

The Nightmare People

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

Wildside - Horror



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THE NIGHTMARE PEOPLE



The next step in the evolution of evil ...
Lawrence Watt-Evans

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SECOND EDITION

*Dedicated to
Richard Tucholka
because he's partly responsible.*

Chapter One:

Wednesday, August 2nd

1.

The air was hot and thick, heavy with moisture, and he lay unwillingly awake beneath its weight, his bedsheet soaked in sweat. The ceiling was gray and blank above him when he opened his eyes. When he closed them and tried to sleep, or pretended to try, he saw only a darker gray.

He thought he could almost hear the air moving about him, a slow, sluggish, viscous movement, like the shifting of wet sand, and he wished that his clock-radio were an old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock, so that at least he would have the ticking to mark off time for him. As it was he lay in an infinite timelessness, feeling the perspiration ooze from his back into the mattress.

He forced a sigh out into the air above him and turned his head. The glowing red digits on the clock read 3:09 a.m.

There was no point in pretending he could sleep, he decided. It was too hot, too humid, the air too still and the silence too deep.

He could sleep later, by daylight, after he had dragged someone from Maintenance up to fix the air



conditioner. He was almost two weeks ahead at work, and half the department was off at the beach anyway. No one would care if he took Wednesday off and slept all day.

If his bedroom stayed this hot, however, he was not sure whether he would ever sleep again.

He wondered whether the outside air had cooled off enough to be better than the air in his apartment. He had carefully hoarded what little coolness remained since his air conditioner had failed, but now, he admitted reluctantly, it was gone. It was time to open the windows and gain whatever benefit the warm, foul outside air might hold.

Wearily, he swung his legs off the bed and leaned forward, his arms resting on his thighs. Breathing required a conscious effort.

After a moment's rest he stood up and took the one step necessary to reach the window. He stretched out one hand, groping in the gray gloom, and found the drawcord of the drapes. He tugged, and the drapes slid away from the window, revealing the streetlight world beyond.

Something was blocking his view.

With a shock, he saw that eyes were staring in at him, glowing red eyes beneath a blue-black slouch hat, eyes that were too large to be human, set in a dark, bony face, a face too long and narrow to be human.

He stared back, too surprised to react.

The misshapen red-eyed face parodied his surprise; the eyes widened like his own.

There were no whites, and the pupils were vertical black slits in scarlet that blazed like neon.

Between the eyes was a mere sketch of a nose, a narrow grey ridge down the center of the face, ending in two large, open, sharp-edged nostrils.

Below that, thin black lips rimmed a pursed little slit of a mouth.

Above that face the hat was like a patch of starless night sky, a heavy, old-fashioned hat that made no sense at all on a hot August night.

For a moment he tried to tell himself that it was his imagination, or a distortion of his own reflection, but then the apparition smiled at him, a humorless grin revealing long needle-sharp teeth, far too *many* teeth, gleaming pale gray in the darkness. That was not his reflection, distorted or not.

A misshapen, attenuated hand appeared, one black, clawlike fingernail touched the brim of the hat in sardonic salute, and abruptly the thing was gone, sliding suddenly away in a direction the man inside the bedroom could not identify.

Startled out of his paralysis by this disappearance, he snatched at the window latch and flung up the sash; he wanted to lean out the window and call after whoever — or whatever — had looked in.

The screen blocked him. He leaned up against it, knowing that by the time he could work the stiff, uncoiled, spring-loaded catches the peeper would be long gone.



He stared out at shadowy treetops above the parking lot and saw no trace of anyone at the window, no sign of anyone at all, and through his surprise and muddled weariness he remembered abruptly that he was on the fourth floor, the top floor, and that the only balcony was outside the living room, a good twenty feet away.

The window was thirty feet up in a sheer brick wall. Nobody could possibly look in that window.

He sank slowly back onto the bed until he was sitting with his hands at his sides, suddenly unsure of the reality of what had just happened. Perhaps he had fallen asleep after all, he thought, enough to dream the apparition.

That had to be it, he told himself. After all, he could see nothing outside now but the motionless leafy branches, the dark mass of the building across the way, and the dim glow of distant streetlights.

He stood again and stepped toward the window. Thick, moist air brushed against his face, warm and muggy, but cooler than the air in his apartment. There was no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

He stepped back again, leaving the sash wide open.

He shuddered. He was out of practice facing nightmares. He did not remember having any since he was a kid.

He had had one now, though. That ghastly face could be nothing else. It had seemed completely real for an instant, but it couldn't have been. It had to have been a nightmare.

It *had* to have been a nightmare.

Well, he told himself, if he was sleepy enough to dream, he was sleepy enough to sleep, whatever the weather. He lay down on the bed, shifted in a vain effort to get comfortable, then closed his eyes.

Sleep came slowly, and reluctantly, and in tiny increments, but at last it did come.

2.

The world sounded wrong when he awoke.

Outside the window traffic growled and murmured and voices flickered in and out of audibility, just as they always did by day, but something was subtly different, and he knew from the sound that it was not his usual hour for waking — or if it was, then something was wrong somewhere nearby.

He rolled over, blinking in the bright wash of sunlight, and puzzled out the digits on the clock: 11:23 a.m. That was later than he had really expected to sleep. He had half expected to awaken at 7:30, as he usually did, despite having stayed up until after 3:00.

The thought of 3:00 a.m., and the moist heat that still filled the room, reminded him of the apparition he had seen at the window, and again he shuddered slightly. What on Earth, he asked himself, had brought on anything like that? How had he come up with such a thing?

He remembered the long silver-grey teeth, pointed needle-sharp, gleaming dully — how truly hideous! What had he done to dredge up such an image from his subconscious?



and that hat, that great dark slouch hat, the brim turned down on one side, how had he dreamt up something that was simultaneously as frightening and absurd as that hat?

He shook his head, clearing away the memory of the face, clearing his thoughts of the cobwebs spun there by the spiders of sleep, readying himself to face the day — or what was left of it, at any rate.

Coffee, he thought. He rose and let himself fall forward in the direction of the kitchen, catching himself with his feet and transforming the fall into a shambling walk.

The air seemed cooler; he wondered if the little heat wave that had made the last few days so unbearable was over. The summer, and the spring before it, had been cool and wet, so that when temperatures finally had reached the nineties the heat had seemed even worse by comparison.

He was halfway down the hall when someone knocked on the door of the apartment.

Cursing, he turned back to the bedroom, snatched his bathrobe from the back of the door, and shuffled toward the living room.

“Police!” someone called, “Is anyone in there?”

“Oh, shit,” he muttered. “I’m coming!” he called, pulling on his robe as he crossed the living room. The cotton clung to the sweat on his back.

He heard voices, but couldn’t make out the words; someone was talking in the hallway. He thought the tone was one of surprise, maybe fear — that puzzled him.

He stopped and peered through the lens in the door as he knotted the belt.

Two men in police uniforms stood there — and one had his gun out.

He froze, with his hand on the doorknob.

He could not think of anything he had done, anything he was involved with, anything anyone he knew might have done, that could logically account for the presence of a cop with a drawn gun outside his door.

He’d heard stories about drug sales in the area, but nothing like that had happened here on the fourth floor of C Building in the Bedford Mills Apartments, and he certainly hadn’t been involved in any illegal transactions, here or anywhere else in Diamond Park. Even back in college he’d never done anything stronger than pot, and he hadn’t even done that in several years.

“Let me see your badges!” he called through the closed door.

The two cops glanced at each other; then each, in turn, showed his badge to the lens.

He had no idea what to look for in determining whether the badges were authentic. They certainly looked real, as far as he could see in the distorted view through the peephole.

The door was equipped with a cheap little chain-lock. He knew that it wouldn’t stop a serious intruder for more than a few seconds, but he put it on anyway, and with a tightening in his stomach, he opened



he door a crack.

One policeman, the larger one, was standing at the door. The other, the one with his gun drawn, had stepped back well out of reach, and had the gun raised — not pointed anywhere in particular, but up and ready, a black silhouette against the drab gray of the concrete block wall.

The big cop said, “Sorry to bother you, sir, but could we have a few minutes of your time? We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

The cop’s voice was calm, polite, unhurried — but beads of sweat gleamed on his forehead, and his partner was still there with the gun.

He was not stupid or ignorant; he had read of “good cop/bad cop” scenarios. This, however, was carrying the idea to a bizarre extreme.

“What about?” he asked, trying to sound normal.

He failed; his voice was still clogged with sleep, and the question came out as a hoarse whisper.

“Well, sir, that’s hard to explain. If you could come downstairs and talk to the lieutenant...”

“I’m not dressed,” he pointed out. His voice was better this time.

“There’s no hurry,” the cop said diffidently. “You can get dressed.”

He was becoming annoyed, despite the presence of the gun in the background.

“What’s this about, officer?” he demanded.

The cop hesitated, and then said, “It’s a missing persons case, sir. We hope you’ll be able to help us.”

He was still puzzled. Why the gun? Why should he come downstairs and talk to a lieutenant, instead of answering questions here?

“Who’s missing?” he asked.

The cop hesitated again, almost glanced at his partner, and then thought better of taking his eyes off the open door. “Your neighbors,” he said quietly.

“Which ones?”

That drew the longest hesitation yet.

Finally, the cop took a deep breath and answered, in a voice that almost shook.

“All of them,” he said.



His tie was crooked.

So was the lieutenant's.

Neither of them gave a damn. Both men had put ties on out of habit, despite the heat, and from nothing more than habit. Both were concerned with matters other than their appearance just now.

He was still confused, and without his morning coffee he felt half asleep. He had stumbled and almost fallen on the stairs coming down; the police vehicles, the people milling about on various tasks, were all very distracting. Even so, he realized almost immediately that something very, very strange was going on, far stranger than a bunch of confused cops.

The parking lot was full.

At 11:30 on a Wednesday morning, the apartment complex lot was full.

He had never seen it full at midday before, not even on weekends. Ordinarily it emptied out almost completely during the morning rush hour, and then filled back up in the evening. People went to work, after all, and they drove their cars to get there.

Except that this time, they hadn't. The police had parked their half-dozen cars and vans in fire lanes or on the apartment complex lawn, because there were no vacant spaces.

For the first time, it began to really sink in that the cop had said *all* his neighbors were missing.

One of the cops who had come to his door, the one with the gun, had gone on back down while he was dressing; the other was close at his side, but not touching him.

Half a dozen uniformed officers were trotting about, counting the one escorting him; as many others in plainclothes, but still obviously cops, were standing around talking quietly and seriously, or reading from clipboards.

His escort had led him to a nondescript man in a yellow shirt with the sleeves rolled up, whose clipboard lay beside a brown sportcoat atop the retaining wall between the lawn in front of D building and the parking lot. His brown tie was loose and uneven.

"Here he is, Lieutenant," the uniformed cop said.

"Thanks," the man in rolled sleeves answered, looking up. He nodded, but did not offer his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Buckley," he said. He turned and fished something from a pocket of his jacket.

The civilian watched, puzzled, simultaneously trying to figure out what was going on and why he had bothered to put on a tie. He didn't usually wear one, after all.

Somehow, though, going to talk to a police lieutenant had seemed like an occasion that called for a tie — something like jury duty, perhaps. He had put one on, a blue print to go with his powder-blue shirt, but he had tied it badly, and it hung askew.

"Your name?" the lieutenant asked, holding up a pocket tape recorder. Under a thick layer of tinted plastic the tape-reels were turning.



Smith,” he replied, “Edward J. Smith. And yes,” he added wearily, as he always did, “My name is really Smith, it’s not an alias; do you want to see I.D.?”

“If you have any handy, this man will check it,” the lieutenant replied, completely seriously, nodding to a small, balding man in plainclothes.

Smith fished his wallet out of his pants pocket, unclipped the set of plastic windows that held his driver’s license, insurance cards, and credit cards, and handed it over.

The lieutenant watched silently. When the other man had the cards securely in hand, he asked, “Mr. Smith, did my men tell you anything about what’s going on here?”

“No,” Smith replied immediately. He started to say more, then thought better of it.

Buckley nodded. “Well, that’s probably because we don’t *know* what the hell is going on here,” he said. “Not yet, anyway. We’re hoping you can tell us.”

“I’ll tell you anything I can,” Smith replied.

The lieutenant glanced at the clipboard, without moving it from where it sat atop the retaining wall, then asked, “What do you do, Mr. Smith?”

“I’m a programmer,” he answered.

“Computers, you mean?”

Smith nodded. He supposed that there could be other jobs where people called themselves programmers.

“I see,” the lieutenant said. “If you don’t mind, why are you home today? Were you sick?” He peered searchingly at Smith’s face, as if looking for some trace of illness.

“No,” Smith said, “I just needed a day off. I’m ahead on my work, and I didn’t sleep well last night because of the heat — the air conditioning unit in my apartment’s busted, and I couldn’t get maintenance people out here yesterday because it was after four-thirty when I got home, and I’m up on the top floor, which makes it worse, so I wanted to sleep while I could and I didn’t set the alarm.”

The lieutenant nodded. “Yeah, it was a scorcher yesterday.” He looked down at Smith’s shoes for an instant, scratched an ear, and then looked up again.

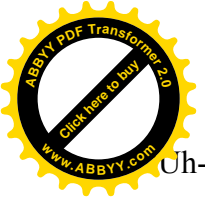
“Did you see or hear anything strange last night, or this morning?” he asked. “Or smell anything, maybe?”

“No,” Smith said, automatically. The memory of the nightmare, that monstrous face at the window, came back to him suddenly, and he started to mention it, but then he stopped. That hadn’t been real.

It couldn’t have been real.

The lieutenant was watching his face. “You’re sure there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary?”

He shrugged. “I had a nightmare, first one in years, but that’s all. I figure it was the heat.”



Uh-huh.” The lieutenant nodded, glanced down again, then back at Smith’s face.

“Mr. Smith,” he said, “We’ve had more than a dozen calls this morning about people who live here, in this complex. A bus driver who was supposed to pick up here for day-camp was one of them; there wasn’t a single kid at the bus stop at the entrance this morning, where there were supposed to be eight or ten, and that was strange enough that he let us know about it. We’ve had people call who were worried about senior citizens who don’t answer the phone, and people who didn’t show up for work and didn’t call in sick — people like nurses and airline pilots who just don’t do that sort of thing. Nobody could reach the rental office, not even the company’s other offices. It was pretty obvious by nine o’clock that something was wrong here, and we came out to see what it was.” He paused, took a breath, and went on, “Mr. Smith, my men have checked through all sixty-four apartments here, with pass-keys we got from the management company’s home office down in Silver Spring, because there wasn’t anybody in the office here. And before you ask, yes, we have a warrant; a hundred and twenty, hundred and thirty, whatever it is, that many people missing is pretty good probable cause for *something*. We don’t know what, but something. So we checked all sixty-four apartments, and sixty-three of them were empty, as if everybody had suddenly gone for a stroll last night and hadn’t come back. Nothing disturbed or broken, but nobody there. Not so much as a dog, or a cat, or even a canary. Hell, we haven’t even seen a stinking cockroach! You, Mr. Smith, are the only living thing we’ve found in this entire apartment complex. The only one. The only person living *or* dead. We estimate that at least a hundred, and maybe as many as two hundred people have vanished overnight, along with a few dozen cats, dogs, parakeets, and hamsters. You, and you alone, didn’t vanish.”

The lieutenant took a breath, let it out, glanced around, then turned his gaze back to Smith.

“Now, think carefully,” he said. “Are you *really* sure that you didn’t see or hear anything strange last night?”

4.

He told them about the nightmare, and the heat, and the broken air conditioner. He told them about his clock-radio that didn’t tick, and his neighbor in C42, Mrs. Malinoff, who creaked when she walked, and his neighbor across the hall in C44, whom he never saw but whose name was on his mailbox, Attalla Sleiman, who kept a cat that meowed occasionally. He told them about his mother back in Boston, and his sister in Ohio, and his father who’d been in Florida last they’d heard. He told them about answering an employment ad from DML Communications and getting hired to work in Rockville, and moving to Diamond Park because he couldn’t afford to live any closer in toward Washington. He told them about driving out here in April and finding an apartment, and about the Goodwin kids from downstairs who had helped him carry in all his stuff and had wanted to play games on his computers.

He told them everything he could think of, over and over again, while the sun beat down on him and his sweat oozed from every pore. He drank lukewarm lemonade from a cop’s thermos, and then told them everything all over again.

And somehow none of it made any sense at all.

The lieutenant’s tape recorder ran out of tape; he put it back in his pocket, sighed deeply, looked around at the cars that jammed the parking lot, and said, “All right, Mr. Smith, thank you. If you want to go back to your apartment, you can, but I’d appreciate it if you let a couple of my men look it over first. You can wait out here; sit in my car, if you like.”



"I'll use the bench," Smith said, pointing to the park bench that stood against the retaining wall, beside the steps between his building and the next — between C Building and D Building.

The lieutenant nodded, and Smith walked nervously over.

Nobody paid any attention to him. He brushed away imaginary dirt, and then settled down onto the wooden slats, slats that were faded and warm from the sun.

The back of the bench pressed his sweat-soaked shirt into his back, and the dampness felt horribly cool and clammy. He leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, and stared.

He was facing the parking lot, facing two cars, an old blue Chevy and a silver-grey Toyota hatchback. He knew the Chevy belonged to Bill Goodwin, the oldest of those kids in C12; the Toyota could have been anybody's. The sun glared blindingly off its bright finish, obscuring details.

Beside the Toyota was a Honda Accord, beyond that an old Ford van; beside the Chevy stood another nondescript coupe that he couldn't identify exactly from where he sat. They were all completely normal; a sweater was draped across a steering wheel, a parking decal from Johns Hopkins was stuck crookedly to one end of a bumper, a Redskins sunshade was propped up behind a windshield.

And their owners were missing.

He shivered, despite the sun, and stood up.

Looking over the cars he could see a police van, sitting in the middle of the lot, the back doors open and a uniformed officer moving things around inside. Beyond it was the other row of parked cars, facing the other direction, and beyond that was the green divider lined with poplars, separating this parking lot from the next, his building and its neighbor from the two across the way.

The other lot was just as full as his own, and police were hurrying in and out of both the buildings on that side, too. The entire complex was affected, all four buildings.

He looked for his own car, a red 1986 Chevy Spectrum, and spotted it right where he had left it, between a white mini-van and an old VW Beetle. None of the three had moved since he had parked there the previous evening.

His eye followed the line of cars out to the left, out to the street, where traffic was zipping by normally, ignoring the crowded lot. The world was going on about its business.

He turned back the other way, to his right, to the little patch of trees that separated the apartment complex from the unfinished office building on the next street. Sunlight glinted from the new chain-link fence that had recently gone up around the office building, erected hurriedly by creditors when the original builder had gone bankrupt.

Not that the fence would actually stop anyone; he had seen kids slipping under it easily, all along the back. He peered, trying to see if the new builder had started work yet.

Something was moving in the shade of the trees.

He blinked, and looked again. Someone was walking through the grove, straight toward the parking lot.



He stared.

It was a woman, a plump middle-aged woman wearing a flowered nightgown or housedress and carrying a small dog, looking very much like a cliché dowdy housewife, the sort that might turn up on any prime time sitcom, except for one bizarre incongruity.

She was wearing a hat.

On a hot, humid day in August, she was wearing a broad-brimmed man's hat.

She was wearing a dark slouch hat, blue-black, with one side of the brim turned down.

5.

Smith stared silently at her, completely incapable of deciding what to do.

Then one of the policemen noticed the woman, and pointed her out to Lieutenant Buckley. Buckley spotted her, and called a few orders that Smith didn't catch.

Three cops trotted down the parking lot toward the woman; a fourth headed for a patrol car. The woman smiled and waved at them, her little dog tucked in the crook of one arm.

Smith stared, as the realization slowly percolated into his dazed mind that he recognized the woman. He didn't know her name, but he had seen her here and there about the complex, walking her dog or taking her trash to the dumpster. Even the flowered nightgown was familiar.

But he had only seen the slouch hat in his nightmare.

Had it been a nightmare? He had fought down any suspicion that it was more than that, but that hat — it was hard to be certain, given the distance, and the hot glare of the afternoon sun compared to the gloom of night, and the distortions of a sleep-clouded memory, but it certainly looked like the hat from his dream.

If he had really seen that hat, then it hadn't been a nightmare after all, it had been real.

Either that, or he was still dreaming.

That was a comforting thought; it could make sense of the mass disappearance. He couldn't accept it, though. The world around him was too real, too solid. He didn't sweat like this in his dreams.

So he was awake, and the hat was real.

It could be a coincidence, he tried to tell himself as the first cop reached the approaching woman. Or maybe he had seen the hat somewhere and it had stuck in his subconscious.

Or maybe it hadn't been a nightmare, but some elaborate practical joke, a false face on a pole held up to his window — but that didn't make any sense. How could anyone have known he would look out the window just then, at 3:09 in the morning and no other time? How could the face have *smiled* at him?

No, a subconscious memory of the hat, that had to be it.



"Hello, officer," the woman said. He heard her plainly, her voice bright and cheerful. "Was there really a bomb?"

"Lieutenant!" the cop called.

Lieutenant Buckley was already on his way; he brushed past Smith and continued down the sidewalk.

Smith followed, not entirely sure whether it was simple curiosity that drove him, or something more complex and dangerous.

The woman had stopped in the middle of the parking lot, the three policemen — no, Smith corrected himself, three officers, two men and a woman — standing in a semi-circle around her, carefully out of reach.

The lieutenant left the sidewalk and squeezed between two cars; Smith stopped there and leaned forward to listen, his hand on the peeling vinyl top of an old Lincoln.

"Ma'am," the lieutenant said while still walking, "What's this about a bomb?"

"Well, was there a bomb or not?" the woman demanded. "That's what that boy told us, who came and got us all out of bed this morning — he said some of those crazy Iranian terrorists had planted dynamite all around the place and were going to blow us up. Did they really?"

"Hold on, ma'am," Buckley said, raising his hands in a calming gesture. "We don't know anything about any terrorists. Can you tell me what happened?"

The woman stared at him. "Are you on the bomb squad?" she demanded.

"No, ma'am," he replied, "I'm a detective, Lieutenant Daniel Buckley. And you are?"

She considered, and apparently decided it was a fair question. "I'm Nora Hagarty," she said. "I live in B22. This is Bozo." She held up the dog, a small gray mongrel with a surly expression.

"Pleased to meet you," Buckley said, with a faint nod. "Ms. Hagarty, you live in Apartment B22, here in the Bedford Mills complex?"

"That's what I said, Officer," she answered, her smile gone.

"Ms. Hagarty," Buckley asked, "What happened this morning? If you don't mind, why are you out here in the parking lot in a nightgown?"

"Well, that's what I was saying, Officer!" She shifted Bozo to her other arm and explained, "Some boy came around this morning at about five o'clock and woke us all up, nicely, though, he was very polite and well-spoken, and he said that the management had sent him, that some terrorist group or other was going to blow the entire complex up with dynamite because one of the owners did something the Iranians didn't like, had helped hide Salman Rushdie or something like that. So I got Bozo, and we hurried out here and we all went over to that building over there, and we hid in the basement." She turned, and pointed with her free hand, indicating the unfinished office building.

Lieutenant Buckley nodded. "Go on," he said.



Well, that's where we all are, but I got tired of waiting, so I came up to see what was going on, and I looked over here and saw all your cars and came over to ask if you'd found all the dynamite yet. Did you?"

"We haven't found any dynamite, Ms. Hagarty," Buckley told her. "I think it must have been a prank. We'll check, though."

"A *prank*?" Her voice rose in outrage. "But we're all over there in our pajamas, and we've missed work because we didn't dare come back for our clothes! It's almost been fun, in a scary sort of way, but I have better things to do! Whose idea of a prank is this, anyway?"

"I don't know, Ms. Hagarty," Buckley said. He turned to one of the officers and muttered something Smith couldn't catch; the officer nodded, then turned and trotted back toward the main body of police.

Buckley gestured to the policewoman, and said, "Ms. Hagarty, if you'll go to that van over there, this officer will take your statement, and then I think we can let you go back to your apartment, and you can get on with whatever you should be doing. Thank you for your cooperation."

Nora Hagarty started to say something, but just then Bozo made a bid for freedom, scrabbling and trying to leap down from her arms, and she had to struggle to haul him back up to her generous bosom, leaving dirty paw-prints on her nightgown.

"This way, Ms. Hagarty," the policewoman said. With a hand on Ms. Hagarty's elbow, she started across the parking lot. Buckley headed in the other direction, toward the office building.

Smith called out, "Ms. Hagarty!"

"Yes?" She stopped abruptly and turned to stare at him. The policewoman stopped as well.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Ms. Hagarty," Smith said, "But where did you get that hat?"

Startled, Hagarty reached up and removed the slouch hat, revealing a headful of curlers, and looked at it. "This thing? Why, I've had it for years. I just threw it on on my way out the door, to keep the sun off, or in case we got more rain. I couldn't find my umbrella and the boy said I shouldn't take the time to look. I thought I might need it, though. I know the weather reports didn't say anything about rain, but the way the weather's been this year you never know; I've never seen so much rain as we've had this year!" She shrugged and plopped the hat back on her head.

"Have you worn it much recently?" Smith asked.

The policewoman was looking at him doubtfully. Buckley had stopped and turned back to listen.

"This old thing? In the summer? Of course not!" Hagarty made a wave of dismissal. "Don't be silly! It hasn't been out of my closet in months. In fact, I don't think I've worn it since Easter." She stared at him. "Why?" she asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Oh, nothing," Smith lied, "It just looked like one I'd seen somewhere, and I was trying to remember where."

"Well, I think I did wear it back in February, maybe," Hagarty reluctantly allowed.



I wasn't here in February; I only moved in in April," Smith told her.

"Well, then I can't help you, young man!" She turned away and marched on across the lot, the policewoman at her side.

Buckley strolled back across the lot to where Smith stood, between the Lincoln and a brown Datsun.

"Mr. Smith," he said, "What was that about?"

Smith shrugged. "That hat," he said, "It's just like the one I saw in my nightmare."

Buckley glanced after the hat, then back at Smith. "Really?" he said.

"I think so."

Buckley shrugged. "Just a coincidence, maybe."

"Yeah," Smith agreed, doubtfully, staring after Nora Hagarty, "Just a coincidence."

6.

At 3:10 p.m. on Wednesday, August 2nd, the Montgomery County police, under the direction of Detective Lieutenant Daniel R. Buckley, acting in response to several reports of missing persons in the unincorporated town of Diamond Park, Maryland, found one hundred and forty-two people, ranging in age from three to sixty-eight, waiting in the basement of a partially-completed building in the temporarily-abandoned Orchard Heights office park. Accompanying them were fourteen assorted dogs, eleven cats, two hermit crabs carefully tucked in their owner's coat pocket, a hamster, and a scarlet macaw. Two cats, a parakeet, and a white mouse had been lost, and were never recovered.

All of those found were residents of the Bedford Mills Apartments, a small residential complex on Barrett Road. All gave the same story, of being awakened by a polite young man who told them that the complex had received a bomb threat. When informed that the threat was apparently false, all came out of the basement promptly and under their own power, without further urging.

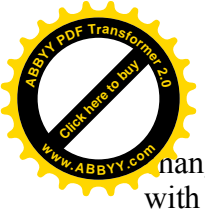
The police took no further action. They did not enter the unfinished office basement, nor continue searching the vacated apartments; they no longer had a probable cause, or anything to search for.

Lieutenant Buckley did, however, ask for signed statements from several of the people involved in the incident. Over the course of the next few days, most of those he had asked obliged him. The statements all tallied closely — very closely, indeed.

When he read through them on the afternoon of Monday, August 7th, Buckley noticed the unusual lack of discrepancies, but dismissed it as the result of those giving the statements having spent the morning together with nothing to do but discuss the situation.

The parties responsible for the prank were never identified or apprehended.

Neither the *Washington Post* nor the *Times* bothered to mention the incident, but the various weekly *Gazette* newspapers put it on page one. Both the daily edition and the weekly version of the *Montgomery Journal* also reported it on page one, below the fold. The *Express* weeklies, which had just



changed their collective name from the *Chronicle-Express* the week before and were still experimenting with the front page, put it on page two.

The Gaithersburg *Gazette* gave it a follow-up mention the next week, as well, castigating the decline in parental discipline that led to such stunts. None of the other papers bothered.

Also on the afternoon of Wednesday, August 2nd, somewhat after 3:10, Edward J. Smith threw his summer clothes and a few toiletries in a suitcase and took a room at the Red Roof Inn on Route 124, three miles up the road in Gaithersburg.

This was not the result of careful planning, rational thought, or even any conscious decision at all.

He had re-entered Apartment C41 of the Bedford Mills Apartments with every intention of staying there. After all, the whole bizarre incident was just a prank. Most of the police were packing up and leaving, while others argued with each other about why no one had thought to check the empty office building when men had been sent to canvass the neighborhood. The other inhabitants of the complex were drifting back, two or three at a time; some were standing around on the lawn discussing the day's events, while others were returning to their apartments. A few of the first arrivals were already dressed and trying to back their cars out into the stream of police vehicles, presumably to go belatedly to their jobs and other engagements.

Smith had turned to close the door, and had seen Mrs. Malinoff coming up the stairs behind him, on her way to C42. She had smiled at him, a tight-lipped little smile.

He had seen her, but he had not heard her. Her knees were completely silent, even on the stairs.

And in the three months or so he had lived there, Mrs. Malinoff had never smiled at him. He had never seen her smile at *anything*, and certainly not at him.

And her eyes had seemed to glow red for an instant, like eyes in a badly-angled flash picture.

Smith nodded politely to her, closed the door, and headed toward the bedroom.

The air in the apartment was still stifling hot. The bedroom window was still open, but the outside air, which was now noticeably cooler than the air inside, seemed reluctant to enter.

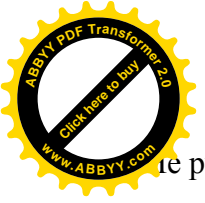
Mrs. Malinoff's knees hadn't creaked.

Maybe, Smith tried to tell himself as he crossed to his bedroom closet, the unusual exertions of the morning had loosened up her joints.

Her eyes had gleamed red.

Sometimes eyes gleamed red in flash photos when the bright light reflected directly off the retina, at the back of the eye. Maybe Mrs. Malinoff's eyes had caught a stray bit of sunlight somehow to produce the same effect.

Except that it had happened in the windowless fourth-floor stairwell, under a skylight crusted over grime, and the only electric light had been *behind* her.



He pulled out his suitcase without thinking about it, and threw it open on the bed.

She had *smiled* at him.

She hadn't shown her teeth, though, and with a glance at the window screen he had this sudden mental image of Mrs. Malinoff grinning broadly, showing dozens of silver-grey needle teeth like the thing in his nightmare, and then he was grabbing for his shirts and stuffing them into the suitcase, and he knew that he was not going to stay the night in that apartment again, no matter whether the air conditioner was fixed or not, not even if they gave him the place rent-free.

The Red Roof Inn was the closest motel, since there were none at all in Diamond Park itself, so that was where he went. There were at least half a dozen others in Gaithersburg, and more in Germantown, but the Red Roof Inn was the closest.

He threw his suitcase in the back seat of his Chevy and went, his hands tight on the steering wheel as he waited his turn to exit the parking lot, tight on the wheel as he drove up Barrett Road to Route 117, east on 117 to 124, left on 124, past the Shell station and then right into the parking lot of the motel.

In the motel office he stared closely at the clerk, studying his eyes to be sure they didn't gleam red, trying to see his teeth to be sure they were white and blunt.

The clerk was perfectly ordinary, a bored young man with sandy brown hair, clearly uncomfortable, despite the air conditioning, in the bright red jacket with the motel chain's logo on it. His teeth were white; his eyes were green, or maybe hazel. Smith took the key to Room 203 without comment.

Once safely in his room he threw his suitcase on the bed, hesitated, and then, feeling slightly foolish, checked the place over carefully, making sure the window was locked and the grilles securely bolted down on the heating/cooling vents.

Then he went back downstairs and crossed the parking lot to the Denny's Restaurant next door, to finally get himself a cup of coffee, something he never had gotten that morning, and while he was at it he would get something to eat to quiet his empty stomach.

7.

That night he turned off David Letterman, turned out the light, and lay back on the bed, telling himself he should get some sleep.

Telling himself that did not make it so, however; he was still too nervous to sleep, particularly in a strange bed. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling, on a sudden impulse he turned and looked toward the window.

His breath caught in his throat, and he felt himself choking, strangling, as his eyes widened so far that they stung.

That creature, that nightmare person, was peering in the window at him. The red eyes gleamed, and the silvery teeth sparkled a duller red in the glow from the motel sign.

And behind it he could see other faces, human faces, familiar faces.



Mrs. Malinoff. Nora Hagarty. Walt Harris, from C31, who complained whenever he played loud music.

Mrs. Malinoff was leaning over the nightmare thing's shoulder, and as he watched, frozen, unable to breathe, she reached up with both hands and began peeling her upper lip back.

The skin of her face slid up, across her cheeks and over her nose, peeling back like a rubber mask and revealing greyish flesh and gleaming silver needle-teeth beneath, eyes a baleful red.

On the other side Nora Hagarty was tugging at her ears, as if to loosen them; then she, too, reached for her upper lip.

As Mrs. Malinoff's face came away, revealing completely the horror beneath, his breath came free, his throat opened, and he began to scream.

He screamed wordlessly, raw sound pouring out.

The red eyes blinked in unison, both pairs of them; Nora Hagarty's hands froze where they were, her lip peeled back ludicrously to the tip of her nose. Walt Harris ducked down out of sight, vanishing completely.

Slowly, reluctantly, Nora's hands pulled the skin of her face back into place, and she, too, dropped out of sight.

The thing that had been Mrs. Malinoff tugged her skin back down over the sparse black hair of its head, back across forehead, eyes, and nose, resuming its human appearance, and then it, too, disappeared.

The last one, the undisguised nightmare face, frowned at him. There was something horribly familiar about the gesture. It raised a long-fingered hand in a parting salute, just as it had before, and then it was gone.

He stopped screaming and caught his breath, gasping, taking deep, ragged gulps of the room's artificially cool air.

Someone pounded on the door. "Mr. Smith? Are you all right in there?"

"I'm fine," he gasped, recognizing the motel clerk's voice, "I'm fine. I just had a nightmare." He gathered what little remained of his composure, and said, "I'm sorry if I disturbed anyone."

After a moment's hesitation, the clerk asked, "Could you open the door, please, sir, and let me make sure you're all right?"

Smith got to his feet and reached out, then paused.

Could it be a trick?

He leaned over and looked out the window.

Nobody was there.

He looked through the peephole.



only the clerk was there.

He had never seen this clerk around the Bedford Mills complex, he was sure. And he had square white teeth and hazel eyes.

He turned the knob and opened the door.

Nothing leaped in at him. Nobody was there on the balcony but the clerk. Smith tried to smile at him.

“I’m fine, really,” he said.

The clerk peered suspiciously past him, then at his face. “If you’re sure you’re okay, Mr. Smith...”

“I’m sure,” Smith told him. “Really, I’m quite sure. It was just a nightmare — a very bad one, but just a nightmare. I’m really sorry if I disturbed anyone.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Smith,” the clerk told him, in one of those calming voices that can be so maddening. “Listen, if there’s any problem, you call me, okay?”

“I will.” Smith managed a smile, then closed the door, repeating, “It was just a nightmare.”

This time, however, he didn’t believe it.

Chapter Two:

Thursday, August 3rd

1.

Smith was unsure whether or not he had slept, but when dawn crept up over I-270 and spilled down the railroad tracks behind the motel he decided to pretend he had, that he was fully rested. He got out of the chair where he had spent most of the night, stretched, and headed for the bathroom.

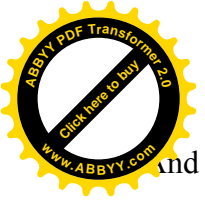
At first, he had only intended to rinse his face, but after he had flushed the toilet and washed his hands he reconsidered and took a long, hot shower.

When he stepped out and towelled himself off he still felt a bit woozy from lack of sleep, but the gummy taste in his mouth was gone, and his skin was fresh and clean. He felt as if he were just now waking up, as if the long night in the motel and the entire day before had been one long continuation of his initial nightmare.

He knew that it had *not* been a nightmare, that he had seen *something* strange and abnormal, but for the moment he was willing to not think about it, to worry instead about the demands of everyday life.

For example, he asked himself, did he plan to go to work today?

It was Thursday. He was still ahead of schedule, and had had so little sleep the past two nights that he was quite sure he would be unable to write any code the computers would accept. On the other hand, it would be a step toward getting back to normal.



and if he didn't go to work, just what was he going to do all day?

One alternative would be to spend the day looking for somewhere new to live, as he had no intention of returning to the Bedford Mills complex.

In either case, he decided as he folded the towel, he would want to look fairly respectable. He picked out a yellow sport shirt and dark brown slacks that would serve that purpose, and dressed quickly.

And whatever he was going to do later, the first thing to do was to eat some breakfast. He'd only managed one meal the day before.

Checking his wallet and room key carefully, he took a last look around the room, stepped out on the motel balcony, and then closed the door behind him.

It was almost seven o'clock. I-270, behind him, was already buzzing with traffic. Denny's, across the parking lot, was busy with the breakfast rush.

He noticed the sign that read "Always Open," and snorted quietly, thinking he'd been foolish to stay in his room. He could have gone to the restaurant and gotten himself a snack at two or three in the morning, when the place would have been almost empty.

He'd missed his chance. He would have to settle for an ordinary breakfast. He headed down the stairs and across the lot.

The food at Denny's was good, but the service could be slow, and was that time; he had plenty of time to consider his plans as he sat in a booth waiting for his fried eggs. He tried to break everything down logically, as if he were planning out a program.

First, what was the actual situation? Never mind what the customer says is happening — in this case, what he thought he'd seen — what was *really* happening?

Second, what needs to be done about the situation?

Third, how could he do it?

Well, to start with, he didn't know the actual situation.

He thought he'd seen something at his top-floor window at three in the morning.

The following day, all the other people in the apartment complex vanished, and were found emerging from a basement several hours later with a story about a phony bomb scare.

Minor details, such as Nora Hagarty's hat and Mrs. Malinoff's knee, had seemed strange after everybody came back.

That night he'd again seen something bizarre at his window.

That was it, so far — four things out of the ordinary. Were they related?

The two apparitions were obviously connected, since they involved the same monstrous face. And Nora



Hagarty and Mrs. Malinoff and Walt Harris were tied in by the second apparition, as well.

The connection to the mass disappearance was less definite.

And what had really caused the disappearance?

If it had really been a prank, why hadn't he been included?

He could make guesses, and he did.

He might have been skipped by a prankster because, exhausted from staying up so late, he had slept too heavily to be awakened by knocking at his door.

Nora Hagarty had said the boy came around at about five, when he would have been asleep for roughly an hour and a half. He would have been deeply asleep.

But why was everyone else so easily awakened? If they were taking it seriously enough to rouse *everyone*, how had he been skipped?

And how did it relate to the apparitions and the general strangeness?

Could somebody be playing an absurdly elaborate prank on him, and him alone?

What if the faces at the window had been faked, somehow? Special effects could do amazing things, he knew.

What other explanation could there be for a face hanging thirty feet in the air?

Suppose that Nora Hagarty and Mrs. Malinoff and Walt Harris had decided, for some perverse reason, to frighten him. Suppose they had somehow projected that inhuman face on the outside of his window, using some sort of movie or hologram.

That would account for how it could reach a fourth-floor window, and how it could vanish so mysteriously, without leaving a trace.

For the second apparition, they could have used a live actor in make-up, and the four of them could have just ducked away around the corner, or into the next room, when he started screaming, before the clerk could see anything strange about them.

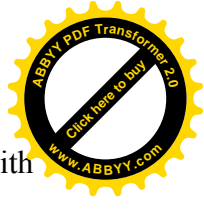
The slouch hat and the strange smile would be easy little teases. The red gleam from Mrs. Malinoff's eyes — that could be colored contact lenses.

The knee that didn't creak was harder to explain. Some sort of special treatment, perhaps?

He had no idea what caused creaking joints in the first place, so he couldn't even guess at what would cure them.

What about the disappearance, though? How did that tie in?

It might be coincidence — or it might be that the pranksters, Hagarty and Malinoff and Harris, had done



That, too, hiring some kid to go around and wake up everybody *except* that guy in Apartment C41, with the story about Iranian terrorists.

It *could* have happened that way. He told himself that. It *could* have.

And didn't an elaborate practical joke make more sense than some sort of needle-toothed monster hiding behind Mrs. Malinoff's face?

His hand shook slightly as he sipped his coffee.

If that was done with special effects, they were damn good, he thought. It had been totally convincing.

Although, he added mentally, he had been tired, it had been dark out on the balcony, he had been caught by surprise — maybe it hadn't been that hard to fool him.

Why would anyone want to play such a trick on him, though? Why go to such incredible lengths?

He shook his head, and sipped coffee again. It didn't make sense.

He knew that he had annoyed Walt Harris sometimes, by playing his stereo too loudly. He knew that Mrs. Malinoff distrusted him because he was relatively young and because he worked with computers, which she hated and feared. Why, though, would they go to such fantastic trouble?

And what had he ever done to Nora Hagarty?

He shrugged that question off easily enough; the other two could have brought her in for money, or the sake of a friendship, or just for fun.

Maybe the three of them — or four, if whoever had worn the grey make-up and fake teeth was one of them, and not a hired actor — were a little gang that did this for kicks.

Maybe they'd even done it before. Maybe, if he knew more about them, he would find out that they'd pulled any number of stunts on other people.

His eggs finally arrived, and he cut a piece with his fork as he considered that.

The whole thing could be the work of three or four middle-aged tricksters.

It *could* be. He reminded himself that he hadn't proven anything with all his clever theorizing. It could be tricksters.

Or it could be that the monsters were real.

2.

He didn't like the idea of real monsters lurking outside his windows, but they had certainly *looked* real. The true skeptic, he remembered reading somewhere, doesn't take *anything* on faith, and that includes the *non*-existence of the supernatural, just as much as its existence.

Suppose, then, that the monsters he saw *were* real. How did *that* fit the facts?



He stopped up some runny yolk and lifted the fork to his mouth as he thought that over.

If the monsters *were* real, then they presumably had some unusual abilities, in order to appear outside a fourth-floor window and vanish so abruptly.

If the monsters *were* real, then Nora Hagarty and Mrs. Malinoff were monsters — he had seen that with his own eyes. That would explain the hat and the eyes.

The knee could be explained by assuming that Mrs. Malinoff — the *real* Mrs. Malinoff — had been a normal human being, and had been replaced by a monster in her shape.

Walt Harris could be a monster, or could be a human being working with the monsters. His face had never displayed any inhuman characteristics.

What about the disappearance?

He dabbed a bit of yolk off his chin as he considered that.

The monsters had been responsible, he supposed. The fact that everything at Bedford Mills had seemed perfectly normal on Tuesday, but on Wednesday everyone had vanished temporarily and when they came back at least two of them were no longer human, certainly seemed to imply...

He stopped at that point, his fork dangling from one hand, his napkin in the other.

What on Earth was he thinking? This was like something out of a horror movie. "...two of them were no longer human...?"

But he had *seen* the monsters. He had *seen* that hat, and Mrs. Malinoff's smile. All his neighbors *had* vanished.

He clenched his jaw for a moment and told himself that he would think it through, no matter how ridiculous it sounded.

Suppose, then, that all his neighbors had been herded away by the monsters, and that when they came back some of them had *become* monsters.

Why had he been neglected? Because he slept too soundly?

Wasn't anybody else in the entire complex a sound sleeper?

And why wouldn't the monsters have found some way to awaken him, if that was what they wanted?

Another possibility occurred to him, and suddenly seemed to make far more sense.

What if the monsters had not come at five in the morning, but at three?

What if he had been skipped not because he was asleep, but because he was *awake*? Because he had seen the thing outside his window?

It was far more believable that only one out of a hundred and forty-four people would be awake at three



in the morning, than that only one would sleep too soundly to be awakened at five.

That would do for a provisional explanation.

And at the motel, the four of them had fled when he started screaming. That seemed to fit. They preferred sleeping victims, or at least unresisting ones.

The four of them — four monsters?

Only four?

They had taken a hundred and forty-three people away, and at least two had come back as monsters. One monster, the one who had appeared at his own window, apparently still had no human disguise.

What if *all* of them had come back as monsters?

What if the one he had seen outside his window had been meant to replace *him*?

What if it was still after him? What if it had come back for a second try and brought along friends to help, in case he resisted? What if that was why the four of them had all been at his window?

What would have happened if he hadn't screamed?

He put down the fork and the napkin and stared at the eggs on his plate, and suddenly had no appetite for them. He picked up his cup and gulped coffee.

When he lowered the cup again he grimaced.

He had two explanations, so far — real supernatural monsters that only he had seen, or an incredibly complicated practical joke directed at him.

Neither one seemed very likely, and a third possibility occurred to him, one he didn't like to think about, but one that certainly made as much sense as either of the others.

Maybe he had imagined the entire thing, from start to finish. Maybe none of it was real at all.

Maybe he'd gone mad.

3.

He finished his coffee and sat staring at his half-eaten eggs.

He had three possible explanations, and he didn't like any of them.

The next step was to figure out what had to be done.

If he was mad, then perhaps the best thing to do was to do nothing and hope he recovered. He'd read *Operators and Things* years ago, and he knew that insane people, even ones with horrible delusions, sometimes recovered spontaneously.



more often they didn't. Perhaps he should see a psychiatrist.

But then, if he wasn't mad, that would be a mistake. The psychiatrist would probably *think* he was hallucinating, and would feed him Thorazine or Stelazine or some other such drug and he'd be reduced to a zombie-like state. He'd heard that while Thorazine could return many schizophrenics to near-normal functioning, it could reduce non-schizophrenics to a near-vegetable condition.

He remembered the discussions in his college abnormal-psych class where this had come up. Someone had said that yeah, some doctors used Thorazine not just to treat schizophrenia, but to diagnose it, too. If they gave a patient Thorazine and he got better, then he was schizophrenic and treatment was working. If he sat around and did nothing but stare at the walls, then he hadn't been schizophrenic after all, and they'd stop the drug.

If he went to a doctor and got dosed with Thorazine and the monsters were *real*, then he'd be easy prey until the doctors decided he wasn't schizo after all.

That assumed that the monsters were not only real, but were pursuing him — but after the little scene on the motel balcony, that seemed a reasonable assumption. After all, he knew they existed, and besides, if his theory was right, then one of them had intended to replace him all along, and had been delayed — but not necessarily stopped.

