he had rushed to her rescue so promptly.

His dark eyes held her a willing captive. He reached behind her back, loosened the slipknot of her bikini top, and slipped it from her shoulders. He rested his hand on her shoulder. "You really do have a nice tan," he said gently, eying her exposed breasts with deliberation. "I don't see a tan mark anywhere."

He stood and backed away. "Excuse me, but I've got a ten-year-old and a monster out on the slope to contend with."

She wanted desperately to run after him and throw herself into his arms. To do so would ruin everything. John Hartman would be untouchable until she had gained his respect.

But the offer had been presented to him, and he'd know the nature of the trade she had in mind. It wasn't one he could lightly dismiss, and one he had just made clear did not offend him.

Seven

John crossed the yard separating the two houses wondering how to explain Joyce to a ten-year-old boy. David waited in the middle of the kitchen, the expression on his face warning of more pressing concerns.

“Okay, so what’s this about a monster on the slope?”

David opened his mouth to speak. He paused and shook his head, pale and trembling. “I guess it’s nothing.”

John brushed a cold sweat from his son’s forehead and decided that it had to be something. “You went checking on that green light of yours, right?”

David nodded frantically.

“What did you find?”

David looked down at the floor, rigid with tension and on the verge of panic.

“I guess it’s nothing.”

“Are you okay?” John said softly.

David forced a reassuring smile. It came out looking grotesque. “I’m okay.”

John decided not to avoid the subject. “Did Joyce upset you?”

David blinked his big brown eyes. “I thought it was Mom for a second.”

John’s smile felt skewed on his face. “It was just Joyce. She cut her hand.”

“Oh.”

Even a ten-year-old would guess the cut hand to have been a pretext for something more. “Joyce is having problems with her boyfriend,” he added.

“Yeah.” The reminder brought David to life. “I hear them fighting sometimes. Are you going to beat up Roy for her?”

John had to laugh. “With one good hand? I’ll get my butt kicked, don’t you think?”

“No way.” But David’s enthusiasm fizzled. He frowned unhappily. “I thought she was Mom for a second.”

“Hardly.”

David eyed him reproachfully. “She didn’t hardly have no clothes on.”

“She was wearing a bikini. You’ll like bikinis when you get a little older.”

David gave a heavy sigh. “I don’t want another mom.”

“Me neither.”

“Really?” David cocked his head suspiciously.

“Joyce is okay, isn’t she? Your mother felt sorry for her.”

David nodded reluctant agreement. “She was always getting beat up and crying to Mom about it.”

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“She’s just a friend, David. Nobody’s going to replace Mom.”

“Promise?”

But David was hiding something behind the small talk. Little if any of his agitation had settled. “What happened on the slope?” John said. “What sort of monster did you see?”

David gave the question a long moment of thought. “I saw something funny, is all.”

“How funny?”

David shook his head, either confused, or refusing to specify for his own reasons.

“I think you’re mad at me because of Joyce,” John suggested.

David put on a crooked smile of his own. “No, it’s not that.” He turned away toward his room.

“Do you want me to go out and take a look around?”

David spun on his heels with a look of panic. “No!” He forced a bit more composure. “It wasn’t anything. Really.”

“You feeling okay?”

John sighed when David grew visibly agitated. He needed to quit asking the question all the time.

“I’m okay, Dad. Really.”

Neither one of them were all that okay, although their crises for the morning had been put on hold. David’s nightmare of the green light had apparently gotten the best of him, and he had survived with flying colors Joyce’s first attempt at seduction. Marlene would have been proud of them both.

John pried his thoughts away from his naked next door neighbor. He went downstairs and wandered the basement den, then switched on the computer in hopes of losing himself in his work. The computer had belonged to

Marlene. Marlene had been the intellectual, the free-lance journalist, although he had always wanted to try his hand at writing. He had to give it his best shot now that he had the opportunity. Without a sense of direction and a purpose to life, he'd drink himself into oblivion. He couldn't let that happen for David's sake.

He sat down and started typing using five fingers of his good hand and three partially working fingers of his bad one. The index finger was rigid and had no feeling, although still useful for punching the top row of number keys. He had been mulling over a few article ideas earlier and managed an hour's worth of brainstorming. Ideas, though, extracted from his untrained imagination as painfully as teeth.

The phone rang. Thankful for the distraction, he snatched up the handset and shoved his chair back away from the desk. "John Hartman here."

The call was from the editor of a small survivalist publication in Arizona. "I have in my hand one of your submissions, an article about military survivalist tactics. It's rather well written. Were you a Marine, Mr. Hartman?"

John tried to place the magazine that Conrad Williams edited. "That goes a ways back, ten years or so."

"No matter. I'm sure you've kept yourself up to date. I've been looking for someone to write about the problems our local paramilitary organizations have been having with the federal government, the FBI and the ATF in particular. We could use a good public relations man working on our behalf."

John leaned his head back and closed his eyes, weary of getting caught up in the crossfire between homemade paramilitary organizations and the government. "I wouldn't be the man you're looking for, I'm afraid."

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“Why not, may I ask?”

“I don’t think your readership would appreciate my background, Mr. Williams. I consider myself an expert in the field of self-defense. I believe it prudent to plan ahead in case of natural disaster, or maybe even an economic crisis, but I don’t consider government to be the enemy of American citizens. I’ve worked in law enforcement myself.”

“Oh, I see.” Conrad William’s tone of voice turned to ice. “Are you with this law enforcement agency at the present time?”

“Not for the past couple of years.”

“John Hartman. Now that I think about it, I’ve heard of you. I thought that name rang a bell.”

John sighed in mounting despair. “Sir, the article I sent you is general interest defense tactics a housewife or a kid on the street could use. Why not let it go at that?”

“You’re the bounty hunter. Hartman Investigations. I knew I recognized that name.”

