

Bleed Magic



Four Stories
by
Lucy A. Snyder

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The Dogs of Summer

Betty McCoy was trying to keep her mind off her aching shoulder when she spotted a pack of dogs clustered in the kudzu at the side of the road a hundred yards ahead. Their forms were strange and indistinct in the shimmering heat. Three big black beasts, Rottweilers or maybe Dobermans, were tearing at something, and a half-dozen smaller mutts circled skittishly, metal tags flashing in the sun. She touched the brake to get a better look as she passed.

In a flash-exposure instant, she saw the deer buried under the canine mob, eyes terrified white, foreleg thrashing. The Rottweiler worrying its neck raised a cinderblock head and barked at her, baring blood-streaked teeth. Its mad, glazed eyes seemed to meet hers, and suddenly she was back in the kitchen, Joe screaming in her face as he twisted her arm and forced her down, down to the yellow linoleum.

She made herself look away, but every bruise on her body was throbbing anew. The smells in the car, road tar and pine and Meals-on-Wheels chicken, suddenly nauseated her, so she turned up the air conditioner. The cool flute of air against her face made her feel a little better.

She picked up the clipboard and stared at the information for the next senior on her delivery route. It was a new name. Mr. Ian Dando, half a mile up on Thorny Creek Road. She read the words over and over, a mantra to dam the fear washing through her mind. Mr. Ian Dando. She hoped he'd be nice.

He probably would be; the old folks out in the country were

almost always glad for company. It was the ones in town who bitched about the food and complained if you were even a few minutes late. The girl who took his call said Mr. Dando sounded pretty friendly.

She turned off the highway onto Thorny Creek. The road ramped sharply and narrowed. The pine trees were thick and tall, leaving only a narrow strip of blue sky visible. She felt as though they were closing down on her.

The road took a sharp left, and she came upon an old Airstream trailer set in a clearing. The shiny aluminum was mottled with gray corrosion and patched with flattened Coke cans in a few places. A bright little garden ran around the hulk, mums and marigolds growing between tomato stakes, melon vines and stubby red cabbages. She pulled in front of the trailer, her tires crunching on gray gravel.

The trailer's door opened and a bald old man with a cane hobbled down the wooden steps and waved at her. His arms were nearly skeletal, but his white undershirt was stretched tight over a barrel chest. He coughed into a gnarled hand, and she wondered if he might have emphysema.

When she opened her door, the air hit her like a bucket of hot water. She was drenched in sweat in the ten seconds it took her to reach the steps with the big Styrofoam clamshell of food.

"Mr. Dando? Hi, I'm Betty from Meals-On-Wheels. Got some baked chicken for you, and corn on the cob, greens, couple of rolls, and a big brownie. How's that sound?"

"Marvelous! Come in, come in. It's far too hot to be outside, eh?" He was definitely not from Clarksville—he had an odd, lilting, not-quite-British accent. "Care for some iced tea?"

She suddenly realized she was intensely thirsty. Besides, Nattie Peters was the only person left on her route, and she never minded if Betty was a little late. "Sure, that would be nice, Mr. Dando."

She followed him into the Airstream and was surprised by an absolutely frigid blast of air. When her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she saw a tidy bunk bed and chest of drawers, a big

refrigerator, two red naugahyde armchairs and about a thousand books. Some of the books were arranged in standard bookcases, others set up on makeshift shelves of planks and bricks. Where there were no shelves, faded opera and circus posters covered the walls. A shiny new Coleman air conditioner labored in the window beside the bed. On the whole, the place was far cleaner than most old folks' trailers. She suspected he hadn't been living there for more than a year.

"Where you from?" she asked.

"Wales, originally, but I've been traveling since then, mainly in Canada. I decided it was time for a change, so I came down here. Unfortunately, the climate doesn't suit me." He hobbled over to the air conditioner and gave it a loving pat. "So I traded my truck for this and the refrigerator. I can't bear to be hot, especially now that my body is so weak."

Betty frowned; most seniors *liked* warmth, since cold aggravated ailments like bad circulation and arthritis. Maybe living up North had turned him into a polar bear. She guessed that he must be racking up a huge electric bill. "Have you talked to the people at the power co-op to see if you can get a subsidy to help you with your utilities?"

He waved away her question and headed for the fridge. "The bills are high, but that doesn't matter. My body will be dead by the end of this month. Would you like a sprig of mint in your tea?"

"Mint? Yeah, I guess." She paused uncertainly. "What do you mean you'll be . . . gone?"

Dando pulled a pitcher and a stalk of fresh mint out of the fridge. Cauliflowers of frost covered the plastic walls. "Oh, don't look at me like that! This body has lived a long time, it's time for it to die." He took two tumblers down from a cabinet. "Please, sit down; sit down."

She took the naugahyde chair nearest the door. He finished pouring the tea and brought her a tumbler. She sipped it, found it was surprisingly sweet, flavored with peach nectar.

"Have you seen a doctor?" she asked.

He lowered himself into the opposite chair, smiling at her. For

the first time she noticed his eyes: a deep, gleaming gray like polished granite. As she continued to stare at him, she realized the whites of his eyes were clear and smooth with none of the yellow nodules and tangled bloodshot webs that marred most other seniors' eyes.

"I have no interest in doctors' opinions. It's time for my body to die, simple as that." He took a sip of his own tea. "So, what do you do when you're not bringing us old folks our supper, Betty? Are you going to school?"

"No, I got my GED after I dropped out of high school a couple of years ago, and I've been doing that housewife thing ever since." She made herself smile.

He raised an eyebrow. "No college?"

"No." She felt a lump rise in her throat. "They keep raising the tuition, and Joe just got laid off at the mill."

"But there's always loans . . . or perhaps someone in your family could help you?"

She shook her head. "Bein' in debt's kinda against my religion, and I haven't got any family left, none that would give me money, anyway."

Her parents had died in a car wreck when she was sixteen. She'd escaped the fatal trip because she was sick in bed with mono. Afterward, she was too numb from shock and fever to realize that when her mother's people came, they'd find her daddy's hunting altar in the basement . . .

No. She couldn't waste time wishing her past had been different. She should just be glad that she was alive, that she had Joe, that he'd gotten her away from her mother's big brother. Uncle Robert had taken one look at the candles, incense, animal skulls and rune-inscribed staghorn in the basement, and decided his dearly departed brother-in-law was a Satanic priest. She should just be glad Joe freed her from the endless "counseling" and prayer sessions and hateful high school rumors.

She managed to blink back the tears welling in her eyes and shrugged. "Even if I had the money, it's an hour drive to the college. I wouldn't have time."

Blood Magic

“Ah.” Dando leaned forward and cocked his head to one side, peering at her. “That’s quite a bruise you have.”

Her hand flew to her jaw. She’d put a lot of cover stick on it that morning, but the makeup must have sweated off. “Yeah, I had an accident . . . I was on a stepladder in the kitchen and, um, fell.”

He leaned back and gazed at her over his tumbler. “A fall is never an accident. I’d throw out such an unlucky device.”

“Hey, I saw the darnedest thing on my way over here,” she said, nervously picking at a hangnail. “A pack of dogs, and they’d taken down a deer. They had tags; they were somebody’s *pets*, and they were acting like wolves or something. Can you imagine?”

“It’s probably the heat,” he said. “Animals will do bloody things when the mercury rises.”

“Um, yeah.” She glanced down at her watch. “I’ve got another delivery to make . . . thanks a lot for the tea.”

“You are most certainly welcome.” After two tries, he got to his feet. “Come by anytime.”

When she got to her car and looked in the rearview mirror, she saw that not even a hint of blue was showing through her makeup.

When she went home, Joe was sitting in the living room watching a talk show. Four empty Miller longnecks sat in a partial pyramid on the coffee table in front of him, and the floor was littered with newspaper. The house felt stuffy, but at least it was a few degrees cooler than the swampy air outside.

“Bout time you got back. What’s for dinner?” He didn’t look away from the TV.

She hurried into the kitchen, her mouth suddenly dry. “I was thinking some fish sticks, greens, maybe some mashed potatoes?”

“You feed them old folks better’n you feed me.”

She paused, feeling sick to her stomach. “Is there something you’d rather have, honey?”

She heard him get off the couch, and she wished she hadn’t said anything. He lurched into the kitchen, shirttail hanging out,

eyes bleary, fist clenching a half-empty longneck.

“Is there somethin’ you’d rather have?” he mimicked nastily. “You tell me. I been poundin’ the pavement all day lookin’ for a new job, out in all this heat, gettin’ doors slammed in my face, and then this damn *poodle* bites my leg down on Main, and I come home and you want to feed me *fish sticks*? What the hell kinda meal is that?”

“There’s some chops in the freezer I can thaw out?” Betty wished she could disappear into the linoleum.

He stared at her, then looked away, cheeks flushing pink under black stubble. “Aw, Jesus. I’m sorry.” He wiped his brow with the beer bottle and gazed down at his boots. “I’m bein’ such a jerk. My momma taught me better’n to act like this.”

He set the beer on the counter and pulled her to him. He gently pushed her long red hair aside and softly kissed the nape of her neck. A shiver of pleasure ran down her spine, and she felt her fear melting away.

“I didn’t mean to hit you last night.” He hugged her close, rocking her back and forth like she was a little girl. “But you *know* how I feel about you working. I mean, volunteerin’s fine, it’s real *sweet*, you fetchin’ the old folks their dinner, but supportin’ us is *my* job. My momma never had to work, and neither are you.”

“I know, but the bills . . . maybe we could find a lawyer, and try to get my folks’ property back from my uncle?”

His grip tightened. “We don’t need nothin’ from that old preacher. I’ll take care of everything.”

After they dined on microwaved fish and spinach, Betty went out back to feed Rufus, Joe’s schnauzer. She found the little dog gnawing the ears off a dead rabbit in the tall, dry grass by his doghouse. When she tried to refill his water dish, he stiffly straddled the bunny corpse and snarled at her as if she were a stranger.

The next day the front page of the local paper was full of stories about sunstroke and mad dogs. Five cows had died in the fields

from the heat, and two small children wound up in the hospital after their mother left them in a supermarket parking lot. A less fortunate child lost a foot to the family German shepherd and roving dogs killed a prize sheep. The weatherman predicted a high of 100°F with sixty percent humidity.

The air in Mr. Dando's trailer was deliciously frigid, and she gratefully accepted a frosty glass of blackberry tea and settled into the naugahyde chair.

"I saw that dog pack again today, less than a half a mile from here," she said. "Maybe you ought to move into the retirement home in town, just for a little while?"

He shrugged. His torso seemed bigger today, the white undershirt tighter, and his hands shook as he put the tea back in the fridge. "I've spent most of my life around dogs, hunted with them when I was a boy. I'd rather my body ended up part of a dog than part of a worm. To be honest, it worries me most that I've gotten so weak." He raised his knobby hands, flexed his creaking fingers in front of his face. "I thought I'd be able to take care of myself until the end."

"Is . . . is it cancer?" she asked.

He paused. "I have a growth, yes."

"I really think you ought to see a doctor."

"No, this must run its course. If you want to help me, honor my wishes. Don't tell anyone I'm dying."

He gazed at her thoughtfully and it suddenly occurred to her that he must have been very handsome when he was a younger man.

"You are truly a lovely girl. Has he hit you again?"

Betty was shaken out of her reverie. "What? No. No, Joe's not like that . . . he's never hit me before. I mean, yeah, he's got a temper, but if he didn't, he never would have stood up to my uncle the way he did. He's been under a lot of strain since he lost his job. And he don't like hot weather, it puts him in a mood. It's . . . it's my fault, I haven't been a very good wife to him lately, I guess . . ."

Dando shook his head sadly. "It's a terrible thing when a man

stops cherishing his love. You've had more than your share of bad luck, haven't you?"

He got up and opened the top drawer of his bureau. "Consider this a good luck charm." He pulled a small deerskin bag out of the drawer and held it out to her.

She took the bag and pulled open the tiny drawstrings. Inside was a ring of polished staghorn. When she held it up to the light, she saw it was decorated with an exquisitely detailed bas-relief frieze of men and dogs running through a forest. It was the kind of thing her father might have carved for her.

She felt the old, hollow ache in her chest, and before she could swallow her emotions, hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

"What's the matter?" Dando asked, eyes dark with worry.

"I'm sorry; I just cry sometimes." Embarrassed, she wiped her face with the hem of her blouse, but the tears kept coming. "It's a beautiful ring, it reminds me of my daddy. He made knives for a living, jewelry, too. Whatever he made, he always worked in a little bit of staghorn somewhere. I just never got over him and my ma dyin' like they did, and then everything that happened afterward . . ."

Dando passed her a box of tissues. "What happened to you?"

"It ain't so much what happened to me as what happened to my daddy," she said. "In '65, he went to Vietnam and got the last two fingers of his right hand blown off. Ma said he couldn't use it properly for a long time, couldn't do any carving or smithing, and it just drove him nuts. This was a couple of years before I was born, and I'm kinda glad, because Ma said he wasn't real pleasant to be around. She said he kept fuming about all the hippies who were running to Canada to dodge the draft, and then one day he up and hopped on a bus to Quebec. She was just frantic, 'cause she was sure he was gonna kill someone.

"But he came back two weeks later, and he was his old self again, except that deer hunting had become a religious thing for him. He made his own muzzle-loader and started casting these special slugs with runes on 'em. By the time I was born, he had this little table with candles and bones and stuff in the basement.

Took me a while to figure out that everybody's dad didn't have a huntin' altar. When I asked him about it, he said that when he was up in Canada, he met a man who got him in touch with his Pagan spiritual roots."

She laughed sadly and rubbed her thumb across the edge of Dando's ring. "Too bad that Canadian didn't turn him on to praying to the Water Spirits, or maybe my daddy'd still be around. He and Ma drowned five years ago when their car got washed into a creek during a flash flood. The police contacted my uncle Robert, who's the Pentecostal minister up in Elliston. It was my fault everything hit the fan like it did; if I'd been thinkin' straight, I would've hidden my daddy's stuff, made sure my uncle didn't find a single bone in the house. But I didn't, and when Robert saw the basement, he just went ballistic. I tried to tell him it was just harmless superstition, but he was sure he'd stumbled onto a Satanic cult. Don't get me wrong; he's basically a nice guy and he means well, but the altar completely fed every paranoid religious delusion he ever had.

"He hustled me up to Elliston and put me in the private Christian high school, convinced he had to de-program me from all this horrible Satanic brainwashing. He kept trying to get me to bear witness against my father, which of course was the *last* thing I was gonna do. Jesus, he doesn't even have kids of his own; he just had no clue, you know? And then he went and told one of the teachers about my 'problem.' After that, everybody knew and the other kids treated me like some kind of freak.

"I finally ran away, got as far as the local Denny's. I was sittin' there drinkin' a Coke and tryin' not to start cryin' when Joe came in. First time I ever saw him; he was wearin' tight black Levis and his shirt was open. The boy *really* worked out. I was sittin' there thinkin' he was probably on the football team at the public high school and probably datin' some gorgeous cheerleader, when he saw me and came over to my table! My heart 'bout stopped when he asked if he could sit with me. We started talking, and I found out he was nineteen and working at the hardware store. He was so nice and had the sweetest smile! After a while, he offered me a

ride home, and, of course, I accepted.

