



Partnerships. The Synergy Drive's Plan-  
in midstream  
Synergy Drive

# The Imaginings

a novel

PAUL D.  
**DAIL**

PAUL D. DAIL

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Paul D. Dail

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## PROLOGUE

From the dark of his apartment, Peter Blithe parted the curtains of his living room window just slightly. Just enough to peer outside. Even though the apartment was cool, sweat beaded on his forehead, pasting his greasy blond hair to his face. He had lost track of how many times he had performed this little ritual over the past hour.

Peter scanned the night outside. The other lights in the complex glared into the dark sky, but he could still detect a few stars above. The storm hadn't arrived yet, but still he hesitated. Because he knew it was gathering.

Peter really didn't want to leave the apartment. Not if he didn't have to go. But he needed the tow rope from his Blazer.

A small dust devil twisted across the parking lot. It whipped up a clump of leaves gathered against the curb, and in the instant before they were scattered, Peter swore that they swirled into the shape of a face. There was only darkness where the eyes should've been. Then it was gone.

No, he definitely didn't want to go outside.

The icy wind had started ripping though the Twin Cities just after lunch. The morning forecast had predicted an unseasonably warm day in Minneapolis, and the cold blast had caught people unprepared.

Peter had been at a used bookstore when it hit. After the optimistic forecast that morning, he had felt safe enough leaving his home. Hell, Peter might have even said he felt good, even though he knew that optimism had become something of a gamble the past

month. When the wind kicked up that afternoon, he knew it had been a bad bet. People suddenly swarmed into the previously quiet store, shivering and pretending to be interested in the handful of new releases the store carried. Peter gently closed the book he had been skimming, *A Field Guide to Demons, Fairies, Fallen Angels, and Other Subversive Spirits*. Through the crowd milling around by the cash register, he could see others on the sidewalk hurrying past in a swirl of clothing and wind-tangled hair.

Who am I kidding? Peter asked himself. And at that moment, he knew it was decided. He would never have peace again. His shoulders dropped.

Nothing had ever come easy for Peter. Not grades. Or girls. Nothing. From trying to get a body that a girl might look twice at, to almost every test in high school and college, most of his life had been a workout with very little to show for it. But there had been a bright spot. Everything seemed to turn around for him when he moved to Minnesota.

It didn't last long. And by the time the real bad shit got started, he just didn't have any fight left in him.

Peter let out a quiet sigh, then looked around the store. He spotted a door at the back with an "Employees Only" sign. He crept across the aisle and tried the handle. Locked. He turned toward the front, studying the group that still waited for the weather to abate. No one seemed to be looking at him.

Or, more importantly, for him.

He had to take his chances, and he started forward, excusing himself through the crowd and leaving the store.

Outside, he had fought through the rushing masses until he reached his SUV and quickly drove back to his apartment. He stayed inside with the blinds shut for the remainder of the afternoon, even though he knew it was the last time he would see daylight. At least inside, he would be safe from the storm until he finished his business.

Peter checked out his window a final time, swallowed hard and took his coat from the couch. He tried to open the front door, but he quickly yanked his hand away in pain. The handle of the door was glowing red, the bronze coating smoking from the intense heat. Blisters rose on his palm where he had touched the knob. Peter clutched his hand into a fist and closed his eyes. When he opened

them again, the door handle had returned to normal, and there was just a faint prickling in his palm.

Not much longer, he told himself, but still he hesitated at the door.

He remembered when the first hallucinations began almost three months earlier, minor harmless flashes of light or movement. Peter dismissed them as work exhaustion. It was winter in the mid-West. The cold and storms could get to a person.

Then it got worse. He started seeing faces in his peripheral vision, outside his windows, which would dissolve when he turned to look at them. He went to the doctor, whose only suggestion was to take some time off from work. Peter did just that, and after a week of rest and apparent calm, he returned to the office, but what he saw  
it looked so real

made him run out of the building, stopping only to vomit in the parking lot.

At first, his supervisor had tried calling and leaving messages, but there hadn't been a call in two weeks, not since Peter had answered the phone and then hung up screaming. He knew his coworkers weren't actually being fed into a meat grinder on the other end of the line, but that's what it sounded like. No one else called him. And until this morning, he didn't leave the apartment.

Just as Peter tried the handle again, a gust of wind blew the door open, knocking Peter back before cracking into the doorstep on the wall. He forced himself onto the porch and descended the stairs. At the bottom, he glanced around the complex before crossing the parking lot. He didn't see anyone else around. Peter opened the rear doors of his Blazer, but he quickly retreated in horror as an avalanche of brownish-black insects poured out of the vehicle. Stag beetles. They were two to three inches long with pincers half the length of their bodies. They tumbled over one another as they cascaded out, their hard shells clattering on the asphalt, where they found their footing and rose up in defensive stances, pincers snapping in the air.

Peter hadn't seen stag beetles since he was a child in Georgia. On hot summer nights, the disgusting insects would descend on his family's porch like a minefield, causing Peter and his younger brother, David, to race from the front door to the yard.

David.

Peter hadn't thought about his brother in months. The last thing he knew was that David was living with some girl in Colorado, but Peter had stopped calling his family.

The stag beetles continued to stream out of the Blazer. Suddenly the group on the pavement scuttled around, grouping together. The groups formed into the shapes of letters. Peter stepped back farther and watched in horrid fascination.

D-A-V-I-D.