Conrad Williams was a bit behind the times. Hartman Investigations had preceded his three years with the sheriff’s department. Regardless, it would accomplish nothing to defend himself. He waited in silence for the other shoe to fall. “You took in Walt McCormick.”

His capture of Walter McCormick had made news in three states. McCormick and his friends had been experimenting with fuel-air explosions in the deserts of Nevada. McCormick eluded agents during an ATF raid and detonated a potent explosive in his car when stopped at a roadblock at a highway junction in the middle of a small town in southern Oregon. Three young boys playing in a nearby schoolyard had been killed in the explosion. Protected

by a make-shift titanium shell within the vehicle, McCormick had escaped.

The world had thought McCormick dead as well. John had thought it another Walter McCormick he had picked up not twenty miles from Eagle Junction for skipping bond, but it had been the infamous one, and the capture had made him famous. John made a mental note to scratch Williams and his survivalist publication from his meager list of potential markets.

“Everyone has an interest in politics, Mr. Hartman. We all have our opinions of what is good for our country and what is detrimental.”

“Yeah, but McCormick killed kids. Nobody makes a political statement killing kids.”

“And you’re sure as hell a Zionist spy if you think I’d publish the writings of a FBI informant and sympathizer in my publication, Mr. Hartman.”

The phone slammed in his ear.

John chuckled as the dial tone kicked in. He hung up wondering if Conrad Williams had the clout to blacklist him from any magazines with a decent pay scale.

Or did it matter? Not in the short term. Joyce Blair’s sleek body made it difficult to concentrate on matters of no immediate importance. It had been the better part of a year since he had last held a woman in his arms. Joyce wouldn’t be his best choice of partners, even if it was about time to let go of Marlene’s memory. Her death had set him afloat on the random currents of life. Continuing to tear at himself over the accident accomplished nothing but to undermine what was left of David’s security in life.

He was still thinking about Joyce when David came

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down to the basement at dusk. “You won’t mess around with her, will you?”

John was startled. “What, are we reading minds now?”

“They’re fighting again,” David said, gesturing with a nod up the stairs. “You had better come see.”

John hurried up after the boy. He could hear Joyce’s shrieks of outrage and pain filtering from the house next door even before he reached David’s bedroom window. He had warned Roy in the past against carrying on in front of his son. John parted the curtains and could see the two rushing about the kitchen through the patio curtains.

“She’s a nice lady, isn’t she, dad?”

“She means no one any harm.”

“Can you stop him?”

A long dormant hair-trigger temper began to simmer. “I might get myself in trouble with Gene for not minding my own business. It’s not good having the county sheriff pissed at me, you know.”

“I know, but he never does anything to stop it.”

The sheriff had been able to put a stop to it because Joyce refused to press charges. Still, he couldn’t allow David to witness a steady diet of Roy’s brutality. He glanced at the boy, seriously considering intervening for the first time. “Are you sure you wouldn’t mind? It might get rough.”

David shook his head decisively. “Nope, I don’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get overly excited. If things get out of hand, you know how to call for backup.”

David grinned mischievously. “I’m not a kid any more, Dad.”

John pulled the shade to the window.

“But I wanna watch!”

“Consider yourself lucky I let you watch your horror movies and let it go at that.”

David sat on the bed and sulked.

John wove his way through the house and went out the back way. He jogged across the well-tended lawns and passed through the open patio doors without announcing his presence or attracting the attention of the two combatants.

Roy Rockingham had Joyce backed against the stove. He was using her for support even as he bellowed at her incoherently and punched at her head. Blood streamed from a corner of her mouth.

Roy Rockingham stood a good half foot taller than John's own five-eleven. John used his shorter height to his advantage when he stepped in, caught Roy's raised fist in his left hand, and spun him about. Roy swung with his free hand as expected. John ducked beneath the swing and kned the taller man in the groin. When Roy folded at the waist, John head-butted him in the face and sent him reeling back with blood gushing from his nose.

One hand had sufficed after all. The two hundred and fifty pound trucker with an IQ not much higher than his age of forty-seven opened his mouth to breathe and dropped quietly to his knees. Joyce sidestepped from both men fearfully.

John dragged Roy to his feet with Roy's right arm bent behind his back. He twisted a finger, threatening broken bones and more pain than a sane man would care to deal with, and then used the hold to steer his adversary out the back door and across the lawn to his own kitchen.

Dumping Roy into a chair at the table, he fetched two beers from the refrigerator, tucked each between his legs and popped both tabs. He slammed one down on the table in

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front of Roy and threw a towel into the man's face as an afterthought.

"We had a talk not too long ago," John said. "You said you'd keep the noise down a bit."

Roy's head lolled about on his broad shoulders. His drunken gaze had trouble focusing. Blood leaked between fingers splayed across his mouth and nose. "You're the one to talk, you bastard."

John reached over and cracked the man against the side of the face with his fist. "Don't get smart with me."

Roy flailed about and won the battle to stay seated in his chair. "I'll get you for this..."

John rose ominously to his feet. Roy's eyes widened. He turned his head aside and squeezed his eyes closed. "Okay, I give."

John sat back down and sipped his cold beer. "I don't mean to stick my nose where it don't belong, but I don't want David to have to listen to it. The excitement isn't good for him. I explained that to you."

Roy sobered quickly. He nodded, muttered respectful acquiescence, and took a slug of his own beer. "You bastard, you busted one of my teeth."

"We both drink too much," John said in an even quieter tone of voice.

Roy eyed him and fought the temptation to use Marlene's death as a stab where it would hurt the most. The hard look in John's eye warned against it.

"So, what if you punch too hard one of these nights?" John said. "What if you kill her? We'd be in the same boat, you and I. It's not a place you want to be. You'd be smart to take my word for it."