“We started seeing each other as often as I could sneak out of the house. We’d been dating a few months when my uncle caught on, and he followed us when Joe picked me up down the block from the house. We hadn’t been in Joe’s apartment a minute when my uncle started pounding on the front door. I thought we were dead for sure, but Joe opened the door and shouted him down, yelling ‘I love Betty, and she’s gonna be my wife, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let you keep her locked up!’ When Joe was done, my uncle looked shocked and sort of shrunken, and in a way I felt sorry for the old guy, but at the same time I was just completely tickled that Joe had defended me like that. So the next day we got the rest of my stuff, and Joe and I went to the J.P. and got married. We moved down here, and I haven’t seen my uncle since,” she finished.

“It would seem your story would have had a ‘happily ever after’ were it not for the current turn of events,” Dando said. “Well, I hope my ring brings you better fortune.”

“Yes, thanks, it really is beautiful . . .”

Betty felt a pang as she realized that she probably shouldn’t have accepted it. The old man had so little, and as he got sicker he’d need every bit of money he could get. Oh well, she’d be back, and would be able to slip it back into his bureau. She tried the ring on the third finger of her right hand, and it went on as smoothly as if it had been made for her.

When she got home, she found Joe in his underwear, kneeling over the innards of their living room air conditioner, furiously pounding on the pieces with a hammer. A half-dozen empty beer bottles were scattered in a loose circle around him.

“This thing’s a piece of crap!” he screamed, throwing the hammer across the room. It smashed into the wall above the couch, punching a hole in the plaster before it fell to the cushions. “Everything’s a piece of crap! The truck’s friggin’ water pump blows when I’m downtown, and I don’t have enough for a cab and I gotta walk home and when I get here the damn air conditioner don’t work!”

He stood and savagely kicked an empty bottle in her direction, narrowly missing her shin. "I shouldn't have to walk home in this kind of heat! Why the hell weren't you here to pick me up? A man ought to be able to depend on his wife!"

She took a step back, bile rising in her throat. "You can depend on me, Joe, if I'd known you were stranded—"

"You're stayin' home from now on! No more of that Meals-on-Wheels crap!" He stared at the wreckage around him. "I need the car more than you do anyway. Damn, what a mess. Why don't you clean this place up? I'm gettin' a beer."

"Clean it up yourself," she muttered between her teeth.

"What'd you say?"

"Uh, nothing." She ran her fingers through her hair, fear squelching her spark of anger. "Nothing."

"No, I think you was sassin' me—hey, what's that on your hand?" He grabbed her wrist and stared at the horn ring. "Where'd you get this?"

"It's nothing!" She managed to pull her arm free and stumbled toward the hall. "Just something one of the seniors gave to me."

"Oh yeah? One of them old men been giving you presents, is that it?" He stepped toward her, hands balling into fists. "Or maybe he ain't so old. I'm startin' to wonder exactly how you been spendin' your time."

"No. Please, Joe, you're scaring me." She started to back away.

"I'm gonna do more than scare you if you don't tell me who you been with!"

She looked up into his eyes and saw nothing but animal rage. She bolted for the front door. Joe caught her before she got it open, grabbed her neck and jerked her off her feet.

He dragged her into the kitchen and threw her against the stove.

"Who is he?" he screamed.

Her desperate hands found the frying pan on the back burner. She swung it into his jaw.

The whack of cracking bone both sickened and satisfied her. He stumbled backward, eyes wide in shock. He fell to the floor

and did not move, blood spilling from his open mouth.

“Joe?” she stammered, stepping closer to him. His broad chest still rose and fell.

She looked down at the cold black skillet, then dropped it as if it burned her. Panicked, she ran to their bedroom and threw some of her clothes into a big suitcase, then grabbed her purse and ran out to her little Ford Fiesta.

Her mind was churning as she tore out of the driveway. She realized she should have called the police. What if she’d hurt him badly? What if he died?

Before she realized what she was doing, she was on her Meals-on-Wheels route, heading down the highway to Thorny Creek. To Mr. Dando’s.

Well, why not? she thought, calming down a little. No one would think to look all the way up there. The old man probably needed a little extra help anyway, and at least she’d stay cool.

She arrived at the Airstream as the sun was sinking, lighting the cloudy horizon in delicate reds and purples. She parked her car behind the trailer so nobody would see it from the road.

Dando didn’t look surprised when he opened the door.

“Come in . . . what’s happened?”

“Uh, well, me and Joe had a fight, and I need a place to stay for a little while.”

“Certainly. You can stay as long as you like.”

“Can I use your phone? I need to call Meals and tell them I won’t be coming in . . .”

Betty was surprised by how quickly she fell into a routine there. During the day, she’d help him as he pattered in his garden, finally doing all the work herself when he became too weak. She didn’t mind, though; it was a nice change to be growing food instead of simply preparing it. She liked the smells of the earth, the way the marigolds and tulips shone in the sunlight. Despite the drought, the garden produced plenty of tomatoes and cucumbers. And since Betty was able to go to the next town for supplemental groceries, Dando called Meal-on-Wheels and had

them end their deliveries.

There was no running water in the trailer, so Betty spent a good bit of time hauling water from or simply swimming in a small nearby lake. It was beautiful despite the heat, a pure blue sky every day and butterflies flitting through the thistle and primrose, cardinals and sparrows twittering in the pines above. Perch nipped at her toes as she swam. She worried a little about the feral dog packs (on a grocery run she spied a paper that said the canines had taken to attacking men and cattle alike) but Dando swore up and down that the dogs never bothered him.

Two weeks into her stay, Betty brushed through poison ivy as she was carrying a bucket of water back from the lake. Her right hand, the one that bore Dando's gift, was seemingly the only exposed part of her that was unaffected by the irritating oil. The old man seemed bemused by her attempts to swab calamine on the rash around her wedding band.

"Why not take the ring off to do that?" he asked.

"Don't think it would come off right now. Finger's too swollen." She winced as she tried to move the band off a broken blister. "And I couldn't, anyway."

"Why not?" He arched an eyebrow, seeming a little displeased.

"I . . . I just *can't*. It wouldn't be right. My momma never took her ring off, ever, and . . . Joe's still my husband. Even if I'm not with him."

She paused, feeling a lump rise in her throat. She *did* miss Joe, missed his smile and the way he used to wake her up with little kisses on her neck and shoulders. She wondered if he was okay, wondered if she'd hurt him very badly.

"This'll stay right where it is until he and I and a judge say it can come off," she finished.

"Or if one of you dies, I suppose."

She looked up at him. He gazed back, his gray eyes watchful, expression inscrutable. "Yeah. I guess it could come off then, too," she agreed uncomfortably.

After that, the old man's condition grew markedly worse. His torso swelled beyond the capacity of his ribs, and occasionally

she thought she could hear a faint cracking as they separated from his backbone and sternum. His breathing became more labored, and he was able to keep down less and less food.

He ran a monstrous fever, but seemed to suffer no chills, for he turned the air conditioner so high that Betty had to put on a sweater when she came in from the garden. His skin developed an unhealthy yellow pallor, and though she would not have thought it possible, his limbs lost even more flesh. Betty wanted desperately to take him to a hospital, but he insisted that he needed to die in peace.

It took her six days to realize that despite the fever and utter lack of bathing, he neither sweated nor stank. The only part of him she could smell was his breath, which carried with it a metallic sweet-sourness that reminded her of menstrual blood.

At night she imagined that his body was a great black coal radiating heat through the trailer. She slept on a folding canvas cot he'd found in his closet, fitfully at best. Sometimes Dando would let out a moan or start murmuring in some strange language.

If the old man's noises did not wake her, nightmares did. Joe would come to her in dreams, sometimes raging, other times turning into a huge black hound that chased her through the woods.

She'd wake with a start from the nightmares and think she heard dogs howling somewhere in the distance. She'd sit there shivering, sometimes crying, and Dando would lift his head and comfort her with soft words. In the darkness, he did not seem weak, and she could not find him grotesque.

Dando collapsed one evening near the end of July. His whole body began to twitch violently, arms and legs jerking, the misshapen bulge of his torso undulating.

She was chilled to the core of her soul when she heard the dogs howling outside.

"Help me get outside. The dogs have come to end this body."

"No, wait—"

“Do it!” he gasped. “It is necessary!”

Stomach cramping with fear, she half-carried him outside into the stifling darkness. The air was thick and smelled of ozone; a thunderstorm was on the way. She had just gotten him down the stairs when she heard a pickup truck coming up fast around the bend. Then she was blinded by the headlights, and the truck slid to a stop in the gravel in front of the trailer.

It was Joe.

She gasped in fright, clutching Dando’s arm. How in the world had her husband found her?

“I called him here,” the old man whispered. “Do not worry; things are in hand.”

“Betty . . . aw, Jesus, Betty, what are you doing out here?” Joe asked as he got out of the cab. He was shirtless, and his voice was slurred. At first she thought he might be drunk, but then she realized his jaw was wired mostly shut. “I’m not mad about what happened. I mean, I was bein’ a jerk, and you was scared . . . I promise, I won’t be like that again.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dando coughed. “Men like him only change for the worse.”

The wind started to rise, swirling dead leaves and grass around their feet. The howling dogs were getting closer, and Betty thought she heard thunder rumbling in the distance.

“Stay out of this, old man!” Joe ran his hands through his hair. “Dammit, it shouldn’t *be* like this . . . look, Betty, just get in the truck, and let’s go home, huh?”

“No. No, I can’t—”

“Yes, you *will!*” Joe roared. “You’re my wife, and you’re gonna get in my truck and come home *now!*”

A brilliant arc of lightning shattered the sky, and a hideous pain tore through her body. She doubled over, muscles cramping around bones that felt as if they were twisting out of their sockets. Dando’s ring glowed hot on her hand, and the pain ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Joe was screaming. He’d fallen to his hands and knees, his body shivering and twitching, face contorted in agony.

Before she could step toward him, lightning forked down from the sky with a deafening boom. The force of the near strike knocked her off her feet.

When she was able to get up, she saw Dando lying a few yards away, a smoking black gash running from his neck to his belly.

She hurried over to the old man, her husband momentarily forgotten. Dando began moaning and squirming . . . no, not him, but something *inside* his body.

She saw two small hands push through the wound. Before she knew what she was doing, she grasped the tiny arms and started to pull. There was a sickening shredding noise, and a gore-slick head broke through to the night air.

The boy wrestled out of the old man's body like a diver getting out of a bulky wet suit. Betty could do nothing but stare open-mouthed, shocked beyond nausea and fear.

He was about the size of a three-year-old, but he had the lean muscles of a young teenager. His eyes glowed with blue fire, and small horn buds poked through his wet hair. Even through the mess, he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Lightning crashed again, and the skies opened in a torrent of rain. The horned boy lifted his head and gave a wild, high cry.

The woods exploded with dogs. They came from behind trees, from under bushes, snarling black missiles. The boy stepped aside as a dozen of the summoned canines fell on Dando's shell, ripping and devouring great hunks of flesh.

Betty made herself look away, but thought she would faint when she saw her husband. The rest of the dogs were circling Joe, snarling but not attacking. Joe's limbs and neck were stretched impossibly long. His whole skull deformed and elongated as if bone had turned to rubber. Grunting in pain, he fell forward onto his hands into the mud. In two heartbeats, fingers and toes retracted into hooves. His blue jeans split at the seams and fell away. White fur sprouted on his sweating flesh, pushing his black hair out of his scalp as horns forked out of his skull.

The white stag reared up and leaped through the canine circle.

The dogs dining on Dando's corpse had grown huge and black,

eyes glowing with the boy's blue fire. The boy gave another cry and leaped onto the back of the largest hound.

The hunt was on.

Howling with the wind, the dogs raced after the stag. The ring burned hot on Betty's hand, and she could not help but follow. She ran after the hounds into the black forest, branches and rain lashing her face. Her legs carried her faster and faster 'til her throat tasted like raw meat and she was sure her lungs would burst.

The dogs' madness was a live thing in the air, and every gasping breath she took infected her heart, her mind, her very bones. As the electric urge swelled in her, she ceased to feel pain, ceased to feel anything but lust for the kill.

The dogs and Betty chased the stag through miles of forest, over slick logs, through swollen creeks, until finally they cornered their prey at the edge of an abandoned quarry.

The stag lowered its magnificent horns and charged the dogs but a St. Bernard blind-sided it and knocked it to the ground. In an instant, the stag was buried in the mob. It let out a human scream as they tore into its flesh.

Betty ached to have a piece of that flesh for herself. But she couldn't keep her balance as she joined the dogs. She fell down between their surging bodies, smothering under their weight and shaggy heat. Her world went black.

She came to right before sunrise. The storm and the dogs were gone. Venus shone bright in the early morning sky. She sat up, groaning as her sore muscles twinged and throbbed.

The stag's remains lay a few yards away. There wasn't much left of it, just the skull, some scattered red bones, a few rags of bloody white hide. She made herself look away, feeling sick.

"Betty."

Startled, she turned and saw the horned boy sitting astride his huge black hound. The storm had washed him clean, and his beautiful eyes and body glowed in the dim light. He had grown in the night, and looked older, stronger.

“What are you?” Betty managed.

The boy slid off his hound and approached her. “I am the master of the Hunt, and I want you to be my mistress. None of this has been coincidence, lass. Your father promised you to me long ago when I was hunting in Canada. When I found him, he was a bitter creature, full of violence. I was about to make him my stag, but when I looked into his eyes, I saw his future, saw you. So I spared him, not for who he was, but for the daughter he would sire. You're a true beauty, lass, the loveliest I've seen in two centuries, and you have far more potential than you know..”

Betty didn't know what to think. “So . . . you and he just made this deal that I was going to marry you some day. When was I supposed to have a say in this?”

“Because your father died before he could prepare you for this, his promise does not bind you. And you need not decide now; the Hunt will last for seven years, and when it is over I will return here, full grown but still a young man.”

He nodded toward her hands. “If you replace gold with horn, you will not grow old. And if you wear my ring still when the hunt is through, you will be my love. Think on it well. Goodbye for now.”

He leaped onto his hound, and they disappeared into the forest.

Betty stood there, staring at the stag's remains and fingering the horn ring and her wedding band. A cool breeze from the East stirred the leaves at her feet.

She gazed out at the horizon lit with bright oranges and pinks by the sunrise. Seven years, and the whole world to explore. But this time, she wanted to see it all through her own prism before she gave herself away again.

She pulled off both rings, slipped them into her pocket and began the trek back to the trailer.

FLESH

WOUND BLOOD

Mike inhaled sharply as the first drop of hot candle wax hit his chest. His eyes strained against the darkness imposed by Olivia's silken blindfold, arms strained against the leather thongs binding him to the bedposts. He could hear the faint hiss of the candle's flame, nearly drowned out by the rustle of Olivia slithering across the satin sheets. And by the beating of their slave's heart, so agonizingly slow now that he was sure the girl had lapsed into a coma.