When the letters were complete, a final clump formed into a squirming question mark, the pincers waving like mad.

Shit, Peter thought. There was a reason he had stopped communicating with relatives. Or even thinking about them.

“It’s not real,” he said aloud and stepped closer to the Blazer. The letters scattered and the stag beetles took on a militaristic front line, all heads raised against Peter. He pushed back his childhood fears and continued, cringing as he crunched over the insects. The survivors quickly spread out and then surged forward. He could feel them crawling on his shoes and then his legs.

“Not real,” he said again, but he rushed forward. The stag beetles continued to erupt like lava from the spot where his towrope was stowed. Peter clenched his jaw, closed his eyes and plunged his hand into the pile halfway up his arm. Hundreds of bites pinched his flesh as he groped around the back of the Blazer. He didn’t need to open his eyes to see that the beetles had stopped surging out of the vehicle and were now swarming up his arm toward his shoulders, his neck, his face. Just as he was about to scream, his fingers found the rope and yanked it free.

The insects disappeared. Peter looked at the empty space, shuddering. Then he slammed the door and ran back to his apartment, only to find his last sanctum invaded. The wind continued to blow in his apartment, even though all of the doors and windows were closed. Newspapers and magazines swirled in the living room. A lamp next to the couch blew over, the bulb exploding in a flash of light.

The stereo switched itself on, and static blared from the speakers. Underneath the static Peter heard a gravelly voice whispering one word over and over:

“David.” The voice started laughing, growing louder until it cut off, replaced again by static.

Peter didn’t have much longer. He figured that the illusions would become reality soon enough, and he had one more thing to do. He had been tricked into setting this punishment on his brother. Whatever had been tormenting Peter had slipped in when he was

weak and plucked out another victim. He didn't know how long until this thing would find his little brother, but Peter had to find a way to warn him somehow, before his mind shredded away entirely.

With the towrope still clutched in his hand, Peter rushed into the whipping debris, grabbed a newspaper out of the air and hurried into the kitchen. He yanked open a drawer, pulled out a black marker and scrawled a note across the front page of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He examined his warning,

never disregard your imaginings.

Peter knew he should say something else, but the swirling maelstrom in his living room told him that more time was a luxury he couldn't afford. These hallucinations

but are they really hallucinations? If someone walked in right now, what would they see?

were the most realistic yet. The others had seemed designed just to break down his mind, but they wanted his flesh now.

Peter scanned his kitchen for somewhere to put the message where it wouldn't be blown to shreds and lost in the mess. His eyes stopped on the refrigerator. He opened the door and set the paper on the top shelf. Someone would clean out the fridge eventually.

As he stepped out of the kitchen, the torrent of periodicals came at him. He threw up his arms in defense, and the pages of the whipping magazines sliced dozens of paper cuts over his exposed skin. He swung the rope at the flurry, managing to knock a few issues to the carpet, but they were quickly caught up again. He fled to his bedroom, slamming the door. It kept out the printed pages, but the wind persisted in his room, tossing the bedding from wall to wall. Peter dodged into his bathroom and yanked back the forest green shower curtain. The rod supporting the curtain was hollow plastic, the kind with an expanding spring to hold it against opposite walls. Too weak, he decided. Back in the room, he slid open his closet doors and tested the wooden rod held in place by flimsy metal hardware screwed to a shelf made of particle board. The shelf flexed when he pulled down on the rod. No good, either. Shit. How could he not have thought of this?

Then an image flashed in Peter's mind, and he hurried out of the bedroom through the living room to the front door. He didn't hesitate this time as he opened the door and stepped out from one storm into another. Outside, sleet had joined the wind, pelting his right side as he stood on the porch. He pulled his hood up and

fought the urge to race down the stairs. Instead he took the steps cautiously, careful to avoid slipping. The last thing he needed was to fall and break his back, ending up crumpled and defenseless on the landing below while whatever torture rained down on him.

At the bottom of the stairs, he sprinted across the parking lot and flung open the gate to the basketball courts. The backboards were supported by four-inch steel poles rising ten feet before elbowing parallel to the ground like an upside-down L. They were perfect. Peter approached the nearest one and tossed an end of the towrope over the elbow. As if taunting him, the wind caught the rope and blew it away from the bar a few times before Peter successfully grabbed the other end. The rope had been designed for tow hitches, each end sewn into a large, sturdy loop. He threaded the dangling end through the other loop and pulled until the loop slid up to the bar. He tugged a couple of times on the rope and then swung the loose end over the bar repeatedly until it dangled a few feet above his head. Then he started shimmying up the pole. Halfway up, he hugged the pole tight with one arm and grasped the rope with the other, sliding the loop over his head before continuing up.

For the first time since his imaginings took on a life of their own, Peter didn't feel any fear. A remarkable lucidity drifted over him. It would all be over soon. Relief finally. Suicide was supposed to be a sin, but surely God would understand this time, considering what Peter had been through the past month.

Halfway up the pole, he stopped.

Maybe it was a test.

Peter's grip loosened, and he slowly slipped back down as the other lessons of childhood Sunday school rushed back at him. There were all sorts of biblical references to people being tested by God. He had put a family on a boat for forty days, surrounded by the filth, stench and disease of a bunch of wild animals. Forty days and forty nights. For Peter, it had really only been bad for the past month. He had been broken after only thirty days. Amazing how long each day had felt like, living in fear of every passing second of it, awaiting the next horrific vision.