Roy gave in with a sigh. He threw back his head and guzzled his beer.

“I don’t want to have to do this again,” John said. “We’ll pay a visit to Packerson and one of his nine-by-twelve suites the next time I have to drag you off that woman.”

Roy flashed raw anger. “Your not a cop no more, Hartman.”

“No, but it pays to know the law. I don’t have to be a cop to make a citizen’s arrest.”

“You stay the hell away from Joyce,” the man murmured.

John shook his head regretfully. “Too late, neighbor. She’s history. Make a clean break before you both get hurt.”

Roy banged his hands on the table and launched himself to his feet. He paused when John gazed up at him without flinching.

“You can’t beat on a woman like that,” John said in a level tone of voice. “No matter how scared you think they are, sooner or later they crack. Keep it up and you’re going to wake up some morning with your dick in your hand and your hand nowhere near your crotch. Do you catch my drift?”

Roy blanched at the thought. He turned away and beat a hasty retreat, rebounding off the door jamb on the way through and all but ripping the iron railing from its concrete mounting. He paused to steady himself, sneezed a spray of blood over his protruding gut, and meandered with as much dignity as he could muster back across the properties.

“Wow,” David murmured from the shadows of the doorway to the living room. “You kicked his butt.”

John looked around in surprise. “I thought I told you to stay in your room.”

“One hand tied behind your back,” the ten-year-old said

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with a prideful grin. "I wish I could punch Tony Doran and Steven Farley like that."

"It's not the best way to go in life, son." John shook his head in dismay. He'd never convince the boy. "I've never been a good influence. Your mother was right about that."

"Nobody picks on you," David said petulantly.

John wanted to compare himself to the gunfighters of the old west, most of whom died with a gunshot wound to the back. Maybe some other time he'd give the analogy a try. "So," he said instead. "Have we had enough of green flying saucers and drunken truck drivers?"

David failed to crack a smile. With a worried expression, he turned away and returned to his room.

Joyce Blair appeared at his back door a few minutes later. Livid red bruises had superimposed themselves over the older blue ones. Her split lip continued to bleed profusely. She looked dazed, but she had traded her earlier bikini for a blouse and slacks, both items of clothing torn and stained with blood. She stank of Roy's alcohol and her own vomit.

"Did he pass out?" John said.

She shrugged. "Maybe somewhere between here and the bars. He phoned for a buddy to pick him up along the way and just started walking. He'll stay in town tonight, I think."

John rose to his feet. "I'll drive you to the hospital."

She took a worried step back. "I'm not hurt that bad. Roy won't pay the bill."

"You need a stitch or two in that lip. Do you want a scar?"

She stared at him, helpless and brimming with despair.

"You're that afraid of him?"

“John, he’ll get me if I have him arrested. Even in Portland. He’ll have his friends do it for him.”

John had no answer for her dilemma. “I can take care of the lip, if you think you can sit still for it. I’ve got a med kit or two sitting around.”

She gave a distracted nod of acceptance. John fetched a surplus military medical kit from the basement and guided her on unsteady feet to the bathroom. Before he could stop her, she stripped off her bloodied clothing and tossed it aside disdainfully, not as an act of seduction, but as access to her injuries. She turned to him trembling from head to foot like an injured child, lost in a fog of pain and shock.

None of the bruises and scratches on her body needed more than a dab of antiseptic. He handed her a bottle of mouthwash. “Gargle.”

She did so and spit blood into the sink.

John sat on the toilet stool and pulled her down onto his lap. Joyce stared straight ahead as he put the curved needle in the cloth of his pants and threaded it. He dabbed at the wound with a tissue and doused the needle in the mouthwash. She flinched once and then held steady as he put one and then a second quick stitch to the cut running down the outside of the corner of her lip. Tears fell as he adroitly tied the knot with one hand and clipped the excess with skill born of long battlefield experience.

John was surprised. “I didn’t think you’d sit still for that. Those will have to come out in a few days. Clip them with scissors and use tweezers, one quick tug.”

He started the shower, then guided her into the stall, holding her steady until the warm flow of water flushed away the sheen of blood and sweat from her pale body. “Keep one thing in mind,” he told her when she stood dripping in front

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of the sink mirror, staring in misery at her bruised and swollen face. “What happens tonight doesn’t constitute a bond between us. You need that safe house in Portland.”

She nodded, but she turned and leaned her forehead against his chest. Relenting to the need to console a genuine hurt, he embraced her. Slowly, her trembling went away. “She loved you more than anything,” Joyce murmured through swollen lips. “She told me that a hundred times. I was so jealous of her. Why can’t I ever meet anyone nice like you?”

John stared off into space immolated in the unseen fire of his own personal hell.

Eight

David listened from the sanctuary of his bedroom to his father and Joyce Blair talking, first from the bathroom and then from his father's bedroom, the room that used to be a utility room with the washer and dryer. The appliances had been moved to the kitchen. His father had locked the master bedroom where he and his mother had slept and never went inside. David decided not to panic as long as Joyce and his father weren't going to sleep in his mother's bed.

David was scared. He had a vague idea of the kinds of things men and women did when they were alone together. It angered him that his father might forget his promise and do those things with Joyce. But when he listened closely, he

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heard his father telling her about Portland and how they weren't right for each other.

He relaxed as he judged the evening's excitement finished. Joyce would be gone in the morning. If he did anything to make his father send her home too soon, Roy might come back and hurt her some more. He didn't want that to happen. Joyce had always been nice to him. His mother and Joyce had been friends for as long as he could remember. The sound of their soothing voices talking for hours on end in the quiet house was an important memory of his childhood.

He lay in bed in the dark with his covers pulled to his chin thinking about the way Tony Doran and Steve Farley pushed him around. He vowed never to be mean to anyone once he had gotten his new heart valves. His only concern was whether he'd live long enough to see it happen.