Well, if the monsters were real, then, what should he do?

He could go to the authorities, to the police, and tell them.

And they'd think he was nuts and he'd be in a cell somewhere, dosed with Thorazine, the next time the nightmare people came looking for him.

That was one thing that he thought the horror movies probably had right, despite all their foolishness — he couldn't look for much help from the police or the government unless he had real, solid proof that there really were monsters around.

Even then, what could the police do?

What could *anybody* do?

What could *he* do?

He could run away, of course, but he had tried that last night. It hadn't worked.

Maybe he hadn't run far enough.

If he ran, though — if he went back home to Boston, or headed out to California the way he'd intended to before he got the offer from DML — he'd lose his job, and the friends he'd made in the area, and he'd have to start all over again, looking for work.

And he wouldn't be able to explain why he left this job so suddenly. What could he say? If he said, "Oh, I didn't like the area," would anyone believe that?

Actually, they might; he could talk about the humid weather and the ridiculous cost of living. Not that



Michigan Valley would be any cheaper.

But even if it worked, he didn't *want* to find a new job.

And besides, the things might follow him, even to California. Why not? He had no way of knowing what they might do.

Was there some way to stop them?

He didn't know. He didn't know what they *were*, after all.

If the monsters were real, he had no idea what he should do. He just didn't know enough.

Enough, hell, he didn't know *anything*.

What, then, if it was all a prank?

He frowned. If it was a trick, how had they found him at the motel?

He shook his head and ignored that. Maybe someone had followed him, or recognized his car.

If it was a prank, was it done with? Would they leave him alone now?

Why had they done it? To drive him out of his apartment? If that was it, then why did they come after him at the motel?

He didn't know.

Whatever was happening, he didn't know enough. Whether it was a prank, or insanity, or genuine monsters, or something else he hadn't thought of, he didn't know enough.

He could just forget about it and try to go on with his life — but then, if he was insane, he might get worse, he might lose control completely.

The pranksters might continue to torment him.

Or the monsters might get him.

He had to do *something*.

He knew he wouldn't be able to write anything that would run properly with this hanging over him; there was no point in trying to go to work. He could stay in the motel for another few nights if he had to, or maybe he could go stay with George down in Bethesda; finding an apartment could wait. He wouldn't need a new apartment if he got himself killed or committed, or if he made up with the pranksters.

The first thing to do, then, was to learn more about whatever it was he was involved in.

In the horror movies, people got themselves killed by walking blithely and disbelievingly into the monster's lair. While it was hard to think of life as being anything like a horror movie when he was



sitting on an ordinary green-upholstered bench in a quiet booth in a sunny restaurant, drinking coffee and staring at plastic plants, he intended to be a bit more prepared, and more careful, than the people in the movies.

He picked up the check and headed for the register.

4.

Simply walking into the Bedford Mills complex, he decided as he waited for a chance to make his left turn onto Route 124, would be too much like entering the locked room, the haunted house, the forbidden vault — if there *were* really monsters there, he'd be asking for it by doing anything so foolhardy.

In fact, walking in *anywhere* with nothing but the clothes on his back would be stupid. He abruptly changed his mind and turned right, instead of left, when a break in traffic finally appeared.

A quick switch to the left lane as he went under I-270, and he turned left at the light, onto Route 355 northbound.

Most of the traffic was southbound this time of day, in toward Washington, so he was able to get up a little speed. Then a kid in a battered green pickup cut him off, and he leaned on the horn for a moment, almost missing the entrance to the new Hechinger's. His rear wheels slewed a bit on the gravel at the corner as he took the turn too fast, but then he was safely into the mostly-empty parking lot.

It was mostly empty for a good reason, he realized when he looked at the dark facade — the place wasn't open yet.

He looked at his watch and saw 8:17; he sighed, unbuckled his harness, and got out of the car.

He stood for a moment looking at the store, then closed and locked the car and crossed to the concrete apron.

A small sign on the door gave the hours, starting at 8:30. He looked at his watch again — 8:18.

He tried to think of someplace that would already be open, and decided that 84 Lumber on Bureau Drive might be, or Barron's down by the Cuddy Bridge, but by the time he could fight his way through the traffic to either one it would be 8:30.

He waited.

At 8:28 a black-haired kid in a red Hechinger's vest unlocked the door.

Smith had had time to consider what he wanted, and wasted no time in finding it.

His first selection was a small heavy-duty crowbar, eighteen inches of blue-painted steel. He passed up the axe-handles as being too obviously intended as weapons. Carrying a crowbar around an apartment complex or construction site, unusual though it might be, seemed reasonable enough; carrying an axe handle did not.

The larger crowbars he looked over carefully, but in the end he decided they would be too large and conspicuous, and he limited himself to the little one.



Besides, it was cheaper.

He followed that up with a sturdy rechargeable flashlight, after hesitating briefly over a pump-charged version.

The hand-pump light couldn't give out on him, but the rechargeable was brighter and easier to hold.

While waiting at the door he'd thought about guns, and decided against buying one. He wasn't sure whether Hechinger's even carried them, anyway. He'd never owned one, hadn't fired one since high school back in Massachusetts, and had no idea what the local laws were about permits, concealed weapons, discharging firearms, whatever.

Besides, guns were too dangerous. He might shoot too soon or too late, he might miss what he aimed at, he might get himself killed or arrested. The crowbar was better.

All the same, he added a good-quality four-inch-blade jackknife to his collection, as back-up for the crowbar.

He tried to think what else he might need, but his brain didn't want to work. As he hefted the crowbar his knees seemed to weaken, and his shins trembled slightly. The solid reality of the wrecking tool in his hand seemed to bring home, more than all his plans or the weird late-night visitations, that he was involved in something real, something serious, something dangerous.

He forced a deep breath down, held it for a second, and then marched up to the check-out with his supplies.

The yawning clerk barely glanced at him as she rang up the bar, light, and knife. He handed her his MasterCard, and she gave the slip of plastic more attention than she had its owner.

"You want a bag for that?" she asked, handing back the card.

"Don't bother," he said, slipping the jackknife into one hip pocket, his wallet into the other. He took the receipt from her, stuffed it in his shirt pocket, then picked up the bar and light and left.

Back in the car he dropped the crowbar and flashlight on the passenger seat and started the engine.

Was there anything else he needed?

A sudden revulsion at further delay made him thrust that thought aside. He needed to get at it; he needed to find out what was going on. He released the brake and rolled.

Getting from the parking lot back out onto 355, and into the rush-hour traffic, took a few minutes; then he crept along past the IBM plant, surrounded by commuters, until he reached the turn for 124.

Traffic was lighter there, and thinned out even more once he was past the entrance ramps for I-270.

When he turned onto Clopper Road he was going against the traffic. He sailed past the turn for the MVA, past the townhouses and the new construction, to the left turn onto Barrett.

The morning sun slanted down through the trees, flickering across his windshield, as he drove through



the state park; it poured down steadily over the lake as he crossed the dam back into Diamond Park.

He almost missed the turn he wanted. His apartment, the whole Bedford Mills complex, was on Barrett, so his habits were all set for that, but that wasn't where he was going this time. Instead he took the right fork onto Willow Street.

Willow Street was empty, and the emptiness was suddenly oppressive; he turned on the radio and got Harris In The Morning on WCXR, introducing another forty-five minute block of non-stop classic rock. He turned left onto Orchard Heights Road to the sound of Pat Benatar.

The trees vanished on the right, replaced by bare dirt and weathered two-by-fours behind chain-link fence. He pulled over, slowing gradually to a stop, in front of the unfinished centerpiece building of the Orchard Heights Office Park.

He set the brake and turned off the engine, and the sound of the radio died away abruptly, leaving him in near-silence. The hum of distant traffic was barely audible, and a bird was singing somewhere.

He sat for a moment, listening, and looking over the site.

The builder had gotten the steel frame up, and the floors, and had had the brick facade about half-done when the money ran out. The south wall rose up above the three-storey frame in an unsupported brick gable, a pink brick triangle stabbing at the sky; the west wall, facing him, was three stories high at the south end, only one at the north, the steel frame behind it thrusting up on the left like the bare flesh revealed by an off-the-shoulder gown.

The east wall, the far side, was invisible. The north end wasn't there at all.

The whole thing looked crooked, and he wondered why the builder had done it that way, instead of building the walls up evenly on all four sides.

Then he shrugged; it didn't matter. He got out of the car, the crowbar in hand.

5.

The fence was no problem. It wasn't a permanent structure, with poles set into the ground, but just a temporary affair strung hurriedly around the property to discourage vandals, the uprights set in old wheel-rims filled with concrete. At one point it passed over a large pile of dirt left by the bulldozers, with a single post set atop the hump, leaving openings on either side where the ground fell away more steeply than the fencing.

Squeezing through one of these spaces got powdery dirt on the legs of his good brown pants, but presented no real obstacle, any more than the **No Trespassing** signs did.

Once inside he stood up again, bar in his right hand and flashlight in his left, and looked the ground over.

There were footsteps in the dirt at the north end of the unfinished building, hundreds of footsteps, a broad track left when the inhabitants of the Bedford Mills Apartments had marched up into the light and headed back through the little patch of woods that separated the two complexes.



He followed the trail around, and saw where a section of the fence had been torn down and trampled on. He could have kept his pants clean if he had bothered to go around.

He looked through the trees at the apartment parking lot. He had never seen it from this angle, but it was still thoroughly familiar. Through the leaves he could see the windows of his own apartment, gleaming in the morning light.

The lot looked rather full for this time of the morning, he thought, and he tightened his grip on the light.

A momentary urge to just walk on through the trees and go home came to him, but he fought it down. He had other things he wanted to do before he dared go home.

He forced himself to turn away and to look into the open north end of the unfinished building.

The eastern wall was mostly open, and bright sunlight poured warmly in across a sand-strewn expanse of bare plywood flooring. A dark opening gaped in the center, a hundred feet away, with a crude railing of knocked-together two-by-fours leading down into it. Above it, a matching opening in the ceiling let in more light, but no stairway or railing led to the upper levels.

That hole in the floor was the basement, of course. That was what he had come to look at.

After all, why had all those people gone down there and hidden, instead of just going to other buildings, or sheltering behind the fragmentary brick walls?

A car buzzed by without stopping, out on Orchard Heights Road.

He stepped in onto the plywood, his feet thumping heavily.

The stairs leading down into the basement were in place, heavy red-painted metal with black non-skid treads. The rough railing went only as far as the landing.

He turned on his flashlight and shone it down into the opening, revealing loose dirt, concrete floor, and scraps of lumber.

Cautiously, he descended, one step at a time, shining the light around as he went.

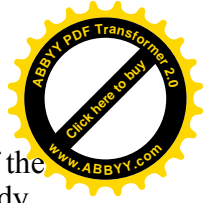
Bare concrete, a small pile of broken bricks, scattered chunks of two-by-four, sand and dirt, a tangle of wire. An area of concrete wall was striped by steel studding. Twenty feet off to one side panels of plywood were stacked up five feet high, the lower part of the pile still bound into two tight bundles by metal shipping bands.

He reached bottom and stepped off onto concrete.

Nothing looked out of place or at all unusual except for the disturbance of the dirt where dozens of people had come marching out of the south end of the basement, out past the plywood and up the stairs.

He shone the light around, and realized that there were no tracks anywhere else; to the north, east, and west of the stairs the dust and dirt were undisturbed.

That made the whole thing seem stranger than ever. The practical joke theory seemed to have just



developed a problem. How could the pranksters have kept the entire group crammed into one end of the basement all morning? Hadn't the kids gone running around, playing with the scraps? Hadn't anybody gone exploring to see if there might be a better corner to take cover in?

Nervous, he shone the light at the plywood.

It was ordinary plywood, the manufacturer's code symbols stamped on the side of each bundle. A smudge of reddish-brown paint was smeared across the top sheet.

He blinked and stepped out of the light of the stairwell, looking more closely, shining his light directly on that top sheet.

Was that paint?

He couldn't be sure.

He swallowed, walked up to the pile of plywood, and dabbed at the smear with a finger.

Whatever the stuff was, it was dry and powdery, and some of it came up when he rubbed at it, but it left a dark reddish stain.

It didn't feel like paint.

He shone the light into the gloom beyond the plywood, expecting to see more concrete and scrap.

The concrete and scrap were there, but everything was liberally splashed with that same reddish-brown, and there were white fragments heaped on the floor that did not look like any sort of building material.

He knew what the brown stuff was. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew perfectly well what it was.

He walked around the stack of plywood, his hand trembling slightly so that the light danced across the floor in frantic whirls, and he looked at the stains that spread across the floor, across the walls, across the plywood and the scattered bits of lumber, and even, in spattered rows of uneven reddish dots, across the metal beams overhead.

Then he looked at the fragments on the floor, white where they weren't stained.

He knew what those were, too. He stooped and shone his light directly on one of them.

It was bone, a curving chunk of bone broken off unevenly at one end. It was a piece of rib, like a bit of leftover from a barbecue, except that it wasn't smoky from cooking; it was gleaming white.

He stared at it and saw marks on it, tiny scratches and indentations. They looked like toothmarks.

Knowing what he would see he swung the light onward, across scattered bits of bone, to a heap of bones piled in the corner, thrown together haphazardly.

All of them had those little marks.

He stood, and began backing out, away from the bones and the bloodstains, back around the stack of



plywood, back to the stairs, where he turned and ran up them into the blinding summer sunlight, ran back out across the plywood flooring, back out of the skeletal building, skidding on the bare dirt, scrambling desperately back out under the fence to his car, where the mad struggle to find his car keys, to unlock and open the door, finally broke his unthinking panic.

6.

He stood panting for a moment, the car keys in his hand and the door of the car standing open, trying to think.

He had to do something. He had to call the police.

What would he tell them, though? That there were bloodstains and what looked like human bones all over the basement here?

That was too lurid, too much like something out of a horror movie. He would just report a dead body. And he'd do it anonymously, disguise his voice — he didn't want to be connected with this.

He turned and looked back at the building. In the bright sunlight, with the solid normality of his car beneath his hands, the everyday reality of the dirt and the chain-link fence and the scrub grass that grew here and there, it was very hard to believe that he had seen monsters, or that he had found human bones — *fresh* human bones — just a few yards away in that basement.

Something moved.

He blinked, and tried to focus on it.

Someone was standing under the trees behind the construction site, the trees that separated it from the Bedford Mills apartments. It was a boy in his teens, wearing a pair of cut-off shorts and a wide-brimmed hat; Smith thought he looked familiar, despite the distance; he squinted, and finally placed him.

That was Bill Goodwin, one of the four kids that Charlie and Lillian Goodwin had crammed into Apartment C12. Smith had met the whole clan as soon as he had arrived at Bedford Mills — Bill's kid brothers, Harry and Sid, had helped him carry boxes of books and dishware upstairs when he had first moved in. Later on he'd talked to Bill a few times, and let him try out a few things on his desktop computer. The Goodwin kids were probably the closest thing to real friends he had in the whole complex.

He started to raise a hand to wave, and then stopped.

Was it really Bill Goodwin?

Wasn't it one of the monsters?

Whoever or whatever it was, the boy stared at him for a moment, then abruptly turned and hurried away.

Smith's mind refused to work properly. He had just seen a basement strewn with human remains, evidence that some sort of horror was loose, but all he could see now was an ordinary summer day, and an ordinary teenager, and he couldn't reconcile his theories of monsters disguised as their victims with that calm, everyday reality. Every impulse, every habit, made him want to wave and call a polite hello to



the Goodwin boy, but at the same time the memory of the pile of bones had left a knot of panic just below the surface, a knot that was trying to choke him, to force him into his car, to make him drive to the nearest pay-phone and call the police, or to flee as quickly as he could, drive away and never come back.

Despite his panicky confusion, the prankster theory somehow pushed its way to the surface of his mind. Could the blood and bone be fake?

He doubted it — but he wasn't sure. He was no expert. He couldn't be certain the bones were human.

He hadn't really taken that close a look, and it was dark down in there. He hadn't touched them. The bones might even be some sort of plastic replicas.

It could be a prank. A horrible and elaborate prank, but a prank.

If it *was* a prank, was Bill Goodwin in on it?

And if the monsters were real, was Bill Goodwin one of them?

Was Bill going to call for help, get the pranksters or monsters or whatever they were to clean up the basement, hide the bones, do *something* to cover their tracks?

Almost certainly, Smith realized, that was exactly what would happen. Why else would the boy have behaved as he did?

Or was his imagination running away with him? Was he panicking, turning paranoid?

He suddenly wished he had thought to bring a camera. His own battered Pentax was still in his apartment, but he could have bought a cheap little Instamatic or something when he got his crowbar and flashlight.

Or he could run across to his apartment and get the Pentax right now.

His mouth twisted at the thought. He climbed into the car and slammed the door.

He wasn't going back in his apartment just now, thank you very much.

He could go back down in the basement, though, and take some of those bones, for proof of his story.

But what would they really prove? And how could he prove where he got them?

That wouldn't work. He wouldn't try it.

Besides, if he went back down into that basement he might be cornered in there if the monsters came back. He wasn't going back.

He would call the police, anonymously, and report a dead body.

That's all he would do, for now.



He started the engine.

Chapter Three:

Friday, August 4th

1.

He sat on the bed in his cramped room at the motel, wondering if the police had found anything. Various horrible scenarios drifted through his mind.

What if two cops went down those steps to find a hundred of those nightmare people waiting for them, silver teeth gleaming in anticipatory grins?

What if his voice on the phone had been recorded and analyzed, his identity somehow discovered, his refuge tracked down, and the cops were about to come knocking on his door, demanding to know why he was wasting their time, warning him of the penalties for giving false information?

(What *were* the penalties for giving false information, anyway? He had no idea.)

What if the police had found the bones and realized that the current inhabitants of Bedford Mills were all cannibalistic monsters, and were trying to stamp them out — but couldn't? What if the monsters came after him, seeking vengeance for this inconvenience he had caused them?

The whole thing was so incredible that he had no idea what to do, or what to expect. He had fallen out of the normal and predictable world into ... into what? Madness? Hell?

Into exhaustion, for one thing. He needed sleep.

He looked at the phone and considered calling the police again, but giving his name this time and asking Lieutenant Buckley what had happened, if anything, in the investigation of yesterday's mass disappearance. Surely, if anything had been found in that basement, Buckley would know and would mention it.

But whoever it was who had answered when he called from the pay-phone at the Quince Orchard shopping center would probably still be on duty, and might recognize his voice. He didn't want that.

Besides, the cops who went to investigate might not have had time to report back yet.

He would wait and call later.

He glanced at his watch, still thinking about phones, and it occurred to him that he hadn't yet called in to work to explain his absence. Einar would be annoyed. Einar didn't mind an occasional missed day, but he liked to know what was going on.

Smith reached for the phone and dialed.

It rang twice. Smith heard the click as someone picked up, and then a familiar voice said, "Hello, DML Communications, software division, Einar Lindqvist speaking."



“Hi, Einar,” he said. “It’s Ed Smith.”

“Hey, Ed,” Einar replied, “What’s up now? Change your mind about coming in today?”

“No,” Smith said, a bit puzzled by Einar’s jovial tone. “I was just calling to let you know that I’ll be out for the rest of the week, but I should be back Monday.”

“So why’d you call?” *Now* Einar sounded appropriately annoyed. “I mean, that’s what you told me an hour ago.”

Smith blinked, staring at the painted concrete wall, and tried to convince himself that he had heard wrong. He felt very unsteady, and for a moment he thought he might faint, just fall over on the bed, or the floor, and let consciousness go away for a little while. He needed sleep, he needed sleep very badly.

“What?” he said.

“I said, that’s what you told me an hour ago.” *Now* Einar sounded worried. “Are you all right, Ed? I mean, I know you’re sick, but ... well, you’re sick, I shouldn’t nag.”

“You talked to me an hour ago?” Smith asked.

There was a pause, and Smith could picture Einar leaning back to get a good look at the wall clock. “About that,” he said. “Maybe only forty-five minutes.”

Smith swallowed and improvised. “Look, Einar, maybe it’s the medication — my doctor gave me some stuff that makes me really fuzzy — but I don’t remember talking to you since Tuesday. Did you call me or did I call you?”

“I called you,” Einar said. “Hey, Ed, how serious *is* this bug you’ve got? I thought it was just a summer cold or something, but if you’re on this medication...”

“Oh, it’s okay, I think, really, it’s okay,” Smith said hurriedly. “It’s some sort of, you know, three-day wonder.” He hesitated, then asked, “Einar, *where* did you call me?”

“At your apartment, of course,” Einar said. “Where else?”

Smith felt himself tense up at that. His throat was dry, and he had to swallow again before he could speak.

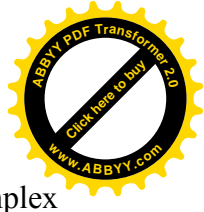
“Einar,” he said, and then hesitated, unsure what to say.

The phone hummed quietly in his ear.

“Einar,” he continued at last, “That wasn’t me. There was some trouble at my apartment building yesterday, and I’m staying in a motel in Gaithersburg. That’s where I am now.”

For a long moment he heard only silence.

“Ed,” Einar finally said, “What are you talking about? It sure *sounded* like you, and who the hell else could it have been, in your apartment?”



It took Smith a moment to figure out how to answer that. He really did not want to try to convince anyone over the phone, least of all the mind-bogglingly unimaginative Einar, that his apartment complex had been taken over by monsters.

“I don’t know,” he said, after an uncomfortable pause, “Some prankster, most likely. The trouble yesterday was a practical joke that got out of hand — you can call the police if you want the details, I don’t really know what happened. Ask for Lieutenant Daniel Buckley. Maybe one of the pranksters got into my apartment and thought it would be funny to answer my phone when it rang, I don’t know. Maybe it was a smart-ass burglar, or a cop leading you on and hoping you’d spill something. I don’t *know*, Einar. I *do* know that I’m sitting here in Room 203 at the Red Roof Inn on Route 124, and that I haven’t been in my apartment since yesterday afternoon.”

The silence that followed was perhaps the longest yet.

“I don’t know, Ed,” Einar said at last. “It sounds pretty unlikely. Sounds completely screwy, in fact. I mean, whoever it was sure *sounded* like you, and he seemed to know who I was, and everything.”

“Did you give your name before he used it?” Smith asked.

He dreaded a possible affirmative answer. If the one who answered the phone was that *thing*, that nightmare person, and if they really took over the lives of the people they replaced, they must have some way of knowing little details of people’s lives.

“I don’t remember,” Einar admitted after a moment’s thought. “I guess not; I guess he said hello, and I said hi, it’s Einar, and then I asked if you — if he’d be coming into work this afternoon ... oh, shit, Ed, I don’t know. It’s weird. The voice was exactly the same — are you *sure* it wasn’t you?”

“I’m sure,” Smith told him. “And the voice — well, you expected it to be me, so you heard what you expected, right? It’s not like my voice is unusual or anything.”

“Well, yeah, but ... Jeez, I’m not sure whether you’re telling the truth now, or if maybe *you’re* the one pulling a practical joke.”

“I’m not, Einar, I swear it. Look, I’ll be in Monday, and you can see me face to face, and maybe by then the police will have it all straightened out. And if you’ve just got to talk to me, call me here. The Red Roof Inn in Gaithersburg.”

“Red Roof Inn. Right. Room 203, you said.”

“That’s right,” Smith agreed.

“Got it,” Einar said. “See you Monday, then.”

“Right. See you.”

Smith set the receiver gently down on the cradle, then fell back on the bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to think.

His thoughts were a mass of fragmentary and horrific images that he tried desperately and unsuccessfully to force into order. That *thing* was in his apartment, answering his phone — and what



use was it doing there? What did a walking nightmare *do* in its free time?

What about all his things — his clothes, his books, his computers? Was that thing wearing his clothes, reading his books, using his computers?

There were so *many* questions and mysteries!

What had happened in that basement? What had the nightmare people done there? What had they done to his neighbors? What had the police found there?

Where had the monsters come from in the first place? Where *could* they have come from? Outer space? Hell? Genetic experiments?

None of those made any sense. How could monsters from outer space disguise themselves as human? Why would they want to? Why attack an apartment complex?

And nobody was doing genetic experiments like that, not even the CIA, he was sure.

And he didn't believe in hell, not really, not as a source of devils and monsters.

So where *had* they come from?

He didn't know. He couldn't imagine any sane explanation, and as he tried, his exhaustion got the better of him; he fell asleep.

2.

He was awakened by the growling of his stomach. Sitting up stiffly, he looked out the window to see the sun low in the west, behind the Orchard Pond apartments.

He looked at his watch and saw that he had slept away the entire afternoon; it was only a minute or two before 7:00 p.m.

He felt better, calmer and more rested, than he had since fleeing his apartment the day before. Sleep had been what he needed, no doubt about it.

He took a moment to use the bathroom, comb his hair, and change his wrinkled and sweat-stained shirt, then headed for Denny's for dinner. It was obviously too late to call Lieutenant Buckley now; he would call in the morning.

And when he did call, besides asking what progress had been made in the investigation, it occurred to him that it might be a good idea to let Buckley know where he was staying.

He found a table, read the menu, and told the waitress what he wanted. After he had ordered, he sat back and considered.

How long was he going to stay at the motel, anyway? And where was he going to go?

Sleeping on George's couch down in Bethesda would be cheaper — not that he was especially short of funds or anything — and would get him farther away from Diamond Park. He would be heading against



the worst of the rush-hour traffic on his way to his job in Rockville, instead of being in the middle of it, and that would be nice.

And what was he going to do about his apartment?

He would give it up, clear it out, and forget about the monsters, that's what he would do. He had done his part in calling the police. Dealing with monsters wasn't his responsibility.

If there really were any monsters.

And if there weren't, well, living with vicious practical jokers wasn't his idea of a good time, either.

A few hours' sleep made it all seem so much simpler. It wasn't his business. He might make a few more anonymous calls, but he wasn't going to ruin his life. The monsters, if they were really monsters, had come and taken over that one apartment complex, and he had been lucky enough to get out alive, and as far as he knew that was the end of it.

That they had turned up at the motel later on didn't matter. After all, they'd had plenty of opportunity while he was asleep just now, or when he was poking around the unfinished office building; if they were going to attack him, they could have done so then.

Of course, he thought, looking out the window at the orange-streaked western sky, that had all been in broad daylight, and the two occasions when he had seen nightmare people undisguised had been in the middle of the night.

Clearing out his apartment had better wait until morning, he decided. And in fact, he might see about staying up all night again, just until he could get settled in at George's place and start looking for a new apartment.

He was watching the glorious summer sunset and trying very hard not to think any more about any of it when his steak and shrimp platter arrived.

3.

"Hey, George," he said into the phone as he lay back on the motel bed.

"That you, Ed?" George's voice was calm and familiar.

"Yeah," Smith said. "How's life treating you lately?"

"Not bad, not bad. You gonna be at the poker game this month?"

"That's a week from Friday, right?"

"Right, and it'll be right here at my place."

"Yeah, I expect I'll be there. In fact ... well, listen, George, I have a favor to ask."

"Ask away; what's up?"



Well, see, there's a problem with my apartment. In fact, I'm calling from a motel; I had to move out. Is your living room couch still vacant?" He tried not to sound as if he were begging.

George hesitated, and Smith's heart sank.

"Jeez, Ed," he said at last, "I don't know. I mean, nobody's sleeping on the *couch*, but Bridget's been..." He let his sentence trail off unfinished.

"Oh," Smith said. He paused for a moment, trying to decide how badly he needed somewhere else to stay, and then asked, "You think that would be a problem? I mean, it wouldn't bother *me*."

"Well, yeah," George said, slightly annoyed. "I think it might have something of an inhibiting effect, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess," Smith acknowledged.

For a moment both men were silent; then George said, "Look, if it's an emergency, maybe for a day or two..."

"No, that's all right," Smith said, a trifle reluctantly. "I can stay at the motel. At least for now."

"Okay. Hey, I'm sorry; if the situation changes, I'll let you know. And if I come across any good apartments I'll give you a call."

"Fine. Thanks, George. Really. I'm at the Red Roof Inn in Gaithersburg, room 203."

"Right."

"Right. Well, guess I'll see you at the poker game."

"Yeah. See you."

He hung up.

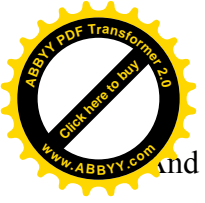
It would seem, Smith thought wryly, that he was not going to be staying with good old George down in Bethesda.

Well, he could find an apartment easily enough. Right across Route 124 there were plenty of apartments, and there were bound to be vacancies — maybe not *right now*, but reasonably soon.

Then he'd have to go and get all his stuff out of his old apartment — maybe it was just as well he'd never really finished unpacking everything. That meant spending at least a couple of hours at the Bedford Mills complex, with the monsters all around — if they were real. That was a daunting prospect.

At least he'd be able to get George to help — he could play on the guilt about his refusing the couch.

But right now, he didn't have much to do. He couldn't go apartment-hunting at this hour, or call the police, and while he'd have been able to work if he were already there, he couldn't get into the building this late; they locked up at six, and he didn't have a key yet.



and all his books and records and tapes were back in his apartment, damn it.

He sighed, turned on the TV, and sat on the bed.

Midway through the Tonight Show, where Jay Leno was filling in for Johnny Carson, Smith came to a conclusion.

When you aren't tired or sleepy or doing anything else, when there are things you'd like to do but can't, and when you're all alone in a motel room, watching late-night television is really, really boring.

Worst of all, the television didn't distract him from worrying about when that nightmare face was going to peer in his window again. His earlier cheerful optimism had faded once night had settled in, the sky had darkened, and the traffic had started to thin.

And not only is late-night TV boring, he decided, but motel rooms are depressing.

Sitting in a motel room watching late-night TV was stupid. There *had* to be something better to do!

Well, a mere twenty miles away was the heart of the nation's capital, and after living in Diamond Park for three months he still hadn't seen most of the monuments and attractions. Except for one weekend in May when he'd driven around the Mall unsuccessfully hunting a parking space, he hadn't been into the District at all in that time.

Midnight probably wasn't the best time, but at least parking should be easier.

He got up and shut off the TV, then checked through his pockets to make sure he had his license and keys. He glanced out the window.

For an instant he thought he saw something moving, something dark and red-eyed, but when he stepped closer there was nothing there.

Imagination, he told himself, just imagination. This whole thing had him horribly jumpy.

He *hoped* it was just his imagination, but he had never imagined seeing things before.

He stood at the window for a moment, staring out. He saw Denny's and the Shell station and Route 124, and no sign of any monsters.

He opened the door and left the room.

4.

Admiring monuments is all very well, Smith decided, but in the muggy August weather, even at night, he didn't care to do much walking or climbing, and staying in his air-conditioned car put serious limitations on what he could see or do — not to mention that Washington was reportedly not a particularly safe place to walk at night. The national capital was the national murder capital as well, after all — there had been something like two hundred and fifty homicides in the District so far this year.

Of course, nobody got shot by crack dealers on the Mall, whatever the hour, and he wasn't about to go wandering through the streets of Anacostia. All the same, except for a quick jaunt past the Vietnam



Memorial over to the Reflecting Pool and back, he had stayed in his car.

Nobody had bothered him during his walk; he had glimpsed a few other people strolling the area, but they were just dark shapes in the distance.

He drove around the Washington Monument once more, and then, at about 3:30, he headed back out of the city, taking 18th Street north to Connecticut Avenue and following that straight out to the Beltway.

The city streets were almost empty; he saw an occasional taxi here and there, but for the most part there was no traffic. The only delays on Connecticut were the traffic lights, but despite the hour he didn't care to run them. He wasn't in any hurry.

There were other cars on the Beltway and I-270, of course. There were *always* cars on the Beltway and I-270, at any hour of day or night. Traffic wasn't heavy enough to get in his way, though.

At twenty past four he hit the ramp off I-270 at Exit 10 and followed the loop around onto 117. Right up until he passed Bureau Drive and the entrance to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, he wasn't sure where he was going.

If he turned right onto 124, he'd be back at the motel in seconds.

If he went straight through the light he'd be on his way back to Diamond Park, where he could take another look at that unfinished building, or drive past his old apartment, and see if anything had changed.

There might be yellow-tape police lines around the office park. That would be worth seeing. It would mean that his call had done something.

That decided him. He stayed on 117 until he reached Barrett, where he turned left.

Then he cruised through the trees and across the dam, Lake Clopper pitch-black in the darkness, far darker than the sky overhead. He turned right on Willow and then left onto Orchard Heights Road.

The abandoned office park was on the left, the fence gleaming faintly beneath the streetlights.

There wasn't any tape.

He continued on down to Diamond Park Avenue, turned right and passed the dark shops of the town's commercial district, turned right again onto Willow, and came back up to Orchard Heights for another pass.

There was no tape. The unfinished building was just as he had left it.

There were no vehicles anywhere.

There were no visible tire-tracks.

There was no sign that the police, or anyone else, had been anywhere near the place.

He drove on past at a crawl, then gradually let his car pick up to a more normal speed until he came



gain to the intersection with Diamond Park Avenue.

This time he turned left, past the Safeway, and then left again on Barrett.

That took him by the Bedford Mills Apartments, and he inched past with his foot lightly touching the brake, the speedometer needle resting against the peg at 5 MPH.

(Why, he wondered when he noticed that, didn't it go all the way down to zero?)

He stared at the complex as he passed.

The parking lot was full. Most of the windows were dark; yellow light showed in a scattered few, squares of rich color showing through the grey darkness of the walls. The blank outer faces of A and D buildings were featureless slabs of blackness.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

He noticed that most of the lights seemed to be in C building. There were lights in three apartments there.

In fact, his own lights were on.

He stopped the car, looked for traffic, and, seeing none, backed up a few yards and stopped again. He leaned close to the glass and looked again.

The lights were on in the living room and bedroom of his apartment.

He felt himself shiver slightly, and tried to tell himself that it was because he had the air conditioning turned up too high. He rolled down the window and leaned out.

Warm, sticky air bathed his face as he looked up at the windows on the top floor of C building.

Something moved in his apartment; he saw a dark figure outlined briefly against the glass in the living room, as if someone were taking a quick look out through the drapes, and then the drapes fell back in place and it was gone again.

He hadn't been able to make out any detail. It was just a tall, thin figure, black against the light, and it was there and then it wasn't.

He stared up at those closed drapes and the yellow light that poured through them for a long, long moment. Then he pulled his head back into the car, rolled the window up, and stepped on the gas.

5.

He was the only customer at Denny's when he first got there, at about five, but by the time he'd finished his meal the place had acquired a dozen or so other patrons, and the sky was pale blue above the motel and the railroad tracks.

His long night was beginning to wear on him; he was ready to go to bed, though he'd only been up for about ten hours. His body wanted rest, wanted to get back on something resembling a normal schedule,



ather than the weird reversal of day and night he had just lived through.

He'd been on a normal schedule until Tuesday night, when the air conditioner had been broken.

He'd slept from 3:30 until 11:20 Wednesday morning, maybe napped briefly Wednesday night, and then slept from sometime Thursday morning — he really didn't know just when — until about 7:00 p.m. on Thursday evening. That was, effectively, two nights' sleep in three days. Here it was Friday morning, and that was catching up with him. He wasn't a college kid any more, able to pull an all-nighter for a term paper or a poker game without suffering for it.

The constant nervousness, the strain he was under, hadn't helped a bit.

If he went to bed, he guessed he would sleep for eight hours again, which would mean getting up around mid-afternoon.

If he stayed up — and he wasn't so worn that his ability to stay awake was seriously in doubt — he could probably hold out until early evening, go to bed, and get up for a somewhat early Saturday morning. If he could manage that, he'd probably be back to normal by Monday, ready to go to work.

Of course, that would mean sleeping at night, in the dark, and something in the back of his mind didn't like that idea at all. What if his earlier guess about the monsters had been right? What if they could only ... could only do whatever it was they did at night, and only when the victim was sleeping?

They knew where his motel room was, and he couldn't retreat to George's couch.

He left the rest of his coffee untouched, and substituted another glass of orange juice. When that was gone, he went back to his room, where he dropped into bed, still clothed, and fell quickly asleep.

6.

When he looked at his watch upon awakening he was startled to see that he had only slept for a couple of hours. Apparently he had only been ready for a nap — his metabolism wasn't quite ready to switch over to a nightwatchman's hours.

Well, he could accept that. That meant he had that much more of the day to try and get something done.

He certainly had plenty to do; he wanted to call the police and find out what had happened at Orchard Heights, and he wanted to find himself a new apartment. And he intended to go back to Bedford Mills, by daylight, and start moving his belongings out of his old apartment.

He got up, showered, dressed, and got ready to face the day.

When he felt sufficiently alert, he reached for the phone — then paused, and reached for the phone book. He didn't know the non-emergency number for the county police.

Finding it, he dialed, and when a polite voice answered he asked for Lieutenant Buckley.

A moment later, a vaguely-familiar voice said, "Daniel Buckley."

"Lieutenant? This is Ed Smith. From the Bedford Mills Apartments."



Yes, I remember you, Mr. Smith. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering whether there's been any progress in explaining what happened on Wednesday."

"Not really, Mr. Smith."

Smith hesitated, then said, "Someone told me that there were officers looking at that unfinished office building yesterday; did they find anything?"

Buckley hesitated, and then said, "Well, it isn't really any of your business, but I suppose it won't hurt to tell you. We got a call about that place, and when two of our men investigated they wound up walking through puddles of fresh paint. We think it might have been the same pranksters who got your neighbors over there on Wednesday, but we don't really know."

"Fresh paint?" Smith was honestly puzzled by that.

"Buckets of it," Buckley told him, "White latex house paint was splashed all over the place, half an inch deep some places, and it couldn't have been poured more than twenty minutes before — you know how fast latex paint dries."

"But where ... I mean..." Smith tried to formulate a single question that would take in all his confusion.

"Why'd they do it, do you mean?" Buckley suggested. "I'd say that pretty obviously, somebody thought it would be funny to get paint all over some uniforms."

"Oh," Smith said.

Another "prank," that's all it was, then.

At least, that was all the police saw.

No wonder there had been no police line. The nightmare people, or pranksters, or whatever they were, had successfully covered their tracks.

That had been ingenious, he had to admit. The creatures clearly weren't stupid. Paint would hide the blood pretty effectively, and they must have carried the bones away and hidden them.

"Abandoned buildings like that always attract vandals, Mr. Smith," Buckley said.

Smith made a wordless noise of agreement into the phone, and then added, "By the way, there's something I should tell you, if you're still investigating all this. I've moved out of my apartment there; after what happened, it made me nervous staying there."

"I think that's understandable, Mr. Smith, but if you'll forgive me, don't you feel that you're giving in to the people responsible? They'll probably think it's all very funny that they forced you out of your home..."

"Lieutenant," Smith interrupted, "That's not my home. I only lived there a few months, and I was never all that comfortable there. I just wanted to let you know where you can reach me."



All right, then.”

“For now, I’m staying at the Red Roof Inn in Gaithersburg, Room 203. I’ll be looking for a new apartment this afternoon. If I forget to tell you where I am, you can either ask my boss, Einar Lindqvist, or a friend of mine, George Brayton.” He gave George’s address and phone number.

There was silence for a moment, and Smith assumed Buckley was noting down the information.

“All right, Mr. Smith, thank you. Was there anything else?”

Smith hesitated, trying to think if there was anything he could say that would force Buckley to push his investigation a little harder, anything that might help him discover the monsters.

“No, that’s all,” he said at last. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Smith.”

He hung up.

7.

As he passed the Willow Street fork he began to slow down.

By the time he reached the entrance to the Bedford Mills complex he was creeping along at little more than walking speed, and on the small bump that marked the division between street and lot he let the car come to a full stop.

It was mid-afternoon, and sweltering hot. He had eaten lunch, found himself a new apartment over in Gaithersburg that would be available Wednesday and only cost about twice what it should, and it was time to come and look over his old place, pack up a few useful things and load them in the car. He was tired of living out of a hastily-packed suitcase.

But this place was full of monsters.

One of them was apparently living in his own apartment.

What would he do if he walked in the door and came face to face with that thing?

He hadn’t entirely worked that out, but his new folding knife was in his hip pocket, and the crowbar was on the seat beside him, waiting for him.

Sooner or later, he would have to face this. He was *not* going to abandon all his belongings. His books, his stereo, his Kaypro 2000 laptop — he was not going to just leave them.

He stepped on the gas, and the Chevy rolled forward into the lot.

The lot was fuller than usual for this time of the afternoon on a weekday, even a Friday; he glanced at his watch, and saw that it wasn’t even 4:30 yet. Mildly puzzled, he found a space in front of C building and pulled in.



He glanced around carefully before shutting off the engine, but he saw no one. He picked up the crowbar and hefted it, then climbed out of the car.

He left the door unlocked, just in case he had to leave quickly, and stuffed the keys well down into his pocket, where they wouldn't fall out accidentally.

Then, crowbar in hand, he entered the building.

The stairwell was empty and quiet, and seemed even more dusty than usual. He tried to move silently as he climbed the stairs, pausing on each landing to look ahead and make sure no one was waiting for him.

At the top he headed for the door to C41, and his hand fell to his keys from habit, but he stopped himself before he put the key in the lock. He leaned forward and peered into the peephole.

It didn't work properly in this direction, and in any case could only show him a small part of the interior, but he stared through it anyway.

Nothing looked wrong. Nobody was there. Everything was as he had left it.

He unlocked the door, pocketed the key, and then shifted the crowbar to his right hand and adjusted his grip. He took a deep breath, and swung open the door.

He had half expected to find the place torn up, as burglars might have left it, but nothing had been disturbed. Everything was just as he had left it on Wednesday afternoon.

The air conditioning still hadn't been fixed, and the apartment was like an oven, but it was otherwise undisturbed.

He had *not* expected to see the nightmare person in it, and he didn't. The apartment was empty.

Somehow, he simply couldn't imagine seeing that creature in full daylight, and the bright August sunlight was pouring in every window.

Of course, the creature had to be *somewhere*, and it had answered his phone in daylight — though that had been morning, when his side of the building was in shadow.

Still, he somehow hadn't expected to find it here.

He moved cautiously through the place, checking the living room, the dining area, the tiny walk-through kitchen, then down the hall, a quick look in the bathroom, and into the front bedroom that he had used as his library-cum-office.

Nothing had been disturbed. The laptop computer was packed up and sitting beside the bookcase, and his main machine, a customized Compaq Deskpro 386, was on the desk.

The dustcover was off the monitor, and he tried to remember whether he had left it that way or not.

After a moment's thought he decided he had. He usually did.

He went on to the bedroom, but nothing was out of place there, either.



There was no sign that the monster had ever dared to intrude here.

He wondered, for an instant, where it was just now, and then suppressed the thought. It wasn't here, and that was enough.

He held onto the crowbar, though, as he began planning what to take with him.

The first thing to get was the laptop, he decided as he emerged into the hallway again, and second would be the Compaq. With those in his possession he would be much more in control of things, he thought. He'd also have something better to do than watch TV all night.

Someone knocked at the door.

He froze.

Another knock sounded.

"Who is it?" he called.

After all, he tried to tell himself, it didn't have to be one of the monsters. It could be Lieutenant Buckley, or Einar come to check on his story, or any number of other people.

"Mr. Smith? It's me, Bill Goodwin, from downstairs."

He hesitated, unsure what to do.

The Goodwin boy was one of *them*, wasn't he? He was the one who had alerted them all after spotting Smith coming out of the Orchard Heights basement, so that they could clear out the bones and paint over the blood in time.

But this might be a chance to learn more about what was really going on, if he could talk to one of them. And if it was just the one of them, in broad daylight — and Bill wasn't that big, and he had his crowbar...

"Just a minute!" Smith called.

He crossed the living room and peered through the peephole.

It looked like Bill Goodwin, certainly, standing there in cut-off shorts and an old Metallica T-shirt. And he couldn't see anybody else.

He hooked the chain-bolt, opened the door a crack, and looked out.

He still saw nobody else.

"All right, come in," he said, opening the door wide.

"Hey, I didn't mean..."

"Get in here!" Smith bellowed, startling them both.



“Okay, okay!” The boy ducked quickly inside, and Smith slammed and locked the door behind him.

Then he turned to face his guest, still holding his crowbar, and gestured toward the chairs over by the windows. “Have a seat,” he said.

He wanted the boy in the sunlight. He couldn’t have said why; it just seemed safer, somehow.

“Sure,” the lad said, dropping onto one of the chairs. “Hey, what’s with the wrecking bar?”

Smith settled slowly onto the other chair, never loosening his grip on the crowbar and never taking his eyes off his guest. “Just a precaution,” he said. “I think somebody broke in here while I was out.”

The other made a wordless noise of concern.

Whoever and whatever he was talking to, it *looked* like Bill Goodwin. It sounded exactly like him, even moved like him.

“How’re your folks?” Smith asked.

Goodwin, if it really was he, shrugged. “They’re fine.”

For a moment they both just sat, staring at each other.

“So what brings you up here?” Smith asked at last.

Goodwin shrugged again. “Oh, well, I saw your car in the lot, and you hadn’t been around the last couple of days, so I wondered if there was anything wrong, and if there was anything, y’know, that I could do to help out.”

Smith eyed him warily.

He looked human. His eyes were blue, not red. Smith thought he might have seen a slight silvery glint to his teeth when he spoke, but that might just have been fillings, and it was too quick to be certain of anything.

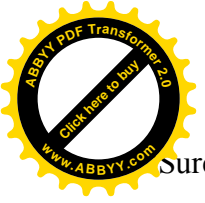
He looked right. He sounded right.

Still, something was slightly off. Smith puzzled over it for a moment, while Goodwin shifted nervously under his scrutiny.

“Hey,” Goodwin said at last, “If you’re okay, I guess I’ll go.”

“No, wait,” Smith said, raising a hand — his left, since the crowbar was still in his right. He thought the teeth might have glinted again, and he felt as if any moment he would sense what was wrong, why he didn’t believe he was really talking to the Bill Goodwin he knew.

“Fact is,” Smith said, “that I’m planning to move out of here. That ... that whatever-it-was on Wednesday made me nervous, you know? And I could probably use a hand loading the car, when I get everything ready to go. Think you could help me out?”



"Sure," Goodwin said, shrugging. "No sweat."

That was it!

That was what was wrong, Smith realized. He couldn't smell anything.

No sweat.

That is, he couldn't smell anything but his own scent and his apartment's normal dusty odor. Goodwin gave off no odor at all, so far as he could tell. No sweat, no deodorant, no aftershave, no hair oil, nothing. And there was no dampness to his T-shirt, no sheen of moisture on his forehead.