If he'd undergone this delicious torture only a year earlier, he would have been sheened in sweat, shivering like a mouse. But now his skin was cool and dry as a snake's, his dead heart steady, a cold flesh clockwork.

The second candle drip seared onto his lower belly, alarmingly close to parts he *didn't* want burned, and he reflexively tried to cover himself. The leather ripped, and suddenly his hands were free.

"Oops. Sorry," he mumbled.

Olivia sighed. "Michael, will you *never* learn to be still?"

He pulled off the blindfold and blinked at her in the candlelight. "We could try regular handcuffs next time."

"And have you splinter my mahogany with the steel? I think not."

She caressed the dark bedpost. Mike remembered her telling him that she'd had the bed since 1850. It had been part of the dowry she'd brought with her from England, and it was only piece of furniture she'd been able to rescue from her then-husband's estate before Sherman's troops burned Atlanta. He wondered how

many thousands of lovers she'd entertained on it since.

"You're so strong, Michael, even for one of us." She lay down beside him, her long white hair tickling his shoulder, and ran her hand across his broad chest. "Are you like Samson? If I cut off those lovely dark locks of yours, will you be weak for me?"

He smiled grimly. "I don't think my hairdo has much to do with it."

He'd known real weakness: multiple sclerosis. It first struck him when he was twenty. He was at the gym, on the bench press doing an easy warm-up set of a hundred pounds, when suddenly his arms went weak and numb and the bar crashed to his chest. The spotter who heaved the bar off him to help him up had to call a cab because Mike's hands were too numb to pick up his car keys.

He had a cousin in Toronto who had MS; she'd been wheelchair-bound since she was thirty-five. She couldn't even pee without help. The doctors insisted that Mike's illness wasn't likely to get that bad, since he almost fully recovered from the first episode less than a month after it happened. But the specter of living his life in a chair drove him wild. He started spending all his money on women, parties and trips, trying to cram as much living into his existence as possible while he searched for something, *anything*, that would cure him.

Two years later, he'd blundered into the Outland in a drunken haze, and woke up the next morning in Olivia's bed a pint lighter. While he never told her of his disease, she could apparently smell his desperation in his sweat. Her offer of eternal life had been tempting, but it was the implication of eternal *strength* that had swayed him.

"Barbarian. You have no sense of the romantic." Olivia sat up, and picked up the scarred arm of their unconscious slave. "Care for another drink?"

Mike looked at the teenager, who went by the name Onyx; he thought her real name was Betty Lou or something. She was one of the dozens of little goth girls who hung out at the Outland, hoping to get the attention of one of the members of Olivia's circle. Most of them were underage, getting into the club by way of fake

IDs or blowjobs for the bouncers. The unlucky ones simply clustered near the front door, trading stories and clove cigarettes until the cops busted them for breaking curfew.

Onyx had been plump and comparatively healthy-looking only a few months before when Olivia had picked her up, but now her ribs stood out in plain relief, her skin so thin and pale her whole body was traced in a webwork of blue veins. Her small breasts rose and fell with every shallow breath, silver barbells glinting in her pink nipples. Her neck and wrists were crusted with dried blood.

He shook his head. "I don't think we should take any more from her tonight."

Olivia laughed. "What does it matter? There are dozens of these little tarts for us. This one's a runaway; nobody will miss her."

"I'd miss her. She's a good little dancer."

"Hmp. I see you haven't got any sense of value, either." Still, she put down the girl's arm.

He made a mental note to take the girl out for a decent meal—and then to a doctor—once Olivia was occupied with somebody else.

Suddenly, there was a rap on the door.

"Phone call for Michael," Alexander announced.

"I told you not to bother us. Whoever it is, send them away," Olivia replied, frowning in irritation.

"I tried, but she keeps calling back. Some girl named Julie. Says it's an emergency."

Olivia fixed Mike with a cold purple stare, her enormous pupils contracting to pinpoints. "A mundane girl? Calling *here*?"

"Look, I don't know how she got this number; *I* sure didn't give it to her." He rolled off the bed and dug his jeans out of the pile of discarded clothing on the floor. "She's just a girl I went out with for a while last year before you converted me. Whatever this is about, I'll take care of it."

"Make sure she never calls back."

He dressed and went up through the maze of concrete corridors and steel stairs that led up to the Outland's business office. The building dated from the early 1900's, beginning its existence as a bank. During Prohibition the Mob took it over, converting the

underground vaults into secret accounting offices and storerooms for liquor. Now the subterranean complex served well as dark apartments for the thirteen members of Olivia's circle.

Mike climbed up through the trap door in the coat closet and stepped out into the club manager's smoky office. The fluorescent light momentarily dazzled him, and he had to stare at an old dark Bauhaus poster for a few seconds before his vision cleared.

Alexander took a drag off his cigarette and held out the phone. "She's all yours, man."

"Thanks." Mike lifted the receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

"Mikey, is that you?" Julie sounded as if she had been crying.

"Yeah, how did you—"

"Oh, thank God I've found you! Look, I know it's been a long time, but I've *got* to talk to you . . . this is my last quarter, can you meet me at the coffeehouse on the corner of Ninth and Wilshire?"

"Wait, I—"

"Please, Mikey, it's a real genuine emergency! I'm here at the cafe now; promise you'll come? Please? You're the only one left." Her voice was shaking, strained to the point of cracking.

With Julie *everything* was an emergency; her life was one self-inflicted crisis after another. But he'd never heard her sound quite so upset before. "Oh, hell, okay, I'll be there in a while."

"Olivia's gonna be pissed," Alexander commented as Mike hung up and passed the phone back to him. No doubt he'd overheard the entire exchange. "I'd tell you to just blow this girl off, but I got the feeling she'll keep calling back if you don't show. She musta called a dozen times before I came to get you."

"Yeah, she's persistent, that's for sure," Mike sighed. "And I need to find out how she tracked me down so I can make sure none of my family finds out where I am. Hey, is it still light out?"

"Yeah . . . here, take my shades and my trench." He pulled a floor-length black leather coat off the wall hook and dug a pair of Gargoyles out of the inside pocket. "It's too warm out for the trench, but people are gonna think you're a freak anyway."

A half-hour later, he was hurrying down the sidewalk toward

the coffee shop. He kept his head down, hands jammed deep into the coat's pockets, collar turned up high to protect at least some of his face from the rays filtering through the overcast sky. It was an utter myth that his kind would burst into flames if they were exposed to the light of day, but the sun was definitely not their friend. Soon after he'd been converted, he'd made the mistake of staying out past dawn in a T-shirt. In ten minutes, he'd ended up with a blistering burn on his face and arms that left him shivering and sick for days. One of the women in their circle had been some kind of scientist; she'd believed the change from mortal to immortal involved a virus that inadvertently made their cells ultra-sensitive to ultraviolet light.

Changes. His gums itched around his loose canines; Olivia said his new fangs would push through in another month or two, and the rest of his teeth would be replaced during the coming decade. Happily, he hadn't lost his superficial sexual ability, though he no longer produced semen. He'd look less and less human as the years passed, become more like Olivia in every way except his size and gender. She was a beautiful creature, to be sure, but couldn't be mistaken for anything but what she was. All her teeth were as sharp as a serpent's. Her flesh had turned from red to purplish-blue, her gums and tongue sometimes almost black if she hadn't fed in a while. Her irises had grown huge, her pupils the size of dimes. She could only safely expose herself in the freakshow atmosphere of the club, though she was so light sensitive she'd banned strobes and blacklights. Still, she sometimes went out into the city to hunt, cruising the dark streets in her big black Lincoln. He suspected she did it as much for the thrill of the risk of exposure as for the bloody satisfaction of taking unwilling prey.

Like the other young ones, Mike was merely pale, his lips slightly bluish. He didn't sweat and had lost all body odor; and he'd noticed that alone was enough to alert some people's instincts and make them recoil. It almost seemed part of the grand design that they could pass for human their first twenty years, since that was often the span it took them to completely break their

ties to family and unconverted friends.

He'd thought his relationship with Julie had been too slight to ever need re-breaking.

He pushed through the front doors of the coffeehouse, thankful that the place was dimly lit, grateful to be smelling coffee, chocolate and cinnamon instead of the oppressive diesel-and-garbage stink of the subway and city streets.

The pay phone was a few feet from the door, and Julie was leaning against it, chewing her thumbnail and sniffing. Her left eye was badly bruised, nearly swollen shut, and she had finger-shaped bruises on her left forearm. Her strawberry blond hair was uncombed, and she was wearing a ratty Kurt Cobain tee and torn jeans, the kind of clothes she'd wear around the house but would never willingly go outside in.

Her eyes widened when she got a good look at him, and she took a step back.

"Mikey, is that you?" she asked uncertainly.

He took off the Gargoyles and squinted at her. "Yeah, it's me. What's happened to you?" On second appraisal, he realized she'd gained about twenty pounds since the last time he'd seen her.

"Um, well, it's sort of a long story . . . maybe you just need to see her."

Mike followed her back to her booth. A few-months-old baby girl lay asleep in a yellow plastic carrier on the seat. She wore pink polkadot footed pajamas, and loosely clutched a white blanket.

Dear God, this woman couldn't keep a cactus alive, now she'd had a *baby*?

"This is Rebecca; I named her after Tank Girl. I guess I named her after my aunt, too, but she killed herself and I heard it's bad luck to name a baby after suicides."

"Cute kid," he said aloud as they sat down, she by the baby and he across from them. "Who's the lucky father?"

"You. I think. Which is why I had to talk to you," she stammered.

His? She expected him to think that this child was his? After she'd openly cheated on him? He felt as though his heart should

be pounding, but it stuck to its dull, slow funereal beat.

He stared at her hard and she flinched and averted her gaze. "You said you were on the Pill," he said.

"Well, I was . . . sort of. I guess I missed a couple of days."

He shook his head. Those that didn't want, got, and those that wanted had to go without. His sister Nina, an architect with a dull but utterly reliable husband, had been trying for years to get pregnant. They had a beautiful house out in the country, the perfect place to raise kids. They'd recently tried to adopt the child of a teenaged girl in their town. Nina had shown him snapshots of the baby: she'd had skin the rich color of milk chocolate and a cap of black curls framing her sweet little face. But, in the end, the girl's family insisted she keep the baby. Afraid of having her hopes raised and dashed again, Nina had not tried for another adoption.

"What makes you so sure she's mine?" he asked. "I seem to recall I wasn't the only guy you were fucking last year."

Julie looked as if he'd slapped her, and her lips twitched for a moment before she could get any words out. "Jamar is black, so she can't be his, and I thought she might be Tony's; he's the guy I'm living with now, the one you, um, found me with—"

"Is he the one who gave you that black eye?" Tony was a wiry coke freak who worked as an auto mechanic, though his temper made it hard for him to hold down steady jobs. He had aspirations to be a professional kick boxer and played guitar in some kind of garage band. Girls found him handsome and charming. Mike had disliked him on sight, hated him bitterly when he found the guy going down on Julie in the back room of a friend's house during a party.

"Yes." She started crying again. "Becky doesn't look anything like Tony, and he knows it. She looks like you," she added defensively. "If you don't believe me, we can get a blood test—"

"Don't worry about it." He wasn't sure he even *had* a blood type any more; a paternity test would only prove he was no longer human. "So let's say, hypothetically, that she is mine. What now? I wasn't cut out to be a father before, and I'm certainly not the

daddy type now that I'm . . . dying."

She gave a start. "Dying? I—I thought you looked kind of . . . ill, but . . . it's not AIDS, is it?"

"Leukemia."

"Oh." She was silent for a moment. "I'm so sorry—"

"Don't be. It's no great loss." He rubbed his eyes; dim as it was, the overhead lights still bothered him. At least the sun was finally going down. "So what did you want from me? I don't see how I can help you. You and Becky should go to the women's shelter."

"I know," she sniffled. "And I *want* to, but . . . I got so scared this morning when he started to hit me, I just grabbed Becky and ran. I don't have my credit cards, clothes, or anything. I had to buy diapers and formula at the drugstore, and I have two dollars left. I can't go to the shelter without my stuff, but I'm scared to go back to get it alone. So I called you . . . I figured, you'd maybe . . . want to help, on account of Becky and all."

She looked up at him, her eyes pleading. "I mean, you're so big, Tony would never mess with you."

Big. Clearly, he'd missed his true calling as a knight in shining armor. He sighed, wondering how many other ex-boyfriends she'd fruitlessly called for help that day.

"Okay," he finally said. "I'll go with you back to Tony's apartment, we'll get your stuff and go to the shelter. And then," he leaned over the table 'til his face was inches from hers, "you will never, ever call me again, and let me die in peace."

On the subway ride to Tony's apartment, Julie told Mike that she'd found out where he was from one of her girlfriends, who frequented the Outland on techno nights. Mike normally eschewed makeup and outrageous outfits, but realized now that perhaps he should go utterly goth, blacken his lips and eyes and tease his hair into a scary mess every day, just to keep from being recognized again.

Becky was fretful during the trip, and worked up to a genuine squalling fit halfway through. Mike offered to hold her and

managed to unobtrusively hypnotize her and put her back to sleep. It was one of the first tricks Olivia had taught him; he never thought he'd use it on a baby.

As Becky slept, he realized he'd never held a baby before. She was so small and fragile. And awfully cute. He gently traced the curve of her face with his index finger. Would her nose be his, or Julie's? She had his jaw line, he was sure of it. He tried to imagine what she would look like when she grew up. A heartbreaker, he decided. No doubt, she'd drive the boys wild. Then he frowned as he began to think of all the grubby, horny boys who'd be after his little girl.

His frown deepened as he thought of Olivia. He'd been away from the Outland too long, but perhaps she hadn't noticed his absence yet. She'd be absolutely furious if she found out what he'd been up to.

Tony's place was, unsurprisingly, in an utterly appalling part of the city. The hallways of the apartment building reeked of mold and spoiled food and urine, but at least it was dark.

They got no answer when they rapped on the apartment door. Tony was probably off at one of the neighborhood bars. Julie silently unlocked the door and let them inside.

The apartment smelled even worse than the hallway. The stovetop was crusted with burnt macaroni and cheese; papers, dirty clothes and candy wrappers littered the floor and furniture. The TV was on, showing an ad in which a smiling suburban housewife mopped her kitchen so her toddler could crawl on a shiny, germ-free floor.

"Let's get this done quickly," he said as he shut the door. "I'd just as soon not have to deal with your boyfriend tonight."

"Okay." Julie cleared off a section of the couch and set down the still-sleeping baby.

He watched her slip into the bedroom, presumably to pack some clothes. She'd seemed increasingly afraid of him on the subway ride. Realistically, there wasn't much he could do to keep from being frightening, but he did feel bad about having to be so

harsh with her. Better for her to be frightened than for her to call the club again and attract Olivia's tender attention.