"I wasn't going to hurt you," Jackie Kahl said softly.

Emptiness like cold ice flooded into his mind. His eyes flew open to the dark.

"Come outside and play with me, David Hartman."

His heart tried to pound its way out of his chest. She was just outside his window. He could feel her there waiting for him. He rolled out of his bed and crept to the window to check. He parted the curtain just enough to see.

She stood in the moonlight at the edge of the yard. Her pink dress did not stir in the brisk wind blowing up the slope. How, he wondered, could he have heard her soft voice from so far away?

A dark shape fluttered down from the sky and settled on her shoulder. David backed from the window with a gasp. Three big black cats stood at her side. The ground at

her feet seethed with tiny insect and animal life, and the speckled starlings still circled overhead like a dark halo.

David's knees failed him. He dropped to the floor and tried to call for help. His voice came out sounding like a small frog.

Jackie giggled in the night.

David rose on wobbling legs ran with mincing steps through the connecting halls to his father's bedroom. He threw the door open.

There was only one shape in the bed. It wasn't his father's. He went to the downstairs den to confirm that his father was sleeping on the cot by the computer.

"Come outside and play with me!" Jackie called to him on the inside of his head.

Her voice could follow him anywhere.

He hovered over his sleeping father, but dared not awaken him. The thing that had once been Jackie Kahl would lure him to the mirror if he went outside to look.

Still, he felt secure near his father. He sat cross-legged on the rug thinking that he'd lose it for sure if she came into the house after him. He waited for the sound of her voice again. In time, he curled up on the rug and closed his eyes. It had been a long and hard day. Despite his terrible fear, he drifted to sleep.

His father tripped over him in the middle of the night. A bare foot struck hard across his back. John stumbled forward and caught himself against the wall. He flipped the light switch and looked back in astonishment.

"David! For the love of God!"

David said "ouch" and rubbed the sore spot on his shoulder where a toenail had gouged skin. His father reached

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down and hauled him to his feet by one arm. "What are you supposed to be, the family dog?"

David's eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm having bad dreams!" He sobbed with despair, knowing he'd never be able to communicate the exact nature and extent of the danger. He didn't understand it himself, and he didn't dare endanger his father regardless.

John took him by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth rattled. "You'll make yourself sick! I don't know what you think happened today, but you're going to tell me about it! I need to know what to do for you!"

David had no choice but to relent. He couldn't hope to go it alone. "Jackie is trying to get me to go outside," he said in a quavering voice. "It's a trick, Dad. She's not real. She's like the hawk and the cats. The mirror got her."

His father stared at him without expression. "You're dreaming, kid. It sounds like a real doozy."

David opened his mouth to protest, then clamped it shut. His dad's next challenge would be to put up or shut up. They'd go outside together to see, and if Jackie Kahl managed to trick his father into going into the trees...

David refused to think about it.

"Jackie Kahl, you say?" His father raised an eyebrow. "Orville Kahl's kid? Do you play with her?"

"I didn't know her name," David said, sniffing back tears. "She was just the nasty girl. Tony Doran and Steven Farley said her name was Jackie Kahl."

"David, do you know who Orville Kahl is?"

"You said he bought Spruce Valley."

"And you're having a problem with his kid?"

A problem? David's teeth chattered. "She wants me to go outside and play with her," he whispered, and realized that

he had completely failed to convey the horror of his predicament.

His father gave him an affectionate punch on the chin and a flash of white teeth. "Sounds like you've caught yourself a live one. I guess that means we've both got problems with women."

David couldn't help but grin a little himself from the depths of his overwhelming love for his father. Even if it was his father's fault that his mother had died, at least he had been strong enough to survive and take care of him. But there was nothing his father could do about the mirror in the stand of trees. He understood that now.

His father scooped him into his arms and carried him upstairs to his own bed. The excitement had awakened Joyce. He listening to his father and Joyce Blair talking in shushed tones for a while longer. Even after they had gone back to bed, he imagined whispering coming from every corner of his room.

He waited until the dim gray light of dawn until he gathered enough courage to peek out of the window again and see if he had gone away. She hadn't moved an inch, but she didn't look so threatening in the daylight.

David cracked open his window a few inches. "Go away and leave me alone!" he whispered into the gloom.

Jackie Kahl strolled a little closer, rocking to and fro with her hands clasped behind her back. She was smiling at him. She looked real enough, but he saw a moth flutter right through her.

"I know what you are," David said, keeping his voice low so that it would not waken Joyce and his father. "I saw the mirror. I saw what it was doing."

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Jackie frowned and looked genuinely confused. *"You won't tell my father, will you?"*

So close to him, her voice sounded real, and she looked as real as anything else in the world. As for telling anyone, who would believe him?

"Then you won't tell?" she said, sounding perfectly normal for the first time.

"What if I do?"

"I know what makes you afraid, David."

In response to her threat, the ground stirred at her feet.

"Dead things coming out of the ground," she murmured.

Terror lanced through his body like electricity. "I'm not going to tell anybody!" he cried. "You'll just trick them like you're trying to trick me!"

She studied him for a quiet moment and frowned deeply. "Be my friend and I'll be nice to you."

Shapes like smoke stirred in the air. Patterns of light and dark and shape and color grew more intense. He began to see shapes emerging, like things imagined in summer clouds. They turned themselves into pictures as he watched.

He saw the green curve of his father's car fender, the white sweep of a gull's wing against a patch of blue sky. He could hear the surf roar and even smell a sharp tang of salt spray. He saw images from television. He watched a jet roar off a runway, and a cheetah bound across a flat grassland with herds of wildebeests turning this way and that like a school of fish.

A canary fluttered down from the sky and landed on his window sill. He thought it was an illusion, so the canary flew away, but a white dog came around the side of the house and sat panting outside his window with its pink tongue hanging out.