He strengthened his grip and started back up. He had failed. Or God had failed him. Better to end it now than to put more lives in danger. He wanted to pray that his brother would be stronger than he had been, but he knew his prayers at this point would go unheard.

## THE IMAGININGS

At the top of the pole, Peter crossed the bar hand-over-hand, his feet dangling above the blacktop. The sleet made the steel slippery, and a couple of times he almost lost his grip. Halfway across, he stopped.

What the hell am I doing? I can beat thi-

His hands slipped on the ice, and he dropped, but not enough to break his neck. He clawed at the tow rope, his body thrashing while he suffocated. His body twitched a couple of times with his last fight, then went still.

As he died, the sleet stopped, and the wind died down to a whisper.

## CHAPTER 1

### GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO

The wind grabbed the screen door and swung it open with a crash. David cursed the landlord for not fixing the latch as he rushed out of the kitchen, past the living room and down the narrow hallway. He opened the front door, shivering when the chill rushed in. Rain pelted the side of his face, and the wind whipped his shoulder-length blond curls into his eyes and tangled it in his thick goatee. Lightning flashed, revealing thick black clouds. If he still lived in Georgia, he'd be in the basement by now. In the South, those were tornado clouds. In Colorado, it was just one hell of a storm.

David reached out for the thrashing screen. Another bang like that last one would surely break the upper glass section. He wrestled the door from the gusts, finally pulling it shut and making sure the latch caught. Then he walked back into the living room, making a point of wiping his dripping face. His roommate, Kathy, sat on the couch watching the television. As usual.

"Kathy, you know with the broken handle you need to make sure the door closes all the way when you come in."

Kathy didn't bother to look away from the television. "I thought I did." David shook his head and walked into the kitchen. Her excuse for everything was to play stupid.

"Maybe Ann left it open when she went to work," she hollered from the living room.

Or she blamed it on someone else.

David didn't respond. He knew Ann didn't leave it open. It pissed her off more than it did him. David went back to work in the kitchen on the lasagna. It was Ann's favorite, and he knew that his fiancé would need it when she got off work. Nights like these were always busy at the grocery store. People stocking up "just in case." It happened every time a big storm was predicted. There hadn't been a flood in Canyon City since 1965, but people weren't taking any chances, especially with spring having come so early this year.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the nearly opaque plastic that covered the window over the sink. David looked up from the pan, startled. He swore he thought something had moved just outside the window in that brief flash of light. He paused, waiting for a knock on the door, but when none came, he dismissed it. Just the freaking plastic again. Last fall the only department store in town had sold out of the clear window plastic by the time they got around to buying some, so they got stuck with the heavy painter's plastic. It helped keep the heating bill down in the old house, but in David's opinion, the only way the house could've felt like more of a body bag would've been if the plastic were black.

But it came down to dollars and sense, as his Dad used to say. With the wedding less than four months away, David and Ann needed all the money they could get. Having to live with another couple whose main preoccupation was an old 20" RCA television was another example. It was a miracle the thing still even worked; both David and Ann often wished that it didn't. They had been looking for a place of their own for the past couple of months. Big house or not, there was no way they were staying here once they were married. After that, Kathy and Jason could watch television until their brains oozed out of their heads.

Headlights shone through the plastic over the picture windows in the dining nook just as David finished up the final layer of the lasagna.

Perfect timing

He knew it was Ann, even though he couldn't see outside. The sound of her truck with the loose muffler that she wouldn't let David fix was unmistakable. But more than that, David just knew. Like how he could tell when she entered a room, even if his back was turned. Like a little rush of adrenaline, she just made him feel more alive.

David heard a low rumbling sound outside in the distance as the truck's engine died, but it wasn't thunder. It sounded more like a freight train tearing down the residential street. The growling of the gale wind grew as David heard Ann shut the truck door. The blast hit the house, shaking the already loose windows and flinging the front door open. An icy chill swept into the house, raising the hairs of David's neck. Even colder than when he closed the thrashing door the first time, a rash of gooseflesh ran down his arms. He gasped, surprised by the cold.

"You didn't close the door all the way," Kathy shouted from the living room. For a brief moment, David couldn't move. His feet felt like they had grown roots into the worn, green linoleum. Then the door slammed shut, breaking his paralysis, and Ann entered the house in a swirl of obscenities. David was pretty sure "goddamn screen door" was in there somewhere.

"Make sure the latch on the screen catches," Kathy said as Ann stomped in, shaking the rain off her slight figure. Ann ignored the comment and went into the kitchen. She stood in the doorway with a scowl, water tugging down the curls of her red hair before dropping and pooling on the linoleum around her feet. Like a drenched cat.

But a damn cute drenched cat, David thought.

He grabbed the pan of lasagna and showed it to Ann. A smile spread across her tired face.

"I'm going upstairs to get changed," she said.

"Can I come?" David asked.

"I was hoping you would," she said, her smile changing to a sly grin. "How long will that lasagna take?"

"About an hour," David said.

"Perfect. Put it in and come upstairs."

David slid the lasagna in the oven, did an excited little hop and followed Ann upstairs. She flipped on the lamp in the bedroom. David walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her shivering body. Slowly he began unbuttoning her wet blouse.

"How long has she been watching today?" Ann asked.

"Since she got home." David peeled off the blouse and began working on her bra. "Let's not talk about Kathy, okay?"