It was a hot day, outside and in, and Goodwin had just come up three flights of stairs and into a baking-hot apartment. He was a healthy young male, and not over-scrupulous about bathing. He *ought* to have an odor — nothing offensive, nothing anyone would ordinarily notice, but *something*.

And in that T-shirt, he *ought* to be visibly sweating. Smith knew that his own shirt was damp under the arms and across the back of his shoulders. He could feel a film of perspiration on his forehead, and imagined it would be visibly shiny.

Bill Goodwin's shirt and forehead looked totally dry.

Before he could stop himself, Smith blurted, "What the hell *are* you, anyway?"

The Goodwin thing blinked at him. It started to grin, and its teeth gleamed silver, but then it stopped, pulled its lips back together.

"What?" it said. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Smith said quickly. On an impulse, he rose from his chair, transferred the crowbar to his left hand and stuck out his right, offering to shake. He wanted to know what the thing felt like, whether its skin was really as dry as it looked.

"I'll be moving Wednesday, I think," Smith said. "See you then?"

Startled, the creature stood and took his hand. "Sure," it said, "Wednesday."

The hand felt cool and dry and lifeless, more like a glove than like living flesh. "Thanks," Smith said.

"No problem," it answered. It hesitated, then started toward the door.

Smith came along behind it, the crowbar ready in one hand. Without warning, he threw the other arm around the Goodwin creature's shoulders in a comradely gesture.

"I really appreciate this," he said.

The T-shirt was completely dry. The skin at the back of the thing's neck was as cold and dead as its palm, maybe more so.

As Smith pulled his hand away, as his fingers slid across the back of the thing's neck, he hooked them



no claws, nails scraping at the skin.

The Goodwin thing didn't seem to notice.

Smith's hand came away and he stuck it immediately in his pocket, and kept it there. He stepped back and let the creature open the door itself, rather than either putting down the crowbar or taking his other hand back out of the pocket again.

That step back gave him a clear view of where his fingernails had scraped.

"Well, see you Wednesday," the thing said as it turned in the doorway.

"Right, thanks," Smith said, trying very hard not to tremble.

The creature stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind it.

Smith pulled his hand from his pocket.

Where he had scratched the thing, something had come away. When he had looked at the back of its neck he had seen a hole, a hole where something damp and slick and grey had showed through the skin, something the color of wet modeling clay. There was no bleeding or oozing, just that greyness.

The piece that had come away was still in his fingers, and he held it up to the light. It was a sliver of translucent material, dry on one side and damp on the other, about two inches long and half an inch wide across the middle, no thicker than the fabric of a pair of jeans.

Even though he had never encountered such a thing in quite this form before, there was no doubt about what it was.

He was holding a piece of human skin.

Chapter Four:

Saturday, August 5th

1.

He sat in the car, the crowbar across his lap, the Kaypro on the seat beside him, the Compaq and his stereo in back.

There was no way any prankster could have set this up.

There really were monsters. They really had taken over the apartment complex, replacing the people who had lived there.

He looked around at the full parking lot, the lot that had been mostly full even during regular business hours, and he knew that at least some of the nightmare people were not bothering to carry out all the details of their charade of normal humanity — or were not able to. Some of them must have abandoned the jobs held by the people they had replaced — or perhaps they had been unable to do the work, and



ad been fired.



Or perhaps they didn't even know what jobs they were supposed to have. After all, how much did they know about their victims?

He paused. Was he sure that his replaced neighbors were "victims?" What had really happened to them?

He remembered the blood splattered on the walls and floor of that unfinished basement, and the pile of fresh bones, and he clenched his jaw, fighting nausea. He knew what had happened to the victims.

If he could accept that the creatures were real, he could accept what he had seen; he didn't need to try to gloss over anything.

He looked at the piece of skin he still held, and he knew that it had come from the real Bill Goodwin, and that a *thing* was now wearing the boy's skin, pretending to be him.

A hundred and forty-three people had been murdered by those creatures, and no one knew it but him.

That sounded like paranoid raving, but when he looked at the strip of skin he had all the proof he needed that it was real, that he was not insane.

Unfortunately, proving it to anybody else wouldn't be that easy. If he took it to the police, they could analyze it, prove it was human skin — but they wouldn't believe him when he told them where he got it. It was convincing proof of something, certainly, but he knew he could never convince them that it came from some murderous creature out of his nightmares. It was far more likely that they would decide that he had found a corpse somewhere, or even murdered someone, and was hallucinating rather than admit it to himself.

He would probably find himself in St. Elizabeth's, or wherever Montgomery County sent possibly-dangerous lunatics these days.

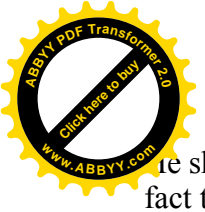
And even if somebody *did* give him the benefit of the doubt — which was staggeringly unlikely — then what? The police had rules and regulations to follow. They would need warrants and evidence and probable cause before they could attempt anything like what he had just done, peeling a piece of skin off a monster to prove that it wasn't human.

And what would they do with the monsters if they ever *did* acknowledge that they really existed? Again, they'd be bound by rules and forms and procedures. They'd need proof that the nightmare people had killed their victims. They'd need a legal determination as to whether the creatures were human or animal. The whole thing would inevitably get into the news, and there would be crazies of every sort popping up — people who would claim that the nightmare people were innocent victims, or UFO aliens, or a punishment sent by God.

And who knew what would happen then? What would the nightmare people do, if the police started investigating them? What would they do to reporters and gawkers and loonies?

Smith knew he couldn't fight the things alone, but he couldn't go to the police, either.

He asked himself whether he really needed to fight them at all. Couldn't he just flee?



He shook his head. No, he couldn't do that. They had killed his neighbors — killed them, and from the fact that there were only bones and no flesh, maybe eaten them. He couldn't just leave the creatures there. Even if he got away, surely, they would eventually kill other innocent people, kill them and eat them.

He shuddered.

Where had the things *come* from?

Had there always been monsters like this, lurking in quiet corners of the world?

He didn't know, of course. He had no way of knowing.

He did know that he had to fight them, somehow, and destroy them — kill them all.

But wouldn't that be murder?

No, they weren't human, he reminded himself. They might be intelligent and humanoid, but they weren't human, and they were all murderers and presumably cannibals — well, man-eaters, anyway. "Cannibal" wasn't the right term if they weren't human.

And "murder" wasn't the right term if they weren't human. Killing them wouldn't be murder.

The police might have another opinion, though. So might the nightmare people themselves. He couldn't just walk in with an assault rifle and start gunning them down and expect to get out alive, or to stay out of jail if he did survive.

He needed to know more about them, and he needed help.

He looked around at the parking lot again, at all the cars there, the cars that had been sitting there all afternoon, instead of carrying their owners to and from ordinary nine-to-five jobs.

The things weren't human. They had disguised themselves as human, but the disguises weren't perfect. Their victims had had friends, relatives, co-workers — the neighbors were all gone, but the families and friends were still out there.

If he could find those friends, and could convince them of what had happened, he would have allies.

He wished he knew more about his neighbors. Did Mrs. Malinoff have any family, or Nora Hagarty, or Walt Harris? None of them had ever told him. He had hardly spoken to most of his neighbors; he had been too busy settling in at work, arranging his apartment, making contacts in the area. The only ones he'd ever spoken to, other than a few minutes here and there in the stairwell or on the lawn, were the Goodwins. He knew a little about them — not much, but a little.

Well, he decided, at least that was a place to start.

2.

Maggie Devanoy was irked.



ne was aggravated.

“Irked” was her father’s word, and “aggravated” was her mother’s; in her own words, she was royally pissed off.

She had had to ride the bus most of the way home from her summer job at the mall, and *walk* home from the bus stop, in ninety-zillion degree heat, and after waiting tables for six hours she did *not* need to do any more walking, and all because that asshole Bill Goodwin hadn’t shown up the way he had promised he would.

Now it was well after seven, and the sun was setting, and she’d missed dinner, and if she admitted that she hadn’t eaten her parents were going to give her another stupid lecture and ask why she hadn’t called them for a ride — and if she *had* called, of course, she’d have gotten a lecture on being independent and old enough to take care of herself and how inconvenient it was for them to make a special trip.

In an attempt at fairness, she admitted that Bill might have an excuse. Maybe he was sick, or that old clunker of his had broken down again, or something — but then why hadn’t he called?

He hadn’t called her since Monday, in fact.

Maybe this was his not-particularly-clever way of hinting that he was losing interest in their relationship, and if that was it, then she was going to be even *more* irked, because it was a really shitty way to break it off, and didn’t he know that?

He could have just *told* her — preferably in the car or over dinner, after he’d picked her up the way he had promised.

She could see her house now. A little red car was sitting at the curb in front, one she didn’t remember ever seeing before — that was all she needed, for her parents to have some stupid guest there when she came in all dirty and sweaty and tired.

Then she saw that someone was sitting in the driver’s seat, and an instant later the car’s engine started up.

Well, that was a relief, anyway — she wouldn’t have to be polite to one of her parents’ friends. She shifted her backpack to her other shoulder and trudged on.

The car was rolling now, but moving very slowly, just inching along, and hanging close to the curb. She stopped and watched it.

The driver looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t place him. Someone from her Dad’s office, maybe?

The car was coming closer, and she decided it was none of her business. She shrugged, and started walking again.

The car pulled up to the curb and stopped, about twenty feet in front of her.

She stopped.

What was this, some sort of pervert trying to pick her up, or something? Or someone selling drugs?



The driver leaned across and rolled down the window on the passenger side. Maggie stepped over toward the grass alongside the sidewalk, ready to head for cover if the guy tried anything funny. She glanced over and saw she was in front of the Goldsmiths' house; she could run up and ring their doorbell if anything happened. Mrs. Goldsmith was pretty cool.

"Maggie?" the guy called, stretching his head out the window.

Oh, great, she thought, he knows my name! She didn't say anything, just stood and watched.

"Aren't you Maggie Devanoy?" the stranger asked.

"What if I am?" she called.

"I'm Ed Smith," he said, pulling himself halfway out the window of his car. "I live upstairs from the Goodwins. I've got to talk to you about Bill."

She eyed him warily.

Yeah, that was where she'd seen him; he and Bill got along pretty well. He'd been teaching Bill some stuff about computers back in the spring. She'd seen him around the Goodwins' apartment building maybe three or four times.

"What about?" she called, not going any closer.

"It's hard to explain. Something's happened to him. Look, have you seen him since Tuesday? Did he seem strange to you?"

She shook her head. "I haven't talked to him since Monday," she said.

"Well, isn't that strange?" the man in the car asked. "I mean, it's Friday evening, and you haven't heard from him?"

Her irritation got the better of her. "You're goddamn right it is!" she told him. "We had a date for dinner tonight, and that bastard didn't show up! He was supposed to pick me up after work!"

Smith, if that was really his name, nodded. "I'm not surprised. Look, I really need to talk to you. I've got some things to tell you, but it's going to be really hard to explain, and hard for you to believe. I don't want to do it here, like this."

"You want me to get in the car with you?"

"Or I could meet you someplace — someplace public, if you're worried about me."

She shook her head. "I don't have a car. And I'm not about to walk back to the bus stop and wait — I'm not even sure there are any more buses tonight."

"Well, then climb in, and we can talk."

She didn't say anything, just stared at him.



Yeah, I know, you don't get in cars with strange men. Look," he said. He paused, groped for something, found it, and picked it up.

It was a crowbar, a blue-painted one with a U-shaped curve at one end. It looked brand-new; in fact, she thought she could still see a price sticker on one end.

He held it out to her.

"Look, you can take this, and just hang onto it, and if I try anything, hit me with it. I really need to just *talk* to you."

She looked at the crowbar, stepped cautiously toward it, then stopped.

She'd never heard of a rapist or pervert giving his victim a weapon like that, but what if he had an even better weapon, like a gun?

"Oh, what the hell," she said. She walked over and gingerly took the crowbar from him.

It weighed at least a couple of pounds, she thought, hefting it, and the curved end would hit really hard. At close range, it would have to be just about as dangerous as a gun — easier to use, harder to miss with.

"Okay," she said.

He smiled, and opened the door, and she got in, the crowbar ready in her hand.

3.

"Is it all right if we drive? I'd rather not just sit here."

She shifted her grip on the crowbar as she glanced around. It was a nice little vehicle, reasonably clean, but with a pile of stuff in the back seat that looked like computer equipment. The air conditioning was running, which was nice; she was in no particular hurry to get out into the heat again. "It's your car," she said. "Just so you drop me at home when you're through."

"Fine." He let the car go forward.

"So what is it you wanted to tell me about Bill?"

He glanced at her, but then turned his eyes back to the road.

"Did you hear about what happened at the Bedford Mills Apartments on Wednesday morning?" he asked.

"There was something in the paper yesterday about a bomb scare — is that what you mean?"

He nodded. "Except that wasn't what it was." He turned a corner, then continued, "On Wednesday morning, every single person in that whole complex, except me, was missing. The place was empty. Wednesday afternoon, they all turned up in the basement of that unfinished office building across the back lot, with a story about a bomb scare chasing them out."



“What about you?” Maggie asked, watching him closely and holding the crowbar. “Why were you the only one who wasn’t missing?”

“Because I slept right through it all. I was up until three a.m. because my air conditioner had broken down, and I couldn’t sleep, and then I slept right through until almost noon, and I missed the excitement, whatever it was.”

“Bill was missing, too?” Maggie asked.

Smith nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Bill, and his parents, and Jessie and Harry and Sid, all of them were missing.”

She blinked. Why on Earth hadn’t Bill called her afterwards, to talk about it? That was an *adventure*, something he would have shared with her!

She’d seen the item in the *Journal*, but it hadn’t occurred to her that the Goodwins were involved; the article hadn’t mentioned names, or said that it was everyone in the complex, only that “over a hundred residents” were involved.

“That’s the *official* story,” Smith said, after giving her a moment to think. She looked at him and listened closely.

“What *really* happened...” he began. “Well, I don’t know exactly, but I know that the people who came back afterwards weren’t the same ones who had lived there before.”

“What do you mean, they weren’t the same ones?” she asked, staring at him.

Then he told her about Mrs. Malinoff’s knee, and her eyes, and the bloodstains he’d found in the basement, bloodstains that had been painted over by the time the cops got there — he didn’t mention the bones, or the apparitions at his windows, or go into any detail about the blood. He told her about his phone being answered when he wasn’t there.

And he told her about peeling a piece of skin off “Bill Goodwin’s” back, and what he had seen underneath, and he fished a little scrap of something, like a milky piece of burst balloon, out of his pocket and held it out to her.

“Eew, gross!” she said, not touching it.

He smiled a tight little smile, and put the scrap on the dashboard. Maggie stared at it, but still refused to touch it.

“That all sounds crazy,” she said.

She immediately regretted it; what if he *was* crazy? What if he attacked her? Sure, she had the crowbar, but she didn’t want to have to *use* it. She wasn’t sure she *could* use it.

She saw a glitter in his eye for a second, and lifted the crowbar.

“I know it sounds crazy,” he said. “Why do you think I haven’t gone to the police with it?” He glanced at her.



He nodded. "I guess," she agreed. "It's like something out of a horror movie, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know," he agreed. "I wouldn't believe it myself if I didn't have to. I tried very hard not to believe it. There were a couple of things I haven't told you about, because if I did I'd sound even crazier, but I saw them, and felt them, and there's that piece of skin there, and I sure as hell didn't imagine *that!* Even if you won't touch it, you can *see* it, right? And it's really a piece of skin?"

He stopped the car at a corner and looked at her with an odd expression on his face, and Maggie realized that he wasn't really sure at all. If she told him it wasn't skin, he'd believe her; he'd think he was nuts.

That might be the best thing all around. She could pretend she'd never seen him, and forget the whole thing.

But it really *was* a piece of skin, or at least something that looked like one.

"I guess it is," she said. "I mean, I've never ... you don't ... I mean, I guess so."

He nodded. "Good enough." He pulled out into traffic, turning east.

"Look, you don't have to believe me," he said a moment later. "Go visit Bill. You've been dating all summer, right? At least that long; I've seen you around a lot. You must know him pretty well by now. Whatever it is that's wearing his skin, you ought to be able to tell it's not him. I mean, has he been *acting* like Bill, this week, not calling you, even after all the excitement? Forgetting your date tonight? It's because the thing that took his place doesn't know everything Bill knew; it doesn't know he had a date tonight. You'll see."

Maggie didn't particularly *want* to see, but she didn't say that. Instead, she asked, "Is that where we're going? Bill's apartment?"

Smith glanced out his side window at the gathering dusk. "Nope. Not at this time of day, we're not."

She looked out her own window; the sun was down, and the sky darkening slowly. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I think they're more active at night."

"You think *what* are more active at night?"

"The nightmare people, the things that ate my neighbors."

She considered that for a long moment of silence as they cruised smoothly along Route 124. Her empty stomach knotted at the idea.

"You really think they *ate* them?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I can't prove it," he said, "But yes, I think they did."

She grimaced. "Eew," she said again.

He smiled. It was not a happy smile, nor a pleasant one.



“So what do we do now?” she asked.

“Well,” he said, “I intend to fight these things, whatever they are, even if I can’t go to the police. I’m looking for people to help me, people who knew my neighbors and who’ll have a reason to want revenge. And also, people who will be able to tell that these things aren’t the people they’re pretending to be. Except I don’t know anyone like that. I didn’t live there that long, and you know how people are in apartments — you never get to know your neighbors, not really. The only person I knew at all who might help was you, because I’d seen you and Bill together, and he told me your name and that you lived around here, so I was able to look your folks up in the phone book and come wait for you.”

She considered that, and replied, hesitantly, “I don’t know about this. I mean, I’m not sure what you’re after, and I don’t think I want to do it. I’m no fearless vampire killer or anything.”

“They aren’t vampires,” he said. “At least, I don’t think they are.”

“Then it’s even worse, isn’t it?” she asked. “I mean, with a vampire, you know he can’t come out in the daylight, and they’re scared of crosses, and garlic, and you kill them with a stake through the heart — but what do you do with these things, whatever they are? Where’d they come from, anyway?”

“I don’t know, damn it!” Smith snapped. He calmed down almost instantly, and continued, “I wish I did. And I know you’re not Rambo or anything, hell, you said you can’t even drive yet, but you’re all I’ve got. You’ve *got* to help me, even if it’s just by telling me where I can find other people who’ll believe me.”

“But I’m not sure *I* believe you!” she shouted.

“I know,” Smith said, nodding. “You will, though, when you talk to Bill Goodwin, or look at the back of his neck.” He pointed at the skin fragment. “You’ll see where this piece came from — if it hasn’t healed up or something.”

Maggie tried not to yell as she replied, “Look, even if I *do* believe you, why should I help?”

“Because,” Smith said, snatching up the skin and shaking it at her, “That *thing ate* Bill Goodwin! It ate the boy you’ve been dating all summer!”

That was too much for her. Her gorge rose.

“Stop the car!” she said, desperately.

He looked at her, startled, “Oh, hey, you don’t have to get out here, I’ll drive you home...”

“No, that’s not it. *Stop the car!*”

Puzzled, he pulled over onto the shoulder, and she got the door open and leaned out just in time to vomit onto asphalt instead of upholstery.

Smith watched helplessly from the driver’s seat, and noted wryly that she never loosened her grip on the crowbar.

At least, she thought as she wiped her mouth with a rag from the glove compartment, at least she wasn’t



hungry any more; missed dinner or no, she wasn't the least interested in eating anything for quite some time.

When she was done, and sure that nothing more would come up, she leaned back and closed the door.

"Take me home," she said.

Smith started the car rolling.

"What about..." he began.

"Tomorrow morning," she said, "I'm going over to Bill's apartment, and I'm going to talk to him, and if you're right, I'm going to go home again and call you up." She paused, then added, "And if this is all some kind of a sick, nasty joke, then I swear I'm going to report you to the cops, you son of a bitch, and tell them you tried to rape me."

"It's not a joke," he said.

"Then you'll hear from me in the morning. Where can I call you?"

He told her.

Then he took her home.

Shortly after ten o'clock on Saturday morning, he was awakened by her call.

He had his first recruit.

4.

He met his second recruit when he came by to pick Maggie up for a lunchtime strategy session.

He had only gotten four hours' sleep that morning, after a long night spent playing with the Kaypro laptop in his motel room, but he tried not to let that bother him.

On two separate occasions during the night he had glimpsed something looking in the window at him, a familiar and inhuman face that vanished as soon as he looked up, but he tried not to let that bother him, either.

He was not at his best, however, when he drove up to the Devanoy house on Amber Crescent and found not one, but two people waiting for him on the front porch there. One was Maggie, tall and brown-haired and gangly, and the other one he didn't know, a boy of sixteen or seventeen, with curly black hair and a pale, round face, an inch or two shorter than Maggie.

"Who's this?" he asked as he got out of the car.

"Mr. Smith," Maggie said, "This is Elias Samaan. He lives up the street, and he was a friend of Bill's, from school."

Elias started to hold out his hand, then nervously changed his mind. "Pleased to meet you," he said.



Smith nodded. “Pleased to meet you, too,” he said. He looked at Maggie.

She shrugged.

Elias said, “I was over at Bill’s place this morning, and Maggie told me about the vampires, and he’s changed, all right.”

Smith frowned. This did not sound encouraging, somehow. “I don’t think they’re vampires,” he said. “I ... well, I don’t think that’s what they are.”

“Sure they are!” Elias insisted. “They aren’t like in the movies, but these things must be what the original legends are based on!”

Smith shrugged. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “This probably isn’t the best place to discuss it, though.”

“Oh, right, I guess,” Elias said. “So what did you have in mind? Where are you working from?”

Smith blinked. “Working from? I’m staying at a motel, if that’s what you mean.”

Elias looked disapproving. “*That’s* no good. We need somewhere they can’t spy on us.”

“Elias says he knows all about this stuff,” Maggie interjected.

Smith did not like the sound of that at all. “*What* stuff?” he said.

“Vampires,” Elias explained. “And monsters.”

Smith glanced about, suddenly wondering if he had made some terrible mistake, then turned back to Elias and Maggie.

“Look,” he said in a low voice, almost a whisper, “These aren’t some kind of horror-movie vampires that sleep in coffins. This isn’t a game, either — it’s not Dungeons Dragons. This is *real*. But it’s not something I want to talk about here where Maggie’s folks might be listening, or the neighbors, or other people. I’m not worried about the creatures bothering us here, or spying on us, but I *am* worried about getting us all in trouble with the everyday authorities — you two with your parents, me with the cops. Not to mention that it’s hot out here. Now, can we go somewhere a bit more private than a goddamn *front porch*?”

Maggie glanced nervously at the door, and Elias looked abashed. “Right,” Elias said.

“Should we get in the car?” Maggie asked.

“I think that would be a good idea, yes,” Smith said. He brought up the rear as the three of them trooped down the front walk.

Elias climbed into the back, and Maggie took the passenger seat. “Kind of cramped back here,” Elias remarked.

Maggie found the lever to slide her seat forward a little. “Is that better?” she asked.



Yeah.”

Smith ignored this exchange as he fastened his seat belt and got his key into the ignition. He started the engine, gave it a minute to warm up, then punched on the air conditioning.

“Where to?” he asked. “Any suggestions?”

“Why don’t we just drive around?” Maggie asked. “We can talk, and no one can overhear us.”

“Not unless they’ve bugged the car,” Elias agreed.

“Nobody’s bugged my car,” Smith said, annoyed at the suggestion — not because it was absurd, but because he was afraid that it wasn’t.

He pulled away from the curb.

After a moment’s silence, Maggie suddenly announced, “Okay, I’m convinced. It’s not Bill. He’s got a bandage on the back of his neck where you got that skin off, but he doesn’t ... well, it isn’t Bill. He doesn’t feel right.”

“He doesn’t smell right, either,” Elias said from the back.

Maggie smiled back at him gratefully, then added, “And he’s forgotten things that Bill wouldn’t forget, and sometimes he doesn’t move right, and he wouldn’t ... I mean...”

Smith threw her a glance, and suggested, “He wouldn’t kiss you?”

“Yeah,” Maggie admitted, relieved. “He didn’t seem to want to touch me at all, and that’s not like Bill.”

Smith nodded. “I didn’t think he’d want to touch you,” he said. “Their disguises aren’t *that* good.”

They rode on without speaking for a block or so, up Southfield Road to the corner of Barrett.

“So what do we *do*?” Maggie asked.

“I’m not sure,” Smith admitted. “I hadn’t really thought it through. I just knew that I needed help.”

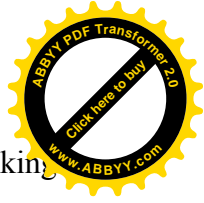
“Help with *what*?” Maggie demanded.

“That’s obvious,” Elias replied scornfully. “Killing them.”

5.

Elias’s father was named Youssef Samaan, according to his birth certificate, but he called himself “Joe” to sound more American. He considered himself a good, solid American, and as such he didn’t like blacks, Hispanics, or smart-ass do-gooders. He didn’t trust the police, or the courts, or his neighbors.

What he did trust was the .45 he kept in the drawer by his bed.



oe Samaan had started drinking on the way home from work the night before, and had gone on drinking until the bars closed. Then he had gone home and polished off the bottle of gin he kept in the linen closet for emergencies. He went on these binges every so often — and with increasing frequency of late. Never more than once a week, though. Never on weekdays. He knew better than to drink on the job, or risk missing work. He only drank on Friday nights, maybe on Saturdays, and not every week.

Most weeks, maybe, but not every week.

He had finally fallen onto the bed around four a.m., and had stayed there, not moving, ever since.

He never even stirred as Elias removed the gun from its hiding place and slipped out of the house, out to the driveway, where Smith's Chevy waited.

Maggie stared at the weapon apprehensively as Elias climbed back into the car.

"I was thinking," Elias said, as he sat back with the gun in his lap, "This might not work. I mean, in all the stories, bullets won't kill vampires."

"These aren't vampires," Smith said for what seemed like the hundredth time, as he started the engine.

"Yeah, but they're *like* vampires," Elias insisted, "So maybe the gun can't hurt them."

"What about silver bullets?" Maggie asked.

"That's werewolves," Elias said in prompt dismissal.

"Well," Maggie began, "Maybe these things are like werewolves..."

"Jesus!" Smith burst out, stamping suddenly on the brake and bringing the car to an abrupt halt, halfway out of the driveway into the street. "*Listen* to you two! Vampires! Werewolves! Jesus fuckin' Christ, this is not some damn horror movie, this is *real!*"

His outburst was followed by a moment of silence. Maggie pushed herself back against the door of the car, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Elias was blinking, startled, but not abashed.

"But, Mr. Smith," he said, "What *are* they, then, if they aren't vampires?"

"I don't *know*, damn it, but they *aren't* vampires! There's nobody in any black capes turning into bats and sucking blood! And *werewolves...*"

"So they aren't vampires," Elias said, "or werewolves, but they are monsters, right?"

"Yes!" Smith snapped.

"But then ... listen to me, please, before you yell again, Mr. Smith. Do you know where the unicorn legend comes from?"

Smith stared at Elias in baffled anger. "What?"



“Do you know where the story of the unicorn first came from?” Elias insisted.

“No; do you?”

“Yeah, I do,” Elias replied. “It’s no big secret. If you work your way back through older and older descriptions of unicorns, you can see it; I read about it a couple of places. What happened was that travelers to Africa and India brought back descriptions of what they’d seen there, including an animal they called a unicorn, because it had just one horn. It’s Latin...”

“I know that,” Smith growled. “Unicorn, one horn. Go on.”

“Right. Well, they didn’t have any pictures, so all they could do was to describe what they’d seen in terms of what the people they were talking to already knew. So they said that a unicorn had a head and body shaped sort of like a huge warhorse, with a horn on its face, and with a tail like an ass, and with great flat feet like an elephant.”

“Wait a minute ... feet like an elephant?”

“That was part of the early descriptions, yeah,” Elias said. “It sort of faded out of them over time.”

“Go on,” Smith said.

“Well, that was the description they gave,” Elias said, “And that was what the pictures were drawn from, by people who had never seen a unicorn. And the travelers said that nobody could get near a unicorn, and that became the whole thing about only virgins approaching them, somehow, even though what the travelers *meant* was that the things were big and stupid and dangerous and would charge at anyone who came near them. And the locals in India used the horn as an aphrodisiac, because it looked phallic, and that became all the stuff about the magical healing.”

“You’re telling me,” Smith said slowly, “that a unicorn is the same thing as a rhinoceros?”

Elias nodded. “Yeah. Not the same thing, though; it’s what was left of the rhinoceros after five hundred years of legends getting handed down by word of mouth.”

“A unicorn’s a rhinoceros?” Maggie asked, confused.

“Yeah,” Elias said. “And we’ve heard vampire stories the same way we’ve heard unicorn stories. Except these things here aren’t unicorns, they’re the real thing, the rhinoceros. They’re what the vampire stories started out from, before everything got twisted around.”

Smith released the brake, and the car rolled out into the street.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe you’re right, but I don’t know. And even if you are, it doesn’t prove anything about what they’re like.”

“I know,” Elias admitted, “it doesn’t, not really — but that stuff about vampires being hard to kill must come from *somewhere*.”

“Like the stuff about virgins and unicorns, huh?” Smith said.



Elias had no answer for that one.

They drove on in silence for a moment, and then Maggie said, “Wait a minute.”

“What?” Smith asked, slowing slightly, but not stopping.

“If the gun won’t hurt them, why’d Elias want to get it? What are we going to do with it?”

Elias said sheepishly, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Maggie turned and glared at him. Of all the times for Elias Samaan, of all people, to turn macho and want to play with his father’s gun!

“You mean we don’t need it for anything,” she accused.

Elias shrugged.

“I think we should try it,” Smith said suddenly.

“Try what?” Maggie asked.

“Shooting them. It might work.”

“Yeah, but if it *doesn’t*...” Elias began.

As Maggie looked back at the .45 and saw Elias’s hands tremble slightly holding it, the reality of the situation sank in.

That was a gun. A real gun, that fired real bullets. And they were talking about really shooting somebody with it.

“That’s *murder!*” she said.

“No, it isn’t,” Smith said, “It’s ... they’re not human. They’re monsters.”

“That’s what the Nazis said about the Jews,” Maggie said.

“Hey!” Elias protested.

“The Jews didn’t eat anybody,” Smith retorted. “These things did. The Jews didn’t dress themselves in other people’s skins, they didn’t leave blood and bones scattered all over an empty basement, they didn’t peer in anybody’s window in the middle of the night with teeth like steel needles...”

“That’s what *you* say these things did,” Maggie yelled. “Nobody’s been peeking in *my* window, and I haven’t seen any blood or anything!”

Smith drove on without comment for a few seconds, as Elias tried to protest and Maggie shouted him down.



“Was that Bill Goodwin you talked to this morning?” Smith asked softly.

Maggie quieted, and they rode on.

“Take me home,” she said suddenly.

Smith glanced at her.

“Take me home,” she insisted. “Maybe you’re right, maybe they’re monsters, but I’m not ready for this. I can’t just go along and watch you shoot somebody — or some *thing*. What if we’re all wrong, somehow? Then it’s murder! Or what if Elias’s right, and shooting them doesn’t kill them? They’ll kill *us*. And even if it *does* kill them, and they *are* monsters, are we going to shoot all a hundred and whatever it is of them?”

“We’re going to start with one,” Smith said, tense, “And see what happens.”

“You guys go ahead,” Maggie said, “But take me home first.”

Smith glanced back at Elias, who shrugged helplessly.

“Okay,” Smith said, resignedly. “If you change your mind, let us know.”

He turned the car back toward Amber Crescent.

6.

She watched the red Chevy pull away, then turned from the window and looked for something to do, to distract herself from any thought of where Elias and Mr. Smith might be going, what they might be going to do.

She started to reach for the kitchen phone, to call Bill — that was what she always did when she was bored or lonely.

Then she stopped.

Bill wasn’t there. Something had taken his place.

Bill was dead.

Tears welled up suddenly.

Bill was *dead*.

She clenched her teeth to keep from screaming.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. She wasn’t some tragic soap-opera heroine. She was an ordinary suburban kid, about to start her junior year of high school. She was supposed to be worried about sex and clothes and whether her friends were on drugs, not about monsters eating her boyfriend, or Elias taking his father’s gun and going off to shoot people.



Bill was *dead*. That thing had *eaten* him.

And she had *talked* to it, touched it, tried to *kiss* it, for God's sake!

She didn't want to be with Elias, with that gun, or with Mr. Smith, who seemed a little bit crazy — he might be a nice enough guy ordinarily, but he was strung pretty tight just now, what with having gone four nights without sleeping while he worried about those creatures. She didn't really know him, anyway, and until he calmed down she didn't *want* to know him.

She didn't want to be in that little Chevy, driving over to Bill's apartment.

And she didn't want to try and act normal right now, either. She didn't want to talk to Emmy Ryerson about trying to sneak into the Ringo Starr concert at the Merriweather Post Pavilion, or to her mother about buying her school clothes for the fall, or to anybody about anything normal, because she knew that in the back of her head she'd keep remembering that Bill had been killed and eaten, and she'd want to scream.

She could just lock herself in her room and try to forget all about it, and she even took a step toward the stairs before she realized that wasn't going to work.

You don't forget something like that so easily.

She had to do *something*.

She looked at the kitchen phone.

Bill was dead, and so were all his neighbors, except for Mr. Smith. And his family — Harry and Sid and Jessie. They were dead, too.

Oh, God, even little Sid!

She had to talk to someone about it. Elias and Mr. Smith were too busy trying to *do* something about it; she just needed to *talk*, to try and understand it. She wasn't ready to *do* anything yet.

She knew some of Bill's neighbors. She'd babysat for some of them. She'd talked to them.

She knew some of their friends and relatives, too.

She reached for the phone and dialed.

Chapter Five:

Later Saturday

1.

“So what do we do, do we just walk in and shoot somebody?” Elias asked.

Smith shook his head. “Give me the gun,” he said, holding out a hand.



Elias hesitated, still holding the automatic. “Wait a minute,” he said. “First tell me what you’re going to do. This is my dad’s gun, after all.”

Smith sighed. “I’m going to go into the building, and go up to my apartment, and then I’m going to call up the Goodwins on the phone and ask if someone can come up and help me move stuff, and when someone comes I’m going to shoot him, and if anyone finds out and asks what happened I’ll claim that I mistook him for a burglar.”

Elias considered this, and couldn’t see anything really wrong with it, in theory.

One detail still bothered him, though. “It’s my dad’s gun,” he pointed out. “If the police get it they’ll trace it. How’re you going to explain that?”

Smith shrugged. “I don’t know yet. Maybe I stole it. I don’t think I’ll have to explain it. You think these things are going to call the police?”

“But what about the neighbors...” Elias began, and then stopped. He had forgotten.

There *were* no neighbors. Just the creatures that he privately thought of as proto-vampires.

“So what do *I* do?” he asked.

“You wait here,” Smith told him. “And if anything goes wrong, you get out of here, and you and Maggie can try your luck.”

That sounded for all the world like a speech from a bad movie, Smith realized, the sort the hero gives before he plunges into some ridiculously dangerous situation, and as soon as Smith had finished saying it he wished he hadn’t.

For one thing, it brought home all too vividly the possibility that he might be about to get himself killed, just like the heroic leader in all too many old war and adventure movies.

And horror movies, of course.

He knew if he stayed and talked any longer he would lose his nerve. “Give me the gun,” he said.

Elias handed him the gun, butt first.

Smith took it awkwardly; it was heavier than he had expected.

Elias saw Smith’s uncertainty. “You know how to shoot, don’t you?” he asked, worried.

“No,” Smith admitted. “I know you point and pull the trigger.” He lifted the gun.

“It’s loaded, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Here,” Elias said, holding out his hand. “Give it back.”

Smith handed it back.



Elias expertly released the clip, checked it, slid it back in place, then worked the slide to chamber a round.

He handed it back to Smith with the safety off, ready to fire.

“Be *careful* with it,” he said. “It goes off pretty easy. Just squeeze the trigger gently.”

Smith nodded. He started to stick the gun in his pocket, then looked at the tension on Elias’s face and stopped.

“I can’t walk in there with a gun in my hand,” he said.

“Yeah, but you don’t want to stick it in your pocket, either — the trigger could snag on your belt or something.” Elias groped around behind the driver’s seat for a moment, then came up with an oily rag. “Cover it with this,” he suggested.

Smith draped the rag across the gun and his hand. “That looks stupid,” he said, studying the result.

“Hold it with your other hand, like a bandage,” Elias suggested.

Smith looked at him suspiciously. “This is the rag I use when I check the oil. It’s filthy. It doesn’t look *anything* like a bandage.”

“You got a better idea?”

Smith shrugged and tried it, holding the rag around his right wrist with his left hand as if staunching a bad cut.

“All right,” he admitted, “It’s better than nothing.” He opened the car door.

“Watch where you point it,” Elias called, as Smith climbed out.

2.

Nobody had paid any attention to him as he had made his way from the car to his apartment; in fact, he had seen no sign of life anywhere in the complex. No children played in the grassy area between the two sections of parking lot; no housewives were sunning themselves on the balconies.

He had to put the pistol down on the floor to unlock the apartment door. As the door swung inward, the thought suddenly struck him that his own particular monster might be lurking inside, ready to pounce, and he quickly knelt and grabbed the gun.

The air conditioning was still out, and hot air poured out over him as he stood up.

Remembering at the last moment what Elias had said, he stopped his finger from touching the trigger.

Nothing jumped out at him.

Gun in hand, no longer concealed, he stepped into his own living room, ignoring the heat.



"Anyone home?" he called.

A car horn suddenly sounded from outside, an almost nasal beep, repeated four times in quick succession.

Startled, he spun to face the windows, and then, realizing where he was, he spun again, looking first back out into the stairwell, and then down the little hallway to the bedroom.

Nothing.

He swung the door closed, and listened carefully to be sure it latched. Then he marched across the room and peeped out through the drapes, the gun held up, pointing at the ceiling, the way the actors always held their guns on all those cop shows on TV.

Elias was looking up at him through his car's sloping windshield; the boy waved.

Smith waved back.

That had almost certainly been his own car's horn he'd heard; Elias had beeped at him about something. The wave had been calm, though, not a signal that something was wrong.

Well, he'd figure it out later.

He crossed to the kitchen, put the gun down on the counter, and picked up the phone. The Goodwins' number was written in felt tip on the edge of the memo pad he kept there; he read it over, then dialed.

On the third ring, someone answered. "Hello?" said a familiar childish voice.

"Sid?" he said.

He hadn't thought of that. Monster or no, he didn't think he could shoot a little kid. Sid was ... the *real* Sid had been eight.

"This is Sidney Goodwin; who's this?"

"This is Mr. Smith, upstairs in C41." He couldn't face Sid. Nor ten-year-old Harry nor twelve-year-old — or was it thirteen? — Jessie. "Is Bill around?"

"Yeah, he is; do you want to talk to him?"

"No, but if he's not busy, I could use a hand moving some of this stuff up here."

"Hang on a minute, Mr. Smith." A series of bumps came over the line, and then voices, too low to make out the words, and then the Sid thing came back on.

"He'll be right up, Mr. Smith. He'll knock."

"Thanks, Sid."

He hung up.



ne imitation Bill Goodwin would be right up. His target was on its way, about to walk right in.

He picked up the gun, and then looked around the living room, trying to decide where he should stand.

Then he felt the weight of the pistol, and thought about recoil and whether his hands might shake, and he decided he didn't want to stand anywhere.

Instead he sat down in the back corner, leaning back against the wall with his knees up, facing the door. He took the gun firmly in both hands and pointed it at the door.

That should work.

He lowered the gun.

A moment later he heard footsteps coming up the stairs, followed by a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called, "It's open!"

He lifted the gun.

3.

For a moment, as he squeezed the trigger, everything seemed to freeze. The door stopped in its swing, the expression on the Goodwin thing's face set suddenly, even his hands stopped trembling.

Then his eyes closed and the gun went off.

The bang was startling, and loud, but not ear-splitting. The smell of powder was sharp, but not unpleasant. The recoil was like a solid punch against his braced hands, but no worse than that.

The biggest surprise was the rattling that followed the shot.

He opened his eyes to see Bill Goodwin still standing there, looking down at him, his face expressionless.

Smith blinked.

Then the Goodwin thing grinned, revealing those silvery needle-teeth, more teeth than any human mouth ever held, hundreds of them, Smith was certain.

He must have missed. When he had panicked and closed his eyes the gun must have jerked to the side and he must have missed.

Then he saw the half-inch hole in Goodwin's T-shirt, the hole through the crossbar of the T in Metallica, the hole that was not bleeding, but slowly oozing something thick and greyish-black, something with the color of ash and the texture of mucilage.

Even as he watched, the oozing stopped, and the gunk seemed to be visibly hardening, hardening into new grey flesh.



The nightmare thing was *grinning* at him, with those hideous gleaming teeth, and its eyes were red and glowing from deep within its disguise of human skin.

“That’s the second hole you’ve put in this skin,” it said, in a normal conversational tone. “At this rate it isn’t going to last much longer.” It ran a long, inhumanly narrow, inhumanly pointed black tongue around its lips, and Smith could see those human lips being pushed back, revealing something shiny and black and wet underneath.

“I might need to get another if you keep this up,” it said, in Bill Goodwin’s voice. “They don’t heal.”

Smith raised the gun again and tried to fix the wavering barrel on the center of the thing’s chest.

It turned its head, looking back out at the hallway, ignoring the pistol. It reached up with its left hand, feeling behind its right shoulder.

“Make that the second and third holes,” it said. “The bullet came out the back. I think I heard it hit the wall.”

Smith remembered the rattle, and his jaw sagged, but he raised the gun and fired again.

This time he didn’t flinch, didn’t blink. He saw the nightmare thing stagger back as the bullet took it in the throat. He heard the sharp crack as the bullet shattered the hallway skylight, and saw the hallway brighten as sunlight spilled through the new opening, unimpeded by the dirt that had been layered on the glass. Small shards of glass sprinkled across the wall and floor.

Then the thing stood straight again, still grinning, as the same grey ooze seeped from the new wound.

“You’re aiming high,” it said, but its voice was no longer exactly Bill Goodwin’s — at least the bullet through its neck had done that much. “I think you forgot to compensate for the recoil.” It took a step toward him.

He pressed back against the wall, tensing for a struggle.

The moment had come. Elias had been right; the gun was useless. The thing was going to eat him.

He took a breath, getting ready to scream, to fight, to sell his life as dearly as he could.

“Now,” it said, “did you really have something you wanted moved, or was that just a trick to get me up here?”

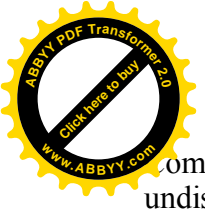
Smith gaped.

The thing just stood there, grinning.

Smith gulped, tried to speak, couldn’t manage it.

Then, abruptly recovering his senses, he lunged forward, scrambled to his feet, and dove toward the doorway, shoving his way past the thing.

It made no move to stop him. He reached the doorway, stumbled through it, and headed for the stairs.



Coming up the stairs, looking up at him from the landing, was another of the nightmare people, this one undisguised by human skin. It looked up, its grey face and gleaming teeth and red eyes plainly visible for an instant, and then it looked down again, like a shy child, its face hidden by the blue-black slouch hat it wore.

Its hands were thrust deep into the pockets of an old raincoat, its body completely covered; with its head down it could pass for human — or for a mannequin.

Smith realized that he was between two of the things, but before he could think about that he was running down the stairs. He slammed the creature on the landing back against the wall and pushed past before it could grab him.

Its hands came out of the pockets as he did, though, long, bony hands, gnarled grey flesh strung tight across bone, with long glistening black nails at each fingertip.

He felt one nail tear at the back of his shirt, and then he was past it and running down the stairs.

Elias saw him coming, saw him running in panic, and started the car — he was already in the driver's seat, and Smith had left the key in the ignition. With the engine running, he leaned over and opened the door on the passenger side.

Smith stumbled and almost fell on the steps down to the parking lot, but he caught himself and ran the rest of the way to the car. He threw the gun to the floor and dove in.

Before he could even get his right foot inside, Elias was backing the car out of its space; by the time Smith closed the door, Elias was struggling with the gearshift, trying to get it into Drive.

Minutes later, as Elias cruised slowly down Barrett Road, Smith finally caught his breath.

4.

“So did it work?” Elias asked.

Smith shook his head. “No,” he said. “You might as well go home and put the gun away.”

Elias shook his head. “Not right away; I'll have to clean it, first. And you'll want to wash your hands with a real strong soap, Lava or something like that — to get the powder grains out. I should've told you to wear gloves.”

Smith looked at his hands; they were a trifle unsteady, but he didn't see anything else abnormal at first.

Then he looked more closely. Were there faint black smudges?

He rubbed, but they didn't come out.

“Do you think maybe silver bullets would help?” Elias asked, clumsily negotiating the corner of Townsend Road.

Before Smith could answer, a horn honked, and Elias jumped slightly. He started to pull over.



"I think you better drive," he said. "I don't have my license yet."

Smith stared at him.

"Hey, I've got a learner's permit," Elias said, defensively. "It's legal, as long as you're in the car with me. I'm just not used to this car. It doesn't handle like my dad's Ford."

"Stop there, then," Smith said, pointing to the parking lot of a 7-Eleven.

He wasn't in the best of shape to drive, either, but if anybody was going to wreck his car, he preferred to do it himself.

Elias obeyed, and climbed out. Smith slid over, while Elias went around the front of the car.

When they were both belted in, Smith headed the Chevy out of the lot.

As he waited for a break in traffic, Elias asked again, "What about silver bullets?"

Smith was trying hard not to think about nightmare people, trying hard to concentrate on his driving. He didn't want to think about whether silver bullets would work.

"Where would we get the silver?" he asked. "How would we make the bullets?"

Elias pondered this for a moment. They had gotten out of the parking lot and were turning right onto Willow Street when he said, "Well, in the movies, they just melt down jewelry, and make the bullets in a mold..."

Smith threw him a glance. "You got any silver jewelry? Real silver, not plate?"

"Ah ... no, but there's a jeweler at Lakeforest Mall..."

"There are jewelers all over; all right, so we could buy silver chains or something. But how would we make the bullets?"

"Well, you melt down the silver..."

"In what? You have an electric crucible somewhere? I don't. I haven't seen one since I toured the engineering lab back in college."

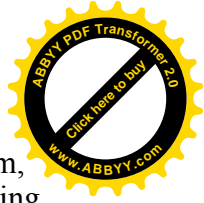
Elias thought, and suggested, "What about an oven? I mean, how hot ... no, I guess not, huh?"

"Ever left silverware in the oven?"