“Leroy?”

David burst into astonished tears. Leroy had been hit by a car. An image of the dog’s bloodied body was cut short. “Sorry,” Jackie Kahl said. “Bad memories are for punishment. Good memories are for reward.”

A kitten appeared instead, but not outside the window. It sat looking up at him at his feet inside his bedroom. David remembered the kitten just as vividly as Leroy. His mother had gotten it for his birthday. No more dogs, but kittens were fine, even if dogs were best. It was like a stuffed toy except that it was alive with soft white fur, big blue eyes and a pink nose. Nothing bad had ever happened to the kitten. It was big now. Old lady Bernice down the road fed it so much it hardly ever came home anymore.

Puzzled by a memory of something that had happened years ago and the reality of the moment somehow mixed together, David sat cross-legged on the floor and reached for the kitten to test its solidity. He touched soft fur and cradled the feather-weight animal in his arms. It stared up at him fearlessly, purring so hard in contentment that it vibrated against his chest like a machine.

He ran a finger across the kitten’s belly. It attacked playfully with unsheathed claws, then scrambled upright and pounced upon his shoelaces. David looked at his hand where the kitten had raked his skin in its thoughtless play. When had he last dreamed and actually felt pain?

The golden sun rose to the east and burst through the bedroom window. Motes of dust spun and flowed in the misty glare of warm light.

“Don’t let it scratch now,” his mother said with a smile in her voice

His mother?

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David's breath caught in his throat.

A dark shape moved to block the morning sun. He refused to look up. It couldn't be. His mother was gone. She could never come back. It was a reality that could never be undone.

"David?"

It just wasn't possible. He sat rigid, not daring to acknowledge the reality of what was happening.

But the dream wouldn't go away no matter how afraid he had become. His eyes widened with both fear and desperate hope. It couldn't really be her, could it?

She squatted in front of him. He could smell her. The warm sun poured over her, and David looked furtively up into her pretty face and the halo of her golden hair.

Marlene Hartman smiled down upon him like a living angel.

"David? Is something wrong?"

He lunged for her. It didn't matter that he was dreaming. In the lucid dream, he hugged her neck desperately. Weeping bitterly, the nightmare of the past year drained away in the warmth and the golden light of dawn and in the softness of his mother's arms.

He vowed never to let go of her ever again.

Nine

David's cry awakened John. He got up to check on the boy, assuming the cry to have been a nightmare and expecting to find David sleeping peacefully. When he raced up the stairs and pushed David's door open, his eyes fell on the empty bed, then at the pale shape sitting cross-legged in front of the window.

"David?"

David looked around with a beatific smile, his eyes dilated, dark, and unfocused. His face was white, beaded with perspiration, and his lips tinged with blue.

"Oh, Christ..."

John rushed forward and scooped the boy from the floor. David's skin was ice. He lay the boy in his bed, drew the

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cover to his shoulders, and tore his way back down the stairs. He flipped on the den lights and began to dress.

Joyce crept halfway down the stairs clutching a towel to her breasts. "What's the matter, John?"

John grabbed for his comb and wallet. "David's sick. I'm running him to the hospital."

By the time John was ready to leave, Joyce had quietly slipped out the back way clutching her bloodied clothing. John bundled David in a blanket and hurried him to the car.

He paused before slipping behind the wheel, distracted by the strange cry of a distant hawk. He looked about the morning sky and caught sight of a number of birds wheeling about the stand of young spruce in the distance.

Starlings. They startled him momentarily. He had never seen birds wheel in such tight circles. It took an effort of will to shake off the strange sight and put himself back in motion.

He drove at sixty to the edge of town, then slowed to the speed limit. He parked at the emergency entrance of County Central on the far edge of Eagle Junction and carried David through the automatic doors of the cold and sterile emergency ward. A nurse pointed to an empty cubicle.

John had been through the routine before. In a small town, the chronically ill were recognized by sight. He left David to the care of the nurses and paced a waiting room. A nurse showed up within minutes to supplement information already on record. When she left scratching on her clipboard, he went outside to park the car, then paced the empty waiting room until a doctor made an appearance and consulted his clipboard. John had never met this particular man before.

"Mr. John Hartman? And your son's name is David? I've

got Dr. Varley down as his personal physician. I gave him a call and he said to hold the boy and he'd pay a visit and have a look for himself. I'm Dr. Andrews."

"What's wrong with David?" was all John wanted to know.

Andrews gave a helpless shrug. "Not a whole lot I could find. What happened this morning?"

"I found him sitting on the floor beside his bed," John said. "I'm not sure if he was dreaming or what. I couldn't wake him up."

"He said he saw his mother. Is there some significance to that?"

John waited out his moment of stunned surprise. "His mother was killed in an automobile accident several months ago."

Andrews grimaced. "Has anything like this happened before?"

"Nothing even close to it. He's got rheumatic heart disease, though."

"So I see. It's something we have to contend with, but the symptoms I'm seeing appear to be a psychological crisis or trauma of some kind."

John grimaced. "I don't understand. He has a vivid imagination. Maybe it was just a dream."

"It would have to have been a lot more than just a dream to account for disorientation of this magnitude." Dr. Andrews shook his head. "He's alert and resting now. Rather than hazard any guesses, I'd like to wait until Dr. Varley has a chance to examine him. We'll move him to a private room."

"I don't have insurance on the boy," John warned the man. David's medical had slipped away from him during his own stay in the hospital following the accident. He had given

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up on the legal battle to have it reinstated and had yet to try for state or federal help.

Andrews ventured a reassuring smile. “We’ll leave that to the business office to work out. While you’re waiting for Dr. Varley, try to come up with something that David may have found particularly upsetting or stressful to have accounted for this incident.”