Ann turned around in his arms and kissed him. They fumbled with one another's clothes, tumbling onto the bed, exploring each other's bodies and falling quickly into passion. The rain and wind rattled the panes of glass on the window above their heads. Loose

shingles on the roof picked up and slapped back down. Ann rolled David over and positioned herself on top of him. The bedside lamp cast her slender shadow on the low-vaulted ceiling as she found her rhythm. That rain continued to pound the roof, but David barely noticed. He was too intent on Ann, their eyes locked, his hands on her hips, urging her on, yet wanting to make the moment last. God, he loved her. Soon they would be married. And together forever. Just as David climaxed, a burst of light blazed through the plastic on the window, and thunder boomed loud enough to shake the house. David opened his eyes as the lamp flashed blindingly bright. Ann's silhouette burned into his vision as she cried out in ecstasy.

And then there was darkness. And silence. David felt like he had left the room...the house... the Earth entirely. All sensation disappeared as he floated, surrounded and lost in the blackness. Again he had the strange sensation of paralysis, but it was more pleasant this time.

Then Ann fell forward on his chest, and the two lay still, catching their breath as the room took shape in the dark. "You were amazing," she whispered in his ear before rolling off his body onto the bed next to him. "What happened to the lights?"

"Must have blown a fuse."

"The way I feel," Ann said, "I think we could've blown the power for the whole neighborhood." She giggled.

A voice squawked up from the bottom of the stairwell. "Hey, you guys, are the lights off up there, too?"

"Shit," David muttered, then louder, "Yes, they are, Kathy."

"Oh," she said. There was silence, and then, "Do you think a fuse went out?"

"Probably just the storm," David hollered.

"Oh. Well, do you think--"

"We'll be down in a second," Ann said.

"Oh, c'mon, baby," he said, but he knew that Ann wouldn't be swayed. He sat up and stumbled over to the bookshelves, feeling around until he found a book of matches and lit the two candles on the second shelf.

Ann wrapped herself in a white fleece robe, grabbed one of the candles, and left the room as David pulled on his jeans and a sweatshirt. He walked downstairs with the other candle just as Ann came back in from the entryway. "The whole neighborhood is pitch

black," she said. "The lightning must've knocked out the power for this whole side of town. It stopped raining, at least."

Kathy had resumed her spot on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the television as if sheer willpower would bring it back on. "How long do you think it will be out?" she asked. "One minute, I was sitting here watching TV. Then I blinked, and it was dark. I was watching my favorite show."

"Heaven forbid," David mumbled. Ann elbowed him. "We could tell ghost stories," he said. "Maybe pull out the Ouija board."

"No way!" Kathy shrieked.

"David," Ann scolded.

"I was just kidding," David said and laughed. Kathy was like a five-year-old when it came to anything remotely scary.

"Well, it's not funny," Kathy said. "The last time I watched a horror movie, I had nightmares for three weeks. And that plastic doesn't make things any better. It scares me almost as much during the day as it does during the night. I feel closed in. I can't see what's going on outside, just blurs of colors and movement. You never know when someone might be standing outside your window."

David sighed. He had heard this complaint on a nearly daily basis, and he regretted that he had agreed with her when she mentioned it the first time.

Lightning struck somewhere in the distance, briefly illuminating the house and making all three of them jump. David pointed to the window next to Kathy. "Hey, was that bush there before?" he whispered.

"Knock it off, David," Ann said.

"I was just kidding—" David started to say, but then he saw movement again. Real this time. A quick blur across the plastic. Someone was outside. David stood from the couch. "There it is again," he said.

"There what is again?" Ann asked.

"I keep thinking I see someone moving outside."

"Stop it, David!" Kathy said. "It's not funny, okay?"

"No, I'm serious this time." He crossed over to the front door, keeping an eye on the windows as he moved.

"David—" Ann began, but he raised his hand to silence her. He swung open the door, half-expecting to see one of his friends messing around. But only darkness met him. He pushed the screen

door open and cleared his throat. "Can I help you?" he asked. He tried to shout it, but the black night seemed to swallow his words.

David stepped out on the stoop. God, it was dead quiet. Even the wind had stopped blowing. Usually David liked the blackouts and the silence that accompanied them, the silence that made him realize how much sound just simple electricity creates, the hum of the streetlights and the buzz of life happening in other homes. Tonight David didn't like the silence so much. Tonight it felt like the sounds of life had ceased, like if he walked into the house of one of his neighbors, he would see something horrible.

David shivered and then laughed in spite of himself. Must be Kathy getting to him. He puffed up his chest a little and leaned back into the entryway. "It was nothing. I'm just gonna have a smoke." He said this into the house but hoped it was loud enough to be heard by anyone outside as well. In reality, David wasn't too worried. Canyon City was pretty safe.

David shut the door, being sure to latch it, even though the wind had stopped. Around here, it could start up again any second. He stepped off the stoop and turned the corner of the house, heading down the driveway to the detached garage. Dark as it was, he knew his way, and his eyes had adjusted enough by the time he reached the backyard for him to see that if anyone had actually been there before, they were gone now.

He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his cigarettes. Low thunder grumbled in the distance, but David didn't see any flashes of lightning. Maybe the storm had passed over.

Peter.

A lump rose in David's throat. As he had done during the start of almost every storm for the past two years, he thought about his older brother. It still didn't make any sense to David, and maybe that was why he couldn't let it go.