"No, and besides, ours isn't silver, it's stainless steel, but I get your point. But we could *get*..."

"And what about a mold?" Smith said, interrupting.

"Well, I don't have one, but aren't there hobbyists who make their own bullets?"



“Sure, there are — but I’m not one of them, and neither are you, and I don’t know where to find them, and doesn’t it seem to you that this is all going to one hell of a lot of trouble and expense for something neither of us really believes will work?”

Elias opened his mouth, then closed it again. Smith turned onto Diamond Park Avenue.

“You don’t think it’ll work?” Elias asked at last.

Smith shook his head. “I don’t know. I saw those wounds close up, and I don’t see why it would make any difference if the bullets had been silver instead of lead. I mean, they went right *through*.”

Elias didn’t answer, and after a moment Smith looked over to see what his passenger was doing.

Elias was staring at him, that was what he was doing.

“What’s your problem?” Smith snapped.

“They went right *through*?” Elias asked. “What ... I mean, what happened? You didn’t say, and I’d sort of thought that the bullets just, you know, vanished, like in the movies or something...”

Smith snorted. His terror was completely gone now, worn away by the reassuring normality of driving. “I keep telling you, this isn’t some damn horror movie!” he said.

He drove on for a moment, then continued, “I shot it twice. The first time the bullet went through its chest, not right in the center, but up toward the right shoulder, and it came out the back and ricocheted around the stairwell. It left a hole in the shirt and ... and the skin, and this grey slimy stuff filled up the hole and sealed it, like ... like caulk or something. Then I thought it was going to kill me, so I fired again, and got it in the throat, and that one ... well, I aimed high, or it got deflected or something, and went out through the skylight.”

“And that one closed up the same way?”

Smith nodded. “Exactly the same. Except I think maybe its voice sounded a little different afterward. And then I ran for it, and there was another one on the stairs but I got past it okay.”

“God,” Elias said, “you must’ve been scared shitless. How did ... what did it do when you shot it?”

Smith shuddered at the memory. “It smiled at me, with those teeth.”

“God,” Elias repeated.

“Yeah,” Smith agreed. “Let’s take the gun back where we got it, all right?”

“All right,” Elias agreed. He glanced down regretfully at the pistol, lying on the floor of the car.

Smith reviewed the afternoon’s events, trying to recall if there was anything else he should tell Elias. Something occurred to him, not to tell, but to ask. “Hey,” he said, “Why’d you beep the horn?”

“Oh,” Elias said, “Well, that was because I thought I saw something climbing out of your bedroom window.”



What?”

“Yeah, something climbed out. It didn’t look human, exactly, sort of like a big spider. It climbed down and then it went into one of the windows the next floor down. I didn’t really get a good look at it, and it was gone by the time you came to the window, so I figured it was too late to do anything about it.”

Smith blinked, and puzzled over that, trying to make it make sense.

The idea that came to mind at once was that the thing that had been in his apartment when Einar called actually *had* been there today, and had somehow slipped out the window and gotten away, so as not to confront him.

But why didn’t it want to confront him?

And Elias said it had looked like a spider, not like a person, when it crawled down the side of the building.

Could the things change shape?

Like vampires?

And what could kill them, if bullets couldn’t? Holy water? A stake through the heart? Sunlight couldn’t, obviously, although they didn’t really seem to like it much.

Had that thing he met on the stairs been his own familiar haunt, coming back up the steps by more normal means to investigate the gunshots?

He had so many questions, and so few answers, and no way to learn more.

Or was there really no way?

He was considering this as he pulled up in front of the Samaan house on Amber Crescent.

There might be one way to find out more about the things.

He could ask them.

5.

He drove back to the motel alone. He had told Elias to call if he had any news, or any ideas about how the creatures could be fought — but right now, he had no idea what the two of them could do, so there was no point in driving about aimlessly together.

Elias had agreed, a bit reluctantly.

They had to know more about the things before they could fight them effectively, that was all there was to it.

Once he was back in his motel room, he first checked to make sure that the maid hadn’t disturbed any of his belongings.



ne hadn't, nor had anyone else.

Reassured, he sat down on the bed and reached for the phone. He took a deep breath, and then dialed his own number.

He held the receiver to his ear. He heard the buzz that meant the phone in his apartment was ringing, and then someone picked up.

"Hello?" said a voice, a voice that was oddly familiar. He thought for a moment, and realized that it sounded not like his own voice as he ordinarily heard it, but as he had heard it on recordings. When he had called his own phone at work to test the answering machine, his taped message had sounded exactly like this.

It must be how he sounded to other people. The thing had his voice.

"Hello," Smith said, "Who is this?"

"You dialed this number," that familiar voice said. "Don't you know who I am?"

Smith could almost hear the creature smirking.

"Yeah," he said, "I know who you are, I guess. Or at least who you're pretending to be. I don't know *what* you are, though."

The thing on the other end of the line snickered.

It was a really hideous snicker. Smith wondered if he ever sounded like *that* when he laughed; he fervently hoped not. He hesitated, trying to think how he should phrase his questions, how he could get the nightmare to tell him what he wanted to know.

The snickering died away, and the silence grew awkward, but Smith couldn't get his questions out.

"Did you want something?" the thing asked at last, "or did you just call to taunt me?"

Smith blinked. "*Taunt* you?" he asked.

"I shouldn't have said that," the creature said hastily.

"But you *did* say it," Smith said. "What do you mean, taunt you?"

"With the fact that you're still alive, of course. I should have gotten you on Lammas Night. Damn stupid air conditioner!"

Hearing his own voice say that sent a chill down Smith's spine. "I..." he began, then froze.

A thought trickled into the back of his mind — who was taunting whom? The creature might well be very much aware of the effect its words created, the revulsion its seemingly casual manner evoked.

Did it take pleasure in scaring him? Did it draw some sort of sustenance from terror?



could it feed on emotion, like the monsters in some of the stories he'd read, or seen on *Star Trek*?

"Vampire," Smith muttered. Maybe Elias was right with his theories about the vampire legends.

"What did you say?" the voice on the phone asked eagerly.

"Nothing," Smith said, his voice catching in his throat.

"Sounded like you said something," the creature insisted. "Sounded like 'vampire.'"

Smith hesitated. Then he asked, "Are you?"

"Am I what?" the creature said. "Am I a vampire? Hell, no; don't be stupid. There aren't any vampires."

Hearing a walking nightmare, a cannibal monster bent on replacing him, dismiss vampires so easily, as if the supernatural was the nonsense Smith had always considered it to be, was a very strange and confusing experience. "But you..." Smith began.

"If there were still any vampires around, I wouldn't be here," the thing said, interrupting him. "The last vampire bought it in Los Angeles in 1939 — got a stake through the heart and her head cut off, the mouth stuffed with garlic and the whole thing burned. Messy, very messy."

Smith stared at the phone, as that horrible imitation of his own voice continued, casually conversational, "Of course, I don't suppose I should criticize; as you saw in that basement, we aren't very tidy ourselves, when we *feed*..."

Smith hung up, slamming the phone abruptly into its cradle.

6.

He thought about calling back, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead he sat, trying to order his disordered thoughts.

The creature had been so calm and matter-of-fact about it all. It hadn't tried to deny anything. It had admitted openly that it and its kind had eaten all his neighbors, and that it had intended to eat *him*.

And what was that about vampires?

Had there once really been vampires?

He shook his head. The image of blood-sucking bats was too corny, too overworked, to take seriously. The creature must have been trying to sidetrack him somehow.

Maybe it really *was* a vampire, and had been trying to mislead him. Maybe Elias was right after all.

The phone rang, and he jumped. He stared at it, then reached out carefully and picked it up.

After all, the thing couldn't get at him through a telephone.

It could seep through closed windows, though — why else would it have been outside that first night,



instead of coming up the stairs? And it could heal bullet wounds in seconds — how did he know what it could do? Maybe it *could* travel through the phone lines!

He almost hung up again, but then he decided to risk it. He lifted the receiver and said, “Hello?”

“Mr. Smith?” a voice asked, a feminine and unfamiliar voice. Whoever it was, she sounded very young and very nervous.

Was it one of the other nightmare people, trying to lull him, get him off-guard somehow?

“Yes?” he said warily.

“Mr. Smith, this is Maggie Devanoy,” the voice said. “I ... look, I think I need to talk to you again. And some other people do, too. Could you maybe meet us somewhere, say, tomorrow afternoon? After church?”

“I don’t go to church,” Smith said without thinking.

“Well, I do,” Maggie replied, “And it doesn’t matter anyway. Could we see you tomorrow?”

“Who’s ‘we’? Who are these people?” he asked.

Had the nightmare people gotten at Maggie? Had they gone after her, because he had told her about them?

Was it really Maggie at all, and not a nightmare imitating her voice?

“Well, after you left,” Maggie explained, “I got thinking, and I made some phone calls to some people I know, and I found some other people who are worried about what’s been happening at that apartment building.”

That did sound like a trap. “What people?” he asked warily.

“Well,” Maggie said, “there’s Annie McGowan, her sister Kate lived at Bedford Mills, or maybe her sister-in-law, and there’s Alice and Maddie Newell, their father lived there, and there’s Khalil Saad, who had friends there and knew Bill, and Sandy Niklasen, who lived there himself except he had a fight with his girlfriend last week and moved out, and ... and ... I think that’s all, but maybe I forgot someone.”

Smith stared at the flowered curtains that hid most of the window. “How’d you find them all?” he asked.

“Well, I just kinda knew them, I guess,” Maggie answered. “I met Annie when I was waiting for Bill one day, she was sitting on the lawn with her sister Kate, that’s the one that ... that they got, and she was crocheting something, and I got talking to her. And she’s listed in the phone book, so that’s how I found her. And the Newell girls are in my school, or at least Maddie is, and Alice was last year, before she graduated — they live with their mother, and when their folks got divorced a few years ago their father moved into the apartment over there. And Khalil used to talk to Bill about cars sometimes, he works in a garage — Khalil, I mean, not Bill; anyway, he talked to Bill sometimes when he was over there visiting his other friends there, so I knew him from that. And I met Mary, that was Sandy’s girlfriend, when I babysat for her neighbor across the hall a couple of times. She talked about Sandy a lot, but I never met him, but I knew his name, and she told me who he’d gone to stay with when he moved out, so I called



im.”

It sounded plausible, certainly. It was exactly the sort of thing he had wanted to do himself, except that he hadn't been able to think of anybody except Maggie herself.

It appeared he'd chosen well, though, when he contacted Maggie.

“So will you come, tomorrow?” Maggie asked.

“All right,” Smith said. “Where and when?”

“Well, I was figuring that the best place would be Annie McGowan's house, on Topaz Court — number 706, Topaz Court — around two o'clock. Would that be okay with you?”

“That would be fine,” he said, scribbling down the address on the pad on the nightstand. “I'll be there.”

“Oh, good! See you tomorrow, then!”

“See you tomorrow.”

She hung up.

He held the phone for a moment, then put it gently down.

He had his group now, assembled for him and ready to go. He was clearly going to be the team leader, since he was the one who had started this and who knew the most about those things, but these were people who would *know* what the nightmare people had done, people who had lost friends and family, had them *eaten*. They'd be angry and frightened, and would probably be ready to do almost anything he asked of them.

But he remembered the bullet-holes, he remembered the slow grey fluid that had sealed them. These things that he and the rest were up against were not mortal flesh. Whatever the things were, they were truly supernatural.

Maggie's recruits, he was sure, would do what he asked — but what could he ask?

7.

Maggie stared at the phone for a long moment.

She had called everyone she could think of — sweet old Annie, and that crazy Khalil, and that rotten Sandy Niklasen, and the Newells. She had called Elias Samaan, and talked to him for awhile. She had called Smith back.

And she still needed to talk. She was still scared, still confused, still twisted around.

But she'd called them all, everyone she could think of that she could find a number for and that wasn't out of town on vacation or something. Elias, Khalil, Annie, Sandy, the Newells, Ed Smith — that was everybody. There was nobody else left that she could call about the monsters.



nobody, that is, except the monsters themselves.

Without knowing why, she dialed the Goodwins' number.

"Hello?"

Mrs. Goodwin's voice. Even if it wasn't really her, the voice was still the same. "Hi," Maggie said. "Is Bill there?"

"Just a minute."

A sudden panic swept over her. What was she going to say?

Would she pretend it was really Bill, her old familiar Bill, and talk to it as if nothing had happened? Would they talk about friends and movies and TV and sex, just like any ordinary couple?

Could that thing carry on a real conversation? That morning it hadn't seemed to know what was going on. It hadn't gotten her jokes. It hadn't followed any of the gossip about their friends. It hadn't watched any of the TV shows she talked about.

Did monsters watch TV?

What would she say to it?

If she didn't pretend, if she treated it as the monster it was, what would she say to it?

Was there anything she could tell it, anything she needed to ask?

What did she really need to know?

"Hello?" Bill's voice said in her ear.

Her voice burst from her. "*Why?*" she asked it, without thinking. "Why did you kill him?"

For a moment there was only silence on the line.

Then Bill's voice asked calmly, "Have you ever wondered about the nature of evil?"

Chapter Six:

Sunday, August 6th

1.

The tall, sixtyish woman in the flowered dress who had answered the door was undoubtedly Annie McGowan herself.

"Hi," Smith said uncertainly, "I'm Ed Smith."



"Come in, Mr. Smith," she replied, "We've been expecting you. I'm Anne McGowan." She held the door wide, and he stepped past her, through the foyer into a small, sunny living room.

Elias Samaan and Maggie Devanoy were already there, sitting at either end of a rose-patterned couch, not talking to each other. A dark young man with straight black hair sat silently on a nearby chair.

"I think you know Maggie, and Elias," Annie said, as she followed Smith into the room. "This is Khalil Saad."

Smith nodded, and Saad nodded back.

"Have a seat, Mr. Smith," Annie said.

Smith took the remaining armchair and looked about.

A large window at the back gave a view of a small fenced yard ablaze with roses and gladioli; an archway on one side opened into a tidy little dining room where crystal glistened in the sun. Mirrors hung over the couch and the dining-room buffet, reflecting each other into infinity, a myriad of Maggies and Eliases in the lower corners of every second image.

"Mr. Smith," Khalil Saad said suddenly.

"Yes?" Smith replied, startled.

"You have seen the things without their masks? Maggie said you had?"

The man had a slight accent, Smith noticed. "Yes," he said. "I've seen them."

"What is it they look like?"

Smith considered. "Well, the first time I saw one, I thought I was asleep and dreaming — having a nightmare. I think of them as nightmare people, because of that. They have grey skin, like old grey leather, and needle-sharp silvery teeth, and red eyes."

"I have glimpsed the eyes and the teeth," Saad agreed, nodding.

The doorbell rang, and Annie answered it, letting in two attractive young women — one eighteen or twenty, Smith judged, and the other in her mid-teens.

Annie showed them in and introduced them around — Alice and Maddie Newell. Alice was the elder of the two, her hair blonde and curled where her sister's was light brown and straight.

Before the introductions were complete, the doorbell rang again, and Annie admitted a stocky, brown-haired man, probably in his late twenties, who introduced himself as Sander Niklasen.

Names were pronounced once more, and the newcomers found seats — the regular living room furniture was not sufficient, so more chairs were brought from the dining room.

When everyone had a place, Annie turned to Smith, but hesitated, unsure what to say.



Smith took his cue and rose.

“My name’s Ed Smith,” he announced, “And until a few days ago I lived in Apartment C41 at the Bedford Mills Apartments on Barrett Road.”

All eyes turned to him; his audience was attentive and ready.

Smith told his story, beginning to end — the face at the window, the mass disappearance, the continuing late-night apparitions, the bloody basement, the borrowed gun, all of it. As he spoke, he noticed that Elias and Maggie and Khalil Saad were listening closely; the Newells seemed distracted, and kept glancing about at the others. Annie McGowan listened, but with an expression of disapproval that grew steadily more intense.

And Sandy Niklasen sat back and stared at him, face calm and unreadable, the entire time.

When he had finished, Smith simply stopped. He had no rousing conclusion.

“I saw them again last night,” he said, “Outside my window at the motel — the one with my voice, and Bill Goodwin behind it. They saw I was awake, and ready for them, same as always, and they went away. And that’s all; that’s all I know about them.”

Alice Newell stood up suddenly, long hair flouncing prettily. “Is this a joke?” she demanded, frowning.

“No,” Smith said mildly. “I know it all sounds pretty stupid, but it’s not a joke.”

She looked around at them all, and saw no one smiling. “Look,” she said, turning back to Smith, “I came here because Maggie called me yesterday and asked me if my father had been acting funny. And I said yeah, he had, he wasn’t himself — but I didn’t mean he’s turned into some kind of movie monster or anything, I just meant he was ... was distracted or something. I know Maggie said something about strange things happening at the apartments, and that the people there weren’t human any more, but I thought ... I don’t know, I didn’t take her seriously. I was expecting some kind of group counseling here, or something, or maybe something about toxic wastes in the water there, I don’t know what I expected, but I know I wasn’t expecting a bunch of loonies out of a horror movie!”

Elias snorted.

Smith looked at Alice for a moment, and then said, “Ms. Newell, I know the whole thing sounds unbelievable, but it’s true. Everything I’ve told you is the truth. Maggie and Elias have seen for themselves that the creature pretending to be Bill Goodwin isn’t human; I had hoped that everybody here already knew that their friends and family are gone. If you don’t know that, don’t already believe it, I’m not going to try to convince you. You can leave, if you don’t believe, or if you don’t want to get involved, or you can stay, and maybe help avenge your father’s death — because he really is dead.”

Alice stared at him, then turned on her heel, without a word, and marched out the door.

Her sister looked after her, looked around the room at the others, then whispered, “I’m sorry,” and ran after Alice.

“Mr. Smith,” Annie McGowan said, “I don’t doubt you believe that you’ve been telling the truth. I know that thing pretending to be my sister-in-law Kate isn’t her — my Lord, the thing can’t even knit, and



ate's been knitting since she was a girl! But are you really *sure* that ... that these things have *killed* all those people?"

Smith considered carefully before replying, "No, Ms. McGowan, I'm not *sure*. I'm not sure of *anything* any more. Maybe I've gone mad and imagined the whole thing. I know that those things appear to be wearing the skins of the people they replaced, and I know I saw blood and bone in that basement, so I made some assumptions — but I don't *know* they're all dead. Fair enough?"

Annie nodded. "Yes, Mr. Smith, that's fair enough. But in that case, why haven't you gone to the police?"

Elias snorted again, and Maggie leaned over and slapped him lightly across the ribs. He looked at her, startled.

"Ms. McGowan, the police aren't interested," Smith explained. "They know all about the disappearance, but they've written it off as a prank — and what hard evidence could we show them? *You* know that thing isn't your sister-in-law, but how could you prove that to the police? They aren't equipped to handle this — at least, not unless we can come up with something clear and definite enough that they'll accept it as proof that a crime has been committed."

"You could show them what's under the skin of one of these creatures," Elias suggested.

"I could?" Smith asked. "How?"

"It seems simple enough," Annie said. "Get an officer out there on some pretext, and then just grab the creature's arm and pull up a piece of skin."

"But what's the thing going to do while you're doing this?" Smith asked. "And what's the officer going to do? After all, at first glance, it'll look like you're attacking an innocent person. Would a police officer just stand there and let you pull skin off an innocent person? Besides, there are more than a hundred of the things out there, and they probably don't want us proving anything to the police."

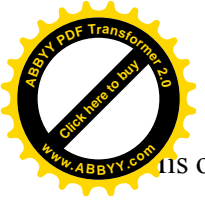
Annie frowned. "Mr. Smith, this is a nation of laws," she said. "We should at least *try* to work with the police before we take the law into our own hands, as you seem to be proposing! As you already *did*, when you took a shot at that boy!"

"Ms. McGowan — I just can't see how it can work. And it wasn't a 'boy.'"

"Ms. McGowan," Maggie said, startling everyone, "I talked to one of those things last night, on the phone. They aren't scared of the police. They aren't scared of anything. The one I talked to said that they were evil incarnate."

Smith blinked at her. "What?" he asked. This was the first he had heard of this.

"That's what it said," Maggie explained. "It said that evil is a real thing, a real force, a ... a *power* in the world, a power that can take on solid form, and live with us without us even knowing it. And it's done that, throughout history — it's taken one form after another. Each time, it's been found out, and its creatures have been hunted down and destroyed, but each time it's come back again, more powerful than before, in a new form. And it's been gone, but it's back, now, and these creatures are its new form."



his own conversation with the thing in his apartment came back to him. “Vampires,” he said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Vampires,” he repeated. “The one I talked to said that the last vampire was killed in 1939, in Los Angeles. Fifty years ago. That must have been ... well, if they’re a new form for this force, then vampires must have been the last one, the old form.”

“But vampires were never *real!*” Sandy Niklasen said.

“How do we know?” Elias asked. “How do we *know* that? If they’ve been extinct for fifty years, and they must have been rare for years before that, of course no one believes in them now. People thought that dodos were a hoax for years, after they were extinct. Vampires *were* real, but we finally killed them off — and now we have these *new* vampires!”

“Except they’re different,” Smith pointed out. “They aren’t vampires. They come out in daylight, or at least they can sometimes. They don’t sleep in coffins — as far as I can tell, they don’t sleep at *all*.”

“But they’re *like* vampires,” Elias insisted. “They’re heirs to the vampires — their descendants, more or less.”

“Sort of the next step in supernatural evolution,” Smith suggested.

Elias nodded enthusiastically, and rose to his feet. “They *are*,” he said, “That’s it *exactly!* They’re the next step in evolution! The vampires got wiped out, unfit to survive, so something else has come along to fit the ecological niche they left vacant!”

“So if we kill them all,” Maggie said, “Something *else* will come along and take their place?”

Elias nodded. “Yeah, of course!” he said.

“But not right away,” Smith pointed out. “It took fifty years for these things to appear. If we wipe them out, we might be safe for another fifty years...”

“Safe,” Khalil said. “Safe, like this past fifty years? World war, nuclear bombs, safe?”

“Yeah, safe,” Sandy said. “Which would you rather live with, monsters that’ll eat you in your sleep, or the same stuff we’ve *always* lived with?”

“I wonder,” Maggie said, “I wonder if there’s a connection? I mean, if these things are made out of evil, doesn’t that evil have to come from somewhere? Won’t it be ... I mean, is it the same evil that’s been around loose in the world since 1939?”

“Evil was loose in the world long before 1939,” Annie pointed out.

“But some times have been worse than others,” Maggie said, “And maybe the better times were when all the evil was being used by creatures — so when there were vampires, there wouldn’t be world wars, maybe?”

“Hitler came to power in 1933, honey,” Annie said. “And he was a monster all along. World War II



“It didn’t happen all at once.”

“But how many vampires were left, by then?” Maggie persisted. “Maybe when there were a *lot* of vampires, we got peace, like ... like...” She stopped, puzzled.

“We’ve never had peace,” Smith said. “There have always been wars and atrocities. I don’t think there’s any law of conservation of evil.”

Sandy shifted in his chair. “Look, I don’t care about all this theory,” he said. “I just want to deal with the thing that you say is pretending to be my old lady. You claim that these nightmare people killed her and *ate* her?”

Smith nodded. “I think so,” he said.

“Then I’m gonna kill the sons of bitches. Now, how do we do that?”

Smith looked at Maggie, who shrugged; he turned toward Elias, but Annie interrupted.

“You all can hold it right there,” she said. “Those things may be monsters, but I don’t want any part of some vigilante attack on them. I won’t stop you, but I don’t want any part of it, and I won’t have you planning it here in my house. I still say it’s a job for the police, and tomorrow morning I intend to call ’em. I’d advise the rest of you to just wait and see whether they can handle this, before you go and do anything foolish!”

Sandy stood up. “Lady, the cops ain’t gonna do a fuckin’ thing.” He marched toward the door.

“Sandy, wait!” Smith called. He turned to Annie. “Ms. McGowan, thanks for your hospitality, but I’ve got to be going now. Is anyone else coming?”

Elias jumped up.

Smith nodded. “Wait for us, Sandy,” he said.

Together, the three men left the house.

2.

“A stake through the heart,” Elias said from the back seat.

“They aren’t vampires,” Smith said again.

“Yeah, I know,” Elias said, “but Ed, a stake through the heart’ll kill *anything!* Would *you* be getting up again if we put a piece of wood through your heart?”

“No,” Smith acknowledged, “But I wouldn’t be getting up again after somebody shot me through the throat, either.”

“You got a better idea?” Sandy demanded.

“No,” Smith admitted.



"Then I say we try it," Sandy said. "The kid's right; nothing gets up again with a stake through the heart."

Smith still had misgivings. "Look," he said, "I think it'll take more than that."

"Sure!" Elias said. "Like in the books. Cut off the head and stuff the mouth with garlic."

"Cut off the head?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah."

"With what?"

"Uh ... doesn't matter, as far as I know," Elias said.

"Garlic?" Smith asked. The one in his apartment had said the same thing, about cutting off a vampire's head and stuffing the mouth with garlic, but it still sounded stupid.

"Well, that's what worked with vampires," Elias said, a bit defensively.

"Elias, they aren't vampires," Smith said.

"But they're *related!*" Elias insisted. He saw the expression on Smith's face, and said, "Hey, what can it hurt to try?"

"I don't know," Smith replied. "That's what worries me."

"So what do we need, then?" Sandy asked. "A stake, and a hammer, and a bunch of garlic, and something to cut off the head..."

"An axe, maybe," Smith suggested. He remembered how quickly the bulletholes had closed up, and he wanted something that would cut *fast*. "What kind of stake? I mean, just a chunk of two-by-four with a point, or does it have to be some special wood?"

"Oak, ash, or thorn, I think it is," Elias said.

That sounded more like something to do with druids than with vampires to Smith, but he didn't argue.

"Hardwoods," Sandy remarked.

"We can find oak pretty easily," Smith said, waving at a tree by the roadside. "Just cut a branch and put a point on it."

"We gonna do this today?" Sandy asked.

Elias and Smith looked at each other. "I don't know," Smith said. "I'd want to do it by daylight."

"It's three o'clock now, and the sun sets at what, seven thirty? Eight o'clock?" Sandy said. "That's five hours. What say we get on with it, then?"



Smith looked at Elias; he was a little pale, but he nodded.

“All right,” Smith said, turning the wheel. “An axe first, to cut the stake, and a bunch of garlic; anything else?”

“A sledge,” Sandy said, “Maybe six pounds.”

“And a cross,” Elias said. “My grandmother’s got a silver cross in her jewelry box.”

Sandy sneered, but said nothing.

“Right,” Smith said, as he stepped on the gas. “Hechinger’s first, then, for the axe and sledge.”

3.

About ninety minutes later they stopped at the Roy Rogers on Route 124 to eat and plan. Their purchases stayed in Smith’s car. So did the freshly-cut two-foot length of oak, one end sharpened and the other blunt.

“We need to get one of them alone,” Smith said, putting down his burger. “We can’t take on all of them at once.”

“Which one? Where?” Elias asked. “How do we do that?”

“The one that got Mary,” Sandy said. “The one that’s pretending to be her — that’s the one we start with.”

Smith was momentarily unsettled by the idea of driving a stake through a *woman’s* heart, but then he reconsidered.

The things weren’t human. It wasn’t a woman, it was a monster in a woman’s shape. He nodded. “All right,” he said, “One’s as good as another, as far as I’m concerned. But how do we get her alone?”

“That’s easy,” Sandy said. “I call her up and ask her to meet me somewhere. She’s still pretending to be Mary; she doesn’t know I’m onto her. So she comes, and we grab her, and we do it.”

“Where?” Smith asked.

“Where I’m staying, of course,” Sandy said. “My roommate’s out for the weekend.”

“What if she screams, and the neighbors hear?”

Sandy looked annoyed. “Yeah,” he said, “That could be a problem.” He looked at Elias.

Elias shook his head. “My folks are home.”

Smith said, “And I’m living in a motel.”

“There’s the woods along Barrett Road,” Sandy said. “So long as we don’t give her a chance to get away.”



"We can surround her," Smith said.

Elias chewed slowly for a moment, then said, "Vampires were supposed to have the strength of ten men. There's only three of us."

"Ten men, hah!" Sandy said. "Mary was only five-one. If the three of us can't handle a five-one broad, we're in pretty piss-poor shape."

"But it's not really a woman," Smith said.

"It's still only five-one and ninety pounds," Sandy replied.

Smith looked at Elias; Elias shrugged. "I guess you're right," he said, "But I wish there were more of us."

"What do you expect from a bunch of women?" Sandy said.

"There's Khalil," Smith said.

Sandy just stared, and Smith decided not to argue.

"We could call them," he said, "And see if any have changed their minds."

"Okay," Sandy said. "But if any of them call the cops, it ain't my fault."

Smith nodded; Elias shrugged.

"Let's do it, then," Sandy said.

4.

They picked Khalil and Maggie up at Annie McGowan's house a few minutes after five. Sandy recovered his own car, a black Mercury, and Khalil rode with him, while Elias and Maggie rode with Smith. The Newells were long gone, and Annie herself wanted nothing to do with their vigilantism, but Khalil and Maggie both wanted in.

Sandy made his call from the pay-phone outside the 7-Eleven on Townsend.

"Hey, Mare!" he said.

The others couldn't hear the reply.

"It's me, Sandy. Look, I'm sorry for the things I said last time, okay? Can we talk about it?"

He listened for a moment.

"No, really, I want us to get back together, okay? I *love* you, Mare — no shit, I really do. So can we talk somewhere? In person?"



Maggie kicked nervously at the sidewalk.

“Naw, Bob’s around, and I want it private. Look, how about you meet me at the north end of the dam, on Barrett Road, and we can walk in the woods, just you and me and Mother Nature, okay?”

Smith looked over at Khalil; he seemed calm, like Sandy, while Elias and Maggie were obviously nervous.

“Seven thirty? Can’t you make it any sooner?”

Smith couldn’t hear the false Mary’s reply, but he saw Sandy wince and guessed it wasn’t exactly polite agreement.

“Okay, okay,” Sandy said. “Seven thirty, then. See you there!” He hung up.

“All set, you guys,” he called.

“Seven thirty?” Smith asked.

Sandy shrugged. “Best I could do.”

“It’ll be getting on toward sunset by then,” Elias pointed out.

Sandy shrugged. “Hey, what can I do?”

No one had an answer to that.

That left them a couple of hours; Maggie and Khalil hadn’t eaten any supper as yet, so they made their next stop the Wendy’s on Diamond Park Avenue.

When they emerged, around six thirty, the sky had clouded over; as they climbed back into the two cars the rumble of distant thunder reached them.

“Lovely weather,” Sandy remarked.

They needed twenty minutes of the remaining hour to get out to the dam and find a spot to hide Smith’s Chevy, up around the curve out of sight.

The walk back to the dam would take perhaps five minutes, but nobody was in any hurry to make it, as the sky was dark and the rumbling more frequent now.

“*Lovely* weather,” Sandy repeated sarcastically. Khalil made no reply, and the other three, huddled in Smith’s Chevy, didn’t hear him.

About ten past seven the storm finally broke, and rain spilled down heavily, but in the way of summer storms it was over quickly; ten minutes after it had begun, the downpour stopped.

When the rain stopped Smith and Elias and Maggie emerged cautiously from the Chevy and began the walk back to the appointed meeting place, while Sandy got the Mercury turned around and headed back. The ground was damp beneath their feet, and crickets shrilled on all sides.



When Sandy and his passenger reached the agreed-upon spot the other three were waiting for them.

“I just hope she isn’t early,” Smith said, as Sandy and Khalil climbed out.

“I just hope she *shows*,” Sandy said. “When I phoned it was still sunny and warm, and now look at it.” He gestured at the dark grey skies.

Maggie shuddered slightly.

“I’ll wait here,” Sandy said. “The rest of you get out of sight.”

Smith nodded, and led the other four off the road, back among the trees, well away from the road, so that whatever they did wouldn’t be seen.

Then they waited.

“This is stupid,” Maggie finally said from behind an oak, “Even if she comes. She’ll see us!”

“No, she won’t,” Elias answered. “I don’t think they see very well in sunlight.”

“What sunlight, Elias?” Maggie asked. “I can’t even tell whether the sun’s still up there behind those clouds or already set.”

“Shut up!” Sandy called from the roadside. “I can hear you from here, and that’s her car coming!”

A battered old Volkswagen pulled up onto the sandy shoulder; Smith could just make it out through the shadows and foliage. Someone got out, a petite blonde in denim shorts and a red halter and broad-brimmed straw sun-hat — she obviously hadn’t let a little summer shower bother her enough to make her change clothes. Sandy talked to her, and she answered him, but none of the others could make out what was said.

Then the pair of them walked down into the forest, away from the road, toward where the others waited. Smith clutched the oaken stake; he was sweating, more than the lingering warmth of a summer evening could account for. He glanced over to where Khalil held the four-pound sledgehammer they had bought — on Smith’s charge card — earlier that afternoon.

The little blonde’s voice reached Smith. “...I’m *not* still mad at you, I just don’t think I’m ready to get back together.”

Wet leaves rustled as the pair walked, and the crickets sang wildly.

“Mare,” Sandy said, “What’s to be ready? I mean, it’s not like it was the first time, or anything. We lived together for over a year, right? So we already know each other. We know what we’re doing.” He had an arm around her shoulders as they walked, his other arm swinging free.

Then, suddenly, the arm around her shoulders was around her throat, choking her; he lifted her off her feet and threw her to the ground, then knelt astride her chest, pinning her arms with his knees.

She looked surprised, but didn’t resist.



Smith swallowed bile and stepped forward, out of concealment, a little voice in the back of his mind shouting at him, she's a woman, an innocent, this is wrong, it's murder!

Khalil emerged, and Elias, and Maggie, and the four of them surrounded Sandy and his prisoner. She looked up at them and suddenly screamed, "Rape! Help! Rape!"

With a curse, Sandy thrust his fist in her mouth to stop the screams, but as he did he felt a hundred sharp, sharp points prick at his knuckles from either side, like hot needles. His own mouth came open, but no sound emerged; he tried to pull his hand back and couldn't.

The screaming was stopped, but his hand was being maimed, he could feel it, the razor-sharp points drilling into his hand, into the tendons, the pressure of her jaws forcing his own fingernails into his palm.

He slapped at her with his free hand, and felt her skin shift at impact, loose from the flesh beneath.

"Let go, bitch!" he shouted.

She *smiled*, around his hand — except that one side of her mouth didn't work right, where he had slapped at her, the skin slid loosely and sagged, and something dark grey, almost black, showed underneath, something that looked like a dog's gum, twisted upward in a leer. The eye on that side gleamed red, while the other was still Mary's familiar blue.

"You killed her, bitch, you *aren't her*," Sandy shrieked. "Let go of my hand, goddamn it!"

Then Elias was there, with the axe, threatening her with it. She let go suddenly, and Sandy's hand came free. He fell backward, blood spraying from the dozens of punctures.

"Jesus!" he said, looking at it.

Blood was flowing freely now, winding around his thumb and down his wrist and arm in a steady stream; he clutched at the wounds with his left hand, trying to stem the flow. He could feel each individual puncture, each one stinging, each as if a nail had been driven into him.

Maggie was beside him, looking around helplessly for something to use as a bandage, and Smith was holding out the oaken stake. Sandy looked down at the thing that had bitten him, the thing that had pretended to be Mary, the thing he was still half-sitting on, and he spat at it.

It grinned at him, and he could see the long silver needle-teeth, each one tipped in bright red; one eye was equally red, the other still human and blue. The skin — Mary's skin — had pulled away from the jaws completely now, and the chin was hanging loose on the thing's neck, while the upper lip was wrinkled across the bottom of its nose, like a thrown-back bedsheet. In between, the jaws were dark grey, corded with heavy muscle, like ropes of thick clay. The thing's own lips were thin and black, not at all like Mary's lush red mouth.

Both its own flesh, and Mary's skin, were spattered with a fine spray of his blood. A stray shaft of sunlight suddenly broke through the clouds and spilled through the trees to blaze golden from her hair, and Sandy could see gleaming red droplets in her hair, on the surrounding earth, on the moist undergrowth.



lil around, the crickets sang.

His spittle caught it on its bare cheek; it didn't react.

It wasn't struggling, he realized. It was lying there, grinning at them all, no longer screaming, just lying there.

He felt a chill, and he flexed his neck. Why was it so calm? He suppressed a shiver.

Why was he shivering? Shit, he'd been hurt worse than this, been through worse, without being scared.

Blood loss, he thought, looking at the trickle that was dripping from his elbow. He was losing a lot of blood. Or maybe there was venom in the wounds.

It wasn't dangerous, though, not unless there *was* venom, and he didn't have time to worry about it. They had to kill the thing.

"Give me that," he said, and he snatched the stake away from Smith, who was standing helplessly, like a fucking baby, Sandy thought, he started this and now he can't go through with it.

He placed the stake between the thing's breasts, point down, ignoring the blood that dripped from his hand and ran down the rough oak.

Before he was really ready, Khalil swung the hammer, and the wood ripped against his palms; the point drove down into the thing's flesh, tearing through the flimsy halter it wore, and tearing through Mary's stolen skin.

He braced himself, squinting against the expected spurt of blood.

Nothing came; the thing gasped softly, and lay still.

It was still smiling.

"Again," Sandy said.

Khalil swung again, and the stake drove down again, tearing at Sandy's hands; he let go, and it stood upright, held by the creature's flesh.

Khalil swung a third time, and the stake drove in again, and this time Sandy saw the thing's hands flop at the impact, saw the loose skin on its hideous face bounce up. Something came loose, and its other eye shone red, Mary's blue gone forever.

Sandy moved back and climbed unsteadily to his feet; once upright, he clutched at his wounded hand again.

God, that hurt!

He looked at the thing on the ground, and saw that only about eight or nine inches of the two-foot oaken stake still showed. It had obviously been driven clear through the creature, and well into the ground beneath.



That was pretty good driving, he thought; Khalil was stronger than he looked.

Maggie knelt by the thing's side, and Sandy started to shout at her, to warn her away from it, because despite that shaft pinning it to the earth he was not entirely convinced it was dead.

He was having trouble getting his breath, though.

Then Maggie grabbed Mary's halter top and tore a strip of the fabric away, exposing bare pink skin and a shrivelled nipple. The skin had torn where the stake went in, revealing the grey flesh beneath, and the slackening had let the nipple slide over to the outside of the lump on the creature's chest, a lump that was *not* a breast, but only a rough imitation of one.

Sandy gagged at the sight, remembering all too clearly when that nipple had stood atop a real woman's breast.

Then Maggie was there in front of him with the strip of cloth, wrapping it around his injured hand to stop the bleeding. He looked down, and realized that his hand and arm were completely covered with his own blood, that blood had run down his T-shirt, down his jeans and into his Nikes, that the thing that had pretended to be Mary was smeared and splattered with blood — and all of it was his.

The daylight was dying, the sun was almost down and the clouds were closing in again.

"Cut off its head," Sandy tried to say, but his voice failed him. He tried again.

"Cut off its fucking head!"

That was better.

Elias was standing there holding the axe, and not doing a damn thing with it. Khalil was holding the sledge, and looking ill. Smith wasn't holding anything; he was just standing there, staring at the thing.

"He's right," Smith said. "Elias, cut off its head."

Suddenly Elias looked sicker than Khalil did. "I can't," he said, "You do it!"

Sandy started forward, intending to take the axe and do the job himself, but he brushed up against Maggie and stopped as pain laced through his hand again.

He probably couldn't even *hold* the damn axe, with his hands all torn up!

It didn't matter; Smith had taken the axe from Elias, and was lifting it up over his head. The sharp edge caught the last glimmer of direct light, as at that moment the sun finally vanished for good.

Then the thing on the ground moved, it twisted its head to look up at the axe, and its arms came up.

The axe came down, but a hand was there to meet it, meet it not at the blade, but the haft, just behind the head. The axe didn't stop, not at first, but it slowed, and never reached the thing's neck; it stopped an inch or two short, the creature holding it with both hands. It glared up at Smith with those baleful blood-red eyes, its needle-teeth gleaming.



Elias stared, and then began groping at his shirt, pawing at it, desperately searching as the nightmare on the ground began a bizarre, grim tug of war with Ed Smith, each of the two trying to snatch the axe away from the other. Smith was standing, feet braced, while the woman was lying pinned to the earth, but he could not wrench it away.

The woman-thing had the better grip, because of the axe-head, which kept her hands from slipping off the end, and because Smith's hands were slick with sweat, while hers were dry — or almost dry. There was still a faint slick of Sandy's blood on them.

Elias pulled at the chain around his neck, and brought out his grandmother's silver cross.

Sandy took more direct action; injured hands or not, he had to do something. He stepped forward and kicked the axe out of the thing's hands.

Khalil stepped up and grabbed it, and he and Smith backed away with it to one side, beyond the thing's right shoulder, while Maggie pulled Sandy back, past its feet. And Elias stood there, protected by his holy crucifix, to its left.

The thing was still pinned and helpless, but now it was struggling, silently.

Then it took the stake in both hands, but instead of trying to pull it up and out, it pushed *down*.

"Jesus God," Sandy said, watching. Maggie retched.

The thing was pushing itself up off the stake.

"Split it with the axe!" Sandy called. "Split the stake! Wedge something in it!"

"Are you *nuts*?" Smith yelled back. "I'm not going near that thing! What if it got the axe away from us?"

"Let's get out of here!" Maggie shouted.

Sandy watched as the thing pushed itself up, and saw that the grey flesh around the stake wasn't just sliding, it was oozing, or rolling, along the rough oak. "Yeah," he said, "Yeah, I think you're right." He started backing away.

He wasn't afraid of anything God had put on Earth, Sandy told himself, but this thing was none of God's doing.

"Sandy," it called, in Mary's voice, "What's the rush?"

He ignored that. "Smith," he called, "Whatsyername, come on!"

Smith nodded, and started circling around the thing, giving it a wide berth. The axe was still in his hand. Khalil, after an instant's hesitation, came close behind him.

Only an inch or two of stake still showed above its chest, and its entire body was off the ground. Its knees were bent, its sandalled feet planted on the earth; Mary's golden hair, tangled and filthy with blood and dirt, hung from its head.



Elias,” Maggie called, “Come on!”

Elias was holding out the crucifix. “I’m all right,” he called. “It can’t hurt me while I’ve got this; you guys go on, and I’ll bring up the rear.”

“Elias,” Smith shouted, “It’s *not a goddamn vampire!* Look at the stake, for Christ’s sake!”

Elias threw Smith a glance in which Smith read dawning terror, and then turned to follow.

The thing came off the stake and threw itself after him; a hand caught his ankle, and he went down.

He rolled over and thrust the cross in its face as it fell on top of him. “*Get away!*” he shrieked, “*Get it off me!*”

“Oh, Christ,” Sandy said, and he turned back.

Smith and Khalil hesitated, then joined him.

Elias was lying on his back, the Mary thing sprawled across him, and as the others started back toward it it took the crucifix from Elias’s hand, smiled at him, and then lifted the crucifix to its mouth and bit it in half.

Even in the dimming light Sandy and Smith and Khalil could see the ragged hole in the thing’s back where the stake had gone through; Mary’s skin had been shredded, leaving an opening several inches across surrounded by ragged flaps of tissue.

Under that, though, the grey flesh had already healed over; only a slight indentation remained where a two-inch shaft of oak had gone through the creature’s body.

It spat out one piece of the crucifix, and flung the other aside. One hand reached up and pulled Mary’s skin up and off its face, flopping it back like a hood. Blonde hair trailed back in a mass of blood, dirt, and tangles, and its own true face was revealed — staring red eyes in round, black-rimmed sockets, grey muscles like clay smeared on a skull, a few strands of grayish-white hair on an almost-bald scalp the color of mud. It smiled down at the trapped boy, revealing what seemed like hundreds of gleaming silver teeth.

Then it leaned its head forward and kissed Elias on the mouth.

He shrank away in terror. The thing’s black lips were hard and cold; its red eyes filled his field of vision. There was no warmth or softness to this, such as he imagined there would be in kissing a woman, no warm breath — no breath at all that he could sense.

Nonetheless, it was undeniably a kiss, and somewhere under his terror he wondered why, why was this thing *kissing* him? How should he respond?

Then its hands reached up to his face and stroked gently along either side of his lower jaw. He felt a thin, pointed tongue pressing against his lips.

Then the thumbs dug into his cheeks just behind his molars, painfully forcing his mouth open. The tongue slipped into his mouth, and ran slickly along his teeth.



He could taste something foul, something compounded of mildew and decay, as if that tongue probing his jaw were rotted and moldy.

He pulled his own tongue back until he almost gagged on it, and struggled to pull his head away, forcing himself back against the hard ground. He was dimly aware that Sandy and Smith had reached him, that they were tugging at the creature's shoulders, trying to get it off him, but with no effect.

The thing shifted, its lips sliding down, so that instead of meeting his own mouth squarely it was nuzzling his lower lip, its own lower lip on his chin, its upper lip in his mouth. He tried to bite, but those unyielding fingers at the hinge of his jaw wouldn't let him.

And then he felt the fangs extending from its upper jaw — not just a pair of them, like a vampire, but an entire rank of them, six or eight, at least, like steel needles, forcing themselves down behind his teeth and into the flesh below his gums, and then the pain hit and he screamed and screamed and screamed until the blood filled his mouth and he couldn't scream any more.

It seemed like an eternity.

It was just over four seconds before he passed out.

5.

When the screaming began, Sandy and Smith struggled harder, hauling at the thing's shoulders with all their strength, but they couldn't move it. Sandy's hands were bleeding again, which made it hard to grip, but he tried not to think about it.

Khalil wasn't helping them, and Sandy started to shout a demand to him, but then he saw him running up with the axe, and he was swinging it at the nightmare creature's back.

The screaming had been muffled to begin with, and within seconds it stopped. Sandy saw that Elias's eyes had rolled back in their sockets until only the whites showed.

The axe struck the creature, and bit into it, but the thing didn't seem to even notice, and Sandy realized that the flesh of its shoulders seemed to be softening.

“What the fuck?” he said.

His hands pulled free suddenly, ripping away pieces of Mary's skin; the thing's shoulder had become too soft to grip properly. He started to reach down again, then stopped as Smith's hands, too, came away with nothing but skin in them.

He looked at its lower back, where Khalil had hit it with the axe, and the thing seemed almost insubstantial. Mary's shorts were no longer filled out in a mockery of human sexuality; they were flattening even as he watched.

What's more, the thing seemed to be crawling forward, as if somehow, despite its size, it was crawling into Elias's mouth. Blood bubbled up around its jaws, spilling out of Elias's mouth and running thickly down his cheeks.

Khalil hadn't noticed what was happening; he was raising the axe again.