He heard the elevator door open at the end of the hall. Booted feet began to clomp toward the apartment. Tony, or just a neighbor?

He got his answer as a key scrabbled into the lock and the door swung open. Tony jumped in surprise when he saw Mike, and clumsily pulled a Glock-10 semiautomatic out of the pocket of his motorcycle jacket.

"The fuck you doing here?" he demanded, pointing the pistol at Mike's head. Tony stank of whisky, and Mike thought he detected the acrid tang of crack smoke.

Great. Julie never mentioned the guy carried a piece. Of course, given the neighborhood, nobody but an idiot would go out alone without protection.

"Calm down, Tony, I'm just here to help the lady get her things. Another minute or two, we'll be gone, out of your hair; you'll have the whole place to yourself." He stepped forward, staring into Tony's bloodshot eyes. He'd never tried mesmerizing a druggie before. Olivia had told him drunks and stoners were trivially easy, but crackheads and speed freaks were liable to spook, snap awake as if from a nightmare and lash out at anything that moved. He couldn't tell what chemical ruled Tony's brain. "Just be calm, and put down the gun."

Tony's eyes glazed, and the nose of the pistol dipped.

"Ohmygod, Tony, put that down!" Julie shrieked, running out of the bedroom.

Tony's eyes snapped wide in disoriented terror, the spell shattered. His finger reflexively jerked on the trigger. Two rounds slammed into Mike's belly. Mike's vision clouded in the bright vortex of pain.

Mike stumbled backward against the wall, numbly staring at the purple blood spilling down his shirt and pants. Would he bleed to death? No, the wounds were already starting to heal.

But he'd lost precious blood. His veins burned with a horrible thirst.

Tony was still firing wildly around the apartment, hollering incoherently. Mike shook off his momentary shock and sprang forward, batting the gun out of Tony's hand. He grabbed Tony by the hair and threw him to the scarred wooden floor.

Tony shrieked and thrashed wildly as Mike's blunt teeth clamped around his throat. But Mike could not be thrown off. In seconds he'd crushed the man's trachea, gnawed open his carotid. The blood came out in a bubbling fountain, and Mike drank 'til he could hold no more.

As he came up for air, he saw himself reflected in Tony's dead eyes. Cold horror extinguished his predatory fury. Sweet Jesus, what had he just done? Behind him, the baby was screaming. He couldn't hear Julie; the girl was probably petrified with terror at what she'd just witnessed.

He fairly sprang away from the corpse, and turned, trying to think of something he could say to her—

Julie was on the floor, dark blood spreading beneath her. He knelt beside her and gently lifted her head. A stray bullet had hit her in the temple. She was dead.

The baby abruptly fell silent, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"Well, you've made a mess of things, haven't you?"

He slowly looked up, his whole body electrified with dread. Olivia was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, a vision in a black lace dress. She'd apparently climbed the fire escape and slipped in through the window. Just to drive home the point that she was far better at this than he, no doubt.

He stood and stepped away from Julie's body, nervously wiping the blood off his face. "How did you find me so quickly?"

"I *made* you, Michael. I could hear the beat of your heart halfway around the world." Smiling sardonically, she glided into the room, delicately lifting her skirts to keep them out of the blood and debris.

"In my day, this would be considered the result of blind stupidity, but we live in more enlightened times, don't we? Now this sort of thing is called a 'learning experience.'" She stared at

him. "So tell me, Michael, what have you learned tonight?"

"That what you told me was true," he stammered obediently. "That if they're not fit to be converts, mortals are playthings or food. Nothing more."

His stomach churned as he spoke, curdled blood rising in his throat. He didn't believe a word of it, but he dared not anger her further. Though she'd always cooed over his strength, they both knew she was more than a match for him. She was fiendishly fast, and had a century of experience as a murderess; he'd watched her single-handedly disarm (and then eviscerate) a pair from a rival circle who'd broken into the club basement.

"Don't feel too bad, Michael, for I also had a learning experience tonight. I should've heeded your advice to leave little Onyx alone. No great tragedy, true, but I had not intended for her to die so soon. A mistake is a mistake."

Becky gave a low, frightened whimper.

"Ah, but the night's not a total loss," Olivia said, fixing her gaze on the baby. "I do so love little children. Is she yours?"

He paused. "Yes."

"Not any more." She stared at him, her eyes daring him to challenge her.

He could not. She would destroy him, as easily as he'd destroyed Tony. Maybe easier.

But if he let this happen, let her kill a baby who might be his only child, what was the point of his existence? *Fun? Pleasure?* He'd never asked himself those questions before. He'd known the price of joining Olivia was losing his soul. But to let her kill Becky . . . that would cost him his heart. Mike bowed his head, wondering how many hundreds of children she'd murdered to satisfy her palate.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the pistol lying on the floor. He remembered the shock of the bullets slamming into his own flesh. Maybe there was still a chance.

"I don't care," Mike lied. "Take her."

She smiled and gave a satisfied nod, then turned to the couch to take Becky.

Mike dived sideways, praying the magazine had not been spent, and scooped up the pistol. Olivia turned on him with alarming speed, shrieking in rage. He pointed the Glock at her midsection and furiously pumped the trigger.

Two firecracker pops, then impotent clicking. But he'd hit her. She stepped backward, staring in mute surprise at the ichor-spilling holes below her breasts.

That hesitation was all he needed. He threw the pistol aside and leaped into her, ramming his left hand into her razored jaws as he dug the fingers of his right into her solar plexus.

He'd thought the impact would knock her down, but she stood fast, snarling and slashing his face with her sharp claws. He had to shut his eyes to keep from being blinded. Dear God, she was strong! He shoved his fist deeper into her mouth, and she savagely worried his hand. His fingers broke with an audible popping.

Ignoring the pain, he managed to hook a leg around and kick her feet out from under her. They fell in a heap beside Julie's corpse. The momentum of the fall helped him pierce the skin beneath her breastbone with his fingers. She bucked and thrashed, hammering his head and shoulders with bone-cracking blows as he worked his hand deeper and deeper into her slick, cold flesh. She got her claws around his neck, ready to tear out his throat. His fingers closed around her coarse, pulsing cardiac muscle. He yanked it free.

Her heart came out in a great gout of ichor. Olivia's body convulsed, and then was still. As Mike watched, her dead flesh deliquesced, skin and muscle melting into grayish goo over crumbling black bone. Her heart turned to foul jelly and slipped through his fingers. The stench of rot greased the air.

He stood up, feeling nauseated as the ragged edges of broken bones in his skull and arms scraped against each other. He gingerly explored the lacerations on his face and scalp, thankful he'd been able to kill her before she'd done much more damage. The blood loss made him desperately hungry, but he could endure it until he found a dog or rat. He couldn't bear to dine on the cooling blood in Julie's corpse.

Becky was wailing. What was he going to do with her now? The answer came to him instantly: if his sister had been desperate to take some poor mixed-race child, she'd certainly take custody of her only niece.

He wiped the rest of Olivia off on his jeans, then hurried over to the infant.

"Hush," he said, mesmerizing her with his black eyes. "It's okay, I'll take you someplace nice. It's got trees and a barn, and when you're a little older you can have a puppy, I bet."

Wrinkling his nose in distaste, he poked through Olivia's sodden dress until he found her car keys. The Lincoln was likely parked no more than a few blocks away; Olivia had always hated walking. He shook the keys free and stood up, breathing deeply.

People were making noise out in the hallway. It was only a matter of time before the police arrived. He'd have to sneak out by way of the fire escape, go up and over the building if a crowd had gathered on the street below.

His sister's house was an hour away from the city. He wasn't sure what he'd tell her; the truth would probably work, or most of it. He'd make sure to leave a note granting his sister guardianship. With luck, Becky's first few months in chaos and single evening in Hell wouldn't leave lasting scars. She could grow up with parents who would love her, and she would be free to make her own dreams. He hoped that she'd do better than her biological parents, but if she didn't, well, at least the mistakes would be hers to make.

He washed the gore off his hands and arms in the kitchen, then gathered up Becky. His body itched; his flesh and bones were starting to knit. He had strength; he had freedom. And he might just have eternity.

And wherever he ended up, he would make sure his existence *meant* something.

. . . AND HER HEADQUARTERS

Charlie . . .

Eleven-year-old Charlotte gave a start and stared over the boat's railing into the sparkling green St. Augustine water. Nobody was there. But as she looked harder, she thought she saw a dark shape moving beneath the waves lapping against the hull.

I can give you what you want, Charlie, the voice said coyly, a little louder. It was a girl's voice, and it was almost as if she heard it inside her head.

Her heart beat fast and her stomach churned, like it had when her father made her take a shower with him. She hated the way he touched her. The stink of his sour sweat and the whisky on his breath made her sick to her stomach, and she threw up on him. She couldn't help it. Furious, he dragged her out of the bathroom and whipped her with his belt.

When her mother came home, he claimed he'd beaten Charlie because he caught her stealing change out of his desk. She'd tried to tell her mother what really happened, but her mother slapped her and told her she was bad for making up nasty stories. She sent Charlie to bed without dinner.

Charlie realized she shouldn't be surprised that her mother believed her father instead of her. Whenever her mother was gone on sales trips, her father wouldn't come home until very late, until after Charlie had put herself to bed. She'd hear the front door bang open and he would stumble in, singing off-key to himself. Sometimes she'd hear a strange woman's voice, too.

And sometimes, there'd be makeup stains on the couch the

next morning. Her mother would see the lingering spots and ask her father about them. He always said Charlie had been playing in her makeup and got it on the furniture. She'd get smacked for that too.

If her mother would buy a lie about a lipstick smear, she'd buy a lie about practically anything.

Tell me what you want, Charlie.

"I don't want anything." It was wrong to want things, she knew, because wanting what she didn't have just made her chest ache and her eyes burn. Wanting never helped her get anything.

"What did you say?" her mother asked behind her.

Charlie nearly jumped out of her skin; she hadn't heard her mother walk up.

"Uh, nothing, mama . . ."

Her mother bent down to whisper in Charlie's ear. Though she still wore the smile she used with her sales clients, her voice and eyes were cold.

"What did I tell you last night?" her mother asked, her voice taking on a nasty edge.

"You told me to act happy, and smile and play with Mr. Bannister's kids, 'cause you want him to hire you," Charlie stammered.

"So what the are you doing over here sulking by yourself, *honey*? Put a *smile* on your face. You'd better not mess this up for me . . ."

Letting the threat hang unfinished in the air, her mother turned away and gave the rest of the boat party a bright smile.

"Is she okay?" called Mr. Bannister. He was a huge, hairy man, but he had a nice smile and he told silly jokes ("What's brown and sticky? A stick!"). Charlie decided she liked him.

"Oh, she's just a little seasick," her mother replied. "She's never been on a boat before."

"Well, how 'bout a swim? That'll help us work up an appetite. Not that some of us need any help," he added, laughing as he patted his belly.

His two little boys shrieked in delight and scampered to the

ladder. Mr. Bannister stripped off his bright Hawaiian shirt and her father slipped off his polo shirt and Bermuda shorts. The sight of him wearing nothing but his Speedos made her feel ill all over again and she had to look away.

Tell me what you want. She peeked over the railing and saw the dark thing spreading like black ink beneath the waves.

“Are you coming?” her mother asked.

The thing in the water scared her worse than anything her parents might do to her later. But she knew her mother wouldn’t believe her if she said she saw something down there. “Can I please just stay up here?”

“Fine.” Her mother smiled tightly, then peeled off her tee shirt and went down the ladder.

Charlie moved around the railing to watch the others swim. The Bannister boys giggled as they splashed water on each other. They probably got to go to the beach all the time. She’d lived in Florida all her life, but her parents never took her to see the ocean. *They’d* gone to the beach, but always left her behind with a babysitter. Until today. Today she was finally *convenient*.

A knot of rage tightened in Charlie’s chest as she watched her mother laughing and smiling that fake, fake smile of hers as she treaded water and chatted with Mr. Bannister. And there was her father, floating on his back and looking so very unconcerned and happy with himself, but Charlie knew that men who did what he did deserved to go to Hell . . .

“I want them gone,” she whispered through clenched teeth.

Suddenly, the dark shape surged up under her father. He had just enough time to let out a shriek before it dragged him under and tore him apart, staining the water with his blood.

Her mother screamed.

“Oh, Jesus, getintheboat, getintheboat!” Mr. Bannister yelled to his kids.

Her mother, who’d always been a strong, graceful swimmer, had already reached the ladder and was almost clear of the water when the thing grabbed her leg. It yanked her down so hard that Charlie heard her bones snap. Then came another furious

churning under the waves. The water bloomed red.

Then silence.

Mr. Bannister, who'd stopped when he saw her mother snatched from the ladder, was treading water with his boys a few yards away. The children were crying, and Mr. Bannister's face was a bad gray.

Finally, when it was clear the thing had gone, Mr. Banister towed his kids to the boat and boosted them onto the ladder. After they'd scrambled up to the deck, he hauled himself up with shaking arms.

Charlie was still staring at the fading bloom of blood, numb with shock. What had she done?

Mr. Bannister put his arm around her and gently pulled her away from the railing.

"Oh, please don't look, you shouldn't see that," he said. "Jesus. It musta been a shark. I had no idea they'd be out this time of year. God, I'm so sorry . . . you poor kid, nobody should have to see something like that."

She wasn't sorry, but she was terribly afraid.

The Coast Guard never found any trace of her parents' bodies, nor did they manage to catch any sharks. After the memorial service, Charlie left Florida and went to live with her aunt's family in Cuchillo, Texas. It was hot and dry and far, far away from the ocean.

Her mother's sister, Lois Wilson, was a real estate agent, a tall blonde woman in her early forties who'd married the local tennis pro right out of college. They had two teenaged girls, Misty and Jennifer, who were just as tall and pretty as their mother, and like their father they had dazzling smiles, good tans and fearsome overhead volleys.

Charlie, like her father, had bark-brown hair, freckles and a pug nose. And, as her mother had often told her, she was fat. She'd taken a lot of teasing back in St. Augustine Elementary ("Fatty, fatty, two-by-four, can't get through the kitchen door!"), and so she *knew* deep down that she was worthless and ugly, but

moving into the Wilson's big limestone house just drove it home.

Summer came and school let out, and Misty and Jennifer went off to sports camps. Mrs. Wilson deemed Charlie too young to be left at home alone. So she was sent along with Mr. Wilson every morning as he went to work at the Swim & Racquet Club at the edge of the city.

They'd arrive early, before the club opened. Mr. Wilson would go off to check the courts and open the pro shop. Charlie would be able to swim by herself for an hour or so, a time when the whole pool was her private blue ocean. She'd pretend she was crossing the English Channel, or she'd throw pebbles in the deep end and pretend she was diving for pearls. Sometimes she wondered about what had really happened at St. Augustine. The voice *couldn't* have been real. Could it?