Was it like this? he wondered and took a pull from his cigarette. A calm in the storm? David knew that sometimes the calm could be an illusion, like the placid field directly under the eye of a tornado, or the seeming innocence on the face of a serial killer loved by all of his neighbors. But he couldn't imagine the storms raging around Peter in the last moments of his life. Storms both real, and in his head.

David had been the one to find the note in the refrigerator. Along with two pounds of rotting ground beef and bad vegetables. The apartment was a wreck. When their mother called him, she

could barely keep herself together. First their father and now this. When David first saw the apartment, he felt sure that someone else had done this to his brother, trashed his place and then hung him from a goal post like some degenerate criminal, but the police only went silent at this suggestion.

He was still convinced that someone else was to blame when he came back a week later to clean out the apartment. Then he found the note.

never disregard your imaginings

David still had the scrap of newspaper in one of his drawers, but he never showed it to his mother. Even though David knew that something had gone terribly wrong in his brother's head, driving Peter to give up the most important fight of all, his Mom needed to believe, if only just a little, that something horrible had happened to her son, and not that he had done something horrible to himself.

David didn't think he'd ever forget the bruise marks showing through mortician's make-up job around Peter's neck.

He had killed himself on a night like tonight, except colder. David had overheard one of the police officers say that it was a miracle his brother made it to the top of the pole in the icy conditions. Pete had always been determined.

In the dark quiet of the backyard, David shook his head. It just didn't make sense.

What could've been that bad?

He took a drag from his cigarette but immediately coughed the smoke back out. Suddenly, the cigarette smelled like burning hair and... something else. David had never tasted burning flesh, but he grimaced as he pinched off the end and flicked the butt into the metal trashcan. He needed to quit smoking, anyway.

He climbed the steps to the backdoor and cut through the kitchen into the living room, still half-watching the windows.

"What was it?" Kathy asked from the couch.

Ann looked up from her spot on the floor. David leaned down and kissed her. "Nothing," he said. "Just seeing things, I guess."

Just then the television screen flickered like it had been turned on. In that brief instant, David thought, oh god, it's over.

A voice boomed out of the previously lifeless box, punctuating just three words. "Jesus Christ, Almighty!"

David stepped back. The three went silent, their attention drawn to the resurgence in the television. Outside the rain started up again.

“Yes, brothers and sisters, only Christ Almighty will save your mortal souls from damnation.”

The man on the screen preached in a Southern drawl. The drawl of a rich Southerner. Crisp. For the second time tonight, David was reminded of Georgia and his boyhood. And his brother.

The camera pulled back slowly and the evangelist slid across the stage to a second podium. Then back to the close-up. His face was drawn with age and shiny with makeup, his receding hair plastered to his head.

“To the entire nation of sinners, I cry unto you, you that have been guilty of commerce with the devil, I pray unto you, deanse yourself.” The preacher raised both hands to the sky. “For the Prince,” he continued, “Yes, brothers and sisters, the Prince of Darkness knows no preference. He is an equal opportunity employer. He does not discriminate based on gender or race. He will take you one and all for the sins of yourselves, and the sins you have borne witness to but been too weak to prevent. Yes, brothers and sisters, too pitifully weak.”

A gust of wind rattled the old windows in their casings, and the rain started again, pelting the panes.

“Where’s the remote control?” Ann asked, annoyed.

David broke from a daze. “Whoa. How about this guy?” He shook his head. “He had me going for a second there. I was right there with him.”

“He sounds like my dad,” Kathy said.

David and Ann laughed. They had both met Kathy’s father, the itinerant Fundamentalist reverend. “Now, that’s spooky,” David said. “Where is that remote? Let’s find something decent to watch.”

For a moment Kathy sat staring at the screen, until David shot her a look. Then she joined the others in searching under couch cushions and pillows. The evangelist kept up his rant. “Complete repentance!” he continued. “Yes, complete repentance is the only way into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“To hell with it,” David said and walked over to the television. “What did we ever do before remote controls?” The digital light on the television read channel sixty-six. He pushed the channel button repeatedly, and the screen went dark as the count ran up to ninety-nine. Then the numbers rolled over and David stopped pushing at channel two. CBS. The sound came in before the picture.

“For God does not accept the foul and the dirty.” The old television always took a minute for the picture tubes, and as the color bled into the picture, the evangelist’s face transformed from blue to green to orange to flesh.

David shivered. “Strange,” he murmured and stared at the screen.

“Hey,” Kathy said, “why isn’t the street light back on?”

“Why aren’t any of the lights on?” Ann asked. No one had noticed until now that the television seemed to be the only power in the house.

“The TV works,” Kathy said.

“Not from where I’m standing,” David said.

“Yes, brothers and sisters, you must atone for your every sin, for until you do, you are guilty in the eyes of the Lord. There will be no discrimination between the murderer and the man who covets his neighbor’s wife. All are guilty in the eyes of the Lord.”

“Enough, David,” Ann insisted. “Change the channel.”

“Yeah,” Kathy agreed. She pulled a strand of her black hair around and started chewing on it. “It’s a little too much like Daddy.”

“I tried,” David said. He demonstrated his previous failed efforts. The digital numbers rose and fell at David’s touch, but the picture remained.

“That’s not funny, David,” Ann said. “Fix the VCR or whatever it was you screwed up for this little trick.”