“Don’t,” Sandy said, “Look!”

Khalil, startled, looked.

“If you hit again, you might go right through her and hit Elias,” Sandy said. Smith nodded agreement.

“*What’s happening?*” Maggie called from the roadside.

Elias had stopped screaming and struggling. He had stopped several seconds ago, Sandy realized. He reached down for the boy’s wrist, his hand passing within inches of the nightmare creature. It ignored him.

He could find no pulse.

“He’s dead,” Sandy announced.

Smith shot him a glance. “You’re sure?”

Sandy nodded.

“What’s it doing?” Smith asked.

“How the fuck should *I* know?” Sandy demanded.

“Sorry,” Smith said, turning to look at the thing, still wrapped around Elias’s corpse, its head now definitely being squeezed into the dead boy’s mouth. Blood was running steadily down the corpse’s cheek. As he watched, something white was forced up and out, and tumbled down the stream of blood to the ground — a tooth, or perhaps a piece of bone. Smith could hear a chewing noise now, like metal scraping on bone. He swallowed bile.

“What should *we* do?” he asked.

“I think we should go,” Khalil said.

“He’s right,” Sandy said, stepping back. “There’s nothing we can do for Elias now, or for Mary, and I think we’ve just made it pretty goddamn clear that we don’t know how the hell to kill these things, so I think we’d better just get the fuck out of here while it’s still doing whatever it’s doing. I don’t want to be next on its hit parade.”

Smith nodded. The three men slowly backed away from the creature and its prize; they gathered up the axe and the sledge and departed, leaving the stake still embedded in the earth, the fragments of the broken crucifix where the thing had flung them, the spattered blood undisturbed in the growing darkness.

Blood was beginning to pool under the two figures, locked in their fatal embrace; more teeth and bits of bone were coming up now, and the nightmare thing had its entire head forced into its victim’s mouth.

“I’m sorry, Elias,” Smith called. He turned away.

By the time they reached the road, they were all running.



“I feel sick,” Smith said. The Chevy hummed quietly down Barrett Road, its headlights painting a swath of color through the black and grey gloom ahead.

Maggie just nodded. It went without saying that she, too, felt ill, and she hadn’t even been close enough to see just what the thing had actually done.

The Chevy’s empty back seat seemed to silently reproach her and Smith both.

“What do we do *now*?” Smith asked.

“I don’t know,” Maggie said quietly.

That wasn’t exactly the truth, she admitted to herself. She didn’t know what Smith would do, but she’d decided what *she* was going to do.

She was going to pretend the whole thing had never happened. She never knew any Bill Goodwin or Elias Samaan. She never talked on the phone late into the night with something that had claimed to be the newborn spawn of supernatural evil. She never saw a blood-spattered thing wearing a woman’s skin pull itself up off a wooden stake, somewhere in the woods between Diamond Park and Germantown.

It hadn’t happened.

In a month, she’d be back in school, and everything would be back to normal, and then the year after next she would go away to college — and she wouldn’t come back. Ever.

She wasn’t going to tell Mr. Smith, though. He was a part of it; he hadn’t happened, either. She had never met him. If she told him, he’d try to talk her out of it, try to make it all real again, and she couldn’t stand that.

It couldn’t be real. She wouldn’t *let* it be real.

She was going to go home, and stay there, and if Smith ever called her again she was going to hang up on him, and if Sandy Niklasen called, or that Khalil, she would hang up on them, and most of all, if Bill Goodwin ever called she would hang up, or maybe unplug the phone from the wall, because she couldn’t possibly let that thing ever talk to her again.

She *couldn’t*.

“I need to get home,” she said, “Take me home, please. Or just drop me off somewhere and I’ll walk.”

“I’ll drive you,” Smith said. “It’s no trouble.”

She didn’t argue, but she would almost have preferred walking. Smith was a part of it, and she wanted to get away from him.

On the other hand, those things were out there somewhere, and if she went walking around alone, with the sun down, one of them might find her.



ney didn't really exist, but one of them might find her.

It occurred to her that she might never dare go out at night again, but she didn't much care. She had never been a night person. And right now, she wanted nothing but to be safely indoors somewhere, shut away from this horrible outside world where she could imagine things like nightmare people.

She sat silent the rest of the way home.

7.

"You want me to drop you at McGowan's place?" Sandy asked.

"Yes, please," Khalil said, nodding slightly.

"You got a car there?"

"Yes."

Sandy glanced at his passenger, then returned his attention to the road. "Not real talkative, are you?"

Khalil didn't answer that.

"Thanks for helping," Sandy said. "It didn't do any good, but you did real well. Thanks."

For a moment Khalil didn't reply. Then he asked, "How is your hand?"

Sandy glanced at him, startled. "It's okay, I think." He took it off the wheel and flexed it. "It still hurts, but I don't think it's bleeding any more, and it's not stiffening up too much." He didn't mention that both his palms stung from the loss of skin he had suffered when Khalil had hammered down the stake while he was holding it.

Khalil nodded. "You should get a better bandage. And you should go see a doctor."

"Yeah," Sandy agreed, "You're right. It could get infected or something."

He turned the corner onto Topaz Court.

"We must find a way to kill them," Khalil said.

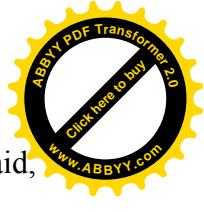
"Yeah," Sandy agreed, "But what? Smith shot one, we drove a stake through one's heart, you hit it with a fuckin' axe, and it didn't even care. What the hell else is there?"

Khalil considered that for a long moment, and Sandy pulled up into the driveway at 706.

"Perhaps fire?" Khalil suggested, as he opened his door. "They say that fire purifies, no?"

Sandy stared at him. "That's a great idea," he said.

Khalil shrugged. "It's nothing."



Sandy smiled. “No, it’s great. Yeah, burn them — like witches.” A thought struck him. “Hey!” he said, “Where can I get hold of you?”

Khalil paused. “Oh?”

“Where can I get hold of you?” Sandy repeated. “We need to stick together, you and me and the others who know about those things.”

“Ah,” Khalil said. He fished a wallet out of his pocket and pulled out an old newspaper clipping. “You have a pen?”

Sandy found one in the glove compartment, and tore a piece off a 1973 map of New York State to write down his own phone number.

They solemnly exchanged notes and pocketed them.

Then Khalil crossed to his own car, an ’84 Pontiac, got in and started the engine, while Sandy pulled back out into the street.

He drove away, heading back to his borrowed apartment, while Khalil made a three-point turn in the street.

At the corner of Barrett Road Khalil glimpsed Sandy’s black Mercury far off to the right, but his own route home took him in the other direction.

He turned left and drove home.

8.

Amber Crescent is near the southeastern corner of Diamond Park, Maryland. It runs west from Southfield Road, then turns south, then turns west again, and ends in a circle. In the center of the circle is a grassy area, and along one side of the grass stands a row of four Bradford pear trees. Forty-two houses, on quarter-acre lots, line the street, comfortable, moderate-sized houses built in the mid-1970s. The Devanoy family lived at 19036, on the south side just before the circle.

The Samaan family lived at 19017 Amber Crescent.

Hanna Samaan began worrying when her son Elias wasn’t home for Sunday dinner, but he’d missed dinner before, so she didn’t say anything to her husband. He was nursing a hangover, and in no mood to be bothered with such things.

Joe Samaan went to bed early, in hopes of feeling better by the time he had to leave for work in the morning. He hadn’t really noticed Elias’s absence.

Hanna sat up and waited.

It was almost midnight when the front door opened quietly, and she saw Elias’s familiar face peer in.

“Mom?” he said, “What are you still doing up?” His voice was oddly high-pitched — in fact, it sounded more like a woman’s voice. She’d thought he was well past that stage, and settled in with an adult tenor,



ut she guessed she'd been wrong — or maybe he'd been drinking or something.

“Waiting for you,” she snapped.

“You didn't have to do that!” Something was definitely peculiar about his voice.

“Well, I did it,” she pointed out. “It's about *time* you got home! I was worried!”

“Hey, I'm fine,” Elias said. “Oh, and I brought some friends with me — they'd just like to come in for a bite.”

Hanna wavered, thinking she really should order these friends, whoever they were, out — Elias had no business bringing anyone in at this hour!

“One of them's Bill Goodwin,” Elias said. “I don't think you've met the other.”

Hanna knew Bill Goodwin, and considered him a good friend for her son to have. He was polite and helpful and showed no signs of drug use or thuggery, even if he did like that awful heavy metal music and spend an awful lot of time working on his car. She gave in.

“All right,” she said, “Bring them in.”

Elias stepped in. His clothes were a mess, dirty and even torn in places, she noticed, and she wondered what on Earth he'd been up to.

Not just dirty, *filthy*; and was that a bloodstain on his shirt?

Behind Elias, Bill Goodwin leaned around the door. “Hi, Mrs. Samaan!” he called.

Then the third one came in, the one in the slouch hat.

She stared at him, astonished.

“Hallowe'en isn't for months yet!” she said.

Elias and Bill exchanged glances, smiling tight-lipped little smiles, smiles that could be called smirks. She noticed that Bill had a bandage on his neck, a rather large one, and his color wasn't good. She blinked. Had the boys been up to something? That third one in the fright mask and the silly hat — she didn't like it.

It was a very good mask, too. It looked almost real.

“Mrs. Samaan,” Bill said, stepping forward, “It's great to see you, it really is.”

He smiled. “Let me give you a kiss.”

Chapter Seven:

Monday, August 7th



1.

Bright and early Monday morning, Annie McGowan called up the Montgomery County police, and explained to the desk sergeant who took her call that someone had taken her sister-in-law's place, and was living in Kate's apartment, pretending to be Kate.

Yes, it looked like Kate, Annie agreed, but there was no doubt at all — it was *not* Kate. The imposter couldn't knit, didn't recognize a word of the little secret language the two of them used to have, didn't remember anything about Kate's dead brother, Annie's husband — not even his *name*.

The sergeant referred her to a lieutenant, who, upon hearing the addresses involved, transferred her to a Lieutenant Buckley, who listened to the entire story without comment.

When she had finished, he sighed. "Mrs. McGowan," he said, "I'll tell you honestly, it sounds to me like your sister might have had a stroke or something, or maybe she's got Alzheimer's — isn't that more likely than an imposter taking her place?"

"Likely or not, that thing's not Kate," Annie insisted.

"That *thing*? Come on, now, Mrs. McGowan!"

Annie realized her mistake; she would never convince anyone over the phone that the imposter wasn't even human. "I'm sorry," she said, "It's just so *upsetting* to have someone there pretending to be her, when it isn't really her at all!"

The lieutenant made a vague noise that might have indicated sympathetic agreement — or might have indicated only that he didn't want to think about this nonsense. "I'm sure it is, Mrs. McGowan. Listen, I'll send out one of my officers and a police psychiatrist, and you can go along with them to talk to your sister-in-law, and we'll see if we can't get this all straightened out."

"A psychiatrist?" she asked doubtfully. Did this lieutenant think she was crazy?

"Certainly," Buckley said. "You don't think that someone who would try to take your sister's place is completely normal, do you?"

Slightly relieved, Annie had to concede that he had a point. She had been thinking the psychiatrist was intended to keep an eye on her, not on the false Kate.

Of course, in point of fact, she guessed that the psychiatrist would be watching both of them. The police didn't know anything about her, and really, it was reasonable enough to doubt her story. "All right," she said, "When should I expect them?"

There was a pause, and she could almost see the lieutenant glancing at a clock somewhere. "About ten-thirty, I'd say," came the reply. "Does that suit you?"

"That would be fine, yes. Thank you very much."

She hung up, and looked around the room.

Perhaps those men at the meeting had been right, perhaps the police weren't going to help — but surely,



she just gave the police a chance to *see* what had happened...

Surely they would see.

2.

Smith had slept from six until nine; he intended to be at work by ten, so he couldn't really allow himself any more. Einar didn't mind if he kept flexible hours, as long as they weren't *too* far out of step, and as long as the programs he wrote did what they were supposed to and came in before deadline. Even so, Smith didn't think anything later than ten would be a good idea.

An odd thing that was bothering Smith slightly was that for the first time since leaving his apartment he had gone an entire night without even the faintest suspicion of a glimpse of a nightmare person. *Every* other night, even if he hadn't gotten a clear look at one, he had felt them out there, watching him — and he had usually gotten at least one clear look. The exact number and personnel had varied somewhat; he had seen Nora Hagarty and Walt Harris and Bill Goodwin once each, and of course that one that didn't have a disguise yet, the one that always wore a slouch hat and had Smith's own voice, had been there every time.

It had come looking for him every other night — but not last night.

Smith had sat up waiting for it, as he had the last few nights, but it had never come. He had spent the night watching TV, playing with his computer, thinking over the long, horrible day that had just ended, and the monster had never come.

Did Elias's death have something to do with it, perhaps? It had been a different monster that had killed the boy, not the one that was after Smith, but perhaps there was some connection.

Smith couldn't see what the connection would be, but perhaps there was one.

At nine-thirty in the morning, though, he wasn't supposed to be thinking about that. He was supposed to be getting to work and thinking about the program he was finishing up.

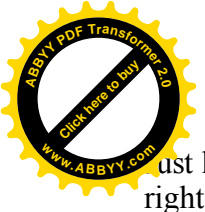
He had managed to shave and shower and dress, but when he got in his car and pulled out of the lot he found himself heading toward Diamond Park without consciously intending it.

That was the wrong direction.

Making a U-turn on Clopper Road at rush hour — even the tail end of rush hour — was completely impossible; he turned onto Firstfield Road, then around the corner onto Bank Street and through the Quince Orchard Plaza shopping center from end to end, then back onto Clopper, heading the right way this time.

The sky was clouding up; it looked very much as if it was about to start raining. Everything looked so normal — the construction work, the cars, the grass and the sound barriers on either side of the highway, all just as they had been a week ago, before anything strange had begun to happen. He was in his own car, on his way to work, just like any other Monday.

Just like any other Monday — except that he had only had three hours sleep.



ust like any other Monday — except that he had seen a boy horribly killed by a monster the day before, right before his eyes.

The first drops of rain spattered the windshield, and as he reached for the wiper button he realized that his hands were shaking.

3.

The officer glanced at Mrs. McGowan, who was shaking off her umbrella, and then rang the bell. The psychiatrist stood back a pace or two, watching.

“Who is it?” called a cheerful voice from inside.

“It’s me, Annie,” Mrs. McGowan called, furling the umbrella.

The door opened, and a startled little face appeared. “Annie?” Then she noticed the others. “Who’s this?” she asked.

“This is Officer Nilson,” Annie said. “And that’s Dr. Dodge. Could we come in and talk to you?”

“Oh, is it about those terrorists that said they planted a bomb last week?” the false Kate asked anxiously. Then her face cleared. “Oh, no, it couldn’t be, Annie, because you didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Could we come in?” Annie repeated.

“Ma’am,” Officer Nilson said, “May we, please? We’d just like to talk to you. Nobody’s done anything wrong.”

Annie threw him a glance of outrage at this lie, since someone certainly *had* done something wrong in replacing Kate with this fraud, but then she covered her anger and smiled. “May we, Katie?”

“Certainly, if you like,” the imposter said, swinging the door wide and smiling in return, her head tipped to one side just as the real Kate’s always was when she smiled.

Annie stifled her revulsion. The *real* Kate would have seen how upset she was and wouldn’t have smiled like that.

She studied the creature closely as the four of them settled into Kate’s living room. Dr. Dodge sat on the couch; Annie and the monster took the flowered armchairs, and Officer Nilson, rather than taking the other end of the couch, brought a straight chair over from the dining area.

Annie approved of that action; it seemed more businesslike. She wasn’t quite sure *why* it seemed more businesslike, but all the same, she was glad that Officer Nilson had done it.

Nilson, on the other hand, knew exactly why he had settled on the hard chair. He was well aware that if either of these dotty old women were to go berserk he would need to stand up in a hurry and grab her before she could do any damage, and it was much easier to get up quickly from a solid wood seat than from the depths of an overstuffed sofa.

Old women might *look* harmless, but he knew better. *Anybody* could turn violent, and even the feeblest



ripple could do some damage if not stopped. Every cop knew that.

And these two might both be in their sixties, but they both looked pretty healthy. He watched both women closely.

The big one's story that the other was an imposter sounded crazy, but you could never be absolutely sure. It was far more likely that one of the pair had slipped a cam somewhere — or maybe both of them had — but the possibility that their hostess really wasn't Kate McGowan had to be kept in mind, as well.

"Can I get you anything?" Kate — or whoever it was — asked. "I have some ginger ale in the fridge, or I can have the kettle hot in a few minutes if you'd like tea or instant coffee."

"That's all right, ma'am, we're fine," Nilson replied, watching the nervously-fluttering hands.

"Well then," she asked, her gaze turning nervously to Dr. Dodge, and then back to Nilson, "What can I do for you?"

Nilson glanced at Dr. Dodge, who made a small waving gesture, urging him to proceed.

"Well, ma'am," Nilson said, "Your sister-in-law was worried about you. There have been some peculiar incidents here recently, like that bomb scare..."

"Oh, yes, wasn't that ridiculous?" Kate tittered. "All of us down there in our nightclothes, waiting for the building to blow up!"

"Yes, ma'am." Nilson was watching Annie McGowan rather more closely than he was watching Kate. Kate seemed a little discomfited by the presence of unexpected guests, probably especially because they were police, and maybe even more so because one of them was black, which still made a difference to a lot of people, especially older ones — Dr. Dodge knew that, which was probably why he was letting Nilson do all the talking. Or maybe Dodge was just keeping up his role as impartial psychiatric observer, rather than thinking about his race.

Whatever the reasons, Kate appeared discomfited, but *only* discomfited, nothing more than that. Annie, on the other hand, looked as if she were smothering an outburst of some kind and were almost ready to explode.

Nilson continued, "Anyway, your sister-in-law was worried about you, living here, so we came to talk to you to ask if you knew of anything else strange, anything that's gone wrong lately, or seemed peculiar or out of place."

Kate looked utterly mystified. "No," she said, "No, there's nothing I can think of." She turned to her sister-in-law and asked, "Annie, are you feeling well?"

Annie gasped at the sheer audacity of the thing. "Am *I* feeling well?" she asked. "*Me? You're* the one who's forgotten how to knit, which you've known since you were a girl! *You're* the one pretending to be Katie, when you aren't anything like her, really, you're just acting the part. Officer, I'll show you — she's wearing my sister's skin, that's not..."

Annie was up and moving toward the Kate thing before she even knew it, intending to tear that stolen face right off her, but Officer Nilson was up as well, blocking her, and his hands were on her arms, the



thumbs digging solidly into the insides of her elbows as he forced her back a step.

“Take it easy,” he said gently. “Take it easy, Mrs. McGowan.”

Dr. Dodge was there, too, standing behind her, listening.

“Take it *easy!*” Annie snapped, “Take it *easy?* That’s *not Kate!* It’s not even human!”

“Annie, are you all right?” the thing asked, and the voice was just like Kate’s, but when she looked into its eyes she saw no honest concern, she saw mockery, and a hint of warm red that shouldn’t be there.

Annie didn’t fight against Officer Nilson. She was outmatched. The police believed the creature, instead of her.

Mr. Smith and the others had been right. She forced herself to appear calm, forced her muscles to relax.

It wasn’t that hard. All her life she had taken what came her way without undue protest, doing as she was told, even when she hated it. She had thought that was done with when Pat died and left her on her own, but now she saw it wasn’t.

“No,” she said, “I’m not all right. I’m sorry. Officer, could you take me home, please? I’m afraid I’m not well.”

Nilson glanced at Dodge, who nodded.

“Come on, Mrs. McGowan,” Nilson said, “I’ll take you home. Miss McGowan, I’m sorry if we’ve disturbed you.” He escorted Annie to the door, holding one elbow with his left hand; she did not resist, made no attempt to pull away.

Kate stood up, looking a trifle dazed. “It’s all right, officer,” she said. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some tea?”

They were both nuts, Nilson decided.

Dodge picked up Annie’s umbrella, then stepped out, closing the door of the apartment behind himself. Nilson raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“We’ll take you home now, Mrs. McGowan,” Dodge said. “If there’s anything you’d like to tell me, though, I’d be glad to listen. Did you say something about an imposter wearing your sister’s skin? Did you mean that literally?”

Annie shook her head as she started down the steps. There was no point in telling these people the truth, because they would either treat her as a silly old woman and ignore her, or as a genuine lunatic, in which case they might take her away somewhere.

All she wanted now was to go home.

She had to give it one more try, though — just one, and if it didn’t work, then she would be meek and mild and they would let her go home.



I *thought*,” she began, “that maybe something had, well...”

She let her voice trail off as she realized how utterly unbelievable anything she could say would sound. Frustrated, she tried again.

“I don’t know *what* I thought,” she said, “but I really do think that there’s something very wrong with Kate, and I wish that you could get a doctor to check her. Dr. Dodge, couldn’t *you* examine her, somehow?”

Surely, Annie thought, the creature wouldn’t be able to fool a doctor.

Dr. Dodge shook his head. “You may be right,” he said, “But I’m afraid it’s not my line. I would suggest that both of you might want to talk to your own doctors — I’ll call your sister-in-law later and explain how worried you are, and suggest that, if I may. I can’t examine her myself, though, unless she asks me to. To be honest, Mrs. McGowan, I didn’t see anything strange about her, but then I don’t know her as you do. It may be that whatever’s changed her, if something really has, has you so upset that you’re not thinking clearly about it. I really think you should *both* see a physician — but I can’t make either of you do anything you don’t want to, I can only make the suggestion.”

Annie nodded. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said, her voice lifeless.

That was another dead end. That thing would never go near a doctor of its own free will.

No help from the police. No help from doctors. That just left Mr. Smith and his vigilantes.

She wondered how their expedition had gone the day before.

4.

Smith stared at the screen, trying to see why the routine didn’t work. He didn’t hear Einar come up behind him.

“So, Ed,” Einar said suddenly.

Smith started, and his hand hit the keyboard, transforming line 16186 into gibberish.

“How’s it going?” Einar asked. “You over whatever you had last week?”

Smith said, “Uh ... oh. Yeah, I guess. Sure, I’m over it.”

What had that line said, anyway? He had lost five characters that he had typed over, or possibly six, and the line had no notation attached that would tell him what it was. He’d always been sloppy about documenting his work.

What was it he wanted this line to do?

“How’s it coming?” Einar asked, distracting him again. “Still on schedule?”

“I think so,” Smith said, trying to ignore Einar without being rude about it. He needed to concentrate on the program. Was that supposed to be the line that specified the data string for the page header



ubroutine? No, that was 16180.

This wasn't working; he couldn't think clearly.

"What happened there?" Einar asked, peering over his shoulder and pointing at line 16186.

"Bumped the keyboard," Smith said.

"Oh," Einar said. "Well, I guess I'll leave you to fix it, then."

"Right," Smith said.

He had the old line 16186 on disk somewhere, he realized, and he set out to retrieve it.

He wished he weren't so tired, but the lack of sleep and the unusual hours he had been keeping were catching up with him — not to mention the strain of trying to concentrate on his work when the nightmare people were always lurking in the back of his mind, worrying him, intruding on his every thought.

He called up the file he wanted, and only after he had done it did he realize that he had forgotten to save the changes he had spent the last half-hour on.

"Damn!" he said.

Choong Fu, at the next terminal, straightened up from his own keyboard and glanced over at Smith. Smith waved at him half-heartedly, then went back to the screen and started over.

5.

Maggie had stayed in the house all morning, and she knew her mother had noticed that. That wasn't her usual pattern. One day, though, wasn't anything for anyone to get upset about, and she could blame it on the rain.

Even so, when the postman came by not long after the rain stopped, Maggie decided it was time to get outside at least long enough to walk out to the curb and get the mail.

She trotted across the porch, down the steps and along the walk, and was almost to the mailbox when she noticed someone waving from up the street, on the other side. She turned and looked.

It was Elias.

Elias, who she had seen butchered the day before, was standing there waving at her.

She didn't run.

She didn't run, but it took all the determination she could muster not to. She went on to the mailbox, collected the day's delivery, and walked back to the house. She didn't run.

By the time she was inside with the handful of letters, magazines, and junk mail her jaw hurt from clenching her teeth tight to keep from screaming.



She threw the mail on the table and stared at the door, expecting the doorbell to ring, expecting the false Elias to be there on the porch, expecting it to smile at her with those gleaming silver teeth and then to kiss her and sink them into her flesh, into her jaw.

When the doorbell rang she wouldn't answer it. She wouldn't go back out there. She would never leave the house again.

She was scheduled to work a four-hour shift at the mall Tuesday evening, but she would call in sick, and she would just stay safely inside, and that thing would have to give up and go away eventually, and then she could go on as if none of it had ever happened.

She wouldn't let it in. It couldn't get in.

Could it?

She had seen Elias die. She had seen that thing start to crawl into his corpse's mouth, eating as it went. She'd seen the blood bubbling up, heard Elias scream before he died. When the creature had started eating its way in it had been shaped like that woman, Mary somebody, the one Maggie had talked to all those times when she babysat Jimmy Billiard. Mary had been short and small, with breasts and a round ass that Maggie had secretly envied, and that thing had looked just like her.

Now one of the monsters was pretending to be Elias, and it was taller and thinner than Mary, flat-chested and narrow-hipped, and from the glimpse she had gotten it seemed to amble like Elias, in a way that no woman ever had.

That meant that either this was a different one that had somehow taken Elias's place, or else the thing could change its shape.

And how could it be a different one? She had seen that thing crawling out of Mary's skin and into Elias.

If it could change its shape, couldn't it squeeze under the door, or around the window, or in through the gable vents or the chimney or through the same cracks in the basement floor that had let water seep in during all that heavy rain they'd had the last few months?

And if it was pretending to be Elias — was it staying in his house, sleeping in his bed?

What about his parents? Did they know that thing wasn't really their son?

The doorbell still hadn't rung, and she saw nothing oozing in anywhere; she crossed to the front window and looked out.

Elias was still up the street, just hanging around, just as if he were an ordinary teenager and this was an ordinary summer day.

Did his parents know?

They *had* to know. She had to call them, tell them.

She headed for the phone, then stopped in the kitchen doorway.



What would she say? “Mrs. Samaan, Elias got eaten by a monster yesterday, and that thing on the sidewalk isn’t him, it’s the monster dressed up in his skin.”

If she said anything like that, Mrs. Samaan would call the narcs and have Maggie put away. It *did* sound like something a strung-out druggie would come up with.

Maggie wished it *was* just a drug-induced hallucination, but she didn’t use, except for an occasional drink or a little weed at parties sometimes, just to be sociable, and she hadn’t even done any of that in months — not since school let out, anyway.

Maybe she could just hint that something was wrong with Elias, and not give any specifics. After all, Mrs. Samaan was a mother, right? Any clue that there was something wrong with her kid and she’d be watching him every minute, seeing stuff anyone else would miss, wouldn’t she?

Maggie’s own mother was certainly like that, and from what Maggie had seen of Mrs. Samaan, she was even more so.

But then, if Mrs. Samaan got suspicious, what if she said something wrong and gave herself away? What if she just thought that Elias needed someone to talk to? What if she talked to that thing about her suspicions?

What if the monsters ate her?

What if they had *already* eaten her?

Maggie’s hand had found its way to the receiver, but now she let it drop again.

What if they *had* already eaten her? And Elias’s father, too? Three of those things, not a mile away at Bedford Mills, but right there on the same block with her — she couldn’t stand that.

She couldn’t stand not knowing, either. She picked up the phone and dialed.

6.

At 4:00 Smith finally gave up. He wasn’t accomplishing anything useful by sitting there and staring at the screen. His actual yield for the entire day’s work was one minor subroutine successfully debugged, after six attempts. He gave up fighting against it; he would need a few days of rest before he could get back to serious programming.

Whether he could manage a few days of rest he didn’t know. The nightmare people might still be after him; the one night without a visit might be a decoy, to get him off-guard.

Maybe, though, they’d seen how ineffectual he was, seen that he had been unable to harm them, and they’d decided to leave him alone. If there was some mystical reason they had needed to kill one hundred forty-four people, and couldn’t settle for one hundred forty-three, then now, with Elias, they might be satisfied. They’d gotten a hundred and forty-four.

It was possible, wasn’t it, that they’d given up on him, because they had enough, or had run out of time, or he had been away from his apartment too long?



...couldn't that be possible?

He *wanted* it to be true, but *was* it?

He knew who could answer that. It probably wouldn't want to, but it *could* answer. After he packed up his notes and shut off his terminal, he picked up the phone and dialed the number for his own apartment.

He let it ring eleven times before he hung up.

The thing wasn't there, or at least wasn't answering.

Maybe it was gone. Maybe the creature was gone for good. Maybe the nightmare was all over.

As he walked out to his car he told himself that it *must* all be over. The things had finished doing whatever they had come to do, and were gone.

Or at least they were no longer after *him*.

All the way back to the motel he tried to convince himself that that was it, that they had had an arcane quota to fill, and their task was now done, and they wouldn't be bothering him any more. He would be able to sleep all night in safety.

He kept telling himself that, but he didn't really believe it.

At the motel, the first thing he saw in his room was the red light on the phone. He threw his briefcase on the bed, sat down beside it, and picked up the receiver.

When he'd reached the clerk and identified himself, he was told, "Oh, yeah, these two women kept calling. Maggie somebody, looks like Delaney, maybe, I can't read the handwriting, and a Mrs. McGowan. They left their numbers; you want 'em?"

"Yes, please." He found a pen and pad in the briefcase, and noted down the numbers.

When the clerk had hung up he stared at the numbers for a moment. Why was Maggie Devanoy calling? And why was Annie McGowan calling? Ms. McGowan had said she wanted nothing to do with him and his "vigilante" tactics, and he had thought that was the end of it. As for Maggie, she had looked sick after last night's disaster, physically sick, which was understandable under the circumstances, and he had assumed that she had reached and passed her limit, that she wanted nothing more to do with any of the nightmare people, or with him, or anything else related to them, at least for awhile.

He hadn't expected to hear from either Maggie or Annie any time soon.

He dialed the Devanoy number.

The phone at the other end rang twice, and then someone picked up.

"Hello?" a female voice answered.

"Is this Maggie?" he asked.



Yes,” she said, “Who ... oh, is that Mr. Smith?” Sudden suspicion crept into her voice. “Or is it the other one?” she asked.

“This is the real Ed Smith, Maggie,” he said. “You left a message to call you?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Smith, thanks for calling, really!” She sounded almost cheerful for a moment, but that vanished when she added, “It’s ... it’s about Elias.”

He blinked, and felt a tightness in his chest. “Maggie,” he said, in a low, sympathetic voice, “What about Elias? I didn’t really know him, you know, but if you just need someone to talk to...”

“No, it’s not anything like *that!*” She made no attempt to hide her exasperation. “I mean he’s *back*, or the thing that ate him is, the way Bill Goodwin was, and he’s come back home, and I think those things got his parents, too, because Mrs. Samaan doesn’t sound right on the phone and Mr. Samaan didn’t go to work, and Mrs. Samaan says he’s not feeling well, but Mr. Samaan *always* went to work no matter *how* sick he was, and this one isn’t ... well, it’s not him. They got them all.” Her voice rose toward the end.

Smith stared at the blank concrete wall, wondering how he could possibly have failed to anticipate this.

“You’re sure it’s both of them?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure,” Maggie said. “At least, I think I am.”

Smith didn’t argue with the confusion implicit in that reply. He asked, “Were there any other kids in the family, or anybody else living there?”

“No, just the three of them,” Maggie said. “I think Elias had an older brother once, but he died or something; anyway, he’s never lived there.”

A wave of helplessness, stirred into overwhelming motion by this unexpected new catastrophe, threatened to drown Smith. Here he had been thinking that maybe the nightmare was over, just because *he* was no longer being directly bothered, when other innocents, who knew no more about what was happening than his dead neighbors had, were dying.

And there wasn’t anything he could think of that could help.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

Maggie said, “Well, I talked to Mrs. McGowan, Annie McGowan, and she says the cops weren’t any help at all, so we’re having another meeting at her house, this evening, as soon as everybody can get there. I was waiting for you to call back before I went over there, but I’ll head over right now, on my bike. I haven’t gotten hold of Sandy Niklasen or Khalil Saad yet, I guess they’re at work, but I’ll keep trying from over there. Um ... do you think I should try the Newell girls again?”

“No,” Smith said, “Don’t bother. They probably still wouldn’t believe us. Listen, do you ... do you know anything more about them? The monsters, I mean, not the Newells. Have you got any ideas on how we can kill those things?”

“No. Do you?”



No. And that means I don't know if this meeting is going to do any good..."

"Don't *say* that!" Maggie shouted, interrupting him. "I mean, we've got to think of something, right, if all of us are there? I mean, there's *got* to be ... well, hey, I've got to talk to you guys, okay? Will you be there?"

Reluctantly, Smith said, "I'll be there."

He hung up.

He stared at the phone for a moment, then let out a sigh, but whether it was a sigh of dismay or relief he wasn't sure.

7.

Annie McGowan smiled at him as she held the door. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Smith," she said. "Mr. Niklasen and Mr. Saad should be here soon; they called, or at least Mr. Niklasen did. Maggie's in the kitchen making sandwiches; you haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't, Ms. McGowan. Thanks." He followed her gesture and found himself in a small, tidy kitchen, where Maggie Devanoy was slathering mustard onto slices of bread.

He had just started to look at the selection of cold cuts spread on the counter when the doorbell rang. He stepped back to the doorway to look as Annie answered it.

Sandy Niklasen pushed his way in, clutching something that looked like a thick bundle of gauzy, soiled rags; Khalil Saad followed him somberly, a couple of paces back.

"*Look* at this!" Sandy said, and Smith saw that he was literally shaking with rage. "Look at it!"

"What is it?" Maggie asked over Smith's shoulder.

Sandy turned, and his mouth opened, then snapped shut; he was too furious to speak. He thrust the bundle at Smith.

Smith accepted it reluctantly. The instant his fingers touched it he realized it wasn't cloth, gauzy or otherwise. He stared down in horror at what he held.

Maggie, looking around his shoulder, went white.

"I don't understand," Annie said. "What is it?"

"It's Mary," Sandy said.

"We went to that place," Khalil said, "In the woods. And we found this there. It is all that is left of her. We found this, and her clothes, and the wooden stake, and some blood, and pieces of bone, all lying in the dirt. Nothing else."

With unsteady hands, Smith unfolded a little of the bundle, and a thick hank of blonde hair tumbled free.



I don't understand," Annie repeated. "What is that you have there, Mr. Smith?"

"It's skin," Smith forced out.

"It's *Mary's* skin," Sandy bellowed, "Mary's skin that that thing was wearing like long underwear, and when it got Elias instead it just crawled out and left it lying there, where we found it!"

Smith had not been prepared for the shock of having the entirety of a woman's mortal remains thrust into his hands without warning, so most of his mind was blank.

Somewhere, though, far in the back, a little trace of logical thought lurked.

This would be the evidence needed to convince even the most skeptical cop that something out of the ordinary was going on here. Even the most determined psychopath could not have removed a woman's whole skin so neatly or completely.

Could he?

That little bit of him tried to push its way up through the layers of shock and fatigue, to tell the others, to let them know that this could save them all, but then Maggie burst out wailing and fled to the far corner of the kitchen, and he stepped aside to let a concerned Annie hurry past him on her way to comfort the terrified girl, and then Sandy was taking the skin back and saying, "We're going to burn them. It was Khalil's idea; aren't evil spirits all afraid of fire? We're going to burn *all* those bastards!"

Smith tried to think of something intelligent to say, but his thoughts refused to cohere. One fragment managed to surface for an instant.

"Elias," he said.

"Yeah," Sandy said, "It's dressed up as Elias now, but it must be living in Mary's apartment, right? I mean, it..."

Smith shook his head. "No," he said, "Elias came home last night, Maggie said."

Sandy stared at him. "What?"

"Elias came home. And Maggie thinks they got his parents, that the one in Elias's skin let in a couple more."

Sandy and Khalil looked at one another.

"If," Smith managed, his thoughts moving again, sluggishly, "If we tried to burn down the apartments, we couldn't get them all. It's too big, too many of them. And those three aren't there."

"We wouldn't get the one that got Mary," Sandy agreed.

"And we don't *know*," Smith said, "that fire will stop them. Not really." The image of a hundred nightmare creatures swarming out of the burning Bedford Mills complex, like wasps from a broken nest, came to him. "And the cops..." He lost the thread of what he wanted to say.



All right,” Sandy said, “Then we burn the house first, a trial run — burn the three of them, or however many are in there. Get the one who got Mary and Elias.”

Khalil nodded.

Annie McGowan, with Maggie in an encircling arm, came up to the kitchen door just then.

“Burn the house?” she said. “But that’s *arson*, it’s destruction of property!”

“Oh, fuckin’ *Christ*,” Sandy said, turning away in disgust and slapping a hand against the wall.

Smith blinked. “Ms. McGowan,” he said, “These things are *murderers*, remember. They’ve killed the people who owned that house. And shooting and stabbing them doesn’t bother them, but fire just might.”

“Oh, I know,” Annie said, flustered. “I mean, I see you’re right, really. I do. The police weren’t any use, and we have to do *something*. I wish there were another way, though.”

“There might be one,” Smith said, “But we don’t know what it is.”

Maggie sniffled. “When are you going to do it?” she asked.

Sandy turned back. “Tonight,” he said. “Soon as it’s dark, right? Before they know we’re onto them!”

Smith blinked, wishing he could think more clearly, that he were steadier on his feet. “Tonight?”

“Sure!” Sandy said enthusiastically. “The sooner the better! Lady, do you have any gasoline here? For your lawnmower or anything?”

“Not gasoline,” Annie said slowly, “But I have a can of lighter fluid, and a little kerosene.”

“That’ll do fine!” He smiled, showing more teeth than Smith liked to see. “You gonna come along yourself and bring it?”

“Oh, no!” she said, “I’m too old for this sort of thing. Mr. Niklasen, Mr. Smith, all of you, I’m in no shape to fight these things — I’ll help you plan, and you’re welcome to stay here, or meet here, but don’t expect me to come with you!”

“No problem,” Sandy said, “That’s plenty. With this house to use as a base we’re all set. We’ll do the rest. You and Maggie can stay here.”

“Oh, no,” Maggie said, her voice suddenly strong and firm again. “I’m coming with you. I want to see those things die!”

Smith stared at her. Sandy grinned.

“Fine,” Sandy said. “Ever set any fires?”



None of them had any experience in setting fires.

Most particularly, none of them had ever tried to set a fire where no one was supposed to get out. Starting the fire itself seemed simple enough, given the kerosene and lighter fluid and Sandy's cigarette lighter, but figuring out how to keep the nightmare people inside until they burned was another matter entirely.

"In the movies," Maggie pointed out, "when the bad guys are trying to burn somebody up, they always tie them to chairs."

Smith began, "After what happened to Elias..."

Sandy cut him off. "I'm not trusting any goddamn movie," he growled.

"If we just burn down the house, though, they'll just get out, and we won't get anywhere," Maggie said. "We need to make sure they stay inside until they burn."

"We do not really need to burn the house at all," Khalil pointed out, from his straight-backed chair in the corner. "It is not the house we want destroyed, it is the things inside."

Sandy stared silently at Khalil for a moment, then smiled tightly and nodded his understanding.

"Well, how are we going to burn them up, except by burning up the house?" Maggie demanded. "What are we going to do, walk up to them and hold a match to their toes?"

"Close," Sandy said, "Very close. Maggie, how well did you know Elias's folks? Well enough that they'd let you in the house?"

She shrugged. "Well, yeah, I guess so; I've been inside there a few times. What are ... oh, wait a minute. I mean, this is like..." Her voice trailed off as she found all three men staring at her.

It was clear what Sandy had in mind, and Smith wondered whether Maggie was up to it. Sandy wanted her to play decoy, to get the door open so that they all could get inside — but once inside, it would be the three of them — four, counting Maggie — against three nightmare people.

Those were not favorable odds. Not against creatures that shrugged off bullets, that could pull themselves up off impaling stakes.

He wondered if he were up to it himself.

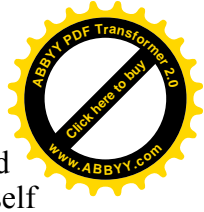
He wondered if *any* of them were up to it.

Chapter Eight:

Monday Night

1.

The grass sighed softly against the sides of Smith's sneakers as he moved into hiding. The sound of his



own breath was loud in his ears, and gurgling of the can of lighter fluid in one unsteady hand seemed like waves crashing in the cool August night. He knelt down behind a rhododendron and found himself in a patch of mud; the day had been overcast and unseasonably cool, and traces of the morning rain still lingered in the sheltered area between the bush and the wall of the house. It was damp, but it was out of sight; he stayed. He wiped a forearm across his face to remove the sudden moisture, then waved to Maggie with his crowbar, signalling that he was ready. She stood out on the sidewalk, under a streetlight, looking very small and vulnerable and scared.

Sandy crouched nearby, between a scraggly evergreen and one end of the Samaans' front porch. Smith could see only his back, but there was no sign that he was nervous at all.

Theoretically, Khalil was somewhere nearby, but Smith could neither see nor hear him.

Maggie took a deep breath and marched up the walk, up the steps and onto the porch. Smith crouched down low as she pressed the doorbell button.

He heard no bell, but Maggie presumably did. She looked quickly, nervously about, then faced the door again.

It opened, but Smith could see nothing of who or what had opened it.

"Hi, Mrs. Samaan," Maggie said, and Smith was sure he heard a quaver in her voice. "Elias left some stuff at my place; can I come in and give it to him?"

"What stuff, dear?" a voice asked, a voice that seemed to Smith to have an oddly familiar sound to it.

"Well, just ... just stuff ... I mean..." Maggie's voice trailed off. After a second or so of awkward silence, she asked plaintively, "Can I come in?"

"Well," the voice said, "If it's just something he left, I can give it to him, but if you want..."

"I need to talk to him, too, Mrs. Samaan."

Smith saw that Sandy was up and moving, so suddenly and silently that it caught Smith completely off-guard. Sandy was jumping up onto the porch and charging toward Maggie and the open door.

Khalil, too, had emerged from somewhere — Smith hadn't seen where — and was coming up the porch steps.

Smith realized belatedly that "I need to talk to him" had been the agreed-upon signal; he rose and pushed around the rhododendron and clambered awkwardly up onto the porch.

He still only had one foot up on the concrete when Khalil and Sandy burst in through the open door, out of Smith's line of sight, carrying Maggie in with them. Smith heard the door slam back against a doorstep with a sharp bang.

Cursing his own ineptitude, he flung himself across the porch and into the house.



Sandy was sitting astride the thing that wore the late Hanna Samaan's skin; he held a hunting knife at its throat. Maggie was standing with her back pressed to the foyer wall, trying to stay out of the way of whatever might happen. Khalil, armed with an ordinary hammer, was halfway down the front hall, scouting for further opposition.

"Close the door!" Sandy ordered.

Smith stepped into the house, shoved aside one of the false Hanna's slippered feet, and closed the door. After a moment's hesitation, he threw the deadbolt.

The creature smiled up at Sandy, a cruel, tight-lipped smile that looked very much out of place on Hanna Samaan's haggard and ordinary face. A faint hint of a baleful red glow showed through the brown of her eyes.

"You again," it said, in a conversational tone.

"Us again," Sandy agreed, grinning back. He pressed the knife-blade down, driving the point through the skin and deeply into the flesh beneath.

He had been unsure what to expect, so he was not surprised that except for the lack of blood it felt very much as he had always imagined it would feel to cut a person's throat. The blade sank in fairly easily for perhaps an inch, and then met resistance.

He drew the blade across the thing's neck, and the mottled, wrinkled skin of Elias's aging and out-of-shape mother parted, peeling back slightly to either side, revealing no red blood or mortal flesh, but that hard, grey, ropy substance that the nightmare people seemed to be made of.

He had to saw at it to cut effectively, and he sawed grimly away.

"What's going on here?" someone asked.

Sandy didn't look up. He was busy; the other two weren't his problem, they were for Smith and Khalil to deal with. Instead he went on sawing, putting all his strength into it.

He could feel sweat on his forehead.

The knife-blade was halfway through the thing's neck, and the consistency of the flesh was changing. Strands of gray, gummy stuff were sticking to the knife, and a thick pale liquid seemed to be oozing everywhere. The wound seemed to be closing up over the top of the blade. "Damn," Sandy muttered.

The creature just smiled up at him with its woman's face, not bothered at all by the huge gouge in its neck.

Sandy had hoped that he would be able to cut the thing's head off, to see whether it could survive decapitation, but it appeared his knife was not going to be enough to do the job.

That left the original plan, burning the things to death. He looked up.

Khalil and Smith were standing in the archway between the foyer and the living room, brandishing hammer and crowbar, and facing the mock Elias and someone who must be the false father, a big pot-



ellied figure in a sweat-stained T-shirt who reminded Sandy of a black-haired Archie Bunker.

The sweat stains were old, Sandy noticed, not fresh, despite the heat of the day.

“Give me the can,” he said.

Smith took a single step back, never taking his eyes from the two creatures he faced, and held out the can of lighter fluid.

Maggie took it from him, popped the plastic cap, and handed it to Sandy.

“What are you doing?” the thing beneath him rasped; his knife might not have killed it, but its voice was reduced to a harsh whisper.

Sandy’s answer was to spray lighter fluid in its face.

It didn’t even blink.

Moving slowly and carefully, Sandy crawled back down the thing’s body to its feet, spraying fluid as he went, soaking its face, its hair, its pale blue housedress. It stared up at him, not frightened, only puzzled.

The stench of lighter fluid arose.

“What’s that stuff you sprayin’ there?” the fat “man” called.

Nobody bothered to answer it.

Sandy got to his feet and stood, looking down at the creature he had just saturated. He sheathed his knife on his belt, then handed the can of lighter fluid to Maggie, who took it and backed away.

The Hanna thing blinked, finally, trying to clear its vision of the fluid that had pooled in its eyes. It sat up.

Sandy and the others moved away from it, away from the front door; the other two creatures stepped back, making room for them, watching.

Sandy took an old business card from one pocket, and his cigarette lighter from another, and flicked the wheel. The lighter flared up, and the flame caught the corner of the card.

When it was burning strongly, Sandy flipped it at the false Hanna, just as it was getting awkwardly to its feet, still trying to blink the lighter fluid out of its eyes.

The fluid caught immediately, and flames spread across the front of Hanna Samaan’s housedress, up into her hair, onto her stolen face.