But when the club opened and people started trickling in, her paradise rapidly turned into Purgatory. By noon the pool was clogged with screaming kids. The poolside became a maze of greased adult bodies basking in the sun. To make matters worse, her breasts were growing, perpetually sore little lumps that made her feel even more self-conscious. At school, she was covered, camouflaged. Here her every flaw lay blazing in the sun.

One boy, a big red-haired thirteen-year-old named Jason, delighted in harassing her. At first, it was just the usual taunts about her weight. Then his tactics changed alarmingly.

It started when she was near the 4' mark, mutely watching a group of seven-year-olds play Marco Polo; Jason grabbed her butt. She whirled around, a protest on her lips which died when she saw he'd pulled down the front of his trunks, just enough to expose his genitals.

"Touch my monkey," he drawled.

The sight made her remember her father. Charlie splashed away from Jason, numb with shock and nausea, and got out of the pool to sit in the cold shade of the snack bar.

Jason was still in the pool, smirking at her. She watched as he called over two of his buddies and whispered something to them. Then all three of them started pointing at her and laughing.

Charlie felt herself blush a deep red. She wished the ground would open up and swallow her. She couldn't tell the lifeguard what had happened, not *now*, because even if Jason got in trouble, he'd just tell all the other kids what a chicken sissy she was.

She prayed that Jason would get bored and find someone else to bother, but he didn't. The very next day, he rubbed up against her in the deep end.

"My big brother said you fat chicks are good fucks," he giggled. "He said it's 'cause you're so ugly, you're grateful to get any dickin' you can."

Charlie fled from the pool and went to the ladies' locker room. She changed back into her shorts, sandals and a dry tee shirt. There was no way she was going back into the pool. She'd just go watch her uncle give tennis lessons.

But when she stepped outside, she saw that Jason and his two friends were standing around on the sidewalk that led to the tennis courts. Charlie bit her lip. There was no way she could avoid the boys.

Then she noticed the back gate was open. There wasn't much to the land beyond, just patchy grass and a winding arroyo obscured by short mesquites and thick brush. The arroyo snaked around the whole West side of the city, a shallow, muddy gash in the arid landscape. Mr. Wilson said that the club owners wanted to turn the land into a golf course, but some local environmentalists had it protected as a wetland. He'd told her not to go back there because people had seen coyotes skulking in the brush.

After St. Augustine, coyotes just didn't seem all that scary. And there would be butterflies and rocks and plants and stuff, much more interesting than tennis.

Charlie went through the back gate and padded across the dry grass toward the arroyo. The sun seemed hotter out here, and now that she was away from the pool and its smells of chlorine and suntan lotion, her head practically buzzed with the bittersharp scent of a thousand weedy wildflowers. She waded into the brush and stopped beside a patch of sunflowers that towered over her.

She stared up at the bumblebees fumbling in the heavy, nodding blooms. A beautiful black-and-yellow butterfly flitted past her face and lighted on a small thorny bush a few feet away. Charlie stepped over and bent down to get a better look at the butterfly. Her shadow crossed it and it flittered away. The stench of rotten meat slid up her nostrils.

She looked down and saw the fresh carcass of a headless jackrabbit just a few inches from her toes. Shiny black ants covered the ragged stump of its neck and crawled through the blood-matted fur. She could do nothing but stare at it, morbidly mesmerized.

“Hey, Fatsol!”

Charlie jumped away from the dead rabbit. Jason and his two friends had put on their sneakers and come through the back gate. They were sauntering toward her, grinning. Her heart pounded hard in her ears as she realized the horrible mistake she’d made coming out here where none of the adults could see. The boys would be able to do whatever they wanted if they caught her.

She plunged into the brush, tripping over rocks and fallen branches. Thorns tore at the bare flesh on her arms as she pushed through the mesquites, trying to find a place to hide. Then she broke free of the branches and nearly fell as she stumbled down the muddy red bank into the arroyo. The winding, shallow creek was wide as a road and the water came up to her knees. Her feet scared away a school of tiny, translucent minnows.

She tried to splash across to the other side, but the red mud sucked at her sandals. Her left foot got stuck when she was halfway across. Her terror turned to frustrated anger as she tried to pull her foot free, only to lose her sandal in the mud.

The mesquites rattled and the boys appeared on the bank.

“Hey, that creek’s too small for a whale like you,” laughed Jason.

Charlie’s heart was pounding with rage.

These little boys need to be taught a lesson, don’t they, Charlie? It was the little girl’s voice from the ocean, whispering softly inside her head.

“Yeah, come on out of there,” said one of the other boys. “We just wanna play with you.”

“What if I don’t want to play?” she retorted.

“Then we’ll *make* you,” Jason replied, not smiling.

Charlie could feel her shadow spreading beneath her, hiding under the red silt, darkening the water to the color of blood. She could feel the beating of the boys’ hearts, and she knew that the cruel power they’d wielded in the pool was gone in this living water.

“Then I guess you’ll have to come down here and get me, penis breath,” she said. “Unless you’re scared of the water.”

The boys looked at each other, then hopped down the bank and splashed toward her.

“You’re the only one who’s gonna have penis breath,” Jason threatened.

“Jason, did you ever think about what it’s like to die?” she asked.

He frowned, confused. “No.”

“That’s too bad. You should’ve thought about it, ‘cause now you’re *DEAD!*”

The dark, silty clouds curling around the boy’s ankles suddenly turned to hard, razor-sharp jaws that clamped deep into their flesh. They screamed as their legs were ground down into the watery maws like celery sucked into a garbage disposal. In seconds their bodies were liquefied and consumed. The slashed rags of their swim trunks and sneakers were all that remained.

Charlie stared at the bloody water and rags and started to shiver. Dear God, she hadn’t really wanted *this*, had she?

Her sandal bobbed to the surface.

Run back to the clubhouse as fast as you can, the voice told her. Tell them you came out here to play hide-and-seek with Jason and his little friends. Two men grabbed the boys, but you got away because you were hiding.

She grabbed the sandal, shoved it onto her foot, scrambled up the bank and ran through the brush. Dear God, what had she done, what had she done? By the time she made it back to the

gate, she was crying and screaming for help at the top of her lungs. It felt good to scream. A half-dozen people crowded around her, and she haltingly told them what the voice had said to tell. Someone ran to fetch Mr. Wilson and the club manager.

They wrapped her in a beach towel, and Mr. Wilson sat with her and tried to soothe her with kind words and a soda from the snack bar. Charlie drank it, even though she felt sick to her stomach. Her lower belly hurt too, a weird crampy ache she'd never felt before.

The police arrived and searched the arroyo. Soon the officers came back with the boys' bloody trunks and sneakers in plastic bags.

When she finally got back to the house, Charlie locked herself in the bathroom and drew a big tub of hot water.

She undressed and eased herself in, wishing that the tub was bigger so that she could get her whole body under the water. The dried mud melted away from her arms and legs, staining the water a brownish red.

Charlie . . .

Suddenly, there came a bright pain like someone had stabbed her lower belly with an icepick. She doubled over, bile rising in her throat.

Her eyes widened when she realized she was bleeding. A thin tendril of blood rose from her pudendum and began to spread through the water. The pain was so bad she thought she might faint.

You're a woman now, Charlie. Hurts, doesn't it?

"Please, make it stop," she whimpered.

You'd be hurting a lot worse right now if I hadn't been there today to save you from those boys. I won't take away the blood, but I can take away the pain, if you do something for me.

"Yes, anything," she gasped. It felt as if her womb was trying to turn itself inside out.

Tell your aunt and uncle that you don't want to go back to the club, not after what happened today. Tell them you're old enough to be at the house by yourself . . .

The Wilsons reluctantly agreed to let her stay at home, and the voice took her for long walks around the city. They visited all the playgrounds and parks in the city, and she learned about all the best places for her shadow: the river, park ponds, drainage pipes, ditches, even the perpetually-sodden ground around the public water fountains.

She also learned to spot the quiet men who lurked near the playgrounds. Sometimes they sat and fed the birds, sometimes they jogged or walked dogs, but they always watched the children. One afternoon, she hung around a merry-go-round until one of the men noticed her. Pretending she didn't see him, she walked off to a deserted alley.

The man followed her in. He offered her a soda, then tried to grab her. She let her shadow devour him in a puddle of fetid water beside a dumpster.

After that, her shadow made her hunt in earnest. She walked all day, sometimes even skipping lunch when her shadow scented a pedophile or a new wet place. By early August, she'd trapped two more men. Hunting was easiest when she was on her period; when she was bleeding, her shadow spoke to her constantly, urging her on. When she wasn't near her period, the shadow spoke rarely, and only near water. When it wasn't there to reassure her, she fretted about the hunt and lay awake at night, wondering if her soul was destined for Hell.

When school started, Charlie had no choice but to abandon her daily walks for the dull routine of books and teachers and bland cafeteria food. She was in junior high school now; she'd hoped it would be better than elementary school, but it was just bigger.

She sat in the back of the classrooms, like always. Almost everyone ignored her. Everyone except her shadow.

It started to whisper ominous suggestions when she was walking to classes:

See that boy? He burned a litter of kittens alive. He's going to

the restroom; follow him in and let me have him.

See that girl? She's been trying to poison her baby brother, putting soap in his formula. She'll kill him soon if you don't help me take her.

Charlie knew she couldn't possibly do what her shadow wanted, not at school. Parks and underpasses were one thing; there was lots of space, lots of ways to slip away unnoticed even if people screamed as they were dying. But she was trapped at school. She'd get caught for sure.

She tried to ignore her shadow's exhortations by making up rhymes in her head while she was between classes or by doing anagrams and palindromes in class when the teachers got boring. But when her math class had a young substitute teacher named Mr. Berling, the shadow became unbearable.

Mr. Berling was young and smiled a lot. He explained things a whole lot better than their regular teacher and Charlie liked him.

He touches little girls, the shadow told her. Takes them out to see the horsies on his father's farm and feels them up in the stable.

"Able was I ere I saw Elba," Charlie muttered under her breath. Her hands were shaking so bad she couldn't write.

He's scum, just like the rest of them. Follow him home, let him take you to the farm. He'll fit nicely in the horse trough.

"Stressed desserts." Charlie thought she was going to start crying.

"Charlie, are you okay?" asked Mr. Berling.

"I think I ate something bad at lunch," she stammered. "I think I need to go to the bathroom for a while."

"Please do," he agreed.

Charlie bolted from the classroom, ran downstairs to the girls' restroom in the basement. It was usually empty; Charlie prayed no one else would be in there.

She pushed through the door and found four girls clustered around a pack of Camels. Two were inexpertly puffing on cigarettes as the third showed the fourth how to work the childproof lighter. They all turned to stare at her when she came in.

Charlie, get out of here this instant! the shadow demanded.

But it seemed to be growing weaker, recoiling from the smoke. With each breath she took, it slipped farther away.

“Can I try one of those?” she asked, stepping toward the group.

“I guess,” said the girl with the pack. She pulled out a cigarette and handed it and the lighter to Charlie.

Charlie lit it and took an experimental drag, then immediately started to cough and gag. This was surely the foulest thing she’d had in her mouth since . . . since a time she didn’t want to remember. Eyes streaming, she took another puff.

It was working, wind and fire canceling water and earth. Her shadow’s indignant demands were faint, fading into the rhythmic drip of the leaky faucet.

Charlie soon learned that it only took two cigarettes a day to silence her shadow. She smoked them on the sly in the bathroom at school and in the back yard at home. When the shadow started to talk to her in her dreams, Charlie bought incense and started burning it in her room at night.

She knew she was vulnerable without her shadow. The sick men she’d hunted before were still around. And she had the awful suspicion that she was still attuned to them, and they attracted to her. She needed a way to protect herself.

So when her aunt asked her what she wanted for her fifteenth birthday, she asked for karate lessons. Her uncle took her to Master Kim’s Tae Kwon Do dojang, bought her a white uniform and belt and enrolled her for a class that started that very night.

Charlie had always hated PE classes, and although taekwondo was several degrees harder than anything sport she’d been made to try at school, she liked it instantly. Unlike running stairs or chasing balls, the kicks and strikes had a *point*, a real and practical purpose. Everything she learned was useful; getting into shape was just a happy side effect.

Another happy side effect was David. He was a year older than Charlie, tall and cute but painfully shy. Charlie was attracted to him the moment she saw him. It took her weeks to swallow her

own fear and talk to him after class, but once she did they became fast friends. Best friends, and, as far as she could tell, each other's only friends. He already had his driver's license, so they often went out to see movies or to go hiking in the low hills north of the city.

Six months after they started going out, Charlie knew that she loved David, even though he'd only hugged her briefly and had never tried to kiss her. He didn't say so, but she suspected it was because of her smoking. His favorite aunt had died of lung cancer, and he hated being around smoke. She cut back as much as she thought she could, and wished she could explain her habit to him. But she knew that her shadow, though quiescent, would not tolerate being exposed.

A year later, David got his red belt, and Charlie got her blue. They were both drenched in sweat by the end of their respective skills tests. Charlie got a quick shower and changed at the dojang, but David never liked showering in the men's room there, since Master Kim had not thought to provide separate stalls for the men.

"I feel way gross," he said as they climbed into his truck. "I probably stink too, sorry. Let's go back to my place and let me get cleaned up, and then you wanna go get some ice cream?"

"Sure." Charlie suddenly realized that she hadn't had a cigarette all day. She hadn't smoked that morning because she wanted her lungs clean for the test, and she'd forgotten to bring her pack with her for a puff in the ladies' room afterward.

"It's really cool that you've got your blue . . . now you'll be able to spar with us in tournaments. I heard Master Kim on the phone the other day; he's arranging for all of us to go to Corpus Christi next month for the Tejas Invitational. That will totally kick butt; we'll get to go to the beach. I've never swum in the ocean before."

The ocean. Charlie's skin prickled with dread.

"I—I can't go," she muttered.

"What do you mean? You gotta go, this will be too cool to miss!"

"I can't." Dammit, why had she forgotten her cigarettes?

“Is it because you’re nervous about competing? You shouldn’t worry about that; you’re really good. And you know how to intimidate people, I mean, you should see the look you get on your face when you hit the heavy bag—”

“Look, don’t bug me about this!” she snapped. “I said I can’t go, end of discussion!”

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

They drove on in silence until they got to David’s house. The place was empty; his father was probably off on a sales trip, and his mother was probably working another 14-hour nursing shift at the hospital. David didn’t like to talk about his parents much.

She followed him into the house and to his bedroom. David kept his room excruciatingly tidy; Charlie doubted she’d even be able to find dust on the tops of his bookshelves.

“You wanna just hang out here while I shower?” he asked as he pulled fresh clothes out of his dresser. “If you want a Coke or anything, just help yourself.”

“Okay.”

David padded off to the bathroom and she sat down on the edge of his bed, trying not to muss the perfectly smooth green bedspread. She stared around at the neat rows of kung fu movie posters on the walls.

I wonder what David keeps under his bed?

Charlie’s breath caught in her throat. Had that been her own thought, or her shadow’s?

“Are you there?” she whispered, aching for a cigarette. “Damn you, David’s a good guy, there’s nothing bad under his bed.”