“That’s the thing, babe. I didn’t do anything.”

The evangelist paused and stared into the camera, into the dead quiet living room. “Be prepared, sinners.”

“Turn it off, David,” Kathy whispered.

“Yeah, David,” Ann said. “I don’t like this very much. Why isn’t the power on anywhere else?”

“I don’t know,” David snapped. “Christ, how the hell should I know?”

Kathy cringed into the corner of the couch. “You shouldn’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Don’t start with me, Kathy. Not now.”

Ann rose from her spot on the floor, the deck of cards dropping from her hand and sprawling across the floor, and stood on the other side of the room, clutching her shoulders. “God, it’s cold in here,” she said.

David felt it too, but he didn't say so. The last words he had spoken sounded slurred to him. He tried to blame it on a creeping chill that was settling into his joints, his jaw included, but why was it so cold all of the sudden?

"Ann, don't take the Lord's--" Kathy started.

"Not now, Kathy," Ann said. "Turn it off, David!"

David looked at Ann, confused. His vision blurred for a quick moment. What was she talking about? David had to shake off the stupor. What the hell was going on? He couldn't keep focused. He tried to lift his hand hit the power button, but his muscles felt sluggish, like he just woke from a long sleep. He had to flex his fingers out in front of him a couple of times, could almost hear them creaking with each bend, then he reached for the power button. With a push, the screen went blank.

"Thank God," David muttered. He swayed a little in place.

"Yes, my brother and sisters, thank God, indeed!" The evangelist's face crept back on the screen. He looked different, though. Worse. His hair was even greasier, his face paler.

David concentrated on the face. It seemed to be changing before his eyes. Slowly, to be sure, but definitely changing. The hair growing longer, the face turning sicklier.

But that's crazy.

"God dammit," David said, "what the hell is going on?" He knocked on the side of the television and felt a wave of warmth rise up his arm from the contact. When he stepped back, the cold seeped back into his body. He stepped forward and banged on the top of the television with his palm, jarring the picture, and again the heat surged into his body. "Must be something wrong with the television," he said, and started banging harder and faster. At this point, he didn't want to fix the picture as much as he wanted to feel warmth in his body.

"Knock it off, David," Ann whispered. "I can't see."

David kept pounding. Kathy had all but fused with the corner of the couch. She huddled in a ball, her feet pulled up beneath her body. She kept shaking, despite how tightly she had wrapped herself in the comforter.

"I know what's happening," she whimpered, but David ignored her.

"Knock it off, David," Ann said again.

“I should’ve known,” Kathy continued, but no one was listening. “Had a bad feeling all day. Momma was right. The devil’s finally come for me. I’ve been bad, and now the devil’s come for me.”

Soon the transformation on the screen became so obvious that David knew he couldn’t change it even with all of his banging. He stopped, his hand poised a couple of inches above the television. He let out a heavy breath like someone had punched him in the stomach when he saw the aberration. “Holy shit.”

“That about sums it up, son.” The evangelist’s hair had grown about six inches slimier and now hung over a face of mottled skin the color of buttermilk. Black, filmy, pebbled eyes rolled toward David, and the mutation broke into peals of guttural laughter. David staggered back a couple of steps before falling over. Ann backed up against the wall. It couldn’t be possible, but David could swear he was looking at-

“A demon,” Kathy whimpered as she continued to disappear into the couch. “David, please turn it off.”

“He can’t do that, sweetheart,” the demon said and turned its attention on Kathy, its gaze sending her deeper into the upholstery. “You’ve been living in sin, little girl. You and your man. We know what your daddy would think, but what about your momma? What would she have to say?” Kathy let out a gasp. Her last words were sobbing apologies to her dead mother. Then silence.

“So easy,” the demon said.

“Turn it off!” Ann shrieked.

David shook his head. “I can’t,” he stammered.

“Then I’ll do it for you.” Ann rushed over and threw her entire body against the side of the entertainment center, knocking over videos and framed photographs. She stumbled back and threw herself at it again. The television crashed to the floor, landing on its side with a sharp crack and a flash of sparks. But the screen remained intact. The picture on the television slowly rotated ninety degrees until the demon’s face leveled again. “There’s a lot of fire in that one, David,” it said and nodded in Ann’s direction. “I’d hold on to her, if I were you. For eternity.” It chuckled.

Ann attacked the television again, this time kicking it. She kept up the assault, even after the blood seeped through the toe of her slipper. She wouldn’t stop. Finally David grabbed her and pulled her away. She struggled briefly and then fell against him, sobbing and dragging him to the ground.

“Time to go, kids,” the demon whispered. A murky red glow radiated from the kitchen. Apparently the television wasn’t the only appliance that still worked. Thin threads of black smoke snaked up from the oven and curled around the doorframe into the living room. “Time to go.”

“Wait!” David shouted. “Just wait one goddamn minute.”

The demon smiled.

“Why us?” David asked. “Why us? What did we do that was so wrong?”

The creature on the television started laughing. The laughter rose to a screech of delight that sent a spider web crack over the entire television, splintering both the screen and the plastic shell and distorting the demon’s face into a nefarious Picasso. “That’s just it, boy,” it said. “You haven’t really done anything.”