Sandy had half-expected a great “whoosh,” like in the movies, but the only sound was a faint hissing, and a sudden crackle, like a far-distant string of firecrackers, as Hanna’s grey hair went up.

“Hey, you *crazy*?” the largest of the nightmare people demanded as a billow of orange fire flickered across the foyer ceiling, leaving a thin black film of smoke.



Sandy turned and squirted lighter fluid at the creature. It backed away.

The one in Elias's skin hadn't spoken yet, but now it did.

"Sandy," it said, in Mary's voice, "What do you think you're doing?"

Sandy's reply was to spray lighter fluid at that one, as well. "Bastard," he growled.

Khalil and Smith had stepped to the side, along the living room wall; Maggie was on the stairs, but at a gesture from Sandy she ran across and joined the others.

"You don't know what's up there," Sandy told her, "and if the fire spreads there might not be a way out." He turned back to the burning thing in the foyer.

It was standing there, smiling at him through the writhing flames as flakes of burning skin peeled away, flakes that fluttered up like orange fireflies, then blackened and fell.

The creature's human face was gone, and the silver needle-teeth were gleaming golden in the firelight. The last shreds of stolen hair and scalp were being carried upward by the rising heat, brushing lightly against the smoke-darkened ceiling and then drifting away, to fall as fine ash.

The skirt of Hanna's housedress was blackened and smoldering, the bodice gone completely, and as Sandy watched the remnant slid down over the thing's hips and fell to the floor, revealing white panties that were already darkening with the heat, heat that was spilling out in waves, pouring into the living room, forcing Sandy to take a step back.

And the thing was smiling silently at him, just smiling, red eyes like hot coals in the fire, smiling, smiling, smiling.

3.

Maggie turned to watch the thing burn, leaning around the corner of the arch and trusting Smith and Khalil to warn her if one of the others made a move toward her. She saw the dress fall away, saw the skin shrivel and darken, the hair drift away as ash, and she saw the thing smile.

She saw it smile, and saw it step forward toward Sandy, who stood there, frozen.

"That's the second time you people have ruined a perfectly good skin for me," it said in Bill Goodwin's voice, and it reached out through dying flames toward Sandy. "I think I'll just have to take yours."

Sandy stepped back and drew his hunting knife, so quickly that Maggie didn't see him move; just one moment he held a lighter in one hand and the other was empty, and the next moment the lighter was still there, and the other hand held a knife.

"Fuckin' A you will," Sandy told the thing. "I'll see you in hell first!"

The thing just kept smiling, and it came forward, seeming to step out of the fire as the last fluid burned off, the last tatters of cloth and skin falling away. Sandy stepped back again, and the thing lunged for him.



lunged, and it got him.

The pair fell past Maggie into the living room, the thing on top, Sandy underneath, and she could hear Sandy grunting as he hacked at the thing with his knife, but she couldn't see any blood, couldn't see anything but the smoldering grey flesh and a few charred black flakes of skin, and then it reached up with both hands and dug its thumbs into Sandy's jaw, and its head dipped down to kiss him, the way the other one had kissed Elias, and Maggie found herself screaming.

"No!" she shrieked, "No, no! No!"

She dove on top of the thing, her hands curved like claws, like talons, but she'd cut her fingernails, because who needs long nails in the summer? She couldn't claw the thing, but she grabbed its still-hot shoulders and tried to pull it away, and she heard Sandy shriek as it did *something* to him, and then his shriek was muffled, and she couldn't stand it, she couldn't.

She'd seen Elias die that way. She'd seen this thing, this same one by the voice, walking around as a parody of Bill Goodwin, who she thought she might even have been in love with. She was not going to let it get another of her friends!

She forced an arm around its neck in a chokehold that would have stopped anything human, ignoring the heat that singed the fine hairs on her forearm, but it didn't even notice, and she flung herself forward again, desperate, and closed her teeth on the thing's ash-streaked shoulder.

It let out an eerie wail, a sound like nothing Maggie had heard before, and erupted beneath her, flinging her off to the side and releasing Sandy.

Sandy seized his chance. He rolled aside, leaving a smear of blood on the carpeting, and staggered to his feet, running toward the sliding glass door that led out onto the deck, one hand on his mouth, blood oozing between his fingers.

Confused, unsure what was going on, Smith followed him.

Khalil leapt forward and picked Maggie up from where she had landed, threw a quick glance around at the three nightmare people, and then dragged her, too, toward the back door.

Maggie looked, trying to understand what had happened.

The burned nightmare creature was cowering in a corner, pawing ineffectually at one shoulder; the other two were standing over it, doing nothing.

And the important part was that none of them was paying any attention at all to the four humans.

Sandy had the door open, and the four of them spilled out onto the deck, then down the steps to the back yard, and then Maggie led them around to the street and away. She resisted the temptation to run home; her parents could not deal with this. Annie McGowan might.

She led the way to Sandy's car.



Sandy couldn't drive; he was bleeding from the mouth, and the hand that had been bitten the day before was bleeding again as well. His shirt was scorched and blackened, and he had minor burns on his arms and face.

Smith seemed dazed; Maggie was incoherent. Khalil took the wheel.

They only had three long blocks to cover to Annie McGowan's house, but as a group they weren't fit for walking or running.

Besides, the car would be harder to follow, should the nightmare people attempt pursuit.

Khalil pulled into the driveway at 706 Topaz Court, parked the car neatly on the apron, not blocking the garage, and then turned his attention to getting his passengers safely into the house.

The first step was to get the door open, so that no one would have to wait on the porch. He hurried up the steps and rang the doorbell while Smith helped the burned and bleeding Sandy out of the car and up the walk.

Maggie followed, slowly; now it was she who seemed dazed, while Smith was largely recovered.

Annie answered, and Khalil shushed her before she could exclaim over the sorry condition of the group. He then acted as doorman, herding the others inside before he entered himself.

He made certain the door was locked, and glanced around to reassure himself that there were no open windows before he followed the others into the living room.

Sandy was sitting in one of the armchairs, his head tilted back, while Annie held a cold towel to his lower jaw; the bleeding seemed to have stopped, finally. Maggie was huddled at one end of the couch, curled up in foetal position. Smith was standing by the window, looking out at Annie's flower garden.

Annie looked up as Khalil entered. "What happened?" she asked.

Khalil shrugged.

"What *did* happen?" Smith asked. "Sandy, I thought it had you; why'd it let go? What did you do?"

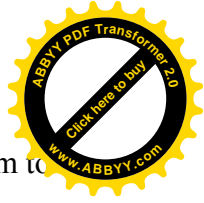
Sandy tried to speak, and almost choked on a fresh flow of blood. He desisted, and managed a half-shrug. He pointed to the knife on his belt — he had managed to sheathe it somewhere along the way — but followed that with another shrug.

"You stabbed one of them?" Annie asked.

Sandy nodded.

"He stabbed it a dozen times, at least," Smith said. "He cut its throat, tried to cut its head off, and it didn't even care. And then when it was attacking him he stabbed it in the chest over and over again, and it didn't seem to notice at first, but then all of a sudden it screamed and let go."

Annie swallowed, looking at the sheathed knife. "I thought you were going to burn them?"



"We did," Smith said. "Sandy set one on fire, and its clothes and skin burned off, but that didn't seem to bother it any more than the knife did."

Annie shuddered. Maggie curled herself more tightly.

"Maggie," Khalil said.

Smith looked at her, then at Khalil. "You think it was something *she* did?" he asked.

Khalil nodded.

Sandy turned his head long enough to glance at Maggie, and then he nodded, as well. "Knife didden' do nuffin'," he said, trying not to move his lower jaw as he spoke.

Smith crossed to the couch and sat down. "Maggie?" he said. "What did you do to it?"

"Go 'way," she said, not moving.

Smith blinked, and wished he'd had more sleep.

"Maggie?" he said again.

"Go 'way," she repeated, with more emphasis.

Khalil came and stood over her. "Maggie," he said, "We must know what you did."

"Don' wanna talk about it," she said, and Smith realized that she was sucking her thumb. He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder.

She twitched away. "Go 'way!" she snapped.

"The hell I will!" Smith snapped back. "Listen, Maggie, I know you don't want to talk about it or think about it, but you *have* to! Those things are still out there, and they're probably determined to kill us all, and they've *already* killed Elias and his parents and Bill Goodwin and his whole family and all those other people. We've shot them and stabbed them and burned them and driven a fucking *stake* through one's heart, and they just smiled at us like we were nothing, and now you did something that hurt one of them, and we have *got* to know what it was!"

Maggie curled up more tightly than ever.

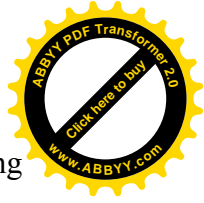
Enraged, Smith leaned over and yanked her thumb out of her mouth.

She spun around and slapped him across the face, hard.

Smith grabbed one hand, and Khalil grabbed the other, and they held her there, facing Smith.

"What did you *do*?" Smith demanded.

"I *bit* it!" Maggie shouted. "That's all! I bit it, I was so scared and mad I couldn't help it."



for a moment, no one spoke, and the room was silent. With a distant hum, the central air conditioning came on.

“You bit it?” Smith asked at last. Maggie nodded.

“What did it taste like?”

“Like shit,” Maggie said, “And there were ashes and bits of skin and it smelled of lighter fluid, and I think I’m going to be sick, let me up.”

Smith and Khalil released her, and she staggered to the bathroom. The others all sat, silently staring at one another, pretending they couldn’t hear her retching.

“Has she been poisoned, do you think?” Khalil asked.

Smith shook his head. “She’s just upset.”

“If they don’t mind knives and bullets,” Annie asked, “Why would a bite bother them?”

Smith shrugged. “Why does a cross bother a vampire?”

“S no reason,” Sandy said.

“The cross is the sign of God,” Annie said, “and vampires are supposed to be the spawn of hell, so naturally they’d fear it.”

Smith shrugged. “But that’s if you accept the whole Christian worldview. If you don’t know that, it seems pretty arbitrary. Never mind the cross, then; why does it take a stake through the heart to kill a vampire?”

Nobody had an answer to that.

“You mean,” Annie asked, “that it’s all just random? That there’s no sense to it?”

Smith shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “As you said, with vampires, there’s the whole Christian mythology thing, where they fear the cross and holy water, and sunlight, which comes from God, and maybe there’s some sort of symbolism to the stake through the heart, I don’t know. Maybe there’s a pattern with the nightmare people, too, a pattern we can figure out.”

“Not Christian,” Khalil said. “The cross did nothing.”

“They’re Jewish?” Sandy suggested sarcastically. The bleeding had stopped again, and he had swabbed away most of the blood.

Smith shook his head. His brain seemed oddly clear for the moment. “No, it’s not that. Look, when there were vampires, people took Christianity and its symbols pretty seriously.”

“They still do!” Annie protested. Smith held up a hand.

Maggie emerged from the bathroom, but stood silently listening.



"No, most people don't, not really," Smith said. "A hundred years ago nobody was putting 'Is God Dead?' on the covers of magazines. *Some* people take it seriously, but even for them, the trappings don't have the same meaning they once did."

"Whash your point?" Sandy asked. His speech was still a bit mushy, but better, and improving rapidly.

"My point is that vampires were creatures of their time," Smith replied. "And these things are probably creatures of *our* time. They're new, just invented, or evolved, or whatever. They're meant for now, for the 1990s."

"So they aren't Chris ... Christians?" Sandy said, working his jaw carefully. "Fine, but what the hell *are* they, and what's it got to do with biting? I don't see biting as the next big fashion trend around here."

"No," Smith said, "but nowadays nobody has any grand scheme of good and evil. There's no moral order to our universe, not when kids are killing each other over crack, and people on Wall Street are getting rich without ever doing anything but playing with other people's money. We don't have any God any more, or any real devil, we just have the law of the jungle."

He realized that Sandy and Annie and Maggie and Khalil were all staring at him, and he hesitated.

"Look," he said, "It makes sense, doesn't it? It's using their own weapon against them, after all. They try to eat us, don't they? And to kill a vampire, which sucks blood, you stop the blood from flowing with a stake through the heart. It's the law of the jungle, as I said."

Smith paused, looking at them all.

"Kill or be killed," he said. "Eat or be eaten."

5.

"How do you mean that?" Sandy asked.

Maggie moaned, and took a step back toward the bathroom.

"Mr. Smith," Annie said, "You don't mean we have to *eat* those things?"

Smith nodded. "I think we do," he said. "I think that's why Maggie's bite hurt it. I think that's the only way to kill them."

An uncomfortable silence followed Smith's pronouncement.

"Mr. Smith," Annie asked at last, "How do you propose to test this theory?"

Smith shrugged. "I don't know that I *do* propose to test it. I was just presenting it as I saw it."

"Of course we're going to test it!" Sandy said. "We've gotta kill those damned things!"

"But *eat* them..." Annie said, aghast.

Maggie moaned again.



“Maybe we wouldn’t need to eat all of one to kill it,” Smith said. “Maybe just the heart, same as a stake through the heart kills a vampire.”

“Mr. Smith,” Annie said, “I asked you before, and I’m asking again — how do you propose to find out?”

“Well, Ms. McGowan, I guess we’d have to try to eat one.”

Maggie ran for the bathroom again.

“We’ll need to get one of them alone,” Sandy said. “They don’t seem too eager to work together — I mean, the other two never attacked us when we set that one on fire — but we couldn’t expect them to just stand by. We couldn’t count on it.”

Smith nodded. “Maybe we could lure one here, somehow. We lured that one out to the woods, after all.”

“Not here!” Annie protested.

“Maybe at that house,” Khalil said, “Maybe we lure two of them away?”

Smith and Sandy looked at one another. Sandy nodded. “Yeah, we could try that,” he said. “Maggie must know someone else who knew Elias, someone who could lure him away.”

“Do we know which nightmare people they are?” Smith asked. “The one that got Elias was the one that used to be Mary, but what about the others?”

“Who cares?” Sandy asked.

“Maybe *they* do,” Smith said. “That one that was after me — it tried every night for five nights, and as far as I know it didn’t go after anyone else.”

Sandy shook his head. “Then why did that thing give up Mary’s skin to get Elias?”

Smith shrugged. “I don’t know. It did, though. And that other one, the one we burned, that used to be the Goodwin kid, judging by its voice. I guess they get tired and move on to the next victim, or something. But do they maybe still ... I mean, if I tried to get Bill Goodwin for something, would that thing come, even though it’s not Goodwin any more?”

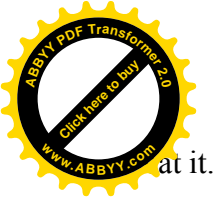
“Nah,” Sandy said. “Why should it?”

Smith had no answer to that.

6.

They talked and schemed until 2:00 a.m. Maggie phoned her parents and told them she was staying over at the Ryersons’. Annie apologized and went to bed around midnight, and the others sat up, planning.

They discarded a dozen ideas, and finally settled on a clear and simple one. Maggie would phone the Samaan house and tell whoever answered that she wanted to meet him outside, alone, somewhere. The others would be watching the house, and when one came out, they would follow it, jump it, and try to



at it.

If two came out, they would break into the house and go after the one left behind.

If all three emerged, or none, they would abandon the scheme and try again another time.

There was some argument as to whether Sandy, with the fresh bite in his jaw and the older one on his hand, was fit for this, but he won out, and was included.

Smith was glad of that; Sandy was clearly the strongest and most aggressive of the lot of them, and two humans against one of the creatures would not be odds much to Smith's liking.

At least, whatever the things were, they didn't seem to have the legendary strength of ten that vampires had, nor the ability to turn to mist, or a bat, or a wolf.

Smith wondered if vampires had really been able to do all those things, or whether the legends had grown in the telling. He remembered what Elias had said about unicorns and rhinoceri.

That was not comforting, however, when he considered that he'd much rather face a unicorn of legend than a real rhinoceros. What if vampires had been *worse* than the legends? What if the nightmare people had hidden powers that Smith and his little group hadn't yet learned about?

He said nothing about that, though, as they headed back to Amber Crescent.

They parked Sandy's car two houses up, and crept quietly down the street, and into the bushes beside the Samaans' front porch, just as they had before, and then they waited.

It seemed forever. The cool air was thick and humid, the silent street oppressive, and the heavy overcast reflected a diffuse and hostile blue-grey light down upon the unlit house. There was no sign of the moon; if it was up the clouds hid it, and Smith was fairly sure it had already set.

Then, faintly, Smith heard the ring of a phone. He smiled; Sandy glanced back at him, and he, too, smiled.

A light came on, and then another, somewhere inside, and golden light spilled across the lawn. Smith tensed.

It seemed like another eternity before the front door opened, turning the flow of light from within into a flood. The thing wearing Elias's skin stepped out onto the porch and looked around cautiously.

Smith and Sandy ducked back down.

It pulled the door closed behind itself, and started down the steps. Sandy had his hunting knife in his hand; Smith raised his own weapon, a bread knife he had borrowed from Annie's kitchen.

"Get it!" Sandy whispered, and he and Smith leapt forward.

Khalil appeared from somewhere beside them, and the three of them landed heavily on the back of the Elias thing, knocking it to the ground and falling with it, so that all four of them lay in a heap on the front walk.



Sandy got up on his knees and heaved at the thing's shoulder; the others slid off, and he flipped it onto its back.

It was wearing a grubby T-shirt and a pair of jeans, colorless in the darkness. It looked up at him and smiled.

"Hello, Sandy," it said, showing those needle-sharp teeth.

"Hold that pose," Sandy said, and he plunged his knife into its chest.

Smith had its right shoulder and was pinning it down; Khalil had the left. It raised its head and looked at the knife piercing its flesh, and it smiled again.

Sandy dragged the knife down, trying to open a cut; the T-shirt ripped, and the skin beneath it parted, but the underlying grey flesh oozed thickly and closed up again, leaving only a thin line like an old scar. The thing watched with mild amusement.

"Give me a hand here," he muttered.

Smith reached over.

"Hold it open," Sandy said, and he pulled at the knife again.

Smith shoved his fingers into the wound before it could close.

It was like a thick pudding, like wet sand, like shoving his hand into lukewarm mud, and he could feel the stuff oozing between his fingers, and he thrust his other hand in as well, trying to hold back the flow, holding the thing's shoulder with one knee.

"It won't hold," he muttered.

Khalil added his hands, and Sandy stabbed and ripped again, but the wound continued to close, and the thing just smiled at them.

"Having fun?" it asked.

Sandy spat in its face.

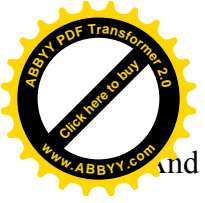
Khalil, inspired, spat in the wound.

The healing slowed visibly. The mocking smile vanished. The thing looked almost worried.

"Who goes first?" Smith asked, uneasily.

Khalil shook his head. Sandy started to say something, but then the thing brought a knee up from behind, and he was too busy fighting this sudden attack to waste his breath on words.

Holding his own breath, Smith thrust his head down, between his hands, mouth open, and bit. A chunk of the thing's flesh tore free in his mouth, a chunk that felt like hard rubber in his mouth.



and Maggie had been right; it tasted like shit.

Only worse.

The thing screamed, and Smith bit again, and chewed, trying hard to ignore the taste, which was the taste of foulness and corruption, like the stink of rotting meat, oily and vile. He ignored the screaming, though it hurt his ears, and he ignored the lights coming on in neighboring houses, and he ignored the churning in his belly, and he sank his teeth into that stinking grey flesh again, and hit something harder, something like clay, something that gleamed black and wet, and he bit into that, too, his teeth scraping through it.

The thing let out the loudest shriek yet, a howl like nothing Smith had ever imagined, like a damned soul in torment, and he almost gagged just from the sound of it.

Then he took another bite, and the scream trailed away into a breathy hissing.

Smith gnawed, and chewed, and forced himself to swallow, and didn't worry about the clawed fingers scraping his side, or Sandy's struggles to hold the thing's legs, or Khalil leaning forward to push the thing's head back down so it couldn't bite. The taste and the stench seemed to get worse and worse, and he could only force himself to go on by refusing to think about anything except working his jaws, about biting and chewing and swallowing.

And then he finished the black stuff, and the struggling stopped, and the thing's hands and head fell back, and Smith dared to rise up for a faceful of fresh air. He opened his eyes — he didn't remember closing them, but they were tightly shut — and looked down.

The thing was utterly lifeless, a gaping hole in its chest, a hole through thick gray flesh, a hole smeared with viscous, milky fluid, a hole that was no longer trying to heal itself.

It still wore Elias's skin on its face, but the boy's features were twisted into a feral, inhuman expression of hatred and terror, the skin pulled back from around the mouth, revealing thin black lips and shining metallic teeth.

Its curled hands still wore Elias's skin, but long black claws had thrust out from the fingertips. The left, that Khalil had held, was unmarked beyond that; the right, which had raked Smith's side, was smeared with blood, the skin scraped back from two of the fingertips.

But the creature was dead.

In fact, the creature was rotting away.

That hole that his teeth and the knives had made in its boneless chest was blackening at the edges and growing; reeking black liquid was oozing from the decaying flesh, spilling across the gray gunk, flowing down and filling the bottom of the cavity.

Smith turned away and vomited on the grass, choking up the thing's substance as best he could, spitting it all out on the lawn.

Khalil rose and stepped away, watching. Sandy fell back off the thing, onto the grass.



When Smith turned back the creature was visibly falling in upon itself; its head was flattening out like a deflating ball, oily black liquid dripping from the nose and mouth and seeping out around the eyes. The limbs had gone limp, and as Smith watched one shoe fell off. The foot that had worn it had withered away to nothing.

The stench of death and decay was overpowering, and Smith's nausea returned. He gagged, then retched, but had nothing left to bring up.

Sandy got to his feet, staring down at the thing. He spat onto the rotting corpse, spat a goblet of sputum mixed with blood.

"That's for Mary, you son of a bitch," he said, as he wiped his mouth.

Khalil hissed and pointed, and Smith and Sandy looked up to see the beam of a flashlight shining across the bushes in front of the house across the street.

A siren sounded in the distance.

"We better get out of here," Smith said.

Sandy nodded, and the three of them ran for the car. Sandy limped slightly; Smith ran bent over, trying to minimize the pain from the gashes in his side.

Behind them the shapeless mass and stinking black puddle that had been the nightmare person, the false Elias, were beginning to steam.

Chapter Nine:

Tuesday, August 8th

1.

"One down," Sandy said, smiling.

"And a hundred and forty-three to go," Smith responded glumly, closing his hand around his coffee cup.

"Hey, that's not so many!" Sandy said. "At least we know how many there are!"

"Do we?" Smith asked. "How do we know they don't reproduce somehow? Vampires could make more vampires, couldn't they?"

"I don't know," Sandy said, "Do you? Could they?" He scowled. "And besides, these things aren't vampires."

"Yeah," Smith said, "and we don't know what they really *are*, either. Yeah, we know how to kill them now, but people knew how to kill vampires hundreds of years ago, and they still didn't get the last one until 1939."

"That's what that creep told you," Sandy said. "You can't believe the creeps."



"You killed one?" Annie asked from the doorway. "You're sure?"

Smith turned. Their hostess was standing there in a pale pink housedress and fuzzy blue slippers. "Good morning," he said. "Yes, we're sure. It rotted away to nothing."

"Not nothing," Sandy objected. "The skin was still there."

"That wasn't part of it," Smith pointed out.

Sandy shrugged.

"But I thought you intended to ... ah..." Annie said.

"Eat it?" Sandy asked.

"We did," Smith explained, "But we didn't need to eat *all* of it. There's a part where the heart should be that's black and harder than the rest, and when I ate that it began to melt away."

"I wish we hadn't left it there," Sandy said.

Smith shrugged. "What were we going to do? I mean, its screaming woke up the neighbors, and would *you* want to explain to them that we were killing monsters on their lawn at three in the morning?"

"Yeah, and what about when the neighbors find Elias's skin lying there empty?"

Khalil, who had been sitting silently staring at his coffee, shook his head. "The others, from the house," he said. "They got there first."

Smith turned and blinked at him. "How'd you know that?" he demanded.

"I saw," Khalil replied.

"Damn," Sandy said. "They know we know, then."

"They'd know anyway," Smith said.

"Where's Maggie?" Annie asked, looking about the kitchen.

"Asleep on the couch," Smith replied.

"Oh." Annie finally left the doorway and entered.

"I hope you don't mind," Smith said, a little belatedly remembering his manners, "but we made ourselves some coffee. We've been up all night."

"Oh, that's fine," Annie said. She looked around, somewhat puzzled, then went to fetch the corn flakes from a cabinet.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" Smith pushed back his chair.



Oh, no, that's all right," she said, "I'll just have orange juice."

"Okay." He settled back down.

Sandy looked at his watch. "I'll have to call in sick today and then get some sleep," he said.

Smith nodded. "Me, too," he said.

"I'd better be getting home." Sandy pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Hey, wait," Smith said. "What about the others? We're going to kill them, right?"

"Yeah, of course," Sandy agreed.

"When?" Smith asked. "I mean, they seem less active in daylight; shouldn't we go at it right now?" He waved at the sunlight pouring in through the kitchen window; the clouds had broken up not long after the three men had fled the Samaan house, and the day outside was bright, the sky blue.

Sandy looked at Smith for a moment before replying.

"Look, Smith," he said, "It's been a long fuckin' night, you know? I'm tired. My hand hurts. My jaw hurts. My chest hurts where I got burns. My shirt's tore up. I haven't had any sleep in, what, twenty-four hours, at least. I'm going to go home and get some rest, and then I'm going to come back here when I wake up, and *then* we can go after the fuckers again. You don't look that good yourself, y'know; are you really in that big a hurry to eat more of that stuff?"

Smith glanced about, and realized that Khalil, too, had stood up.

"No," Smith said, "No, I guess not. If you go to sleep now you should be up again by late afternoon, right? And you'll come back here and we'll still have a couple of hours of full daylight, right?"

"Right," Sandy said, slapping him on the shoulder. "And Smith, get some sleep yourself, okay? You look like hell."

"Yeah, sure," Smith agreed.

Annie had listened to this without comment as she filled a bowl with cornflakes, sugar, and milk, and poured a large glass of juice. Now she looked up and said, "Sleep well, Mr. Niklasen, and you, too, Mr. Saad, and you're welcome back whenever you like, until you get this all taken care of."

"Thanks, Annie," Sandy said as he left.

"Thank you, Mrs. McGowan," Khalil said as he followed.

Smith stared down at his almost-empty cup.

"Will you be going, too, Mr. Smith?" Annie asked.

"No hurry," he said. He picked up the cup.



his hand shook.

“Mr. Smith, you’re exhausted, aren’t you?” Annie asked.

He nodded. “I suppose I am,” he said. “I haven’t been getting much sleep lately. One of those things was after me for five nights running, and I haven’t made up for it yet.”

“Are you sure you can drive yourself home safely?”

“Not going home,” Smith told her. “They’re there. I’ve been staying in a motel.”

“Oh, well, that’s no good!” Annie said. “Listen, I have a perfectly good guest room upstairs, and nobody’s using it, since you put poor Maggie on the couch; you go on up and get yourself some sleep! It’s the door on the right at the top of the stairs, next to the bathroom. You go on!”

He looked at her gratefully. “Ms. McGowan, I’d love to, but all my stuff is back at the motel...”

“Well, fooley, so what? They aren’t going to throw it out just because you’re out for the day! You can go get it later. For now you just go right upstairs and get some sleep!”

“Uh ... I need to call in sick at work, too, and there won’t be anyone there until nine...”

“Oh, don’t *worry* about it! Just sleep! Mr. Niklasen was right, you *do* look awful!”

He nodded, and got unsteadily to his feet.

“On the right?” he said.

“On the right,” she confirmed, “right next to the bathroom.”

The room was pink and lacy and the bed was fluffy and cool, and he barely managed to get his shoes off.

2.

When he awoke it took him a long moment to remember where he was.

The blinds were drawn and the room was dim, all faded pink and soft grey shadows. He lay atop a high four-poster, on a quilted pink comforter, still in his sweat-stained, soiled, and stinking clothes. Around the edges of old-fashioned roller shades light seeped in through layered pink gauze curtains, but failed to really illuminate the room.

The furniture was imitation French Empire, in cream and gilt, while the throw rugs and lampshades and upholstery were dusty rose. A chair stood in each corner, a nightstand on either side of the bed, a vanity table with a triple mirror against one wall.

He sat up, and realized that he felt better than he had in days. He remembered the morning’s discussion around Annie’s breakfast table, and he wondered how long he had slept.

He was still wearing his watch; he looked at it, and saw 5:40.



nat was *late*. He'd slept the whole day away!

He swung his feet off the bed and stood up, and it seemed as if he had those feet planted more firmly than he had in days. A good long sleep, without interruption, had been what he needed.

A shower and a shave and a change of clothes wouldn't hurt, either, he thought, as he felt his shirt stick to his back.

He wasn't going to get any of those here, though; his clothes and razor were back at the motel, or in his apartment, and he didn't want to take a shower and then put the same smelly old clothes back on again.

He wandered out into the hallway and looked down the stairs.

He saw no one, but he thought he heard someone moving quietly about.

"Hello," he called, "Anybody home?"

A moment later Annie's head appeared in the archway to the living room.

"Hello, Mr. Smith," she called. "Feeling any better?"

He nodded. "Much better, thanks." He started down the stairs.

"I was just trying to decide what to do about dinner," she said. "I had thought that Mr. Niklasen and Mr. Saad might be here by now, and I didn't know if they'd have eaten or not — and of course, I didn't know when you'd be waking up."

Smith's stomach growled. "I don't know about dinner," he said, "I mean, I don't want to put you to any trouble, but I could use something to eat."

"Oh, it's no trouble," Annie said, hurrying into the kitchen. "I'll just make something for the two of us, and if anyone else turns up ... well, I'll worry about that if it happens."

Smith knew that the polite thing to do would be to protest further, but his stomach let him know that it wasn't interested in being polite. "Is there anything I can help with?" he asked.

"Oh, you might start the coffee, if you'll want any — I'll be having tea." Annie was bustling about, closing the oven door and turning knobs, throwing something green in a saucepan and plopping it onto the stove.

"Where's Maggie?" Smith asked, as he located the coffeemaker.

While he looked about for the coffee, Annie said, "Oh, she went home first thing this morning."

"Ah," Smith said. "Where's the coffee?"

Annie pointed to the cabinet directly above the coffeemaker; he opened it, and a packet of coffee filters fell out onto the counter, revealing a can of Folger's.

The doorbell chimed.



"I'll get it," Annie said, hurrying past him.

Smith busied himself with the coffeemaker, but looked up a moment later to see Khalil and Sandy standing in the hallway. They both wore fresh clothes, reminding him that he did not. Sandy was looking about as if he had never seen the place before.

Smith slid the coffeepot into place and ambled toward the hall.

"I just now started dinner cooking," Annie was saying as he approached, "And I can throw a couple more in the oven if you like."

"That's all right," Sandy said, "I already ate."

"And you, Mr. Saad?"

"I would be pleased to eat with you," Khalil replied.

"Well, that's fine, then. It's nothing fancy, just chicken filets, from a frozen package, you know, I didn't make it myself. Let me put another in the oven." She marched into the kitchen, past Smith, and headed for the freezer.

"Hi," Smith said to the two new arrivals. "I thought you'd be here sooner than this."

"I thought so, too," Khalil said. "Sandy said this morning he would come and fetch me, so I waited, but he did not come. So I went and fetched *him*, and here we are."

Startled, Smith looked at Sandy.

"I forgot," Sandy said defensively, "All right? I overslept and I forgot. We're here now, right? So what does it matter?"

Smith shrugged. "It doesn't matter," he said, "You're right. So what's on for tonight?"

"I don't know," Sandy said.

"Are we going back for the other two at the Samaan house?" Smith asked.

Then Sandy's reply penetrated, and he looked at Sandy more closely.

Up until now, Sandy had always known what he was doing, even when it was entirely the wrong thing. Forgetfulness and oversleeping seemed out of character.

"Are you feeling okay, Sandy?" Smith asked.

"Sure," Sandy said, "I'm fine."

Smith's uneasiness was not allayed.

Sandy had been bitten by the things twice — or actually, by the same one twice, in two separate fights, once on the hand and once inside his mouth. In the discussion after they had killed the creature, Sandy



ad said it felt as if it had sunk a row of huge needles into the bottom of his mouth, in the soft part just below the gums; the three men had theorized that the things had extensible fangs that gave them a firm grip on their victims while they did whatever it was they did that allowed them to eat their way in.

Did they have some sort of venom, perhaps? Was Sandy poisoned?

Or worse?

Smith was still in the kitchen; he glanced around casually.

Annie was stirring the pot of vegetables on the stove, paying no attention to her guests just now. To her left was the refrigerator, to her right the countertop and double sink. To the right of the sink was what he wanted — a rack of carving knives.

“Scuse me a minute,” he said to Sandy.

He strolled around the kitchen table the long way, to the counter by the sink.

“Can I help you with anything, Ms. McGowan?” he asked.

She looked up. “Oh, no, I’m doing fine, thanks. You fellows make your plans.”

“All right. Thanks.” He strolled back, and casually pulled a knife from the rack as he walked past.

It was a good knife, a bread knife with a walnut handle and a serrated stainless steel blade.

Sandy and Khalil had gone on into the living room. Sandy had settled on the couch, while Khalil stood by the window, looking out at the garden. The sky was clouding over, Smith noticed. He held the knife casually in one hand, as if he had forgotten it was there.

“How’s your hand, Sandy?” he asked.

“My hand? It’s fine,” Sandy said.

“Let’s see,” Smith said.

“Hey, it’s fine, so fuck off, okay?”

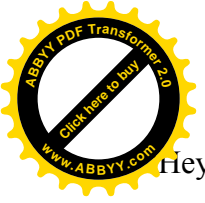
That was almost the first thing Sandy had said this evening that was in character, but by now Smith was seriously worried.

“Khalil,” he said.

Khalil looked at him, then looked at Sandy, sitting on the couch. He tensed.

Smith lifted the knife.

“Let’s see the hand, Sandy,” he said.



“Hey, fuck yourself, Smith, my hand’s fine!”

“Then let me see it, Sandy. What’s the big deal?”

“What’s that knife for, asshole? *That’s* the big deal. You gone nuts, planning to cut off my fingers?”

Sandy’s attention was focused on Smith and the bread knife; he was caught by surprise when Khalil grabbed his arm and lifted it.

“The scars are there,” Khalil reported.

“Just scars?” Smith asked.

Khalil nodded.

“Hey, I told you it was fine!” Sandy insisted. “Christ, so I heal fast. What the hell is wrong with you, anyway, Smith?”

“Hold him still,” Smith said, approaching carefully, the knife raised.

Khalil looked very worried, but he held the arm where it was.

“Khalil, look,” Smith said. He reached out, wincing, and pricked the middle finger of his own left hand on the tip of the knife.

A red drop of blood appeared and dribbled down the blade.

Khalil nodded, and his worried look faded somewhat. He turned his full attention to Sandy.

Smith hesitated. It was Sandy who had him worried, but what if Khalil, too, was tainted?

He had to risk it.

“Now you, Sandy,” he said. “Just a drop of blood.” He wiped the knife on his shirt — the garment was already hopelessly damaged and dirty — and took another step toward Sandy.

Sandy suddenly began struggling, and Khalil forced him back down, shifted his hold. The two wrestled briefly, and although Sandy was the larger man, when it was over Khalil had Sandy in a full Nelson.

Smith took Sandy’s hand and pricked the finger.

No blood appeared.

He pressed harder.

Sandy struggled again, but no blood came.

Smith shifted his aim, and drew a cut down Sandy’s upper arm.



he knife left a white line; no red.

Smith cut more deeply, and the skin parted to reveal ropy grey flesh beneath. Khalil stared.

Smith stepped back. He glanced uneasily at Khalil, but then focused on Sandy once again.

“We know how to kill you,” he said. “And we *should* kill you. You murdered our friend, the man whose skin you’re wearing.”

The Sandy thing just stared at him.

Smith needed time to think of what to do next. He couldn’t bring himself to just fling himself on the thing, cut open its chest and eat its heart out, here on Annie McGowan’s couch.

At least, not yet.

“Ms. McGowan,” he called, never taking his eyes off the creature, “Could you come in here, please? And bring a sharp knife, a paring knife would be fine.”

Annie answered, “What?”

Smith repeated his instructions, and added, “And lock the front door on your way, please.”

A moment later he heard her bustling into the room behind him. He didn’t turn.

“Give the knife to Khalil,” he said.

Clearly puzzled, Annie obeyed.

Khalil accepted the knife uncertainly.

“Let me see your blood,” Smith said. He leaned forward so that the tip of the bread knife was resting lightly on the false Sandy’s chest.

Comprehension dawned; Khalil loosened his hold on the creature enough that he could use the knife to prick his finger.

Blood welled up immediately, thick, red, human blood.

Smith relaxed.

“Forgive me,” Khalil said, “but Mrs. McGowan?” He made a small questioning gesture.

That had not occurred to Smith. He nodded. “Ms. McGowan,” he said, “I’m sorry to have to ask this, but could you draw a little blood for us? It seems to be the surest way to be certain you’re ... well, still you.”

She blinked. “I’m not sure I understand what’s going on here,” she said, but she took the knife Khalil offered her, and cut across the base of her thumb.



blood flowed freely, red and shining.

“Thank you,” Smith said. “So it’s just Sandy.”

“Here,” Khalil said.

Smith stared at him. “What?”

“It is just Sandy of the four of us here. We don’t know about elsewhere.”

Smith nodded; Khalil was right; Maggie had gone home, and the nightmare people might have gotten her there.

There was nothing they could do about it right now, though. Not if it was already too late.

But if there was still time...

“Ms. McGowan,” he said, “Would you please phone Maggie, and warn her that the nightmare people have been active again? If she can, I think she should stay with other people at all times, and to stay awake, and it might be wise to stay in well-lit places. If she wants to come here, that would be fine, but not alone — someone should walk with her.”

“All right,” Annie said. She looked at the false Sandy, at the knife at his chest, and hurried to the kitchen.

3.

“Now,” Smith said to the imitation Sandy Niklasen, “What are we going to do with you?”

The creature didn’t reply. It watched Smith warily.

“You probably think,” Smith told it, “that we’re going to kill you, that we’re going to cut you open and eat your stinking black heart. And you may be right. On the other hand...”

He paused for dramatic effect, but the thing just stared at him. It still looked exactly like Sandy; except for the cut on its arm, its disguise was perfect.

“On the other hand,” Smith said, “If you tell us everything we want to know about your kind, maybe we can make a deal — you leave us alone, we let you go. What do you think, hey?” Khalil, where the thing couldn’t see him, shook his head angrily.

“I think you guys are nuts,” it said. “You think I’m one of *them*? Hey, I’m Sandy Niklasen; I helped you *kill* one of them last night!”

Smith shook his head. “No,” he said, “You aren’t. Sandy’s dead. You ate him, and now you’re wearing his skin. We know it, and you know it, and there’s no point in denying it.” He flicked the knife aside for an instant to point at the exposed flesh of the thing’s arm, then quickly pressed the tip back against its chest, a little harder than before.

The steel blade cut into Sandy’s shirt a little. The individual threads seemed to slide up the blade one by



ne, stretching until they parted.

The thing stared up at Smith for a moment, then it flashed a quick, silvery grin.

“All right,” he said, “You’ve got me. I want to live, same as anybody; I’ll deal. What do I have to do?”

Smith looked up at Khalil, who looked back. Both of them could hear Annie McGowan’s voice in the kitchen, too low to make out the words, as she spoke to Maggie on the phone.

“What *are* you?” Smith asked.

The thing blinked, and its eyes flashed red for an instant before Sandy’s familiar brown returned. It shrugged. “You called us nightmare people,” it said. “That’s as good a name as any.”

“You don’t have a name for yourselves?” Smith asked.

“Nope,” the thing said. “Why should we? We knew that sooner or later, your kind would give us one.”

Smith hesitated, and then demanded, “Where did you come from?”

“Nowhere. Or everywhere. We didn’t come from anywhere so much as we just *happened*.” The voice was still Sandy’s, but something had crept into it, a coldness that hadn’t been there before.

“What are you talking about?” Smith asked, uneasily. The knife sank a little deeper, indenting Sandy’s stolen skin.

“We *happened*,” the creature insisted. “We didn’t come from anywhere. When Lammas Night came with the new moon, at 3:00 a.m., we were just *there*, at the Bedford Mills apartments.”

“What is Lammas Night?” Khalil asked, before Smith had phrased his next question.

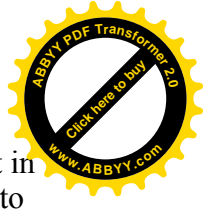
“The night of August first,” the thing said. “And the early morning of August second. It’s one of the four nights of the year when the old, dark powers are strongest, the powers that you people say you don’t believe in any more — the powers you hid from as children, the ones that put monsters in your closets, the powers you deny now even when they put those same monsters in your streets and parks, with knives and guns instead of claws and teeth.” It shifted, and smiled again, showing silver teeth. “You all know Hallowe’en, and some of you remember Walpurgisnacht, or Beltane, and your very awareness of them weakens them. But that left us Candlemas and Lammas — and here we are.”

“Why 3:00 a.m.?” Smith asked, trying to inject a little sarcasm. “Isn’t midnight traditional?”

The creature shook its head. “Not any more. Before the electric light, midnight was the darkest hour, when sanity was weakest and evil could walk free, but nowadays you people are scarcely in bed then, what with the eleven o’clock news. No, it’s 3:00 a.m. when the spirit fails, when the darkness is deepest and hope furthest away. That’s the hour for suicides, the time of despair, when the day past is gone and the sunrise still impossibly far ahead.”

“You sound like you’re enjoying this,” Smith muttered, annoyed.

“Oh, I *am*!” the thing said, smiling. “Don’t you see? Isn’t it obvious? You people, you humans, you’re



my natural prey, my targets, my enemies; my kind is destined to destroy yours, to devour you — but in secret. Always in secret. And where's the fun in that? Hey, I like to gloat as much as you do; I want to brag. I want to let you poor creatures know something of what you're up against, so you'll see how hopeless it is. I want to see you scared. I want to see you suffer, see you worry. I enjoy seeing you frightened." It paused, grinning.

"Ordinarily, I couldn't tell anyone," it said. "That would be too dangerous. But you've forced me to speak; my sibs can't hold it against me, even if you let me live. And of course, you're already marked anyway. You won't live to tell anyone."

"You sound like a bad movie villain, gloating over his captives and giving the hero time to arrive," Smith said.

The thing's grin widened. "Ah, but isn't there some truth in that cliché gloating, however foolish it might seem to take the risk? And what if, instead, I'm distracting you while my own reinforcements arrive?"

Khalil glanced around at the windows and the front door, then back at the thing on the couch.

"If that's the case," Smith said, "then you're a fool to tell us."

"Only if you believe me," it said, "But you don't, do you? You don't think I'd be that foolish — or that clever."

Smith stared at it, baffled.

"Maybe we should just kill you after all," he said. "Just in case." The knife sank a little deeper, and Sandy's skin gave, allowing it passage into the hard grey flesh beneath. Smith licked his lips and swallowed.

The grin vanished.

"No," it said. "Don't do that. I'll tell you what you want to know. There's no one else coming yet; they don't know you saw through my disguise. I'm supposed to get you to separate, after dark, so we can get you one by one."

The pressure on the knife lessened.

"Talk," Smith said. "Don't wait for questions, and don't try and scare us with any stories about boogey-men in the closet. Just tell us what the hell is going on."

"But you already know most of it," the thing said.

"Tell us anyway," Smith demanded.

Annie was standing in the doorway. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Smith didn't take his eyes off the thing. "We're questioning it," he said.

"It looks like you're *torturing* it," she said.



Smith just shrugged.

“What about Maggie?” he asked.

“She says she’s all right, but she’s scared,” Annie reported. “She’s going to work in a few minutes — I caught her just as she was leaving, she’s already late — so she’ll be out in public for the rest of the evening, and she’s asking her father to come and pick her up after she gets off for the night.”

Smith looked up at Khalil, who looked back.

“Well,” Smith said, “I hope she’s okay. I don’t know what we can do about it.”

Khalil shrugged.

Smith glanced at Annie, who was still standing there, looking disapproving.

“Ms. McGowan,” he said, “have a seat. I’m afraid this will take awhile; we’ll have to hold off on eating dinner for now.”

She frowned, and said, “I’ll wait in the kitchen, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine,” Smith said. “Go ahead and eat if you like, you don’t need to wait for us. Besides,” he said, as he turned his attention back to the Sandy thing, “I may be eating in here.”

The thing sneered.

Smith smiled back. “All right,” he said. “Talk.”

It talked.

4.

“You people think you’re so smart, with your science and your religion, you think you know all about space and time and what’s real and what isn’t,” the nightmare person said. “Well, you don’t. You don’t know shit. You worry about atoms and quarks and gods and devils, or about car payments and income tax and cocaine, and you don’t even know what death really is.”

“And I suppose you do?” Smith said.

“More than you,” it answered.

Smith didn’t reply.

A moment later, the thing went on, “There’s real evil in the world, you know. *Real* evil. Not just disease or accidents or bad luck, but evil, a force that *wants* you people to suffer and die and rot away, that wants to see you all destroyed, that wants to see everything you’ve done perverted and debased and ruined, and then blotted out — everything that any of you ever did, ever fought for or loved, wiped away. That’s what it wants — what *we* want. Some of you call the true evil the devil, but that’s wrong — your idea of the devil is so fucking wimpy and anthropocentric it doesn’t even begin to reflect the truth. You don’t have any words that do it justice. You don’t have any words that fit it at all, but the one



— evil.

“There’s a real, tangible evil in the world, a supernatural force that’s basic to the universe, indestructible and omnipresent. It manifests itself wherever life exists, taking its form in part from whatever life it finds.

“It touches you sometimes, some of you more than others — or maybe *you* touch *it*, because you feed it, all of you, there’s evil in all of you, lurking down there in the darkness. It’s something that evolved in you, and in some of the other natural species on this planet — and on other planets, too, but the part of it here, the part I’m talking about, it can’t reach that far. It’s part of this world, part of *your* world. And it *wants* you. It wants you, and it’s going to get you, consume you.

“And it’s not satisfied with just touching you every so often, so that you destroy each other and yourselves. A few suicides, murders, wars, that’s not enough. It’s insatiable. It wants you *all*, it wants you to die horribly, it wants to devour you, absorb you, make you all part of itself.

“So when the touches aren’t enough, when it can’t find another Ted Bundy or Adolf Hitler, it makes tools for itself, living tools.