Are you sure?

Charlie sat very still, muttering anagrams to herself while she tried to ignore the dreadful curiosity building inside her. She could hear the hiss and spatter of water from the shower.

Are you afraid? If you don’t look, you’ll always wonder.

“Damn you.” Charlie slid off the bed, got down on her hands and knees and peeked under the bed. She pushed aside a baseball mitt and a pair of cleats and saw a wide, flat cardboard box. She pulled it out and opened it up. Inside was a stack of comic books

in plastic sleeves.

“See, it’s just comics,” she said, starting to riffle through them. “Batman, and Nighthawk, and the Hulk, and . . . oh shit.”

At the bottom was a Swedish magazine, unsleeved. She couldn’t understand the words, but the pictures of naked prepubescent boys were clear enough. The center spread showed an elevenish boy giving a slightly older boy a blowjob. And tucked inside the back cover were three Polaroids of a naked boy in different poses on David’s bed. On the same green bedspread she’d tried not to wrinkle.

Charlie felt completely and utterly numb. Defeated. She put everything back exactly the way she’d found it and reassumed her perch on the bed. A few minutes later, David came in, freshly dressed and toweling off his short brown hair.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t be nervous about Corpus Christi,” she announced. “I changed my mind; I’ll go to the tournament.”

His face broke into a broad grin, and he leaned over and gave her a quick hug. “That’s great! We’ll have a terrific time, I bet.”

In her mind, Charlie could see David, the only real friend she’d ever had, being torn apart in the waves. Her shadow felt smug, satisfied.

Was her whole life going to be like this?

Despite feeling intensely depressed, Charlie did well at the tournament, placed tenth in her belt class out of a field of seventy competitors. David did even better, placing third. In fact, most of Master Kim’s students did quite well, so he took all eight of them out for pizza that night and drove them to the beach in his big van the next morning.

The sky was overcast, and though it was a hot day, the strong, salt-greasy wind from the ocean carried a chilly bite.

“Watch out for undertow!” Master Kim admonished as they piled out of the van in their flip-flops and big T-shirts. “It takes you down like *that*.” He hit his palm with his fist for emphasis. “And watch out for what lifeguard say. If he yell ‘shark,’ get out of water, fast as you can.”

Charlie walked across the sand and set down her beach bag. She pulled out the single-edged razor blade she'd hidden in the folds of her towel. Hiding it in her hand, she kicked off her flip-flops and headed out to meet the waves.

David had run ahead of her and was already paddling around, happy as an otter. The water was dark, a gray like rotting headstones. Charlie waded out away from the others until she was in chest-deep.

He's in over his head, her shadow whispered. Let me have him.

"No."

For a moment, nothing happened as her shadow considered this new rebellion. Then Charlie felt a sharp cramp, deep in her womb.

Give him to me. The shadow's little-girl voice was ominous.

The cramp got worse, and bile rose in Charlie's throat. "No."

I saved you! the shadow shrieked inside her head. *Without me, you'd be less than nothing, and this is how you repay me?*

"Maybe I am nothing. But it's better than what you are."

I'm your God, girl, and don't you forget that.

The cramping became a wrenching pain in her stomach and intestines, and she cried out.

"Charlie?" David called, paddling toward her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, please don't come over here," she managed to call back.

You'll do as I say. And today we're going to start with that little boyfucker over there.

"You haven't proven to me that he's done more than look, and even if he has, I won't let you. Not today."

She began to slit her left wrist with the razor blade. Her blood was invisible in the dark water. "I'd rather die than live like this. You're not getting my permission to kill, never ever again. You asked me what I wanted, and now I want you to go away."

The shadow shrieked inside her head, the pain almost unbearable. A big, sandpapery shape bumped up against her body. Sharp jaws clamped down on her bleeding wrist.

It yanked her down beneath the waves and shoved her into the sandy bottom. Through the cloudy water, she could see the pearly-dead eyes of the big shark holding her down. The shark's

wide, razored mouth was inches from her face.

Give. Me. The. Boy.

Charlie kicked against the shark, churning up the sand, sharp shells and rocks cutting her legs. With her free hand, she beat against the shark's snout, but the huge fish wouldn't budge. Her eyes burned, and her lungs screamed for air.

She saw movement in the corner of her eye. David was diving down toward her.

"No!" she tried to scream, but all that came out was her last bit of air in a long string of bubbles.

The shark released her and rose to meet David. She pushed off the bottom, trying to reach them, but she'd gone too long without a breath. She blacked out.

Charlie came to on a stretcher on the sand. Her left arm was splinted and wrapped in bloody gauze. Master Kim and two paramedics hovered over her. Kim's face was grave.

"Where's David?" she whispered.

"I'm right here." He pushed through the crowd and knelt beside her. There wasn't a scratch on him. "Everything's gonna be okay."

The shark's attack crushed bones in her wrist and forearm and severed a couple of tendons. She felt weaker than she ever had before. The doctors said she might never regain full use of her hand. Her shadow seemed to be gone, leaving behind a sucking vacuum of depression.

David came to visit her in the hospital the very next day. He could barely sit still, and his eyes glowed with a feverish excitement.

"It told me that I could save you, just by wanting to," he said after the nurse left.

"It?" Charlie felt a deep bone-chill.

"Yeah. It's like . . . it's incredible. I can kick more ass than Bruce Lee and Batman combined! I just have to be near water and no one can stop me."

"Oh, God, David . . ." Charlie trailed off as it all sank in.

Blood Magic

Her best friend seemed not to hear her. “I’m gonna go away, maybe to New York or Los Angeles. I just thought you should know, ‘cause we’re buddies and all. I don’t need school, I don’t need Master Kim. Now I can do *anything I want*.”

“David, no, please, don’t do this, listen to me—”

“Sorry, Charlie, I gotta cruise.” He planted a quick, hard kiss on her forehead.

And then he was gone.

Charlie lay in bed, listening to her heart pound. Between the beats, she thought she could hear the shadow’s little-girl laughter.

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SEARCHING

The bookshop's screen door slammed, jarring Henry Schleicher awake from a sweet dream of the heroes' party he and the other boys from his division got in Honolulu the day the Japs surrendered.

Heart pounding from the shock of waking, cheeks warm from sleep and embarrassment and dream champagne, he rose from his old chair behind the cash register and fumbled for his trifocals.

"What can I do for you . . ." He trailed off.

The girl stood at the science fiction shelf, and God Almighty, she was a *looker*. She wore tight, worn-out cutoffs that barely covered up enough to keep her from getting arrested and she was barefoot. The first three buttons of her black silk blouse were open, and he could see her breasts swaying free under the fabric. Thick hair, as shiny and black as her blouse, hung nearly to her waist. Henry wondered if her hair would feel like silk.

She pulled a paperback off the shelf and held it out accusingly. "What's this doing here?"

She had an accent. Korean? Japanese? He couldn't tell.

"I—I don't know, missy . . . what is it?"

"*Forbidden Passion*. This is *not* science fiction."

The girl walked up to the cash register, and he caught a whiff of her perfume, a dark musky-rosy scent that made his whole body tingle. She had deep green eyes, like jade, but prettier. The color reminded him of a silk nightie he'd bought his wife when they had honeymooned in San Francisco after the War. She was as tall as he was, and he'd been a big man, six foot three, before

old age had shrunk his spine. And the girl didn't look quite as young as he'd first thought. Sure, she still looked like a kid, but hell, everyone under thirty looked like a kid to Henry.

She tossed the book onto the counter. "You ought to put this where it belongs, like in the trash."

He blinked in mute surprise. The girl breezed away to explore other parts of the shop. Her bare feet left prints in the fine dust like smudges of grease on dry wood.

He heard the stairs creak as his wife, Violet, came down the stairs from their bedroom above the shop. When they had married in 1946, Violet had been just nineteen. She had been like a china doll to Henry, a small, delicate treasure of a girl. But Violet had kept adding little layers of fat, year after year, just like a tree adding rings. Now she was as round and soft as the doughnuts she made for his favorite breakfast.

"Who's that?" Violet stopped at his elbow.

"Just some girl." He winced, knowing what his wife would do next.

Violet walked down the aisle to see for herself. She came back a few seconds later, whispering, "I don't like the looks of that one, Henry. Moment you turn your back, she'll be out of here with as many comics as she can grab."

Henry sighed. "Oh, give it a rest, Violet; she's just looking at books."

"She's dressed like a two-bit whore, and she ain't even wearing shoes," she whispered back, her voice sharp with jealous indignation. "Look at her; her feet are just *filthy*! 'No shoes, no service.' Tell her that, Henry. Get rid of her."

Arguing with Violet about the girl would be a monumental waste of time. Violet's great-grandfather fought the Mexican Army alongside Sam Houston in the Texas Revolution, and her granddaddy rode a thousand miles on a swaybacked horse to serve under Lee in the Civil War. Her family had always hated foreigners, from Republican carpetbaggers to Cantonese immigrants, and Violet wasn't the kind of woman to break with family tradition.

His wife's prejudices had only cost him sales twice that he

could think of: one was a cookbook he would have sold to a black professor from the local college, and the other was a French dictionary he would have sold to a little Filipino girl. He was never sure whether they'd heard Violet's whispers or if they'd simply been driven off by her icy stares. Either way, two books didn't amount to much. He was about to go out into the stacks and start pestering the girl for a sale when she rounded a corner with a volume entitled *War in the Pacific*.

"You gonna buy that?"

"Oh, I guess so. Nothing else in here is very interesting, is it?"

Henry heard Violet mutter something under her breath, but he chose to ignore both females. "That'll be fifteen even."

The girl managed to get two fingers into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled five and ten. She picked up the book, gave Violet a Cheshire cat grin, and left.

"Good riddance!" his wife proclaimed when the front door closed.

But Henry couldn't get the girl off his mind, her perfume, the way she'd looked. He'd always thought Oriental girls were some of the prettiest women in the world. Not that he'd ever told Violet that, of course. But Orientals did tend toward being a little flat chested, and they were almost always short. Henry had never thought he'd ever see a woman like that girl in the silk blouse. There sure hadn't been any girls like her around in his day.

When they got into bed that night, his goodnight kiss was more than his usual cursory peck.

"Well, what's gotten into you?" Violet asked.

"I—I don't know . . . I just thought, maybe we could . . ."

"You haven't wanted to do *that* for three years." She sounded suspicious.

"I know, but I'd really like to . . ." Damn it, why did he always have to beg his own wife to have sex with him?

She'd never seemed to like it much, no matter what he did. There was a lot she'd never let him try. And when she was finally pregnant at thirty-two, the labor was hard and long and their

little girl was born dead. After that, she'd often turn him down flat, saying she was tired or had a headache. And after she went through menopause, once a year was about all he could get out of her; it was like trying to negotiate an arms treaty with the Russians.

"Oh, all right," she sighed.

He started to kiss her neck, nibble her earlobes. Violet just lay there, like she always did.

Goddamn it, do something! he wanted to yell at her, but he didn't. He couldn't. After all, he was sixty-seven years old, and his wife was the only woman on the face of the planet who would have an old man like him.

So Henry just closed his eyes as he carefully climbed on top of her and entered her. He tried to pretend that the soft, sagging body beneath him was firm young flesh. He tried to pretend that the thin gray hair he caressed was a long, silken cascade. And as always, his imagination worked, at least as long as his eyes were shut.

Henry was kneeling beside an 18-year-old soldier with a chest full of shrapnel, and he couldn't stop the bleeding. He could hear the Zero making another pass over the island. The kid was dying, no matter what Henry did. The plane was zooming closer, and Henry knew he had to get to cover.

He tried to pull away, but his hands were stuck. Henry looked down at the soldier. The kid had turned into a rotting corpse. Henry was being sucked inside.

He couldn't get free. No matter how he struggled to get away from the horror, it just pulled more of his arms inside, first up to the elbows, then up to his shoulders. Henry had to fight to keep his head out of the nauseating mess. The Jap started firing. The sand exploded in lines heading straight for Henry . . .

He sat bolt upright in bed, breathing hard. Violet moved sleepily beside him.

"What's the matter, Henry?" she mumbled.

"The Zero . . . and the kid," he replied, his voice shaking.

Violet rolled over, her back to him. “I thought you stopped having those dreams.”

“So did I.” His voice nearly broke. Why was it back after forty years? Hadn’t seven straight years of the nightmares been enough?

“Prob’ly just a fluke.” She was already dozing off again. “Go back to sleep, Henry . . .”

He lay down, and soon Violet was snoring softly. But he couldn’t even close his eyes. The dream had left him with the vague sense that he was about to remember something awful, but every time he tried to probe his memory, he came up against a cold blank wall.

The girl was back the next morning. She was wearing black jeans and a short white T-shirt that showed just a tantalizing hint of her taut belly. Violet was about to go out to her bridge club meeting, but stopped when she saw who had come in.

“Henry, it’s *her* again,” Violet whispered as the girl began to browse through a set of shelves by the window.

He just wasn’t in the mood for this. “Violet, she’s just looking at books! Go to your club meeting, and quit being silly!” he whispered back.

“But Henry—”

Whump!

The pair jumped in surprise as the girl dropped a thick textbook on cardiovascular disease onto the counter beside the register.

The girl stared at them, her expression inscrutable behind purple-lensed sunglasses. “Ring me up, would you?”

That night, his dreams carried him to a frozen garden, everything iced solid and white. The pond was a rippled sheet; he could see harlequin goldfish frozen a few inches below the surface. The glorious blooms of bushes and trees were entombed in clear, delicate crystals. He drifted soundlessly over the paths, feeling no chill, just the unnatural stillness.

A savage, gleeful laugh tore the silence, making a chandeliered

willow tremble in anticipation. Henry turned to listen.

“Henry . . .”

The laugh came again.

“Henry, help me . . .” Violet was calling to him, but her voice sounded far away.

He ran toward the voices and came out of the garden at the edge of an immense lake. A woman in a flowered dress was lying facedown on the ice about a hundred yards from shore. He recognized the dress; it was the one Violet used to wear every Easter.

He ran out across the ice to his wife. When he reached her, he knelt and carefully rolled her over. Violet opened her eyes and smiled at him. He blinked. Violet was young again, as young and pretty as the day they’d married.

“Henry, help me!” Violet suddenly cried, grabbing his arms.

Before his eyes, Violet’s face began to bloat, fatten, sag into wrinkles, her blond hair turning dull and gray. The ice began to crack beneath her.

“Help me!” she gasped, grimacing in pain. The grimace froze, and her skin went a grayish white. Her flesh began to wither and blacken and slough away from her bones.

He screamed and pulled away.

The skeleton grabbed his arms again and gave out an angry, piercing shriek.

The ice shattered all around them. Henry was swept down into the black water, down through nets of clinging weeds. The weeds wrapped around him, strangling him, dragging him deeper and deeper into the cold, dark mud . . .

Henry awoke with a start, fighting the bedclothes that had somehow gotten bunched up around his neck. He threw off the twisted sheets. Shivering, he rolled over to feel the familiar warmth of his wife’s body. She wasn’t in the bed.