Ann stopped sobbing. David looked down into her vacant eyes and knew that she had left this place. It was a trick she learned from childhood, a trick any child of abuse knew. Ann told David about her secret place once. It was her grandmother’s swimming pool in Virginia. A thick grove of oak trees surrounded the back yard, their reflection shimmering on the surface of the water. David knew Ann was there now. The only thing left of her in the living room was an uncontrollable shaking. He wished he could be there at Grammy’s with her.

David held on to her as tightly as he could. The room grew colder. David could see his breath in the crisp air. He couldn’t see Kathy at all, however. Just a lump of blanket stuffed in the corner of the couch. Of course, he couldn’t be sure with the strobing light from the television streaking patterns in the rapidly thickening smoke and mixing with the growing scarlet haze from the kitchen. Had Kathy really been there before? Nothing made sense anymore. Not since the power first went out. Something had happened. David was starting to lose himself. Blackness bled into his periphery. “Ann?” he called, but no one answered.

The red intensified in the kitchen, the ribbons of smoke more like rivulets of blood. David could feel heat coming from the kitchen. Warmth. Comfort.

“Why did I pick you, son?” the demon asked. “Why you and your little monkey friends? Because you are Innocents. Because Hell lacks Innocents.” The demon chuckled. “We need innocence to return the balance, and I will be the one to bring it about.” His voice

lost the Southern accent, the volume growing into a roar. “And when it is done, the name Mashart shall be revered in the Books of Eternal Damnation.”

David’s head felt heavy. He grew weary of resisting. “I’m not that innocent,” he mumbled. “What about the children?” His eyelids drooped and then closed. “There must be someone else.”

Light flashed beyond his eyelids, and David opened his eyes. Power had returned to the house.

Was it ever gone?

David sat on the floor in the middle of the living room staring at the blank television. Kathy still sat on the couch, and Ann was positioned with her back against the wall on his right, the game of solitaire still placed out in front of her. Thick black smoke rolled out of the kitchen, and the smoke detector beeped frantically, but no one moved. David tried to rub at his eyes, but he couldn’t move his body. Then darkness started to return, running down the walls and over the furniture like a stain. When the shadow passed over the blank television screen, the demon’s face reappeared. It looked curious. And a little uncertain, and when it spoke, the drawl was gone.

“Interesting,” the demon said. “You are stronger than the others.” It paused. “There is another reason I’m here.” The demon’s drawl seeped back in, the confidence returning. “Just as there was a reason I killed your brother, and that girl in your arms just made it sweeter. It will be done. But you needn’t worry yourself about that anymore.”

A dozen sets of hands stretched through the plastic on the windows. The arms pushed farther into the room until the heads appeared and then shoulders. The plastic seemed to melt around the spectral flesh. David didn’t like the looks of that. What he did like was the blood-red blossom that seemed to radiate from the center of the kitchen, so bright and beautiful and welcoming. He gathered his strength and pushed away from the floor and stood up, cradling Ann in his arms, and turned toward the crimson bloom. He carried Ann clear of the mutations birthing themselves through his windows and walked toward the glow.

“Wait!” the demon shouted. “You aren’t supposed to move!”

David stepped into the kitchen just as the red seed in the oven exploded, sending its fleshy core flaming across the kitchen. The clumps splattered against the walls, the curtains, the cabinets. As the

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kitchen burst into flame, David thought he could smell lasagna. He smiled.

At least it would be warm.

\* \* \*

Excruciating pain took over all thought, shocking David back to his senses. He didn't know what had just happened. The last thing he could remember was standing in his kitchen, waiting for Ann to get home from work, when the door blew open. And now...

My God, the pain.

Colors flickered behind clenched eyelids, but the excruciating agony kept them shut. David was burning everywhere. Especially his right side, as if his skull itself was on fire. Muscles strained all through his shoulders and upper back, but he couldn't move his arms to put out the flames. His limbs felt like they were being pulled from their sockets, like he was being pulled into the earth. His body was rooted in place; he couldn't move away from the torment, but he didn't understand what brought him to this place. Was this a dream? Was he in Hell?

My God! What have I done?

Then David smelled something. Beyond his own cooking flesh and singed hair. Something faint but familiar, mixing with the stench. He opened his left eye as much as he could bear and realized what the smell was. Lasagna. Ann's favorite.

The rest of the evening's events rushed back to David, quick flashes of images that were immediately shattered by his brain screaming at him to escape. But still he swayed heavily in the kitchen and watched the flames through a slit eyelid as they climbed the walls away from the blackened pasta and marinara splattered on the peeling wallpaper. The fire had spread quickly. The black smoke rolling off the burning cabinets filled his lungs and burned his eyes, even the one still clenched shut on the side of his face which he was certain was aflame. Tears blurred his narrow vision, rolling down his cheek. His whole body wanted to recoil from the heat from the flames. Man-made material seemed to burn so much hotter than firewood, but still he couldn't move his feet to escape.

My God, the pain.

But the torment wasn't just on the surface, where he could feel the fire eating away at his face. Suddenly he understood the tearing muscles in his shoulders and arms, which felt like he was being taken apart and reformed in a forge, and the realization twisted the whole of his insides around on themselves. He knew why he couldn't lift his arms, why he hadn't simply dropped to the ground. Because he had believed that the kitchen was safe. And now he was burning to death because of it. Now they were burning to death.

David looked down at Ann. He cradled her in his arms, but her own limbs dangled toward the floor. He stared at her in spite of the flames that engulfed her upper body, climbing up her robed arms from the burning linoleum and licking at his face, igniting his hair. He had only wanted to save her.