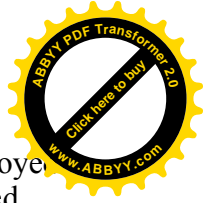
“I don’t want you to think, though, that it’s intelligent, that it thinks the way you people do, with your fragile little egos and half-assed schemes. It’s beyond that. It’s a force of nature — of a part of nature you people call supernatural. It’s not an entity, it’s nothing you have a word for, but it has this drive to hurt you, and every so often that manifests itself in a new way.

“It doesn’t design these things; they *evolve*, they just happen, from random chance guided by what survives, what works, in supernatural selection. The competition isn’t here, in your reality, it’s somewhere else, and only the survivors, only the fittest, ever break through and become real.

“You’ve always had them. On Earth, you’ve called them demons and monsters. It’s manifested itself as lamia, witches, demons, vampires, werewolves, all of them — but only one form at a time, in our own supernatural evolution. Each species appeared spontaneously, bred and flourished after its fashion, and was in time wiped out by humanity as its secrets were learned and the initial fear conquered. Each was appropriate to the time in which it appeared, and each one has eventually failed, it’s been destroyed, wiped out, and then, when time has passed, another has appeared, stronger and fitter, to fill that same niche in the ecology — to be the new predator that preys on humanity. The Romans destroyed the lamiae, and you thought they were just a myth. The Saxons wiped out the fay, the elven, and you turned them into a mere fairy tale.

“Each time, though, the evil came back in a new and more frightening form, one that was harder to destroy. In the Middle Ages there were witches, who could only die three ways — burning, drowning, or by snapping the neck. Then werewolves, that could be slain only by silver. And in 1639 the vampires came, and they had several strange weaknesses, but what they gave up in their susceptibility to sunlight and cross and holy water, their deathlike daytime trances, they thought they had gained back in their powers — mesmerism, and the transformations, and the vast physical strength, and the immunity to all normal weapons.

“At first the vampires, those night-stalkers, were terrifying and unstoppable, but in time people learned the defenses — the cross, garlic, running water, the stake, sunlight, *all* of them. The vampires took their nature from human beliefs — fear of the dark made them nocturnal, Christian superstition made them susceptible to the cross and holy water, and so forth.



They were powerful, but they were vulnerable, and once the knowledge of how they could be destroyed became common knowledge they were doomed. It took three hundred years, but your people stamped them out. At the end, they were helpless and hunted, just a handful of survivors hiding in corners, and the last one took refuge in Hollywood fantasies, pretending to be an actress playing vamps and vampires — but it did her no good when she was found drinking the blood she needed from the husband of a jealous wife.

“So the last vampire was impaled and beheaded in California in 1939, and after a fifty-year hiatus the heart of evil has spewed forth its new spawn. In that fifty-year period, and the long period before it when vampires were rare, hunted creatures, you people forgot that such things had ever been real.

“But they *were* real, and they *are* real.

“For fifty years there was nothing, but the forces of evil were not silent, were not still; our evolution was at work.

“And here we are, twelve dozen of us to start, and we don’t have the vampire’s weaknesses. We don’t sleep by day; we don’t sleep at all. A stake through the heart won’t kill us. We don’t have the strength of ten, nor can we turn to bats or mist — but we have our strengths, our secrets.

“And you don’t know what they are.

“Nobody knows anything about us, about what you call nightmare people. Nobody believes in us, nobody knows what our equivalents of cross, wooden stake, and sunlight are.”

5.

Smith blinked.

“But you’re wrong,” he said. “We know how to kill you.”

“Only the four of you,” the creature said. “And there’s plenty you don’t know.”

“We’ll learn,” Smith said grimly.

“You can *try*,” the thing said, “but I doubt you’ll live that long.”

“Is that a threat?”

The thing just grinned at him.

Smith pushed the knife a little deeper, and the grin vanished.

“So when we let you go,” he asked, “What are you going to do?”

The creature shrugged.

“Are you going to go on pretending to be Sandy Niklasen? Living a mockery of his life, the way those things over at Bedford Mills are going through the motions, pretending to be the people they ate?”



“Probably not,” it said. “You’ve torn up this skin some, after all. It’s not going to heal up.”

Khalil’s grip on the thing tightened suddenly. Smith’s eyes narrowed.

“You mean you’ll kill somebody else, and wear his skin? Or hers?”

“Hey!” it said, and suddenly the voice wasn’t Sandy’s at all any more, it was Bill Goodwin’s. “Lighten up!”

“*Is that what you meant?*” Smith demanded through clenched teeth, and the knife cut down more deeply, pulling down through the grey flesh, opening a slit in the shirt and the skin beneath. Behind him, Annie gasped.

“Yes, it’s what I meant!” the creature snarled, still in Goodwin’s voice. “Of course it’s what I meant! I can’t go out in the sun without a human skin to protect me — it burns, it’s like needles, like acid. And I can’t even go out at night unless I hide every time a human happens along — you know what I really look like! Bad enough that this skin doesn’t *fit*, it binds and itches, but it’s better than nothing, and now you’ve gone and cut it open, so of *course* I’ll get another. Idiot!”

“You mean if we let you go, you’ll murder some other innocent person, just so you won’t have to worry about sunburn.”

“*If?* We had a deal, Smith!”

“*Fuck* our deal, monster!” Smith replied. “I’m not going to let you go out and kill someone for his skin!” The knife drove in clear to the hilt, and everyone in the room heard upholstery tear as the blade came out the nightmare thing’s back and cut into the cushions beneath.

The thing surged upward, pulling Khalil forward, and its arms swung forward around Smith’s neck. Gleaming black fingernails, inches long, thrust out through the tips of the fingers, shredding Sandy’s skin and digging into Smith’s back as Smith dove down into the thing’s chest.

Smith worked the knife with both hands, ignoring the pain in his back, ignoring the stink that rose up around him, ignoring the squirming, sawing it through the stubborn gray flesh until he found what he was looking for, the black slug-shaped heart.

He cut around it and pulled it free, and the thing gasped.

He put it to his mouth and set his teeth on it.

The thing let out a low, keening wail. Its claws stopped digging into him.

“Wait, Smith,” it said, “Wait, please, I’ll do anything.”

Smith looked at its face.

Smith looked at Sandy’s stolen face.

It still looked exactly like Sandy, and its features were twisted in an expression of abject terror — an expression that Smith was sure the real Sandy never wore in his life. Its eyes, still falsely brown, were



reading.

The heart he held was pulsing faintly, and a thin, clear slime was oozing from it, making it slippery and hard to hold. He set his teeth in more firmly.

“Please, Smith!” it said.

He opened his mouth, still holding the heart in both hands. He looked down at the thing’s chest.

The opening had healed over, but a concavity revealed the heart’s absence. Sandy’s shirt and the skin of Sandy’s chest were ripped back, torn open like the foil and skin on a baked potato.

“You killed Sandy,” Smith said.

The thing nodded.

“And Bill Goodwin?” Smith asked.

It nodded again.

“And Elias’s mother?”

Another nod.

“And if I let you go, you’ll kill someone else, won’t you?”

“No!” it said, pleading, “No, I swear, I won’t! I’ll stay inside, I’ll let the others take care of me, *please!*”

“You were the one we burned?” Smith asked.

It nodded again. Its fingers twitched, as if it wanted to grab its heart but didn’t dare.

“There are a hundred and forty-three of you? That’s all? Or are there others, in other towns?”

“Just us. A hundred and forty-three. That’s all so far.”

“*So far?*”

It nodded.

“You mean there might be more someday?” Smith asked. “More are going to just appear?”

It shook its head. “No, there’s only one first appearance, but we’ll breed, of course.”

“You will?”

It nodded.

“How? Like people? Like vampires?”



It shook its head. “Neither,” it said. “We have our own way.”

The depression in its chest seemed to be growing, deepening.

“Give it back!” it wailed, looking down at itself.

Smith lifted the heart higher, further from the thing’s body. “How do you breed?” he asked.

“Give it back!”

“How do you breed?”

“Larvae,” it said, “Larvae that grow inside your people. Give it back!”

“Larvae?” Smith looked from the creature’s face to the black object he held. He had thought of it as the thing’s heart, but now he reconsidered. “Like this?”

The nightmare creature nodded. “Sort of like that,” it said, “It splits, and half of it stays with the parent, and the other half goes down someone’s throat and then eats its way out to the skin as it grows.”

Smith looked at what he held with sudden revulsion, and almost dropped it. Khalil’s face twisted with disgust, and they could hear Annie retch.

“You mean if I swallowed this, it could eat *me*?”

“No,” the thing said, “Not ... I mean, yeah, it could, you’d better give it back...”

Khalil jerked the thing’s head back.

“You’re a lousy liar,” Smith said. He lifted the black lump to his mouth.

“No, no, don’t!” the creature begged. “It ... I’ll tell you!”

“Talk,” Smith said.

“At the full moon,” it said. “And the larvae has to be intact. It’s vulnerable, it’s not like an adult. But every full moon, we can spawn, and it takes two weeks, until the new moon, for the new person to grow into its skin.”

Smith lowered the thing again. “You mean that in a few weeks, there will be more of you?”

It nodded. “Yes,” it said.

“How many?” Smith asked.

“We can all reproduce each month, if we ... if we’ve eaten someone, and of course all of us, we each got someone when we first appeared, all but the one who was supposed to get you, and he got someone later...”



Who?” Smith interrupted. “Who’d he get?”

“Joe Samaan — Elias’s father.”

Smith and Khalil glanced at each other.

“So that’s why he stopped bothering me,” Smith muttered. Then he looked back at the nightmare person. “Go on,” he said, “You were going to tell me how many of you there will be.”

“Well, we can all reproduce, so we’ll double — from one forty-three to two eighty-six.”

Smith shook his head.

“No,” he said, “Not two eighty-six.” He lifted the black mass, trying to ignore the increasing flow of slime. “Two eighty-four, at most.”

He took a bite.

The thing screamed.

Smith had trouble choking the stuff down, but he eventually managed it all, despite the slime and the stink.

The screaming lasted for twenty minutes.

Chapter Ten:

*Wednesday, August 9th;
Thursday, August 10th*

1.

“The sixteenth,” Smith said, looking at the calendar. “It’ll be full on the sixteenth.”

“Today is the ninth, yes?” Khalil asked.

“Yes.”

“Then we have one week.”

Smith nodded.

Khalil shook his head. “In one week, we cannot kill a hundred and forty-two. Our stomachs would not take it.”

Smith managed a sickly grin. He was sitting up in bed after a long night of nausea. “You’re telling me,” he said.

“We do not even know where all of them are,” Khalil pointed out. “I do not believe that they have all



remained in the apartments.”

“I know,” Smith agreed. “At the very least, there’s the one that wanted me, that got Elias’s father. I don’t know if it’s still in the same skin, or if it moved on into someone else.”

Khalil nodded.

Annie stuck her head in the bedroom door. “How are you feeling, Mr. Smith?” she asked.

“Much better, Ms. McGowan, thanks.”

“Oh, call me Annie,” she said. “After all, if you’re going to be staying here...” She didn’t finish the sentence.

“And you can call me Ed, if you like,” Smith said.

She shook her head. “I’ll try,” she said, “but you don’t *look* like an Ed.” She stepped into the room and looked around.

“All these computers!” she marvelled.

“It’s just two computers, really,” Smith explained. “It’s just that the Deskpro isn’t assembled yet.”

“Oh,” she said, staring at the clutter he and Khalil had strewn throughout her spotless guest room.

Khalil had done most of the work; Smith had been too sick. They had gotten everything from his car and motel room and brought it all to Annie McGowan’s guest room.

Smith had paid the bill at the Red Roof Inn, and had not been at all happy to see the total he put on his MasterCard.

They had made no attempt to collect anything from his old apartment. From Khalil’s apartment they had retrieved only two changes of clothing, some toiletries, and two switchblades. Khalil kept one; Smith borrowed the other.

“What about the couch?” Smith asked, hoping to distract Annie from her unwanted new housemates.

She frowned, and Smith realized he was only making it worse.

“That stuff doesn’t seem to come out,” she said, “And of course there are all the tears in the cushions...”

“Ruined, huh?” Smith asked sympathetically. “Don’t worry, Annie, we’ll buy you a new one. Really. I’m really sorry about it all.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault,” she said, waving the matter away.

“I know,” Smith said, “but we’ll buy you a new one, I promise. Hey, what time is it?”

Khalil glanced at his watch. “9:40,” he said.



Annie,” Smith said, “May I use your phone? I’ve got to call my boss, tell him I won’t be in today.”

“Of course,” she said.

2.

Einar was not pleased.

“Look, Ed,” he said into the phone, “You’ve missed a week already, and you didn’t call yesterday, and when I called your motel you weren’t there, and you weren’t at your apartment, either. And when you *were* in on Monday I think you did more damage than good. Just what’s going on? Where are you now?”

“I’m staying with friends,” Smith said. “I was sick enough that I didn’t think I should be alone. The name is McGowan, and the number is 948-8332.”

“Uh-huh,” Einar said. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“No.”

For a moment neither of them spoke; then Einar said, “Look, Ed, I don’t want to pry, but are you sure there’s nothing else? Something you aren’t telling me?”

“I’m sure,” Smith said.

Again, neither spoke. Finally Einar sighed. “Listen, Ed,” he said, “You’re a good programmer, when you’re on the job, but this isn’t college or something, and you’re not a freelancer. You’re supposed to be *here* during working hours, *working*. If you’re not back on the job tomorrow, I want to hear that you’re sick from a *doctor*, not just from you, and I want you to be somewhere I can get hold of you.”

“Sure, Einar, I understand. Did you get the number here?”

“No. Give it to me again.”

Smith gave it to him again.

“All right, I’ve got it,” Einar said. “Do you think you might come in this afternoon? Will you be in tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, Einar. Really, I just don’t know. I’ve been throwing up all night, and I’m not sure I’m over it.”

“Uh-huh. All right, Ed, but remember, I warned you.”

He hung up.

Smith grimaced, and hung up as well.

“I think I’m about to lose my job,” he told Khalil.



“Seriously?” Khalil asked.

Smith shrugged. “I don’t know. Hey, don’t worry about it; it wasn’t that great a job to begin with. I’ve got some money, I’ll be okay for a couple of months if I’m careful. Besides, if we don’t kill those things off, I think I’m going to want to get the heck out of this part of the country.”

Khalil nodded agreement.

“If they double their numbers every month, however,” he pointed out, “Soon no place will be safe.”

Smith shrugged. “That’s *if*. And if that happens, my job isn’t going to matter a whole hell of a lot, is it?”

“No,” Khalil admitted. “I am sure they will try to kill us.”

Smith blinked. “Do you think that’s what the fake Sandy was supposed to do?”

“He said so, didn’t he? That he was to send us out alone, where the others could get us?”

Smith nodded.

They sat silently for a moment.

Annie was in the living room, fussing with the ruined couch again. They could hear her bustling about.

“Maybe we should have asked that thing more questions before we killed it,” Smith said. “Like where they’ll be going next, after Diamond Park.”

Khalil shrugged. “You did not think of it.”

Smith nodded agreement. “There’s a lot I didn’t think of,” he said.

3.

“If we can’t kill them all,” Smith said, “Is there some way we can stop them from breeding?”

Nobody answered. Khalil shrugged, and Annie just looked down at her knitting, her fingers working busily.

“What if we just cut their hearts out, but didn’t eat them?” Smith suggested.

Annie dropped a stitch and frowned. Khalil tapped his fingers quietly.

“And how exactly do they breed? That one we questioned said that the larva goes down someone’s throat — how does it get there?”

“Perhaps a bite, the way it happens when one takes a new skin, but it sends only the larva down, instead of eating its own way in,” Khalil suggested.

Smith nodded. “It’s probably something like that,” he agreed. “But if that’s how it works, I don’t see



“How they can do it. People aren’t going to just let it happen, let strangers walk up and stick their heads in their mouths.”

“Wouldn’t be strangers,” Annie said, looping yarn around the needle. “All those folks over there have friends and family, don’t they?”

“I guess so, but I still don’t see...” Smith began.

“And,” Annie said, “It’s not too much to ask for a little kiss now and then, is it?”

“A kiss?” Khalil’s fingers stopped tapping the table. Smith blinked and looked over at Annie.

“That would do it, wouldn’t it?” Smith said. “At least, it would let ’em get their mouths up against the mouths of their victims.”

Annie nodded, not looking up from her work.

“I expect the one that’s pretending to be Katie may turn up and try to convince me it’s all a misunderstanding, and we should kiss and make up,” she said. “Won’t do it, though, not unless it forces me.”

Khalil and Smith stared at each other.

“I wonder,” Smith said. “Once the larva’s in there, do you think there’s any way to stop it?”

“The doctors have things that pump out stomachs, yes?”

Smith nodded. “Yeah, a stomach pump might work,” he said, “I don’t know. These aren’t normal parasites, after all; they’re supernatural.”

“There are none anywhere yet,” Khalil pointed out. “Should we not try to stop any from getting anywhere?”

“Yes,” Smith agreed, “We should. And I know which one, too — the one that got Sandy said that the one that got Elias’s father was the one that had originally been after me. I think it’s time we finished off that whole fake family over there.”

Khalil nodded.

“Will the two of us be enough, do you think?” he asked.

“We’re all we’ve got,” Smith said. “We’d better be. We’ll be catching it off-guard, I hope, and during the daylight, and there will be two of us to the one of it — we managed okay with the fake Sandy.”

Khalil nodded again. “We go now, then?”

“Yes,” Smith said, “We go now.” He stood up.

Khalil rose as well.



Oh, one thing,” Smith said, pausing. “This time, Khalil, *you* eat it.”

4.

Breaking into a locked house in broad daylight was a new experience for Smith, but with his crowbar it wasn't particularly difficult. The back door of the Samaan house gave way easily.

He just hoped none of the neighbors had noticed anything.

Most of them were probably at work, he figured, or otherwise out for the day — it was late morning, almost eleven. And the others would probably be sitting inside, watching TV. The weather was beautiful, sunny and pleasantly cool — but who noticed that on a weekday morning?

And in August, people might not *want* to be out when it was this cool.

Despite the temperature, forcing the door had been enough to work up a little sweat. Smith stepped inside, with Khalil at his heels.

They were in the living room, where they had fled after burning the skin off the false Hanna Samaan, and it appeared that no one had bothered to move a thing since then. A few spatters of dried blood, Sandy's blood, still spotted the carpet in an uneven line from the foyer to the deck; black flakes of ash were scattered everywhere, and the room stank of lighter fluid and smoke.

It felt deserted.

Smith tried to ignore that feeling; after all, the nightmare people weren't human. They wouldn't necessarily be tidy housekeepers. They were kin to vampires, which had traditionally dwelt in ruins and decay.

Even so, the air in this house felt undisturbed and empty. It wasn't just the ash or the blood or the smell, but something subtle and undefineable.

Khalil carefully slid the door closed, and then drew the heavy carving knife from his belt. Smith equally carefully placed the crowbar on the floor and drew his own blade.

They stepped forward, watching all sides. Staying together, they crossed to the foyer.

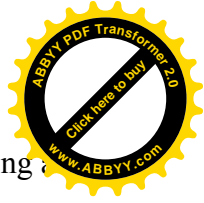
The ash was thicker here, and scorched remnants of Hanna Samaan's housedress lay on the tile floor. One blue terrycloth slipper leaned against a wall; there was no sign of its mate.

Smith backed up into the living room, then led the way into the kitchen.

It was as deserted as the living room. Likewise the dining room and the den and the powder room.

Then it was Khalil's turn to lead, up the stairs and through all the three bedrooms and the two bathrooms, and into the long, narrow walk-in closet over the garage.

One room was clearly Elias's, equipped with a cheap component stereo and racks of unsorted tapes and records. A Pauli Girl beer poster adorned the closet door; a shelf over the bed held a dozen paperbacks by Stephen King and Robert Heinlein, and a larger volume entitled *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of*



ulm, by Michael Weldon. The bed itself was unmade, and a line of cookie crumbs had collected along the crease in the bottom sheet. An old roll-top desk was awash in papers, notebooks, and junk, with a Batman comic book on top. Three pairs of jeans were on the floor.

Also on the floor was a blackened, stinking bundle that upon investigation was discovered to be the clothes the false Elias had been wearing when Smith, Sandy, and Khalil had cut it open and eaten its heart. The skin itself was gone.

Smith looked up from where he squatted over the clothes. “What happened to Mary’s skin?” he asked. “Sandy had it over at Annie’s house, that night — what happened to it?”

Khalil shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Sandy had it. Why does it matter?”

“Because that would be hard evidence to show the police that there’s something strange going on, at the very least.”

“Perhaps that is why the thing chose Sandy as its victim yesterday, then.”

Smith nodded. “I was thinking that,” he said.

“We have Sandy’s skin,” Khalil pointed out.

That was true. After cleaning up the couch they had left the skin in Annie’s basement, soaking in the laundry room sink to get off the rest of the slime.

“It’s kind of torn up, though,” Smith said.

Khalil shrugged. “Mary’s was torn up, too,” he said.

Smith nodded and stood up. “Come on,” he said.

They moved on.

Things were neater in the adjoining bathroom, save that the cap was off the toothpaste.

The second bedroom was the guest room. The bed was made, and covered with an old country quilt. A shelf of knicknacks hung between the two windows. Everything was exactly where it belonged. The shades were drawn, and a thin layer of dust covered everything.

The master bedroom was much larger, and somewhere between the artificial and dusty perfection of the guest room and the adolescent chaos of Elias’s room. The dresser was cluttered with cosmetics, including the biggest bottle of Vaseline Intensive Care lotion that Smith had ever seen. The bed was unmade, but the floor was clear and no crumbs could be seen.

It also smelled better than Elias’s.

It was just as deserted, though.

Only after they had checked the master bath and the oversized closet did Smith notice the note on the dresser mirror. A page from a yellow legal pad had been slipped into the crack between the mirror and



s frame.

He leaned over and read it.

“You didn’t really think I was stupid enough to stay here after you got the other two, did you?” he read.

It was signed, “Joe Samaan 2nd.”

Smith ripped it from the mirror and was about to tear it up, when he realized there was more writing on the back. He turned it over.

“Ed Smith: You’ve really made my life difficult, you know. If you hadn’t been awake at three a.m., when you had no business being awake, I’d have gotten you that first night and it would all be over. Now I have to settle for skins I was never grown to fit, and they ITCH.”

This time there was no signature.

Smith took great satisfaction in tearing the paper into tiny bits and scattering them about the room.

5.

Exhaustion conquered frustration, and Smith slept from noon until shortly after six.

Khalil was still asleep when Smith came downstairs, and Smith didn’t disturb him.

Annie was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper and sipping tea.

“Hello,” she said. “I’d say good morning, but it’s almost time for supper.”

Smith nodded. “Yeah, hello,” he said. He sat down heavily on the nearest chair.

Annie sipped her tea.

After a moment of silence, Smith burst out, “There must be *some* way to get them all!”

Annie looked up from the paper. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “It took three hundred years to kill all the vampires, if I heard that one here correctly; why do you think you can get all the nightmare people in a week?”

“Because it’s still early,” he said, “They aren’t really established yet. And they aren’t vampires, anyway — they’re worse. If they can really double their numbers every month, they can take over the world in, I don’t know, a couple of years, probably. Say a hundred this month, two hundred the next, four hundred, eight, sixteen, thirty-two by January — three thousand two hundred, that’s half of Diamond Park. Six thousand in February, twelve thousand in March, a hundred thousand by next June, a million and a half by October of next year, six million by 1991 — Christ, we’re doomed if we don’t get them all now.”

“But they won’t really spread that fast,” Annie said. “After all, lots of things can breed at that rate — but they don’t. There are always limits, things that hold them back.”

“But these things ... oh, I don’t know.”



You don't really need to kill them all right away," she said, "Just stop them from breeding."

"Yeah, we thought of that," Smith agreed, "But how?"

"Well, if they breed by kissing, and only at the full moon, just keep them from kissing anybody then."

"Fine, but *how*?"

"Well, I don't know," Annie said, flustered. "How do they get near enough to kiss anybody in the first place?"

"They just walk up, in disguise," Smith said with disgust. "They'll get all the friends and family of their original victims, I suppose — or maybe they'll slip into bedrooms while people are asleep, the same as they did originally."

Annie sipped tea again. "What if they didn't have disguises, then? Or if nobody was asleep?"

"Sure, what if, but..." Smith's voice trailed off, and his expression turned thoughtful.

"You know," he said a moment later, "You might have something there."

"Oh?"

"I think so, yes." Smith was smiling thoughtfully.

"Would you care to explain that?" Annie asked sharply.

"Actually, Annie, no, I'd rather not," Smith replied. "I need to think about it some more."

She stared at him for a minute, then shrugged. "Have it your own way, Mr. Smith," she said. She picked up the newspaper again.

"It'll be easier if there aren't as many of them by then, of course," he said.

"Of course," Annie said, without looking up. She drank down the rest of her tea.

"I'm not about to walk back into the apartment, though, where I'd be outnumbered a hundred to one."

"Of course not."

"I'll need to get them alone, one by one."

Khalil, still looking sleepy, entered at that point. He exchanged greetings with them both.

"Annie," Smith asked, "May I use the phone?"

"Of course," she said.

"Khalil, can you be ready to leave in ten minutes?" Smith asked. "I want to use what's left of the



aylight.”

Khalil nodded.

“Thanks,” Smith said. “Where’s the phone book?”

6.

“Hi, Walt? This is Jim. You remember, from work. Look, I’m having some trouble, and I need to talk to somebody. Could you meet me at that little bar on Townsend Road in about, oh, twenty minutes?”

The voice on the phone was puzzled. “I don’t know, uh, Jim; what’s up?”

“I don’t want to talk about it on the phone, Walt. Could you please come? I’ll be at the bar.”

“Oh, what the hell, sure, I guess. Twenty minutes? The bar on Townsend Road?”

“Yeah, you know the one, Carlie’s Nightside I think it’s called.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

Smith hung up and smiled at Annie and Khalil.

The thing pretending to be Walt Harris arrived right on time, but Smith and Khalil were not waiting at the bar. They were waiting in the parking lot behind the bar, which Smith had chosen because the lot backed up to a grove of trees and was not visible from the street or any neighboring buildings.

The only problem was muffling the screams; they used Khalil’s shirt for that, and Smith got a finger jabbed by one of the needle-sharp teeth while stuffing it in.

Khalil gagged repeatedly on the foul black lump, but gamely choked it all down. It didn’t *stay* down, of course, but once the thing had stopped moving and started to dissolve, they didn’t much care. Smith stood guard while Khalil heaved it all back up onto the grass beside the parking lot.

When he was done he looked at Smith. “You ate *two* of those?” he said.

Smith nodded. “And I’m going to eat another, just as soon as we can catch one. Then it’ll be your turn again.” He grimaced. “Who knows, maybe we’ll get used to it.”

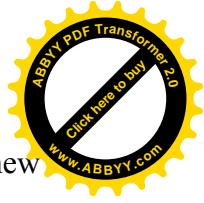
They both thought of retrieving the skin, but looking at the stinking mess that lay beneath the trees, neither one could bring himself to touch it. Nor could they afford to wait around for the remains to finish dissolving. Someone, either human or nightmare person, might happen along at any time.

“We’ll get one another time,” Smith said, leading the way to his car.

“Who is Jim, that he thought he was meeting?” Khalil asked, as they headed back toward Topaz Court.

“Nobody,” Smith said, his eyes on the road. “I made him up.”

Startled, Khalil asked, “But how...”



Their memories aren't complete," Smith explained. "It didn't *know* whether the real Walt Harris knew someone named Jim who would want to meet him like that."

"Ah," Khalil said, nodding.

A moment later he added, "But that will not work with all of them, surely."

"Surely," Smith agreed, "But it's a start."

Khalil nodded again.

7.

The next ruse was a call from a veterinarian, to come and pick up a cat's medicine. The false Attalla Sleiman knew that it had a cat in its care, and could not be sure that it was healthy; Smith's mother had been through a bout of F.U.S. with her cat, years before, so Smith was able to fake the call quite convincingly, and to plead with the creature to come and get the diuretics and antibiotics quickly, because the cat would die without them. Wednesday, he said, was the only day they had evening hours at the clinic.

Sleiman's replacement believed it; he came to the animal hospital on Longdraft Road, over in Gaithersburg, and Smith and Khalil dragged him behind the unused shed out back.

This time Smith had a Nerf ball for a gag, and used a stick to wedge it in.

It was full dark by then, and the nightmare people were stronger in the dark, so the struggle lasted for some time, but in the end numbers and the initial surprise were enough.

After that, the two of them were too battered and worn to tackle any more. They returned to Annie's house, where they washed and rested.

They stood guard that night, while Annie slept; they made plans over the kitchen table, listing every resident of the Bedford Mills Apartments that Smith knew by name, writing down every deception they could think of that might draw nightmare people out alone.

"If they start travelling in pairs, we're in trouble," Smith remarked.

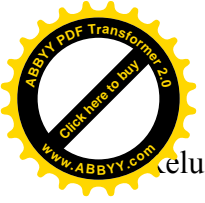
Khalil just nodded.

"Unless we recruit some more help, anyway," Smith added a moment later.

Khalil looked up.

"When we started," Khalil said, "There were four of us, even without Annie and Maggie. Now we are two."

Smith nodded. "I know," he said, "And I feel guilty about Elias and Sandy, too. All the same, we can't do it all ourselves, not when there are a hundred and forty of them left, and they probably all know who we are."



reluctantly, Khalil nodded.

8.

Einar Lindqvist fired Smith on Thursday afternoon, but Smith didn't worry about it. His job didn't seem particularly important just now.

He had other concerns.

"George," Smith said into the receiver, "I can't explain it on the phone, but it's really important. You've got to come out here this afternoon, right after work. I'll give you the address..."

George came.

The first odd thing George encountered was that the old lady who answered the door wouldn't let him in until he'd pricked his finger with a needle she gave him, and let her see the drop of blood that oozed out.

Then he was bundled into a car with Smith and another man, and driven over to the apartment house where Smith had lived, where they picked up a girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, saying they'd drive her to Patsy's house. The girl seemed to know and trust Smith.

Picking her up that way seemed strange, and made George nervous, but it was not particularly terrible.

What came next was terrible. George watched in horror as his friend Ed Smith, who was now obviously insane, stuck a steak knife into the girl's belly, while the stranger Ed called "Khalil" held her down.

His horror grew when he saw that she didn't bleed. She didn't scream, either, but smiled, showing silvery teeth that George tried to convince himself were just peculiar braces.

She started screaming a moment later, though, when Smith pulled a slimy black lump out of her chest and started to eat it, not merely raw but still living, still pulsing faintly and secreting something thin and clear and oily.

George fainted.

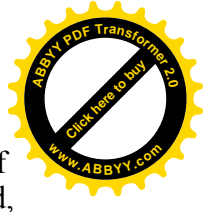
He came to in time to see the girl's corpse dissolve slowly into putrid, oozing slime. The stench was unbelievable.

"The real Jessie Goodwin's been dead for a week," Smith told him. "This thing ate her, and crawled inside her skin and wore it like a disguise."

The combination of the description and the smell was too much; George leaned out the car door and lost his lunch. As he wiped his mouth and looked at the ground he noticed that Smith hadn't been able to keep the black thing down.

George knew he was going to have nightmares about this one, bad nightmares.

"We need help," Smith told him. "There are just two of us doing this, now. We've got some ... I guess you'd call them support people, some other people backing us up who don't actually go out after the monsters. We started out with four of us, but they got the other two before we learned enough to protect



ourselves, and we need more. Khalil and I can't do it all ourselves. There are more than a hundred of them still in there, in those apartments, and next week, when the moon's full, they'll be able to breed, and there could be more of them, more than we could ever get."

George didn't say anything; he was still too sick.

"George," Smith said, "Will you help us?"

George raised his head unhappily. "Help you do *what?*" he asked.

"Kill these things," Smith replied.

"Like *that?*" he said, pointing at the dripping mess on the back seat.

Smith nodded.

George shook his head.

"I can't do it, Ed," he said.

They argued for a few minutes, but eventually Smith yielded.

"If you won't do it, you won't," he said. "I can't make you. If you change your mind, let me know. Or if you can find someone who *will* help, let me know."

He drove back to Topaz Court, where George's car waited.

George drove away slowly, and Smith and Khalil silently watched him go.

They'd had trouble contacting Lieutenant Buckley, who was, after all, a busy man. Smith had finally got hold of him, however, and arranged to meet him later that evening.

They didn't plan to try a graphic demonstration with him, as they had with George, for fear that as a trained man of action he would stop them and give the monster a chance to escape or retaliate. They didn't lay it all out, the story of spontaneous generation of evil, the extinction of the vampires, any of that. They didn't mention that they had killed any of the creatures. They merely told him, as they drove along, that the things in the Bedford Mills apartments weren't human. They described some of what they knew about the nightmare people.

Smith watched his face carefully, judging how much the cop believed.

Unfortunately, it wasn't much.

"It's not my problem," Buckley told them.

"It's over a hundred murders," Smith replied.

"I don't see any evidence," Buckley answered.

"What if we brought you one of the skins they wear?" Smith suggested. "That would prove someone



ad been killed, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," Buckley admitted, "But not by a monster."

"A complete human skin in one piece, except for, say, a hole in the chest, wouldn't prove something supernatural was happening? I mean, the fingers and toes all there, not cut open?"

"I don't know," Buckley said, eyeing Smith uneasily.

"We didn't do it, if that's what you're thinking," Smith said. "We didn't skin anybody. We got it away from one of the creatures."

"How?"

"I'd rather not answer that yet. You tell me, first, what the police would do if I could show them that skin."

Buckley blinked, then sat for a moment, thinking it over.

"Officially?" he asked.

Smith nodded.

"Officially, nothing," Buckley replied. "It doesn't fit. This isn't something we're set up to handle. I mean, think about it. What are we going to do, arrest these creatures of yours? Then what? Put them on trial for murder? They aren't human. If we leave the skins on, we have no evidence of a crime; if we take them off, the thing's not human, and we don't put animals on trial. And could we hold onto them, anyway? Didn't you say they can ooze out through windows? And how are we going to report any of this to higher up? What'll we put in the papers? Nobody's going to believe something like that unless they see it."

"All right, then," Smith said, "What about unofficially?"

"Unofficially, I think you're both nuts, but if it were true, I think I could look the other way at some vigilante efforts, and maybe some of my officers might help out when they're off-duty. But I'd need to see that skin."

Smith nodded.

"It's in the trunk," he said. "It came from a friend of ours named Sandy Niklasen; they got him a couple of days ago, but we killed the one that got him."

Smith saw Buckley tense slightly, and realized that the cop didn't believe him.

"I'll show you in a minute," Smith said. He turned at the corner.

Buckley sat silently until they turned into the parking lot.

"I thought you said that all the people here were really monsters," he said, as Smith slowed the car.



“They are,” Smith said, “But you don’t believe us. So I’m going to show you.” He stopped the car.

In the back seat, Khalil checked to be certain his windows were closed tightly.

“Here?” Buckley protested. “You’re going to show me that skin?”

“Not exactly,” Smith replied as he got out of the car.

“Khalil,” he said, “You get in front. And keep the motor running.”

Khalil nodded, and clambered into the driver’s seat while Lieutenant Buckley stepped out.

“What are you doing, Smith?” he asked.

“A little demonstration, Lieutenant,” he said. “Take a look around.”

Buckley looked.

It was nine o’clock on a pleasantly cool summer evening, but nobody was visible on any of the balconies or basement patios. The windows were all dark. The parking lot was virtually full.

That, Buckley knew, was not normal.

“Hey!” Smith shouted suddenly, “Who’s in there?”

No one replied; no lights came on. For an instant, though, Buckley thought he saw something flicker red in a nearby window.

“Come on,” Smith said, gesturing, “If they won’t come out, we’ll go in after them.”

“I don’t know, Smith,” Buckley said. “This is private property...”

“Hey, I *live* here, remember? That’s my apartment up there, C41.” He pointed. “I’ve got a perfect right to go in and say hello to my neighbors, don’t I?”

“Yeah,” Buckley admitted. Reluctantly, he climbed out of the car.

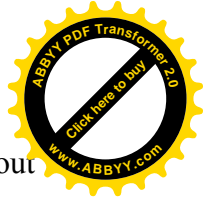
“One thing,” Smith said, “When it happens, turn and run. Remember, there are dozens of them in there. They aren’t significantly stronger than ordinary people, but there are a lot of them, and those teeth are dangerous.”

“When *what* happens?” Buckley asked, annoyed.

“You’ll know,” was Smith’s only reply.

They were halfway up the walk when he added, “And remember, they aren’t scared of guns. Don’t bother pulling your gun if they attack — just run.”

“What gun?” Buckley asked.



“Oh, don’t be stupid,” Smith said, “I know you’ve got a gun. You’re a cop, aren’t you? And you’re out here dealing with someone who might be a dangerous loony, right?”

Buckley didn’t argue.

“And if they get you,” Smith added, “Bite.”

Smith turned aside from the entry and stepped down onto the patio of C14. Buckley followed, puzzled.

“Hey, Smith,” he began, as Smith rapped on the sliding glass door.

Smith held up a hand for silence.

“This apartment,” he said, “Was home to a pleasant little person named Irene Corbett, who I didn’t really know. I ran into her now and then when I picked up my mail or brought down my trash, that’s all. She’s dead now, and there’s something living here pretending to be her.” He rapped again, then tucked his hands into his pockets; the night air was unseasonably cool.

The patio light came on, disturbing a swarm of gnats.

“Look, Smith,” Buckley said, “We shouldn’t be here...”

Before he could say any more the door slid open.

A small, plump woman with curly black hair leaned out. “What is it? Oh, hi, Mr. Smith, Lieutenant; what’s up?”

Buckley started to speak, but before he could get a word out Smith’s hand came up from his pocket, the switchblade snapped open, and he slashed it across the woman’s face.

She blinked and stepped back, startled.

Buckley blinked, as well.

Smith was already turning away; he called, “Take a good look, Lieutenant.” Then he ducked out of the patio and onto the entryway path.

Buckley looked, and at first he thought that Smith’s knife had missed, that this was all just another manifestation of insanity.

Then he saw the skin slipping down the thing’s nose, revealing grey flesh beneath.

No blood.

No pain, from her reaction.

No human reaction at all. Just a slit across her face and the skin sliding down, the dull gray showing through.

He stood for a moment, staring.



“What’s wrong?” she said. She reached up and felt her nose.

“Oh, damn!” she said, when her fingers found the slash.

Buckley just stood, staring.

Then a car horn sounded, and he whirled. He remembered Smith’s warning, and he started running.

The thing jumped him from behind, grabbed him around the neck with both arms, around the waist with both legs. He stumbled, staggered, then ran on.

Something incredibly sharp, like a double row of hypodermic needles, scraped across his scalp. He looked up, but couldn’t see his attacker.

What he could see, though, was a ring of people, all kinds of people, men, women, and children, wearing everything from ordinary street clothes to nothing at all, standing silently on all sides and moving slowly inward, toward him — and toward the little red Chevy that stood in the parking lot, with its lights on, motor running, and horn blaring.

He ran for the car, ignoring everything else. It was rolling by the time he reached it; he dove inside, Smith reaching forward from the back to pull him in.

His attacker came with him. He tried to ram her head against the doorframe, to pry her off, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Here,” Smith shouted, “Get her inside, too — we can handle it, if it’s just one of them.”

He bent forward, dragging her in, and Smith reached up and wrapped his arms around her, trying to pry her loose. The door flapped as the car picked up speed, smashing painfully across the back of his right leg, and he fell forward, almost into Khalil’s lap.

Khalil paid no attention; he was concentrating on his driving.

There was a loud bump, and the car rose up for a moment, then slammed down again. Buckley tried not to think about what they had run over.

Then they were rounding the corner out of the parking lot and onto Barrett Road, and after that he couldn’t see much, as his own blood ran down into his eyes from half a hundred scalp wounds.

Buckley lost track of events for what seemed like several minutes. When he finally got himself straightened out and his vision cleared, he was sitting in the passenger seat, Khalil was driving at roughly twice the thirty miles per hour the law allowed on Barrett, and the passenger-side door was ajar but almost closed.

He opened the door and slammed it, then looked around.

In the back seat Smith was struggling with the false Irene Corbett. Her head was in his lap, face up and smeared with bright red blood, and his right arm was around her throat, while his left arm reached across, the point of the open switchblade pressed between her breasts.



Hold still,” Smith hissed, “Or I’ll cut your heart out and eat it.”

She blinked up at him, horror suddenly plain on her face, and held still.

Smith relaxed slightly, but the knife didn’t move.

The hand that had been round her throat reached up and pulled at the loose skin on her nose.

It peeled away, like a rubber mask, revealing ridged flesh the color of wet modelling clay, a black-lipped mouth filled with gleaming needle-sharp teeth that looked more like stainless steel than bone. From the bridge of her nose — *its* nose — up, it still looked human; from there down, it was monstrous.

“Believe us now?” Smith asked.

Buckley swallowed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I believe you.”

Smith smiled, and sank his knife gently into the thing’s chest.

Chapter Eleven:

Wednesday, August 16th

1.

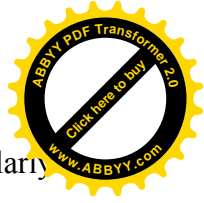
In the days that followed Smith’s little demonstration Lieutenant Buckley and some of his men provided unofficial help in reducing the number of nightmare people in the vicinity, as he had promised they would.

Officially, nothing was out of the ordinary at the Bedford Mills Apartments, nor elsewhere in Diamond Park, or any other part of Montgomery County. No bulletins were issued regarding Bedford Mills or its inhabitants, and no arrests or incidents were reported. Nothing more appeared in the newspapers about the disappearance or its aftermath.

Unofficially, however, the nightmare people were being systematically hunted and destroyed. Half a dozen of the few who still bothered to show up for work at their victims’ jobs received unexpected calls from the police while at their places of business, calls informing them of various emergencies, and when they left to attend to matters they were never seen again. A dozen or so who stayed “home” were phoned there and summoned for questioning, and likewise never seen again.

The brief spell of cool weather gave way to normal August heat, muggy and uncomfortable, but that made no difference to either the hunters or the hunted. None of them paid much attention to the weather, or the news from Lebanon, or the upcoming twentieth anniversary of Woodstock. The silent struggle for survival took precedence.

During that period, several Montgomery County police officers reported in sick with stomach problems — cramps, nausea, and so forth. Officers who had not been included in the secret campaign wondered about food poisoning, and memos were circulated, but nothing came of it. No official cause was ever



ound, and in the end the whole matter was dismissed as an outbreak of an unknown and not particularly serious virus.

By Sunday the thirteenth the nightmare people had no doubt at all of what was happening, but there was little they could do about it. Appealing to higher authorities, hiring lawyers, all the lines of recourse that humans would have were too risky, too likely to expose what was really going on.

Besides, it was already too late to help the ones who had been destroyed.

Phones at Bedford Mills began to go unanswered, however. Traffic in and out of the apartment complex dwindled away to nothing. Police cruisers prowled the parking lot regularly, and went unmolested, but the officers involved generally stayed in their cars, making no attempt to enter any of the four buildings.

After all, in there they would be outnumbered. A raid in force would be noticed, would draw questions that couldn't be answered very well.

A few small expeditions into now-empty apartments were staged, but without significant results. And there were still ways of luring an incautious creature to its doom.

The menace was contained, but not destroyed.

Meanwhile, at 706 Topaz Court, life settled into a routine. Smith and Khalil slept from early morning until mid-afternoon, while Annie and sometimes Maggie stood guard, ready to scream if anyone got into the house. In the evenings, Smith and Khalil joined Buckley and his men in trapping and killing nightmare people, and searching through the homes of destroyed creatures in hopes of learning more about them. At night, while Annie slept, the two of them rested, planned, and stood guard over Annie and each other. No one was permitted to enter the house without showing a drop or two of flowing blood; Annie's sewing basket and a bottle of S.T. 37 antiseptic had been moved to an endtable in the living room so as to provide a supply of sterile needles for that purpose. The three full-time inhabitants all had wounds on their fingers that had been opened and re-opened repeatedly.

Khalil had enough vacation time and sick leave accumulated that his job as a garage mechanic was safe until the 21st, and Smith's job was already lost. They were both able to devote themselves entirely to the fight.

Even so, by Wednesday, August sixteenth, the night of the full moon, Smith knew there were still a hundred and four nightmare people out there.

What was worse, some of them were unaccounted for. Buckley's men reported only ninety-three still in the Bedford Mills complex. The other eleven were lost.

"Probably scattered across half the country," Smith said, during a conversation at the breakfast table. It was late afternoon, and he had just gotten up.

"And there's nothing we can do about them," Smith continued.

Khalil and Buckley didn't argue.

"And there'll probably be twenty-two of them, rather than eleven, two weeks from now," Buckley added.



“At least,” Smith agreed.

“Do you really think we can stop the others, here, from breeding tonight?” Khalil asked.

Smith shrugged.

“We can try,” he said.

2.

“Just what is it you’re planning, anyway?” Buckley asked from the door of his cruiser as he prepared to depart. The sun was down, the sky grey and darkening; somewhere in the east the moon was rising, but hidden by the haze.

“A distraction,” Smith said. “Something to keep everybody busy.”

Buckley wiped sweat from his forehead, and glared at Smith. “That’s no answer,” he snapped.

Smith ignored that and remarked casually, “There’s a lunar eclipse tonight, did you know that? It should start in just a few minutes. First one in seven years that can be seen around here — except I don’t think we’ll be able to see it. All the same, I figure the eclipse might have something to do with how those things breed. Even if it doesn’t, if I understand how lunar eclipses work, that’s got to be when the moon is fullest. And since it’s just now getting dark, I figure this has got to be when they’ll be able to breed, so that’s when I set my distraction for.”

“What kind of a distraction?” Buckley demanded.

“Believe me,” Smith said, “It’s better if you don’t know. You’re still a cop, after all.”

“Yeah, I am,” Buckley said, “And I don’t like the sound of that. Maybe I’d better go along with you two, make sure things don’t get out of hand.”

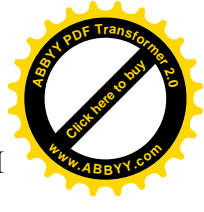
Smith smiled, and leaned on the roof of the patrol car. “I thought you might feel like that,” he said. “That’s why I set the main charge up to be completely automatic. I put it together last night and set it up this morning, right before I came back here to sleep. It’ll go off in about five minutes, whether I’m there or not — I rigged a second-hand computer and printer. See, I put sandpaper in the printer and taped matches and a fuse to the print-head, and then programmed the computer to run a full printer test at 8:23 tonight — that’s when the guy on the news said that the eclipse starts. It’s kind of an expensive way to rig a timer, but I’m not that good with mechanical stuff — I figured I should use what I...”