He sat up and looked around. Violet was lying face-up in front of the open window, her body bathed in a pool of moonlight. Dream-lake chill washed over him when he realized that she wasn’t breathing.

They buried Violet three days later on the 6th of August. Violet's relatives drove down from Dallas for the funeral. Before the church service, they all stood out in the foyer, comforting Henry.

"At least the heart attack took her right away," said Rudy, Violet's nephew.

"Yes," agreed Judith, Rudy's wife. "Thank the Lord Violet didn't have to suffer. Her cousin Rose spent her last fifteen years in the nursing home after her stroke." She shook her head. "Bad circulation. Runs in the family."

Their little girl, Vicki, began to cry and pull at the pink bow in her white-blond hair.

"Judy, give the kid a lollipop and see if that doesn't quiet her down some," Rudy said, frowning absently.

She rummaged through her purse and came up with a lemon sucker of the variety given out at banks. The crying ended as quickly as it had begun.

"She's a little cranky from the car trip," Judith said apologetically, glancing at her husband.

"You still running that book shop out of the first floor of your house?" Rudy asked.

"Yeah, I guess I'm gonna run it 'til the day I die," Henry replied numbly. "My daddy would have wanted it that way. Sorta makes up for me disappointing him by not going to college like he wanted, I guess."

He'd planned to go to college and become an engineer after he got out of the Army, but the War changed everything, made all his ambitions seem small and pointless. He'd been able to keep himself together long enough to marry Violet, have a nice honeymoon and get settled in a job at a hardware store, but nine months after the war ended his nightmares began. He lost his job, and for the next seven years the dreams left him a numb husk of a man, useless for anything but sweeping out his father's bookshop. Violet suffered him more or less silently, but his parents were genuinely patient with their only child and supported him and Violet until he got healthy. After all that, he felt obligated to take over the shop when his father died, even though he really

had little interest in books.

He sighed. "You know, I never thought anything like this would happen. I always thought she was gonna outlive me."

He shivered, recalling Violet's transformation in his nightmare. He felt the horrible almost-memory gnawing at the back of his brain. He didn't *want* to remember any more, but somehow knew he had to get past that cold obsidian barrier in his head. But what in God's name was his mind going to churn out when the wall came down?

In the silence, little Vicki decided that she was tired of her lollipop. She pulled it out of her mouth and threw it at Henry. The sucker stuck to the cuff of his black slacks.

"Vicki!" Judith exclaimed, her cheeks flushing pink.

"Aw, it's okay. Little kids do stuff like that." He bent down and peeled the lollipop off his cuff. Judith took it from him, wrapped it in a Kleenex and stuck it back into her purse.

Vicki was staring up at Henry with big blue eyes, wiping her sticky fingers on the front of her pink jumper. Henry had always imagined that his own little girl had pretty blue eyes like that, but the doctor hadn't let him see her. It was a damned strange world back then; he'd lived through a war where he'd seen men get blown to hamburger, and some country doctor decides he couldn't take the sight of his stillborn baby girl.

Then again, maybe the guy had been right.

After he'd seen everybody off in Rudy's Ford Caravan, Henry drove home alone in his old Buick. The day almost seemed like fall rather than summer; the sky was a deeper blue than usual and the smell of burning wood from someone's barbecue was faint in the air.

When he reached the house, he found the girl leaning against the shop door.

His heart started to beat a little faster. "The shop's not open today, missy."

"I read about your wife in the paper today," she replied. "I'm sorry."

“Yeah,” Henry mumbled, running his hands over his thinning gray hair.

She was still standing there, looking at him like she wanted something. Maybe he should politely ask her to leave, so he could mourn for Violet by himself like he was supposed to.

Problem was, he didn't *want* the girl to leave. Just the smell of her perfume made him as warm and dizzy as if he'd downed a triple bourbon. As he unlocked the door, he wondered if one night of sex with the girl would make up for forty-five years of disappointment.

“My mother died on this day,” the girl announced as she followed him inside.

Henry felt like someone had shoved his head in a bucket of ice water. “Uh, yeah? What, uh, what happened to her?”

“My brother. She died while she was trying to give birth to him.” The girl stared at Henry, then went over to the childcare shelf and pulled out a book of baby names. “Of course, she's got plenty of company; today's the day you guys nuked Hiroshima. Hell must have an incredible maternity ward.”

You guys. Henry felt his cheeks grow hot. “Look here, Missy, I don't like the sound of what you just said. I fought in that war, I watched my buddies die in the mud, and as far as I'm concerned, the A-bombs they dropped on Japan were gifts from *Heaven*,” he told her harshly. “They *ended* it. The Japs weren't going to stop. If it hadn't been for the Bomb, millions of soldiers, ours *and* theirs, would have been killed.”

“As opposed to the hundred thousand helpless women and children who were burned alive.”

“Jesus Christ, don't come in here spouting all that revisionist crap at me! Your people started the whole friggin' mess at Pearl Harbor, and I don't see any liberal hearts bleeding over the innocent boys who died in that cheap shot of a sneak attack!”

“Innocent?” She gave him a cold glare. “They were soldiers, and soldiers are *never* innocent. And there's no real proof it stopped the war. The rice crop sucked that year, and you guys had already torched most of the other cities. Hirohito wanted to end it. There

was no good reason to release Fat Man and Little Boy.”

“You weren’t there; you don’t know what you’re talking about!” He shook his head in exasperation. “Jesus, and you keep saying ‘you guys’ like I was personally involved. You may as well blame me for the bombing of Dresden. Hell, while you’re at it, blame me for the concentration camps! My granddaddy was German, I’m sure I’m responsible for it all *somehow!*”

The girl’s eyes were filled with bleak anger and sadness. “If they’d simply needed to deal out another atrocity, they could have slaughtered everyone just as thoroughly with normal bombs, like they did with Tokyo. But they wanted to see how their evil new toy would work, and it’s Pandora’s Box all over again. And you are a part of it, whether you wanted to be or not.”

She looked down at the book of baby names in her hand. “236,962 souls burned away. Did you know that all the babies that were stillborn after the bombings are still around, in buckets of formaldehyde in a lab someplace? I saw a picture of one in a magazine once; a scientist was holding it, gently, almost like you would a live baby, only it was this gray, shriveled-up thing. Could you imagine that, having to exist for eternity in a bucket of formaldehyde?”

Henry felt sick. “Get outta here.”

She held up the book. “I need to buy this.”

“Then give me ten bucks and get out, and don’t come back!”

That night, sleep took Henry to the hospital corridor beside the delivery room where Violet had been in labor for sixteen hours. Henry heard her cry out, and then he heard a baby start squalling. The doctor pushed through the white door, pulling his cloth mask down around his neck. His white scrubs were spattered with blood. Henry stood up, waiting to hear the news.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Schleicher,” the doctor said evenly. “The baby is dead.”

Henry could still hear his daughter wailing in the delivery room. “What are you trying to pull?” he demanded. “The hell she’s dead; I can hear her crying. Let me see her.”

He tried to go to the delivery room door, but the doctor blocked his way. "Your daughter is dead, Mr. Schleicher. It would be better if you just stayed in here."

He shoved the doctor away and pushed into the delivery room, calling to his wife.

The world exploded in a blossoming chrysanthemum of boiling smoke and flame. Blinded by the heat, Henry fell to his knees as a fiery wind roared in his ears.

The fire abruptly evaporated. He found himself lying on a vast plain of wreckage. He got to his feet and looked around. Steel girders fused by terrible heat rose up around him. White ash covered everything and floated in the sky like snow. There was no sound except the hollow whistling of the wind going past a jutting metal edge.

"What are you doing here, Yankee?"

He turned. A Japanese woman stood a few yards away from him. She was burned all over, face a mess of char and blisters, clothes in carbon tatters, fingers blackened stumps.

"I—I was looking for my wife, and my baby girl . . ."

"All the women and children here are dead."

He was suddenly aware that he could hear an infant whimpering somewhere nearby. "But that crying, I think that's my little girl . . . I've got to find her."

"You seek your daughter? Why should you find her here, when the fire you brought has taken my own child from my body?" He saw that she held a tiny, charred body in her ruined hands.

"But I didn't *do* this." The wailing was getting stronger. "Look, I've got to find her," He insisted, fear pulling at his throat. "She's the only child I'll ever have."

"And this was my only daughter!" the woman shouted, holding up the skeleton. "Look around, Yankee. This is the only legacy you will leave!"

The hidden baby began to scream, louder and louder, suffocating his mind with noise. The screeching went up, up, held one long note until—

Henry popped wide-awake as his hand went down on his

buzzing alarm clock. The room was warm from the morning sun, but Henry couldn't stop shivering.

The girl came in around noon the next day, barefoot, dressed in her cutoffs and a tissue-thin white tee that clung damply to her breasts. Her face and arms were sheened with sweat, staining the canvas book bag slung under her left arm.

He stood up, ready to order her out. But the look on her face killed the words in his throat, made him quake to the core of his soul.

She had the spooky, unnatural grin he'd seen on the faces of shell-shocked soldiers who'd cracked to the point of endlessly giggling at the horrors they'd seen. Her eyes were glassy, blazing with fever. He wondered if she were sick, or on drugs.

"I came to apologize, Henry." Her words came out in a breathless rush as she stepped toward the cash register. "I was a bitch, wasn't I? Shouldn't be bitchy to a nice old man like you. So very nice."

The scent of her rose perfume was thick in the air, but under it was the faint stink of sulfur and scorched metal.

"I mean, I can't be *mad* about what happened, can I?" she asked. "You guys fixed Japan up so nice afterward, and put in bases to protect us . . . my own father was a G.I., and if not for the Bomb . . . I wouldn't even be here, and I should be *glad* to be alive, huh, Henry?"

He was sure the girl was utterly out of her mind. "What do you want from me?" he stammered, starting to inch toward the telephone mounted a few yards away on the wall. For the first time in forty years, he wished he owned a gun; after the War, he'd given his deer rifles to his cousin and had not touched a firearm since.

"I want what everybody wants . . . that special someone who'll make me . . . *complete*. I feel so alone, and I think you do too. Are you the man I'm looking for? I said yesterday that you're a part of things, but I've got to make sure . . ."

She lunged forward and pinned him to the wall. He struggled

and hollered for help, but her arms were iron. She pressed her body against his. He couldn't help but thrill at the feel of her silky hair tickling his neck, her hard nipples brushing his chest.

"Shh, I'm not going to hurt you. Just relax."

She started to kiss his neck and her right hand slid down his body to rest over his fly. He squeezed his eyes shut. Trapped between terror and lust, he could do nothing but moan as she unzipped his pants and pulled him free.

When she went down on him, a blue shower of sparks exploded behind his eyes. Oh, dear God in Heaven, Violet had *never* done this, never would have done it if he'd begged and pleaded, oh dear *God!*

"Who . . . who are you?" he gasped raggedly.

He felt the buzz of the girl's muffled laugh, and she bobbed faster and faster against him to match the slamming of his heart, and suddenly a part of him was afraid he'd have a coronary then and there, but the rest told him this was not a bad way to go—

He came, a hot, sweet explosion that rocked his whole body, buckled his knees and turned his mind to stunned mush.

He felt the girl pull away, and he slid down the wall to lie in a sweaty heap. When he finally realized he hadn't, in fact, had a stroke or heart attack, he opened his eyes and fumbled his pants back on.

The girl was gone, but a book entitled *The Myths of Japan* lay on the floor a few yards away. She'd taped a note to the front cover: "Can you guess my name?"

Trembling, he crawled to the book and opened it at the page she'd marked. He began to read about Izanami, mother of the gods, who became ruler of the underworld after she'd burned to death giving birth to Kagu-tsuchi, the god of fire.

When he finally stopped reading, his whole body was filled with cold dread. He climbed to his feet, joints creaking like rusty gates, then got his checkbook and car keys and drove out to the local gun shop. A few hours later, he returned home with a shiny new Smith & Wesson pistol and a box of 9 mm hollow-point bullets. As he loaded the gun and set it on his bedside table, he sorely

hoped he wouldn't have to use it.

His best friend's chest exploded in a crimson spray. The young soldier fell twitching in the sandy mud. Henry helplessly tried to do something, *anything* for him with the pathetic canvas medical kit. His buddy's eyes rolled up into his head as he let out an awful wet noise. Then he was dead.

Henry dropped the kit and stared over their sheltering coconut log at the Japanese machine gun nest. The Japs were still firing, black smoke snaking from the slits in the bone-pale concrete bunker. He looked down at the sticky blood on his hands, at the black flies that were already crawling over his buddy's wounds.

His field of vision started to twitch in time with his pounding heart and bile rose hot in his throat. Those filthy yellow cockroaches were gonna pay for this. He grabbed his M1 rifle and a grenade and vaulted over the log. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he pounded across the clearing. He felt lances of fire slash his shoulder, his thigh as he pulled the grenade pin and hurled it into one of the black slits.

The percussive gust nearly knocked him down, but as soon as the orange bloom of fire died he kicked open the door and fired a half-dozen rounds into the bunker. When no one returned fire, he jumped down inside.

A half-dozen Japs lay sprawled on the concrete floor, faces and bodies torn apart from shrapnel. Then he heard a ragged moan and saw one of them start rolling around. The Jap was maybe sixteen or seventeen, his face a blood-speckled mask of shock. His close-cut hair looked like the down of a black duckling.

In two strides Henry was on the Jap and bashed his face in with the butt of his rifle.

"Ah, truly the deed of a *mighty* warrior!" came a laugh behind him.

Henry whirled around, but found his arms were paralyzed, his rifle useless.

One of the corpses rose, and in the dimness he initially thought it was a man dressed all in black. But when it stepped into a shaft

of sunlight, he saw it was a naked woman, her whole body charred almost beyond recognition, cooked flesh peeling from the bones of her face and hands. Her eyes were bright amber, live coals glowing in the ruin of her face.

She raised a hand, and his dog tags slithered up his chest. The chain jerked tight, then broke, leaving a stinging track on his neck. The tags flew into her open palm.

“Henry Schleicher, a corporal,” she read aloud. “You please me. You’ve sent many souls to my realm today. Now you’ll drop your weapon and please me *more*.”

Henry’s hands released the rifle and he staggered backward to fall against a pile of bodies in the corner. To his utter horror, he realized he had an erection, and the woman was coming for him, her grin baring rows of gray shark’s teeth . . .

Henry woke with a moan, then had to lurch out of bed to be sick in the bathroom. As he washed his face, parts of the dream replayed themselves in his head. *That* was what he had been blocking so long, the mother of all his nightmares.

He realized he’d had it once before, when he was recovering in the hospital in Honolulu. His buddies had carried him out of the bunker; he’d escaped his crazed charge with a bad case of shock and a few superficial gunshot wounds. They all said God must have been looking out for him. He got a purple heart and a silver star, but nobody ever found his dog tags.

“Can you guess my name?”

His heart froze. The girl stood beside his bed. Her slim body was shoehorned into torn, faded jeans, a black tee shirt, and combat boots. She’d cut off all her hair, buzz-cut it nearly to the bone.