Left alone in the waiting room, John paced and backtracked through his memory. He ruled out his encounter with Roy Rockingham or Joyce Blair as a likely cause of David’s upset. The visit to the cemetery may have caused a problem. John remembered David’s unsettling dream of the green light and his wild story of Jackie Kahl wandering the slope in the middle of the night. Maybe something peculiar was going on in the boy’s head after all.

Dr. Varley showed up within the hour. “I’d like to keep David for the day. He’s hallucinating.”

John felt dizzy with confusion and panic. “Is that part of his heart disease?”

“Not at all. I have no idea what’s causing it.”

“Do you suppose he’s been given drugs?” John asked, appalled that such a thing could be even remotely possible, but remembering David’s tale of two bullies picking on him. One of the boys, the mayor’s son, had already reaped the whirlwind for a previous assault. Had they found a way to retaliate?

Dr. Varley shook his head doubtfully. “I don’t think we’re dealing with illegal drugs. I can think of a few natural chemical imbalances that cause symptoms of intoxication, but they’re all far-fetched scenarios. I’ll run a few blood tests to rule out a physiological problem.”

“Something is sure as hell wrong,” John said, determined to press for concise answers.

Dr. Varley nodded absently. “He’s not in any discomfort at the moment. He says he saw his mother. What emotional state was he in at the time you found him?”

“Emotional state?” John thought about it. “Euphoric, I guess. He wasn’t entirely awake.”

Dr. Varley dropped a hand on his shoulder. “Go home and leave the boy to me. I’ll run the tests and have a talk with him. How is your hand doing, John?”

John held the ruined hand out to view. “It hurts like hell.”

Dr. Varley took the hand in both of his own and turned it about for a quick inspection. “Color looks good. Give it another month or two. We don’t want to make any premature decisions. If the pain bothers you...”

“I can handle the pain.”

There was nothing Dr. Varley could do for the hand. In the end, it would have to come off entirely. With a sigh of frustration, the doctor bid his farewell and turned away.

John drove home alone, trying to hold an anxiety attack at bay. David was his only anchor in life, his only tie to the past and hope for the future. Marlene had salvaged him from the downward spiral of alcoholism. If anything happened to David, if her influence in his life ended entirely, chronic dependency would swallow him alive. He had all the personal resources needed to accomplish anything he wanted in life. All he lacked was the simplest of human faith that life was worth living.

When he returned to the house, Sheriff Gene Packerson’s patrol car blocked his driveway. John slammed on the brakes a block away and battled a storm of rage against his run of

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bad luck. Until he saw the line of deputies and civilians moved up the slope from the tree-line, he assumed someone had reported him driving the Volvo. An arrest now would put a driver's license out of reach for the approaching winter. He'd be forced to abandon the house and find an apartment in town.

Maybe something else was going on. Resigning himself to whatever fate held in store, he drove the remaining distance to the house and pulled the Volvo off to one side of the drive.

Sheriff Gene Packerson didn't look around. He leaned against the front fender of his patrol cruiser with a microphone held to his lips. His eyes were on the slope as the search party approached the crest overlooking Spruce Valley. John stopped at the man's side.

"I'm hoping you have a good reason for using the car," was all Packerson had to say to him.

"I ran David to the hospital."

"Is it serious?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

"I can't cover for you if you're stopped and caught driving with a suspended license, or if you're involved in an accident. You're taking a big risk."

"Gene, I've put four miles on the car this summer."

Gene's silence meant that the transgression would be allowed to slide.

"What's up?" John asked.

"The Kahl girl is missing."

The disclosure jolted him and left a feeling of dread in its wake. "Jackie Kahl?"

"Seen anything of her?" Gene looked around, his steel-gray gaze all business. He stood an even six feet in height.

With his stocky build, his square face and shock of white hair, he was an intimidating man to deal with.

“She must have been around here somewhere yesterday,” John admitted. “David was talking about her, and he doesn’t wander too far from the house.”

“We had a report that David got into a fist fight with the girl.”

John found it hard to believe. “Even so, I can’t imagine what harm he could do as sick as he is. He’s weak as a kitten.”

“Thought so myself,” Gene said. “I heard a strange story from the Doran and Farley boys, though. We found their BB guns on the slope, but no trace of the girl so far. Can I speak with David?”

“Check with Dr. Varley before you pay him a visit.”

“I can wait until he gets home. What’s his problem? His heart again?”

John still felt twisted inside. He had no explanation for David’s strange behavior. “I’m not sure.”

“Kids that age don’t need to be sick,” Gene said. “How’s the drinking problem coming along? Got a handle on it yet?”

Gene thought it his right to be so blunt because of his own drinking problem. To Gene’s mind, the difference between them was a matter of degree. Gene’s habits had never interfered with his job. John’s had all but destroyed his life. “Things are going okay, I guess,” was the best he could do without risking dishonesty.

“It’ll take time,” Gene said.

John had heard the story of how Gene had lost his wife to cancer, leaving him with two adolescent girls to raise alone. Gene thought he qualified as a role-model because of his own personal loss. John, though, had never explained his

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own circumstance, and Gene had long since ceased hinting for an explanation. Gene knew of his military background, but not about his three years as a mercenary in the Middle East. Words did not exist to describe and pain and misery he had witnessed, inflicted, and suffered in those brutal and desperate months in the deserts of foreign lands. No one but another like himself knew how one's soul could be lost in the veritable hell of man's inhumanity to man. Marlene had briefly redeemed from him his conviction that he had no a place in the world and no right to exist. In losing her, more was at risk than his old friend and boss, Sheriff Gene Packerson, could possibly imagine.

"Keep your eyes and ears open for me," Gene said. "I've got to find that girl, and she had damned well better be alive. If she's not, my ass is grass and Kahl's going to crop it mighty short."