He didn’t finish the sentence; the blast was clearly audible despite the intervening seven-block distance.

In fact, it was very loud indeed, loud enough to rattle windows and echo from the surrounding houses.

Buckley’s head whipped around, and he stared in the direction of the explosion. “Son of a *bitch!*” he said. “You fucking maniac, what if there were innocent people around? Where was it?” He looked for some sign of what had happened, and wasn’t sure if he could make out a waver in the air that might be heat or smoke — or might just be more of the thick summer haze in the air.

“Apartment C14,” Smith replied calmly. “About a hundred gallons of gasoline, a hundred pounds of



four scattered around or balanced on the printer, some cotton waste, and all the other combustibles I could find. And there's gas in some of the other basements, too. Took me all night to set it up."

"Shit!" Buckley slid into the car and slammed the door; Smith removed his elbow from the car's roof.

As he watched Buckley drive away, Smith asked Khalil, "Shall we go watch?"

In the east, hidden by the haze, the moon was full and round.

3.

It was a very satisfactory blaze as far as it went, Smith thought. The blast had blown out solid concrete walls. Most of C Building had caved in, as he had hoped, and any nightmare people who had been in there were not going to be out roaming around tonight as if nothing had happened.

He supposed that they could slip out easily enough, but not with their disguises intact. By the time they tracked down new victims for their skins, would they have time to find new ones for their larvae, as well?

He frowned. Or might they plant the larvae first?

Not if anyone saw them coming, of course, and without their disguises that meant they could only attack sleeping victims.

And who, around here, would be asleep, with all this going on?

How far could they get, without intact skins, with cops and firemen and onlookers on all sides?

And the fire had spread quickly; D Building was ablaze from roof to basement.

Unfortunately, A and B buildings hadn't caught. He had stashed open cans of gasoline around empty apartments in both of them, the apartments that had been occupied by the nightmare people he and his comrades had destroyed; he had hoped that a spark would carry, but he hadn't managed to rig anything more definite.

Blinking against the heat and glare he crept across the parking lot, unnoticed by anything human — all eyes seemed to be on the burning buildings.

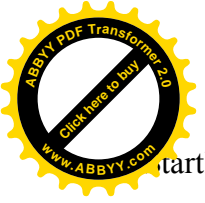
But of course, there were eyes present that weren't human at all.

He tried to move casually, and stepped down onto the little patio of apartment B11 as if he were just trying to get a better view.

He had the crowbar under his shirt, Sandy Niklasen's cigarette lighter in one pocket of his shorts, Khalil's switchblade in another. He didn't expect to need the crowbar or the knife; this apartment, occupied until three days before, was one he had broken into that morning and hidden gasoline in.

He reached the door and tugged at it.

It didn't move.



startled, he pulled harder.

It still didn't move.

He looked in through the glass and saw that someone had wedged it shut with a piece of one-by-two.

"Shit," he muttered. He pulled up his shirt and pulled the crowbar up out of the waistband of his shorts. Then he glanced around, to see if anyone was watching.

Someone was. A familiar face was hanging down over the edge of the balcony overhead.

"Howdy, Mr. Smith," said the thing that had replaced Nora Hagarty.

He froze, and stood staring at it.

He didn't have his carving knife. The switchblade was in his back pocket, on the right, and his right hand held the crowbar.

Besides, the chances were that the thing wasn't alone.

He remembered that Nora Hagarty's apartment was B22, but the one directly above him now would be B21 — that meant the creature was visiting.

It wouldn't be alone.

And this was the night of the full moon. If the thing reached him now, and got its larva down his throat, it would take him *two weeks* to die.

What he had seen happen to Elias was hideous, but at least it was fairly quick; if this one got him now, on this one particular night, the same thing would happen in slow motion.

Two weeks, it would take.

Two weeks.

Another figure, man-shaped, leaned around the corner of the entryway; he couldn't see its face, just a black outline against the roaring inferno that had been C Building, but when it smiled, a stray reflection from the glass door behind him showed him shining needle teeth gleaming orange in the firelight. And the thing that had Nora Hagarty's face was doing something the real Nora Hagarty would never have attempted, swinging itself down over the balcony railing, ape-like, preparing to drop down to the patio below.

He turned back to the door and swung the crowbar with all his strength.

The glass snapped, and a spiderweb of cracks appeared, but it didn't shatter.

"Fucking safety glass," he muttered, and swung again.

A soft plop behind him told him that the Hagarty thing was down. He didn't look back.



The glass shattered this time; he kicked his way through and into B11.

Red eyes gleamed at him from the hallway, and a smile reflected firelight from silver teeth.

“Oh, shit.” He ran for the doorway of the apartment; even as he did, it opened, and another figure stood there.

The gasoline. Where had he put the gas in this one?

In the bedroom; he had poured half a can on the bed, then closed the door, hoping that it wouldn't all evaporate away. The other half-gallon he had stood in the closet with the cap loose.

In the bedroom — at the other end of the hallway.

There were two of them behind him, coming in through the shattered glass door, and one standing in the hallway smirking, and another in the door to the stairwell, and that just left the kitchen.

He ran for it, and made it — but so what?

The kitchen was just a walk-through, with counter and cabinets on one side and appliances on the other, and open at each end — one to the dining area, one to the hallway. And at the hallway end the nightmare creature was already waiting, smiling at him.

He snatched at the cabinets, pulling them open, and found what he wanted — a quart bottle of cooking oil. He pulled it out, opened it, and poured half of it on the floor.

The creature's smile vanished, to be replaced by puzzlement.

Smith pulled out Sandy's lighter, knelt, and flicked the wheel, then touched the flame to the pool of oil.

It took longer to catch than he had expected, but when it did it flared up quite satisfactorily; he lost most of the hair off one forearm, and tumbled over backwards, away from the flames.

The nightmare people, two at each end of the kitchen, frowned at him.

“What do you think you're doing?” one of them asked.

“Trying to get a fire going,” Smith told it. “If I'm going to die, I don't want to leave enough skin on the four of you to do you any good.”

Only when he said that did he realize that that really was his plan, that he didn't know of any way he might survive.

He realized he was sprawled on the floor next to the burning oil, and he got to his feet.

The front of one of the floor cabinets seemed to be catching; he splashed more oil at it. Then he pulled down a canister and spilled flour onto the flames.

It roared up, and he backed away, almost into the hands of the two at the near end.



Get some wet towels from the bathroom!” one of them called.

One of the two in the hallway vanished, presumably to fetch towels.

Inspired, Smith yanked out the end of the roll of paper towels from the wall beside the sink, feeding it into the flames; the fire raced up the streamer, leaving fluttering black cinders drifting in the air en route, and settled onto the roll itself.

Smith’s eyes stung, and he was beginning to have trouble breathing. He pulled open a drawer, looking for more flammables.

He found knives.

He pulled out a big carving knife and smiled at it.

“Maybe,” he said, “I can take one of you with me.” He spun, and flung himself at the two in the dining area.

They were concentrating on the fire more than on him, and the sudden attack caught them off-guard; one fell back, while the other staggered.

Smith landed atop the fallen one, and drove the knife into it.

“At least,” he said, as he dragged the blade through resisting fabric and flesh, “I’ll ruin that skin for you.”

The other one was pulling at him, and he pulled the knife free long enough to slash at it.

He took the tip off its nose, and the severed scrap flew back into the burning kitchen. It didn’t seem to notice.

The two at the other end of the kitchen were back, with dripping towels, and trying to beat out the flames. Smith ignored them; he was concentrating on hacking open the chest of the one beneath him, the one, he realized, that wore Nora Hagarty’s skin.

The other one was still trying to pry him loose; he twisted, and bit its hand.

It howled, and fell back, away from him.

“Hey,” someone called, “Give us a hand here!”

The false Nora Hagarty had its hands on his throat now, and that, combined with the smoke, made it almost impossible to breathe. His vision started to dim.

He pulled the knife free and to the side, and shoved his face down between the thing’s breasts. He began chewing.

It screamed, and scrabbled at him with its claws, but in doing so it released his throat. He lifted his head long enough to gulp air, then dove back down, ignoring the smell and the taste and the flailing claws.



blood was running from somewhere and dripping from his chin, and the heat of the fire was like a furnace at his back. The other three creatures were no longer concerned with him at all; they were all concentrating solely on the fire, which was blazing up wildly, seemingly unstoppable.

The screaming continued, an eerie inhuman screeching that hurt his ears, but Smith was used to that now. He ignored it.

Some small part of Smith's brain, somewhere beneath the unthinking berserk panic that drove him, was noting that nightmare people, as he had previously seen, were not much on empathy, even for their own kind. The three of them had apparently decided that the fire was a greater danger to them than Smith, or at least a more immediate one, and they were selfishly letting him kill their comrade, right in front of them, while they tried to stop the blaze from spreading.

Well, after all, weren't they self-proclaimed evil incarnate? Loyalty to one's kind would be foreign to them.

Something moved, close up against his face, something cool and damp that squirmed, and he remembered that this thing had been ready to breed.

He raised his head and looked down.

The creature's hands slapped onto his cheeks, claws extended; he grabbed them and yanked them away and looked at the thing's open chest.

Where before he had always found a black slug-like mass that throbbed gently, here he found two, one much as always, and nestled against it a smaller one, shining moistly, that writhed like a dying, fresh-caught fish.

The larva.

Smith picked it up with one hand and flung it into the fire behind him.

He hoped that, immature as it was, that would kill it; he wasn't about to eat the thing.

Even if the fire didn't kill it, just being without a host body might be enough. The nightmare he had interrogated the week before had said that the larvae were vulnerable until they found hosts.

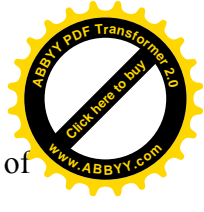
Claws projecting through the skin of Nora's fingertips raked down his face again, and he forgot the larva as he struggled to force his target's hands and arms aside, to get back at its heart before the opening in its chest closed up again.

He bent his head down and pressed with his full weight, and the arms gave. His face sank into the oozing mess, his teeth closed on the black core; he held his breath, closed his eyes, and continued eating.

When it went limp he rolled off it, and realized that one of his shoelaces was on fire and both shoes were smoldering. One leg was obviously badly burned.

The other three nightmare people were gone. The fire was raging out of control.

He staggered to his feet, ignoring the pain of his burns, the pain of the dozens of places that the



nightmare thing had clawed him, and made his way out through the shattered glass door into a night of fire and chaos.

There were still plenty of nightmare people around, and A building was still untouched by the conflagration, but Smith was too far gone to care about that. By now, he was unconcerned with anything but escape.

4.

Khalil had lost track of Smith, but although he was worried, he didn't try to do anything about it. He watched the fire-fighters, the police, the crowds, unsure just what he was doing, and what he *should* be doing.

He saw some familiar faces here and there in the crowd, but he didn't seek them out.

Then he noticed two of them together, looking worried — the Newell girls, who had come to the first meeting at Annie McGowan's house and then walked out. They were standing on the sidewalk, not crossing the police line, but leaning and stretching as they tried to see what was happening.

Then one of them shrieked, "Daddy!," audible even over the roaring chaos of the fire and the crowds, and ran toward a figure emerging from A Building, and then they were both running toward the figure, and Khalil watched as they embraced it.

He remembered that their parents were divorced, and that their father lived at Bedford Mills.

Their father *had* lived at Bedford Mills. He was dead now, and the thing they were holding was a nightmare person.

And it was hugging them back, and kissing them, and then it leaned over and squeezed one of the girls and kissed her hard on the mouth, a kiss that lingered far too long.

The girl seemed almost to be choking, rather than kissing back.

Khalil left his position and headed for the happy little threesome.

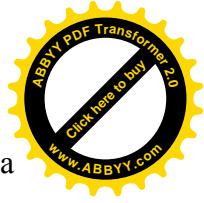
When the kiss ended, the recipient looked somewhat dazed and unhappy, her mouth twisted as if she had tasted something unpleasant. Her sister eyed her oddly.

Khalil stopped, a pace or two away, unsure how to proceed. He had no doubt of what had just happened, but how could he tell her what had just been done to her? How could he get the girls away from their "father," and away from this place where the nightmare people lurked in such numbers?

Just then a new outburst of noise swept over him, fresh screams and shouting, and he turned to see that B Building was afire; something had just exploded in one of the ground-floor bedrooms, blowing window-glass out onto the lawn.

And staggering across the lawn between B Building and himself was Ed Smith, his clothes torn and blackened, his head and arms red with blood.

Inspiration struck.



“Miss Newell!” Khalil called, “Miss Newell! Can you help me with my friend? We must get him to a doctor!”

The Newells turned, and saw Khalil, and saw where he was pointing.

They ran to Smith, reaching him before Khalil could, and picked him up, supporting him.

“Where’s an ambulance?” the older girl asked. Khalil didn’t remember their first names.

Khalil shook his head. “We take his car,” he said, pointing. “I can drive.”

He ran ahead and opened the doors, and the Newells loaded the semi-conscious Smith into the back seat, where blood and char and slime from his hands and clothes streaked the upholstery. The stink of smoke and decaying flesh filled the car.

One of the girls got in beside Smith, to support him; the other, at Khalil’s urging, got in the front passenger’s seat.

And the thing that had eaten their father could only watch as the four of them climbed in and drove away; the car only held four, with no room for a fifth. The creature started to protest, but Khalil started the engine and revved it, drowning him out.

And then they were off, away from the fire and out of Diamond Park.

5.

Dr. Henry Frauenthal marvelled at the variety of damage that this person calling himself Ed Smith had sustained. His legs and feet were badly burned, while his head and torso were bruised and abraded and liberally adorned with long, deep scratches.

Not all of them were fresh, either. A particularly interesting set of gouges in his side looked to be roughly a week old.

“I got caught in a burning kitchen,” Smith told the doctor, “And a lot of stuff fell on me, and this dog panicked and scratched me up.”

“Doesn’t look like any dog-bites I ever saw,” the doctor remarked. “Did you bring in the dog, so we can check for rabies?”

“Didn’t *bite* me,” Smith said, “Just clawed me when I tried to carry it out.” He was getting pretty good at impromptu lying, he thought. He’d had plenty of practice of late, luring the nightmare people out of their den.

Dr. Frauenthal left it at that. He checked over the bandages he had just finished applying, then nodded approval.

“That should do it,” he said. “Now, you just lie here and rest.”

He turned to the others, who stood watching. Khalil had insisted that they be admitted, rather than waiting outside, and Frauenthal hadn’t wanted to waste time arguing when his patient was losing so



much blood.

“I think he’ll be fine,” he said.

The girls smiled, but Khalil did not. “Doctor,” he said, “Please, you must look at these girls, too, and I think pump out their stomachs — one of them, anyway.”

The two girls both turned to stare at Khalil.

“What are you talking about?” the older one demanded.

“I am talking,” Khalil said, “about that thing that is not your father. It kissed one of you, there at the fire, and I think it did more than kiss.”

The older girl simply looked more confused, while the younger one’s mouth dropped open in astonishment.

“How did you ... I mean, what are you *talking* about?” she demanded.

“Miss Newell,” Khalil said, “I saw you at the meeting at Mrs. McGowan’s house, so I know you have heard this and not believed it, but it is the truth. That thing is not your father. It has killed him and taken his place. And now, it has begun to do the same to you, I think. When it kissed you, did it not feel peculiar?”

“Well, yeah,” the younger one admitted, looking uneasily at her sister.

“Maddie,” the elder said, “What are you talking about?”

“Well, it *did*, Alice,” Maddie said, “It felt really weird. Daddy never kissed me like that before. I mean, on the mouth, and then he opened his mouth, and at first I thought, you know, he was giving me the tongue, and that was pretty weird, I mean *Daddy*, doing that? But then it wasn’t his tongue at all, it felt like something else, and it sort of crawled into my mouth and I could tell it wasn’t Daddy at all, it was something he’d had in his mouth, and it tried to slide down my throat and I almost choked on it, and swallowed it without meaning to.”

Alice was staring at her.

“Really?” she asked.

Maddie nodded.

“Why didn’t you *say* something?” Alice demanded.

“Well, I thought maybe I’d just imagined it all, and besides, we were so busy, helping Mr. Smith and everything, I hadn’t had a chance.” She looked as if she might cry. “And besides, it was *Daddy* who did it.”

The doctor had listened to all this, and looked utterly baffled. Smith was too weak to argue; he just lay back and watched. It was Khalil who said, “We should pump her stomach, yes?”



Alice started to protest, but stopped when she saw Maddie nodding.

Dr. Frauenthal agreed.

6.

There were two things in Maddie Newell's digestive tract that had no business there.

One was a significant quantity of blood, apparently her own, and all still fresh. It was as if she had suddenly acquired a severe bleeding ulcer, sometime in the past hour or two.

The other was a black thing about five inches long and an inch or so in diameter, slick and moist, with four tiny sets of razor-sharp, hook-shaped claws, two at the narrower end — what Khalil thought of as the tail — and two about two inches back from the “head.”

It also had a mouth in the head end, a narrow opening perhaps an inch long and lined with tiny needle teeth.

It was quite obvious what was responsible for the blood; the thing's claws and teeth were smeared with bright red.

It was also obvious that the thing was still alive.

The little group in the examining room stared at it in horror as it squirmed vigorously in the plastic bottle that Dr. Frauenthal had sealed it in.

“That was *inside* me?” Maddie asked.

Dr. Frauenthal nodded.

“It's out now,” he said, in a vain attempt to sound comforting.

Maddie sat down, feeling faint.

“Kill it,” Alice said through clenched teeth.

Dr. Frauenthal shook his head. “It should already be dead,” he said. “I don't know *how* to kill it.”

“Cut it up!” Alice said.

Frauenthal grimaced. “Ever see a flatworm cut in half?” he asked.

“Well, do *something*,” Alice insisted.

“What I'm going to do,” Frauenthal said, “is try and find out what it is.”

Alice and Maddie both turned to look at Khalil; Dr. Frauenthal followed their gaze.

“Sir,” he said, “I take it these two think you know something about that *thing* in the bottle. And as it was



your suggestion that it was in there, in her stomach, I assume they're right.”

Reluctantly, Khalil nodded. He looked at Smith, but Smith was obviously in no shape to comment.

He sighed, and started explaining.

The thing in the bottle squirmed helplessly as Khalil talked.

7.

Annie McGowan sat in front of the TV, her feet tucked up on the couch beside her, knitting nervously and paying no attention to NBC's special on gangs, cops, and drugs.

Somehow, awful as gangs and drugs were, they didn't have the same immediacy they had had two weeks before.

She had been alone in the house for hours, ever since Smith and Khalil had left to observe the results of their handiwork, and she had been getting more and more nervous.

For over a week, she had been expecting her phony sister-in-law to drop by, and it hadn't. She had been ready for it, and it hadn't come. She had lived with that. Somehow, though, the full moon, and her incomplete knowledge of what was happening seven blocks away, seemed to make it worse. She almost expected to see faces at the windows, or hear strange howling outside, like a scene from one of those awful late-night horror movies on TV that she never meant to watch but sometimes did anyway.

The sirens that had sounded for so long, over on Barrett Road, had all died away now; she wasn't sure what that meant. Was it just that all the emergency vehicles had reached the apartment complex, or had something gone wrong and kept more from coming?

She pulled too hard at the yarn, trying to loosen a tangle, and instead it knotted hard. She hissed in annoyance.

She was trying to pick the knot apart when the doorbell rang.

She looked up, startled.

Someone knocked, hard.

She dropped the knitting on the endtable, got slowly to her feet, and turned off the TV. Neither Smith nor Khalil would knock like that; Maggie wouldn't knock at all. That dreadful imitation Kate ought to know better than to knock that way.

Lieutenant Buckley, perhaps?

Or someone else?

Or *something* else?

“Who is it?” she called, as she made her way slowly toward the front door.



no one answered.

She hesitated at the door and called again, “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” someone said, in a familiar voice.

Ed Smith’s voice.

But he wouldn’t have knocked and rung like that. He had a key now, after all.

She threw a glance up the stairs at the bathroom door. It stood open a crack, the room beyond dark.

“Just a minute,” she called.

She hurried up the steps, almost running, pushed the door open and turned on the light, to have it ready. She didn’t want to fumble in the dark.

She didn’t have time to check everything, not without arousing suspicion, but a quick glance around spotted nothing wrong. She turned and headed back down.

“Come on, Annie, open the door,” Smith’s voice was calling.

She paused to catch her breath, then reached out and turned the knob.

Immediately, the door was pushed open, and she found herself facing not Ed Smith, but a big, fat man in a greasy T-shirt and old Levis.

He grinned at her.

She stepped back, startled.

“Who are *you*?” she asked.

“Joe Samaan, at the moment,” he said, still in Ed Smith’s voice. “May I come in?”

She backed up onto the bottom step of the staircase. “Well, I...” she began.

“You don’t really have a choice,” the thing said, still grinning.

She stepped back, up another step.

The creature stepped in in a rush of warm, fetid air, and behind it came another man, another stranger, also grinning. She could see a third, a woman, out on the porch.

Simple nervousness turned to real fright. She hadn’t expected a whole group of them.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

The thing that called itself Joe Samaan wiggled a finger at her. “Can’t you guess, Annie?” it asked.



"Tsk, tsk, I thought you'd figure it out right away."

"Well, I didn't, mister," Annie snapped defiantly. "What do you and your friends think you're doing?"

"What are we doing?" It grinned, and silvery teeth glittered. "Well, we're planning a little welcome home party for *your* friends, Ed Smith and Khalil Saad, when they get here." It stepped closer, and she backed farther up the stairs; she was halfway up and it was at the foot, now, and the other two had crowded into the foyer behind it.

The one pretending to be female closed the door, pushing gently until the latch clicked into place.

"I don't think you should do that," Annie said, trying desperately to figure out what to do about there being *three* of them, when she had only expected one. Being scared wasn't going to do any good. The things were horrible, but they weren't omnipotent; Smith and Khalil and that Lieutenant Buckley had been killing them easily enough once they knew how. The main advantages the creatures had lay in their unfamiliarity and their viciousness, and she knew enough of them to cut into that unfamiliarity.

Smith and the others could work up to a pretty good level of viciousness, too, and she thought she could manage that herself — but how could she counter being outnumbered three to one?

The thing gave her no clue. It just grinned.

She couldn't think of anything.

All she could do was go through the motions, do what she could, and hope that Smith and Khalil got back in time to save her, and that they weren't caught off-guard.

She wished she'd thought to fetch a knife from the kitchen before she opened the door, so at least she could go down fighting.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked.

She knew perfectly well they were going to kill her, if they could — not necessarily here and now, but sooner or later. They were evil; killing was what they did, their very essence. She was just stalling.

"Why, no, Annie," it said, advancing. "Why would I want to kill you? I'm not going to hurt you at all." She was retreating, and almost at the top. "In fact," it said, "I'd like to give you a kiss."

She was at the top; the leader was halfway up the stairs, the others waiting in the hall below, certain that they wouldn't be needed to deal with one frightened old woman.

She turned and ran for the bathroom.

The thing bounded up the remaining steps and ran after her.

She made it through the door, but before she could turn and slam it, the thing was right there, forcing its way into the tiny room. Annie didn't try to fight it; she just backed away again, pushing aside the shower curtain and stepping into the bathtub.

The thing pursued her, right up to the shower curtain, just as she expected.



ne reached up, took the wires from the showerhead, and pulled hard.

The bottom of the shower curtain snapped out and slapped against the thing's ankles, wrapping itself around its legs, as the loop of wire she had painstakingly sewn into the heavy plastic curtain and then threaded through a dozen pulleys and guides was yanked tight.

The nightmare person, caught completely unprepared, lost its balance and fell heavily forward; she scrambled out of its way as it tore the curtain down from the rings.

It roared incoherently as it sprawled in the tub.

Before it could recover she wound the wires around its neck and ankles, binding the curtain in place at both ends.

Here she paused, diverging slightly from her plan, to slam shut the bathroom door and bolt it from the inside.

Then she went back to her captive, and with the rest of the wire and rolls of adhesive tape and reinforced package tape she finished the job of securely binding it up in the plastic curtain.

Unfortunately, that was as far as her original scheme could take her; she hadn't expected to be trapped in the bathroom with two more of the nightmare people waiting outside.

The thing had overcome its initial surprise and was beginning to struggle vigorously. She hoped her wrappings would hold.

She heaved the thing's legs up and over the side, and left it lying in the tub, while she sat down on the toilet to decide what to do next.

The thing shouted, "Let me up! Get this thing off me!" The shower curtain did surprisingly little to muffle it.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"Hey, what's going on in there?" an unfamiliar voice called.

Annie looked up. "I've got your friend," she said. "He's my prisoner."

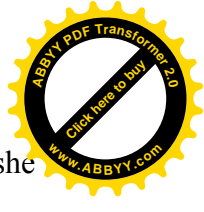
The one in the tub bellowed so loudly she was sure the others couldn't hear her over that racket. The noise it made echoed off the tile and hurt her ears.

"Oh, shut up, you!" she shouted back at it. "Don't you want to know what's happening?"

It shut up, reluctantly.

"Now," she said loudly, directing her comments at the closed door, "As I was saying, I've got your friend tied up, and I've got my husband's old straight razor. You two both get the heck out of my house, right now, or I'll ... I'll cut out this thing's heart and eat it!"

She wished she actually *did* have that old razor, but it was long gone. She hadn't seen it in thirty years or



more. She wondered, even as she spoke, whether there was anything sharp in the bathroom, in case she had to carry out her threat.

She knew that Smith had killed at least one nightmare person with just his teeth and nails, but she didn't think she had the strength or the stomach for that.

The two outside the bathroom were conferring quietly; she could hear their voices, but she couldn't make out the words.

"If you're thinking you can just break that door down and get me," Annie called, "Remember, I already fooled this one. We were expecting you to try something like this; the whole house is booby-trapped. You can go now, or you can stumble around into one of the other traps, or you can wait until the others get here."

She was sweating, she realized, sweating hard for the first time in years. It wasn't from exertion; she hadn't done anything all that frightful, just run up the stairs and tied up her captive — not that that was *easy* at her age!

It was fear, that was why she was sweating. She hoped that her terror wasn't obvious in her voice when she told all these outrageous lies.

"She's bluffing!" the one in the tub called. It started struggling harder, and one piece of tape came loose.

She kicked at the side of the tub. "Hush up, you!" she snapped.

The knob rattled, and then someone outside was leaning on the door; she could see it bending, giving slightly.

The bolt held. She bit her lower lip and looked around.

The only sharp object in the medicine cabinet was her little disposable plastic safety razor; that wouldn't be any use. And there wasn't anything sharp at all in the cabinet under the sink.

That left the vanity drawer, and that was where the old manicure set was.

The scissors and clippers weren't any use, but the nail file might do. She pulled it out and looked at it.

Using a four-inch nail file to cut the heart out of a live, struggling monster didn't seem possible. She put the file down on the edge of the sink.

Something thumped heavily against the door.

"Go away!" she said, panicky, "Or you're next!"

"Joe," something called, "What's happening in there?"

"She tripped me up and tied me up in something!" the one in the tub bellowed.

"Shut up!" Annie shouted. She picked up the nail file, then put it down again. She crossed to the tub.



The thing was flopping like a fish, banging its feet against the bottom of the tub; on an upswing she caught hold of one.

Since the feet were bound tightly together at the ankles, wired together, catching one foot meant catching both.

The thing didn't want its feet caught, and it took all her strength to hold them with one hand while she used the other to pry off its shoes — badly-worn tennis shoes.

“No reason I have to let you bang up my bathtub,” she muttered, more to herself than to her captive.

Another thump sounded as something rammed up against the bathroom door. Annie heard the bolt scraping against its collar, but it still held.

When she had one shoe off and the other loose, the thing thrashed about, and she lost her hold; the feet slammed into one side of the tub, and the other shoe fell free.

The creature wore white sweatsocks — but they weren't sweaty at all, despite the heat outside.

Something rammed into the door again as she tried to recapture the swinging feet, and she heard wood crack.

“*Darn it!*” she said.

Then she had them, had both feet, and in a moment of bravery, or maybe just insanity, she yanked down one sock, bent over, and bit down hard on the creature's right achilles tendon.

It screamed, an ear-splitting squeal that echoed from the tiled walls. Annie was almost glad that her hearing wasn't as acute as it once had been.

The pair outside the door fell silent. The banging against the door stopped.

Annie looked at the bite, and saw that she had poked a small hole in the thing's stolen skin. She bent over and bit again, worrying at the skin like a dog at a bone.

Her captive shrieked in agony.

She kept biting, and chewing, until she had removed most of the skin from one ankle — she spat the bits down the drain as she went, and ignored the thing's wails.

Then she peeled off the sock and the skin from its right foot, peeled the skin away as if she were peeling an orange, and looked at the stringy grey flesh beneath.

There were no true toes, just curving black claws, shaped to hold the skin out in its original form. There was no bone in the heel, no true tendon at the back of the ankle, just stuff that was something like clay, something like rubber.

She retrieved the nail file from the sink and rammed it into the thing's arch.

It shouted, “Let me out of here, bitch!” It sounded frightened, angry — but no longer in pain.



ing had hurt it; stabbing had not. Just as Ed Smith had said. She nodded.

Then she got up and stood at the door, listening.

The hallway outside was completely silent.

Carefully, slowly, she drew the bolt and opened the door a crack and peered out.

The hallway was empty.

She stepped out, checked carefully both ways, and made her way, step by step, downstairs. The front door was open, and she saw no sign of the other two nightmare people.

She closed the door and hurried to the kitchen, where she fished a good, strong carving knife from the drawer by the stove.

Thus armed, she searched the whole house, top to bottom.

They were really gone.

Maybe her bluffing about booby-traps and razors had helped, but it had been the sound of their companion's pain that had sent them fleeing. Cowards!

Well, she told herself, they were gone now.

Except, of course, for the one that had ruined her shower curtain, the one that lay squirming in the bathtub, shouting obscenities at her.

She had that one.

She had wanted a chance at one of them, had wanted her share of revenge. Providing a base for the men, cooking their meals and keeping watch by day, that was all very well, and undoubtedly helped the war effort, so to speak, but she had wanted a chance at one herself, all the same.

She had hoped for the one that had gotten Kate, but this one would do.

Knife in hand, she went back into the bathroom.

Chapter Twelve:

After the Fire

1.

When Khalil turned off the engine they both heard it — something was wailing.

The two men looked at each other. Then Smith opened his door.

“Come on,” he said, swinging his crutches out.



Khalil climbed out, and led the way up to the porch. They moved slowly, step by step, sweeping the lawn and shrubbery with Smith's flashlight.

Everything seemed peaceful — except that inside the house something was screaming and weeping wildly.

And all the downstairs lights were on, even though it was well after one in the morning.

The noise didn't seem human — but then, it probably wasn't.

"Damn, I wonder what the neighbors think!" Smith muttered, as he awkwardly tried to mount the porch steps. He had had little practice using crutches; it had been a long, long time since he'd broken any bones, and he had never before done anything like burning his foot this badly.

Khalil rang the bell.

"Who is it?" Annie's voice called a moment later.

"It is Khalil Saad," he answered.

"Oh," Annie called, "I wonder, could you come to the front window and draw a little blood, please?"

Up until now, the standard procedure had been to open the front door and draw a few drops of blood there. Nobody had thought it was necessary to keep the door closed and use the window.

That didn't mean it was a bad idea. Khalil looked at Smith, who tried to shrug and almost fell. They both made their way to the window.

Smith leaned on one crutch while he fished out his switchblade, then jabbed his left little finger and held it up where Annie could see it. It seemed a little stupid to be deliberately wounding himself like this when he was practically held together with bandages already, but he obliged his hostess.

Annie smiled at the sight of his blood, then looked expectantly at Khalil.

Khalil took the knife from Smith and pricked his own finger, reopening a wound he had already used several times.

Annie nodded. "Be right there!" she called through the glass.

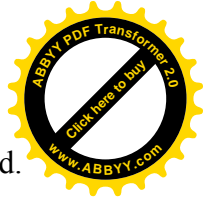
A moment later the door opened, admitting them.

As they stepped inside Annie started to say something about the crutches, and Smith started to ask about the now-clearly-audible screaming, but Khalil cut them both off.

"Mrs. McGowan," he said, "If you would please?" He held out the switchblade.

Annie grimaced, but she took the knife and stuck herself, piercing the scab on one finger.

Blood flowed redly.



He handed Smith the knife; he accepted it and put it back in his pocket, and all three of them relaxed.

“Annie,” Smith asked, as he closed the front door, “What’s the noise?”

“Oh, let me show you!” she said, clearly proud of herself. “It’s upstairs.”

Smith was in no condition for climbing stairs. After several attempts, Khalil assisted him up the stairs, leaving the crutches in the foyer.

2.

Khalil and Smith stared down at the thing in the tub, Smith leaning heavily on Khalil’s shoulder.

The creature’s chest was sunken in, leaving a cavity roughly the size and shape of a football. Its T-shirt had been cut open and folded back, and the human skin beneath had been stripped off. Its feet, too, were bare of both shoes and skin.

The rest of it was wrapped in the shredded remains of a thick green plastic shower curtain, bound up tightly with loops and loops of picture wire around the legs, neck, and shoulders. Elsewhere, long strips of white adhesive tape and tan package tape criss-crossed the plastic. Its arms were bound behind it — underneath it, now. Fluffy green towels were wrapped around its head and stuffed in its mouth.

The green wrapping made it look something like a gigantic ear of corn, still in the husk, with the towels forming the stem — but the grey feet didn’t look much like tassels, and the grey chest didn’t fit. It was as if the ear inside the husk had rotted away from within.

Except that rotted or not, it was moving. It twitched, and tossed its head from side to side, and it kept up an amazingly loud high-pitched moaning, despite the gag, that set Smith’s teeth on edge.

“It had your voice, Mr. Smith,” Annie said, smiling proudly. “I suppose it’s the one that was after you originally.”

Smith glanced at her, startled.

“Really?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Annie said, nodding. “That’s how it got in. It had your voice.”

“What did...” Smith began. He stopped, and asked, “You cut out that black thing, the heart?”

“That’s right.”

“But you didn’t eat it?” he persisted.

“Not yet,” Annie admitted. “I just couldn’t. Not raw, not all slimy the way it was.”

“But ... where is it, then?” Smith asked.

Annie said, “Down in the kitchen.”



He turned back to the tub. “And it’s still alive?”

Annie nodded. “Has been for hours,” she said.

Smith shuddered; he felt suddenly queasy.

“Has it been screaming the whole time?” he asked.

“Oh, no, not really,” Annie told him. “Just sometimes. It’s not happy, of course, but it hasn’t screamed the whole time.”

Smith nodded. “I see,” he said uneasily. He reached down and pulled the towels away from its face.

It looked up at him from red, inhuman eyes. The skin on its face hung in tatters.

“You!” it said, in a hoarse imitation of Smith’s own voice.

Smith nodded. “Yup, me,” he agreed.

“You,” it said, “I came here for you.”

“I thought you might,” Smith said, “But I wasn’t expecting it to be tonight.”

It made an indescribable noise.

“You left us a note at the Samaans’ house,” Smith said.

It nodded, wary.

“You said something about itching?”

“Yes,” it said, “The skins itch. They ... we’re grown to fit. Each of us grows to fit a particular skin, and any other skin will itch, always. It’s horrible.”

Smith blinked. “But the skins wear out,” he said.

The thing nodded. “I know,” it said.

“But that means that eventually, you’ll *all* be wearing itchy, wrong skins.”

“I *know*,” it said.

Smith shook his head. “Bad design,” he said.

The thing jerked about, but said nothing.

“You know,” Smith said, “I think that there’s a lot of bad design in you things. The way you breed, where it takes two weeks and it can be aborted with a stomach pump if you catch it early enough, that’s not really very efficient. And you’re dependent on your stolen skins for a lot, and you aren’t any



stronger than some of your prey — you rely a lot on surprise and ignorance, don't you?"

The creature blinked up at him.

"I know you can slip through narrow places, and change your shape somewhat, but it's not easy, is it? I mean, you can't just melt down and slide away under a door."

"Not..." the thing said, then hesitated.

"Go on," Smith said, "What good do you think it's going to do to hold back? We've got your heart down in the kitchen — or is it so much a heart as the larva you grew from?"

The thing managed to shrug at that. "Name's not important," it said.

"You were saying, about shape-changing?"

"Only ... can't do it in sunlight. And can't do it if we know someone's watching."

Smith smiled. "That's why you couldn't get through my window that first night, because I was watching you? Shit, that's as stupid as vampires and garlic."

The nightmare just stared up at him.

Smith bent down a little farther.

"You know," he said, "One of you told me that you're supposed to be the next step for supernatural evil, the predator that can finally wipe out humanity. I think that's bull. I think you're an evolutionary dead end, just like vampires — except I'd bet my shirt you guys aren't going to last any three hundred years."

He straightened up and turned away.

"Come on," he said, gesturing to Khalil and Annie, "Let's go."

As Smith worked his way back downstairs, one step at a time, he asked Annie, "What did you do with its heart?"

"Oh," she said, "Well, I told you, I couldn't face eating it raw, so I sautéed it with butter and mushrooms and onions. I was just starting on it when you two got here — that was what got the screaming started again. Would you two care to join me?"

Smith gagged and almost lost his balance.

"*Sautéed?*" he asked.

Annie nodded.

Smith was appalled by the thought — but when Annie served out the portions he suppressed his reservations and ate his share.

He had to admit that although it still tasted horrible, it was better than eating them raw.



3.

“You *know* we didn’t get them all,” Buckley said angrily, “And we probably never will, now. That was a damn fool stunt, blowing up the place like that. Sure, it messed them up, and we got a lot of them in the confusion, and we probably mostly kept them from breeding *this* month, but now we don’t know where the hell they all are!” He glared at Smith.

“We didn’t know all of them anyway,” Smith pointed out, sitting stiffly so as not to aggravate any injuries. “They were already slipping away, one or two at a time.”

“I know,” Buckley said, “But now they’re *all* gone!”

“How many got away?” Smith asked.

Buckley shrugged. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Not counting larvae — and we have no idea how many of those are out there — my best count is that about forty, maybe forty-five are unaccounted for.”

“Less than a third of what they started with,” Smith pointed out.

“Yeah, but dammit, I still should run you in,” Buckley said. “That was the messiest piece of arson I’ve ever seen in my life!”

Smith shrugged, and grimaced as the movement pulled at a scab. “I’m an amateur,” he said. “What can I say?”

Buckley made a disgusted gesture and stopped talking.

“What are we going to do now?” Maddie Newell asked. She and her sister and Dr. Frauenthal had called up, wanting to talk to Smith about the nightmare people, and when, in the course of the discussion, they had learned about the meeting that Buckley had demanded they had invited themselves along.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Smith said, “But I think I’ve done my share. I’ve eaten God knows how many of those things — I’ve probably got an ulcer from them, and my digestion’s never going to be the same. I’ve been cut and burned and beaten, I’ve lost my job — I’ve had it. I’m leaving. I’m going to get out while I still have enough money for the fare, and I’m going somewhere a long way away from here — Boston or California or somewhere, where I can find work.”

Khalil shifted. “I am leaving, too,” he said. “This area is not good for me any more.”

George Brayton, seated on the far side of the room, nodded in agreement. Smith had called him that morning and asked him to come over and join the party. With Buckley and the Newells coming, it had seemed like a good idea to get as many of the people who knew about the monsters as possible.

“But there are still some of those things out there!” Alice Newell shouted.

Smith shrugged. “Not my problem,” he said. “Look around, will you?” He waved an arm to take in everyone in the crowded room. The Newell girls and Maggie Devanoy sat on the couch; Khalil and Lieutenant Buckley stood in either side of the archway to the dining room. Dr. Frauenthal leaned against one arm of the chair George sat in. Annie McGowan, as hostess, stood anxiously to one side, watching in case her guests needed anything. “You all know about them,” Smith said. “You all know how to kill



them, what they can do — it's not my problem any more."

"Mr. Smith," Dr. Frauenthal said, "After what I've heard, and having patched you back together the night before last, I can't deny you've done your part, but how are *we* supposed to find them all and kill them? They could be anywhere by now. And we can't tell anybody — they won't believe us."

"Show 'em the one in your bottle," Smith suggested.

"I can't," Frauenthal said. "It died, once the moon was past full and it had no host, and it rotted away to nothing, same as the adults do. I tried to analyze the remains, but it's just a mix of normal organic waste."

"Can't we tell the newspapers?" Maddie asked. "Couldn't we go on TV, warn everybody about them? If people everywhere knew what they were and how to kill them, they wouldn't last long."

Buckley shook his head. "I thought of that a week ago," he said. "I've talked to reporters, even staged a demonstration for one. Even if they believe me, they can't get it into print or on the air. I'd need to convince not just the reporter, but his editor, and *his* editor, and even then, if they did publish it, nobody would believe it. And even if we found one somewhere — and right now we don't know where any of them are, remember — even if we killed one live on TV, they'd all just call it a hoax. This is something people don't believe just from hearing about it or reading it or seeing it on TV. You've got to see one of those things in person, get a look at them under their disguises, to believe it."

That speech was greeted with several nods acknowledging its truth.

"*All* the papers refused?" Dr. Frauenthal asked. "You don't think *any* of them would go for it?"

Buckley shrugged. "Maybe I could sell it to the tabloids, but nobody believes them anyway. It'd just be another 'Space Aliens Stole My Lunch' story. Something like this, it's just not acceptable. People won't believe it."

"Nobody believed in vampires in 1939," Maggie pointed out, "but somebody killed the last one anyway."

"Sure," George said, "Everybody knew how to kill them from all the stories. I mean, once you come up against a vampire, and you can't disbelieve any more, it's easy enough. You find its coffin and drive a stake through its heart; everyone knows that."

"But nobody except us knows how to kill nightmare people," Smith said, "and I don't know what we can do about it, if we can't get it all in the newspapers."

"I never learned about vampires from the newspapers," Maddie said. "What if you wrote stories about them, the way people wrote stories about vampires? Not news stories; books. Horror stories. What if you pretended it was all just fiction?"

"Yeah," Alice said. "It wouldn't matter if people believed it, as long as they knew what to do when they met one."

"That might work, you know?" Buckley said, considering.



“But who’s going to write these stories?” Annie asked. “It won’t do any good to write them unless they get published somewhere.”

No one had a good answer to that at first. After a moment’s silence, Smith said, “I’m no writer. I’m a computer programmer. I don’t even write tech manuals.”

George said, hesitantly, “I used to play poker with a writer, a guy named Lawrence Watt-Evans. He lives over in Gaithersburg.”

“What kind of a writer?” Buckley asked. “I mean, is this a guy who writes articles for *Popular Mechanics*? That’s not what we’re looking for, if he is.”

“No,” George said, “He writes novels. Science fiction, mostly. Makes his living at it.”

Smith shrugged. “Hey, if he agrees, we’ll tell him everything that’s happened, and maybe he can write it all up as a novel.”

George nodded. “I’ll give him a call,” he said, “And see if he agrees.”

4.

Obviously, I agreed.

I don’t usually do stuff like this. People have tried to get me to write up their story ideas for them before, and generally I’m just not interested. I have plenty of ideas of my own, and usually the people who try this have a really peculiar idea of what the story is worth and how the money should be divided. Ideas are cheap; it’s turning them into stories and getting them down on paper that’s the hard work.

This wasn’t the usual situation, though. I don’t usually have some guy I played poker with a couple of times turning up on my doorstep at ten p.m. one night with his friend who has “something important” to tell me, where the friend is on crutches and has more bandage than bare skin showing.

I wasn’t busy, and the kids were in bed, and I liked George when I played cards with him, so I agreed to listen.

It wasn’t the usual situation. The people who want me to write their stories for them don’t usually say the money doesn’t matter, I can keep it all, so long as the story gets published.

And nobody ever suggested a story to me that was anything like this one before.

Of course, the story isn’t like anything I’ve ever written before, either; as George said, I’m a science fiction writer, and I’ve never written anything set here and now, in contemporary Maryland, before. My wife Julie said she didn’t think I should do it. She pointed out that I was under contract for other stuff, which was certainly true.

I figured it couldn’t hurt to give it a try, though, so long as I got something in writing that these people weren’t going to sue me for stealing their story. I didn’t make any promises that it would be published, or *how* it would be published if it ever was.

I didn’t really believe it, of course. Neither did Julie. We didn’t know how this guy had gotten all



newed up and burnt, but we didn't think it was done by monsters.

But it was a good story.

So I agreed, and I wrote it all out just the way Ed Smith told it to me. It took a couple of nights to get all of it straight; the second night they brought Khalil along, just to prove he existed. Nice guy. Very quiet.

I still didn't really believe it, and I still don't, but I took what they told me and wrote it up as the novel you've just read. I changed a couple of the names, just in case; you won't find a real Lieutenant Daniel Buckley on the Montgomery County police force, or a real Dr. Frauenthal practicing around here. Wherever I needed a new name I picked one from a list of the survivors of the *Titanic* — it seemed appropriate — but most names I didn't change.

The apartment complex that burned down last August wasn't really called Bedford Mills, either. That was the only other change I made.

I didn't alter any of the events; as Smith said, you never know what little detail might turn out to be important to someone. I tried to tell them well, but just as they happened, nothing added or removed.

It took awhile to write the whole thing out, but I did it, and now I've found a publisher for it, who'll buy it as a horror novel, and I'm starting to feel a little guilty. After all, all I did was write down what they told me.

I think Ed and George and Khalil ought to get a cut. After what happened here, they could probably use the money.

But I don't have an address for Ed Smith, and there are a hundred Smiths in every phone book. He said he was going to California, but a letter to "Edward J. Smith, California" isn't going to do the job.

George Brayton and Khalil Saad have both moved away, as well, and neither of them left a forwarding address. Annie McGowan won't talk to me; she's retiring to Florida, and says she just wants to forget the whole thing. Maggie Devanoy's gone off to school somewhere. Neither one will admit to knowing where Smith went, or George, or Khalil. Neither will anyone else I've talked to.

So Ed, I'm holding half the money for you, but I haven't been able to reach you, or George, or Khalil.

Half this money is yours.

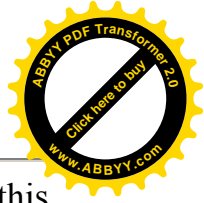
Just tell me where to send it.

— Lawrence Watt-Evans

Gaithersburg, Maryland

About the Author

Lawrence Watt-Evans is the author of more than two dozen novels, and more than a hundred short stories. He served as president of the Horror Writers Association from 1994 to 1996. Further information can be found at <http://www.watt-evans.com>.



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