“How’d you get in here?” he stammered, blushing at the hard-on straining against the elastic waistband of his pajamas. He crossed his hands in front of his fly.

“What, you won’t even *guess*? You’re no fun,” she pouted. “Anyhow, I’m Miko, and I’ll be your demon for the evening.”

“How’d you get in here?” he repeated.

She nodded toward the open window. “Climbed your ivy. Same as when I came for your wife.”

It took a moment for the implication of her words to sink in. His guts turned to ice. “You . . . you killed Violet.”

Another nod. “She was distracting. Not very satisfying, though; I had to kill an old man in a nursing home today, just to make sure I’d be halfway sane when I came here tonight.”

He couldn’t keep from staring at the gun on the table. There was no way he could get to it before Miko did.

She followed his gaze. “Is that for me, Henry? You can’t kill me, you know . . . thanks to dear ol’ mom, I have no soul. What’d my mother look like when she raped you, Henry? Burned or wormy or what?”

“Your moth—oh dear God.” The room started swimming before his eyes.

“She looks like a big smoke cloud now. She and my brother were fighting over the souls in the War, and Kagu-tsuchi tricked her into being at Hiroshima when Little Boy blew,” the girl continued. “Did you know that the mother’s responsible for giving her child a soul? Kind of an automatic thing usually, but since mine’s the Queen of the Dead, she gave me a jones for murder, instead. Mother likes ‘em young, and so she made sure I’d send plenty of kids her way.”

She sat down on the edge of his bed and gave him a grim smile. “I guess you could say my soul is on layaway; I get it as soon as I’ve made up for what my brother took from my mother. Kagu-tsuchi gets the souls of people who burn to death, and at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that was pretty much everyone. Mother was really angry about losing the souls, not to mention being vaporized, so I have to match the A-bomb body counts: 236,962 people. And since I can’t use fire, bombs and guns are out, so I pretty much have to take lives one by one. So far I’ve only managed to send off 538. At this rate, I won’t be done for another twenty thousand years.”

She rubbed her face. “I wish you guys had just nuked *one* city, a much *smaller* city. I mean, I’d be lying if I told you killing wasn’t a kick, but I’m ready to do something else for a change, you know?”

“Why . . . why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Because you can get me out of this. You’re my father, and if you willingly give me your soul, I’m freed from my birth curse.”

She seemed absolutely, horrifyingly sincere, but Henry reminded himself she *had* to be insane, or some sicko getting her kicks at his expense.

“Why should I believe this crazy story of yours?” he demanded nervously. “All that was just a dream I had, and you’re just playing with my head. I . . . I can’t *possibly* be your father.”

She dug into her pocket, pulled out a silver chain and flipped it through the air. “Catch.”

He caught the chain. Two dog tags lay in his palm, gleaming like razor blades. They bore his name, rank and number. The metal was flecked with brownish gunk that might have been blood or rust or both. He turned the tags over and saw the crude American eagle he’d etched with his pocketknife in a fit of barracks boredom. His heart dropped to the soles of his feet.

“Where did you get this?”

“Mother likes to play games. She gave me a box full of hundreds of dog tags a few decades ago, and told me one of them belonged to my father. I’ve blown a lot of old men, Henry, and you’re the only one who tasted of my mother’s poison.”

Her mother’s poison.

Miko met his mortified stare. “I’d always expected my father would be a man who was responsible in some concrete way, maybe Oppenheimer or the pilot of the *Enola Gay* or *somebody*, but it was just you,” she said quietly. “You didn’t ask for this, but neither did *I*. And if you don’t give me your soul, nearly a quarter of a million people are going to get something they didn’t ask for, either.”

She stood up and went to the window.

“Do I have a choice?” he stammered.

“You have all the choice in the world. Your soul’s no good to me if I have to take it by force. If you want to give me and everybody else a chance at a normal life, you’ll meet me tomorrow at midnight on top of Mount Nebo. Otherwise, you can just stay here, and I

won't bother you again. By the taste of you, I'd say you'll live to a ripe old age, maybe even see one hundred."

She swung a leg over the windowsill. "I guess it all depends on whether you're still willing to die for your country or not."

And then she was gone.

At dawn, Henry was still awake, staring down at the gun and the dog tags that lay in his lap. Miko *had* to be crazy. The nightmare about the bunker was just that—a nightmare. And Violet died of a heart attack. Perfectly natural causes.

There was no way the girl could be his daughter. He already *had* a daughter, and if she'd survived she'd be living in one of one of the tidy houses down the street, married to a banker or maybe a doctor, and she'd be a teacher at the local elementary school. And she'd have given him two or three grandkids, towheaded little sprites who'd come over for stories and milk and cookies, and the house would be filled with their laughter instead of this awful empty silence—

Henry's eyes were burning. No frigging way Miko was *his* daughter.

Problem was, he couldn't deny that the dog tags were his. He stared down at the chain draped across his knee. How had the girl gotten hold of them?

Maybe she wasn't crazy. Maybe one of the Nips had survived and taken his tags back to Japan, where he passed them to one of the dead soldiers' families as a revenge heirloom. That *had* to be it; she'd cooked up this wild story to get him to go out to the boonies so she could nail him for killing her grandfather or uncle or whoever.

He should call the police, let them deal with her.

But when he got up to call them on the phone, he started thinking about the time he and Violet had been robbed downtown. They'd been coming out of the bank when some kid grabbed her purse and took off through the city park. A dull-eyed deputy came and took a few lazy notes as Henry and Violet described the thief. The deputy told them he'd "get right on it," but no arrest was ever made.

If the local sheriff's department couldn't handle a straightforward purse snatching, how could they possibly take care of slippery Miko? Hell, the cops might not even believe his story; they might think *he* was the crazy one.

Maybe he should just ignore it all and stay at his house that night. But what if she got mad, and came for him again? Worse yet, what if she'd seen his in-laws come to the house, and decided to vent her anger on Rudy and Judith and little Vicki?

What was he going to do?

He took a shower, dressed and went downstairs to make coffee and microwave his breakfast. For the past few days, he'd been living on the baked chicken and casseroles Judith brought him before the funeral. He knew how to barbecue and mix drinks, but beyond that he was lost in the kitchen. He'd tried to fry an egg once, but he'd burned it to a black mess that he'd had to chisel out of the skillet with a steak knife.

When his drumstick and corn casserole were warm, he poured himself a mug of instant coffee and sat down at the kitchen table to eat. He stared into his mug, the coffee shining black like Miko's hair, and suddenly he could almost feel her lips on him, the heat of her body . . .

He tried to put her out of his mind as he ate. His efforts failed miserably, and between Miko and his lack of sleep he was supremely distracted as he opened up the shop.

When a local schoolteacher came in to buy a gift certificate, he botched three of them before he finally wrote everything down right. Later, a woman came in to buy an armload of romances, and he gave her a dollar too much change. A couple of construction workers came in shortly before noon to look over the pornography Henry kept in a back room. After they left, he realized one of them had shoplifted a deck of girlie cards right under his nose.

This just wouldn't do. Henry put up the "Closed" sign, locked his doors and went upstairs to take a quick nap. Maybe a little more sleep would clear his head.

The bunker nightmare came to him almost instantly. Instead of mercifully ending before the burned goddess took him, it played

through to the horrible end.

He woke with a scream. He lurched to the bathroom to lose his breakfast, then tore off his clothes and got in the shower. He scrubbed his body red, his skin crawling at the memory of those skeletal hands, those vile, cracked lips, the breath hot and stinking of a thousand corpses.

When he finally ran out of hot water, he stepped from the shower and shambled into the bedroom to get dressed. He saw himself in the bureau mirror, his face a bad gray, eyes red and glassy. How could something that felt so real be just a dream?

He opened the top drawer of the bureau, took out the tray that held all his old medals and ribbons and stared down at them. The tray told him he'd been a hero once, and like his daddy always told him, heroes took care of business, never shied away from what had to be done.

He felt cold deep in his bones. If Miko had been telling him the truth, he had to deal with her, had to stop her from killing anyone else. But how could he stop a demon?

He went downstairs and re-read the Japanese mythology book, pored over the entries on Izanami's other deadly child, the god of fire. If the gods truly feuded as Miko claimed they did, then Kagu-tsuchi wouldn't want his little sister to complete her task. If all this was real, then he ought to be able to contact the god of fire somehow.

Henry went to his bedroom and arranged his medals in a big glass ashtray. He carried it down to the kitchen, set it on the counter, cracked open a bottle of brandy he'd been saving for company and sloshed the liquor over the decorations. Part of his brain hollered at him for wasting good booze and ruining family heirlooms, but the rest reminded him that he had no real blood relatives left to inherit his treasures . . . except Miko, if she was telling the truth. And if she was, then contacting the god was a hell of a lot more important than a few medals.

"Okay, Kagu-tsuchi, if you're out there, tell me what to do," he muttered, then lit a match and threw it in the ashtray.

It blazed bright, and he stared into the flames. The silver star

began to blacken, and the ribbons crackled as they caught fire. The crackling got louder, and suddenly he heard a hissing voice inside his head:

“While the mother survived, the daughter shall die.”

The fire grew hotter, brighter, and suddenly the ashtray exploded. Henry stumbled back, momentarily blinded, eyebrows singed.

When the gray afterimage finally faded, he saw that the ashtray and medals were scorched slag, a black, bubbled mess melting into his counter top.

At eleven-thirty that night, he stood before the mirror again, now dressed in his old Army uniform. The seat of his pants sagged and his belly bulged around the waistband, but the fit wasn't that bad, considering.

He slipped the shiny Smith & Wesson and a road flare into the left pocket of his jacket. Then he carefully slid a mason jar filled with homebrew napalm into his right pocket. He'd made the jellied gasoline that afternoon by soaking packing peanuts in gas; he hoped he'd made enough, hoped the jar wouldn't leak.

He headed downstairs to his old Buick. It was a hot night, so he turned the AC up high as he drove. Mount Nebo was fifteen minutes outside town, hardly a mountain but certainly the largest bump in the flatland for miles. A local rancher had lived on Mount Nebo for a few decades but five years ago his house had been hit by lightning during a drought and burned down, killing him and his family. Somebody back East had inherited the land, but nobody ever came out to do anything with it.

As he turned up the farm road toward Nebo, he saw the ruined chimney and walls silhouetted against the full moon. Below, he saw a flickering light, maybe a campfire? He parked the car off the road, clicked on his flashlight and began to hike up the hill.

He had to pause midway to massage the rusty ache in his knees, and was wheezing badly by the time he reached the top. His shirt was sodden with sweat. When the blood stopped roaring in his ears, he realized he could hear Miko singing nearby, too

softly for him to make out any words, but the sound sent an electric buzz through his chest and loins.

No. She was his enemy, and he had to stop her. He pulled out the mason jar and unscrewed the lid with shaking hands, then hobbled around the weathered hunks of burnt wood and cinder blocks to find Miko.

He turned a corner into what might have been a bedroom, and his breath caught in his throat. Miko was dancing naked on a red blanket surrounded by hundreds of candles, from tiny white votives to slim tapers to enormous three-wick cylinders. The thin flames curled and flickered in the hot night breeze, and Miko's dance mimicked them, her body twisting and rippling, the light gleaming on her hair, her breasts, her taut arms and legs. Maybe she had more muscles than he'd been brought up to think a woman ought to have, but she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. The words to her serpentine melody were Japanese, but he understood the message: *Come to me, my love.*

He wanted more than anything to go to her, to touch that wonderful body, but he knew what he had to do. She was the enemy. Swallowing nervously, he pulled out the road flare and sparked it against a piece of cinderblock.

Miko stopped singing and turned to him, eyes wide.

"No! Put that stuff down, you don't know what—" she began, rushing toward him.

Heart hammering, he slung the mason jar at her. She knocked it away, but jellied gasoline splattered on her arm, her breasts, her face. She started screaming even before he threw the flare.

She virtually exploded. Her flesh seemed eager to burn. Henry watched, transfixed in horror, as her hair ignited like flash paper, her skin crisping and peeling, fat and muscle sizzling and popping under the burning napalm. Howling, she frantically beat at the flames spreading across her body. She stumbled backward into the candles and collapsed.

The air was thick with the smoke from her burning flesh. Bile rose in Henry's throat as he watched her thrashing, scattering her candles, fighting the flames that had already destroyed her

lovely eyes, her skin, her fingers. He wanted to turn away, but found he could not even shut his eyes.

Finally her howling fell to a whimper, and then the whimper faded into the crackling of the dying flames. Henry realized he was crying, realized he could move again. He turned and staggered away, wishing he'd brought a handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose, wondering if he'd be able to keep from blowing out his brains when he got back to his empty house.

"Father, please don't leave me like this . . ."

Oh, dear God.

He turned and saw Miko's corpse stir in the ashes and congealing candle wax. Her face was that of Death, eyes and nose black holes, charred scalp peeling away from red bone. He wondered how she could still speak, how she could still be alive.

"Where are you?" She tried to raise herself up on an elbow, but couldn't. "Please, not like this . . . Kagu-tsuchi won't take me. Neither will my mother. No one will come for me. When my bones rot away I will still be trapped here."

She made a choking noise, and her whole body started to spasm. It took him a moment to realize she was sobbing.

Dear God, what had he done? Not even Satan himself deserved what he'd done to Miko. To his own daughter. Heroes didn't burn beautiful women alive, didn't damn them to an eternity of agony in a wasteland. He squeezed his eyes shut against the hot tears streaming down his face.

"Father, please . . ."

Heart hammering madly, he turned and made his way through the wreckage to Miko.

"What can I do?" he stammered.

"Hold me."

Swallowing against a wave of nausea, knees creaking, he got down on the ground and lay down beside her. She slid a hand across his chest and wriggled close to him, her skin crackling with every movement.

He stared at the full moon overhead, his vision twitching with every beat of his heart.

Blood Magic

She kissed his cheek, her lips dry and hard. A cold thrill coursed through his body. He felt his heart stutter, then cramp down. The pain was exquisite.

Miko pulled him tight, her breath hot and ragged in his ear. As he gasped for air, he felt a strange tugging in his chest, his crotch, his mind. Something deep inside started to peel free.

“Ohyes, please, yes . . .” she whispered.

His soul tore free. Her body convulsed against his, and she let out a hoarse, animal groan of delight.

As his vision began to fade, he turned his head and saw fresh skin spreading across her face and body, new eyes blooming open in her sockets.

Before the cold blackness engulfed him, he felt her gently kiss his forehead. Her lips were soft as funeral roses.

“Thank you,” was all she said.

[Lucy A. Snyder](#) is a Texas native whose fiction has appeared in publications such as *Midnight Zoo*, *Snow Monkey*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and Cumberland House's *Guardian Angels* anthology. Her collaborations with Gary A. Braunbeck have appeared in *Bedtime Stories to Darken Your Dreams* (IFD Publishing), *Civil War Fantastic* (DAW), and *Villains Victorious* (DAW).

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