The sheriff glanced around a second time. "We'll be heading into the valley. Remember that cabin you and Marlene were building? Do you suppose someone may have found it?"

And used it for their own nefarious purposes? "Maybe, if it's still standing, bit it's a good ten miles from here, too far for the kids to have roamed in the course of a day."

Gene nodded acknowledgment. "The girl was last seen near here and in the presence of your son and the Doran and Farley boys, but Kahl's got his own security to look into it, and I don't want you to let them get to you. It's bad enough that I had to fire your ass. I don't want you and me dueling on opposite sides of the fence."

Crossing swords with Packerson wasn't John's concern in that moment. He was thinking about David's

nightmare. *Jackie is trying to get me to go outside! It's a trick, Dad! She's not real, just like the hawk and the cats!*

He glanced into the morning sky and eyed the circling starlings and a lone hawk. What had captivated their attention so completely to behave this obsessively? It wasn't at all natural. Around and around they went, going nowhere, ignoring one another, which wasn't at all typical of either species of bird. "What did the Doran and Farley boys have to say that struck you as strange?" John said.

Gene barked scornful laughter. "Black cats. According to our resident juvenile delinquents, they were shooting Bbs at three black cats. They tell me the Bbs went through the cats without hurting them."

"Through them?"

"Through as in too much adolescent imagination, is my best bet. I'm guessing they're covering something up, and I'm hoping like hell they didn't shoot Jackie Kahl with those infernal BB guns. I suppose they could have put one in her brain through an eye socket."

Packerson watched his men move up the slope and sighed. "They're not going to find anything here in the open. They would have dragged her into the trees, either in the valley or back down the slope to the tree-line. There'll be hell to pay if that's what happened."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," John volunteered helplessly.

"I'll be more than glad to have your help, John. You know, I never did manage to replace you. You tackle that drinking problem for good, and I'll have you back on the force in no time."

Which wasn't the truth, not with his bad hand.

John nodded absently, far more eager to solve a short

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term problem. What had David experienced on the slopes the previous day to have driven him to the brink of a nervous breakdown?

Ten

At noon on a cloudy Monday morning, in a rundown boarding house on the outskirts of Eagle Junction, Julian Ackorage handed over a fistful of crumpled bills and took his key with a murmur of thanks, but without once looking into the gnarled face of the gum-chomping landlord. He waited until the door clicked shut before inspecting the best his money had been able to buy.

The furniture was ancient but too worn and damaged to be thought of as antique, the floor stained by decades of spills and the wallpaper yellowed and peeled away from the cracked plaster. The sink in the bathroom spat rusted water at him. The cracked toilet leaked into the rug and filled the room with the stench of a sewer.

None of that mattered. He hurried instead to the front

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window and fought with the rotting frame until it broke free and lifted open. He took a deep breath of the fresh outdoors and closed his eyes in ecstasy.

The room filled with the chiming laughter of children. Hundreds surged about in the chain-link enclosed playground of the elementary school directly across the street.

Julian breathed a shuddering sigh of relief. Feeling a bit unsteady on his feet after his initial surge of excitement, he pulled a chair over and sat down. He spent the next hour staring down at hordes of little girls. A moment with any one of them would have been enough to put him back in prison for the rest of his life.

Nothing at all mattered for the balance of the day. The school bell rang and took them all inside and out of sight, but Julian waited with baited breath until they gushed forth from the school later in the afternoon and poured out into the streets. One or twice a pretty little face tilted upward and saw him looking. Whenever it happened, Julian's heart skipped a beat.

When they were gone, he closed his eyes to fantasize. If only he had a safe way to lure one of them to his apartment. If only he had a means of ensuring their silence. But they were too young to bribe, and, if seen leading some little blonde angel away from the school grounds, he was too distinctive with his long silver-gray hair and thick glasses to be easily forgotten. He had risked it once. It had put him behind bars for fifteen long years. The father of the child had threatened to kill him when he got out. He couldn't be certain an attempt on his life wouldn't still be carried out.

But he hungered so for those soft young creatures and their trusting eyes.

He rose to his feet finally. Every bone in his body creaked. Prison food had kept him slim, but physically weak and as flexible as a dried noodle. Chuck, his parole officer, had given him a deadline within which to register as an offender and find a job, as if he was physically fit to work. Julian wasn't looking forward to filling out employment applications.

Previous employment? Oregon State Prison.

Previous occupation? Pedophile.

Personal skills? Self-gratification.

It was a miracle that he had been turned loose at all. Neither did that matter. He hadn't looked forward to getting out, except for the opportunity to find one more victim with which to fulfill a decade's worth of his ultimate fantasies. And then he would have to kill himself as he had always planned. He fantasized that the FBI would corner him with his three hundredth victim in a fifteen hundred dollar a month penthouse financed by a career of kidnapping and blackmail. He would die in a bloody shoot-out.

In his wildest dreams, maybe.

Going straight, he reminded himself, was equally unlikely. Sooner or later, he would have to look someone in the eye and risk being beaten to death for what they would see there, or be laughed at until he died of humiliation. As a registered sex offender, everyone would know his face.

Physical hunger, too, gnawed at his gut. He had a few bucks left, and then he'd have to go after food stamps, beg Chuck to put him back in jail, or jump out the window. There was that one other lethal alternative, to go on the prowl again even before he had eaten a decent meal, although he hadn't expected to make his move so soon after being released.

Wouldn't Chuck be surprised? Julian replayed his last

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encounter with his parole officer in the arena of his mind's eye. It had begun with the question that had plagued him since his release hours earlier. *"You going to tell everybody about what I did?"*

Chuck glanced up from his paperwork. "You don't think parents got a right to know you're in town?"

"I paid my debt to society."

Chuck put the papers down and leaned back in his chair. "What debt did you incur, Julian? Describe to me exactly what debt you incurred to put yourself in prison for fifteen years?"

Julian went rigid, raging on the inside with anger and humiliation.

"Did you steal a car? Rob a bank?"

Julian couldn't maintain eye contact knowing what was coming next. He looked quickly away.

"Did you hurt somebody's little girl," Chuck said softly. "Would you like to tell me what you did with her? Maybe I'm a sick bastard like you. Maybe I'll get off on it. What do you think?"

Julian pursed his lips, thought it unlikely, and said nothing.

"I got a little girl at home myself, Julian. Blonde, blue-eyed. She's four years old."

Julian's gaze darted back to the icy stare.

"Tell me my wife and I don't deserve to know you're in town. Tell me that you paid your debt to that child who has to live the rest of her life with the memory of your ugly face, the rancid stench of you, and the horror of what you did to her."

"My life has been threatened," Julian said with as much dignity as he could muster.

Chuck gazed at him for a time. "The law's never been

good at preventing crime, Julian. It never prevented yours. The father of that child you hurt is going to have to decide for himself whether killing you is worth whatever debt to society he incurs. I'm sure he's given it lots of thought."

Julian thought he was going to be sick. And in the next second he was. He puked all over Chuck's office floor and a corner of his desk.

Cockroaches ventured from the woodwork in the afternoon. They filled the sink, fled in all directions when he turned the bathroom light on, and lurked beneath and behind each and every loose object in the room. He didn't bother locking the room behind him when he left to follow the children home from school. He had no intentions of ever returning.

He walked away from the old, dirtier end of town to the service stations and fast-food restaurants lining the highway. He had seen an isolated residential area perched high on a hill on the way in. The surrounding wilderness offered the perfect place to hunt and consume his chosen prey. He was climbing the winding blacktop when the sun dropped behind the horizon behind him. To save time, he turned off the road and started up a clear slope to where a stand of trees towered against the blue sky. The houses he had seen lay just beyond.

A few hundred feet from the road, he stopped dead in his tracks. A little girl in a short pink dress blocked his way. A large bird circled above her, and a small flock of little black birds. Julian stood quietly for a time, puzzled, but more afraid that he'd scare her away than unnerved by unusual circumstance. He inched forward, certain she would run. If she did, he was in no condition to chase after her, although he'd try, and failure would be a torture greater than any hell

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had ever threatened. His passions had peaked to unbearable levels since his release.

“Little girl!” he called out. “I’m lost! Can you help me?”

It was a ploy that had worked well in the past. Little girls were always eager to help a lost soul.

He stopped well back from the child when he saw the things moving at her feet. Bugs. Repulsed, he took a step back.

They were gone in an instant, but he paused in confusion and glanced again at the circling birds. Maybe he was like a deprived alcoholic suffering dementia. Suddenly, even the birds overhead were gone. That left only the little girl in the pink dress.

She wasn’t at all pretty. Ugly as a mud fence, actually, and a bit on the plump side. But if the pickings in Eagle Junction were this easy, he’d probably do better the next time around.

“Want to play with me, mister?” She turned and pointed toward the nearby stand of trees a bit higher on the hill. “We can play Little Red Riding Hood in the dark woods. You can be the big bad wolf and try to *eat* me.”

Julian gawked in astonishment. Was she for real? She had to be. At her age, guile was a decade away. Besides, how could she have known that the Little Red Riding Hood story was one of his favorite fantasies? She would have to discover for herself the exquisite manner in which he had modified it to his own satisfaction.

Julian quivered with tension. “Really? Can I?”

“My name is Jackie Kahl,” she called out in a voice that rang with clarity. “What’s your name, mister?”

“Bob,” Julian said on impulse. “My name is Bob.”

Jackie smiled and turned away. Julian followed her up

the hill. Ahead, he could see the ground crawling again, although it all went away as he got closer to the trees. He put it down as a mirage caused by the fading daylight. He had paced a jail cell for so long, he would have forgotten about such things.

Jackie Kahl reached the trees. She glanced back at him, then vanished into the underbrush.

“Little girl?”

“I’m in here, Julian!”

Julian took a step or two before freezing in his tracks. He had told her his name was Bob. He was certain of it. A creeping sense of dread dampened some of his blind lust, which put him in a quandary, because only two things motivated him in life, his all-pervasive passion and chronic fear of retribution.

“Ouch!”

The cry was one of genuine alarm.

“Mister, I fell down and hurt myself!”

He had heard that taut pitch of pain and fear before. Many times before. It stirred his very soul.

“I can’t get up! Mister, please help me!”

Seduced by crippled prey, Julian lunged forward into the underbrush. He stopped dead and teetered at the edge of a small pool of water. He spun his arms to keep his balance, but lost it anyhow and put his right foot forward, resigned to getting at least one shoe wet.

His foot plunged through a depth he had not anticipated, and as he fell, he saw clothing lying on the surface of the pool. He fell face down into a pink dress stained with blood, underpants, patent leather shoes, a hair ribbon, all the things worn by the little girl waiting for him on the other side of the water. For some inexplicable reason, maybe for no

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reason other than to watch him get his feet wet, she had tricked him.

Below the surface, the dry wings of birds fluttered into his face. He plowed through myriad of cold bugs and moist amphibians. Here too, the little girl lay waiting for him, all pink and plump and naked with opened arms. They impacted with one another, and somehow merged. In more surprise than any two human beings had ever known, they came together and united.

Above the mirror, a pair of man's pants floated to the surface to join the pink dress. Other clothing appeared, and then a partial denture plate, a stainless steel surgical pin and three screws that had once held a shattered femur in place.

Overheard, the crow and the starlings began their mindless wheeling through the evening sky. The intelligence projecting their image had no idea what kind of prey they might attract, but it knew that flesh fed upon flesh wherever it was to be found in the universe.