He lifted his head toward the ceiling, but still he held on to Ann's body, even though her death was killing him as well. Bubbles of skin swelled and popped as the burning shreds of his shirt fluttered to the ground. Every muscle tightened in David's body in response to the trauma. His neck went rigid, straining from his skull into his back. His jaw clenched so hard that he thought he would surely grind his teeth into shards as the fire climbed the right side of his chest. Tears of pain welled at his eyes, but they evaporated before they could fall from his lids. Then he dropped to his knees.

Ann's body was slipping through his arms. He couldn't hold onto her any longer.

David lowered her burning body down on the melting linoleum even though his mind screamed to take her outside into the rain.

Maybe he could still help her. Maybe she wasn't dead just yet. If only he had been strong enough. That thing had poisoned his mind, and he had been too weak to fight back. What if he had moved sooner? Instead, he had just stood there while she died in his arms.

His brain rallied with his body, but the agony won out. Ann wasn't moving, and if he didn't get out, he would be dead too. He knew he couldn't lift her again. He could barely keep himself from falling over on top of her. They would never make it out of the house.

David rose slowly on shaky legs and looked down at Ann, the robe having burned away, her naked figure hardly recognizable anymore. His whole body trembled and threatened to give way beneath him, sorrow and pain racking his body. Finally his thoughts stopped racing long enough to issue one definite command.

Get out!

The decision had been made. Still he found it difficult to look away from Ann, feeling a final rip when he turned his back on her, like his heart being pulled through his throat, and sought an exit. The living room didn't look much better than the kitchen. Sparks shot from the cracked television screen, spreading the inferno across the carpet. The heavy plastic over the windows softened and stretched from the heat, dripping burning blackness where other pieces had caught fire. David looked toward the raging couch where Kathy had sat. No movement. No life in the room except his own. It took a moment to get his bearings and locate the door across the room, but now his body had changed its plans. Suddenly, he just wanted to lie down, surrender. What did he have left to live for?

But his mind wasn't giving up the fight this time, and he summoned the last of his energy, launching across the room into the entryway. He grabbed the door handle with his right hand, but charred skin pulled away from his clutch. He looked down at pieces of his skin stuck to the door and blackness started dropping over his vision. He beat the unconsciousness back and yanked the door open with his left hand, bursting through the doorway into the night. The rain from the storm washed over his burning body with a hissing sound. He dropped to the yard, rolling in the muddy grass.

Overcome by the rush of clean air, David was seized by gagging coughs, expelling the smoke. He caught his breath, gasping, and pulled himself to his feet. The world seemed to go gray. His legs wavered beneath him, but he fought the wave of nausea. Unsuccessfully. Doubling over, his stomach retched only fluid. Wiping his mouth, he straightened up, and he scanned the neighborhood for any sign of life. The only light in the area, though, was the growing glow emanating from the burning house.

Instinct took over, and his thoughts finally found focus. He realized that whatever had been in the television could still be around. He had lost the fight. Now it was time to run. His eyes adjusted to the darkness beyond the edges of the glow cast from the house, and he noticed dull light from the east side of town. Power was still on over there. The mountains were that way. Big yards. Lots of property. He could hide until morning.

First he would have to find something for his burns. He could break into a store while the power was still out. Something.

Anything. God, it still burned. His flesh was still cooking. He could feel the heat chewing toward his center.

And in the morning? He would run. The rest would have to take care of itself. There were places he could run, places to hide, people who could help him. He looked back at the house, and his chest hitched hard enough to almost put him back to his knees. There would be no help for Ann.

The tears came then, and blurred his vision as he turned away and stumbled across the street and out of his neighborhood.

## CHAPTER 2

In the nightmare, David was running through the woods, but it was unlike any forest he had ever seen. The trees were barren of any green, their branches low to the ground, twisted and contorted into each other. A thick rain spattered and stained the trees black.

Something was chasing behind him. He could hear it. Even though his brain knew that the demon had only been pursuing him for a few months since fleeing the burning house, in the dream David felt like it had been his whole life. He stopped running and looked back. In a flash of lightning, he saw a dark writhing mass that seemed the size of ten elephants, but with the swiping claws of dozens of wild animals. And countless heads to match. The creature seemed to devour the very forest itself as it tore after him.

David looked down in his hand. He held a .38 revolver, even though he had never personally owned a gun. Knowing already that it wouldn't help him, he still raised the revolver against the monstrosity, but the weapon was replaced by a cap gun with paper strips, like the kind his father bought for him when he was seven. But the paper was all wet, and the gun only made a soft click. David dropped the toy and tried to run, but the muck underfoot sucked at his feet, and tugging felt like he was trying to free his bones from flesh. Finally, he pulled free and dashed through the mud toward one of the trees that grew wider and taller than the rest. At the base, he looked up and thought he could see bright green at the top, silhouetted against the black clouds.

The sounds of growling and gnashing teeth and the splintering of the trees grew louder behind him. Maybe if he could just get above the thing.

The dead tree was bare of any bark, and the rotten branches, slick from the pounding rain, made the climbing difficult. A couple of times David lost his grip, nearly falling, but finally he gained some height, and indeed life started to reappear, sprouts of green and patches of bark for better purchase as he climbed. But with the life came death. There were other people in the tree. Like the gallows trees of old, the branches were populated with the dead, but in this tree they were still squirming. Some were definitely worse off than others, barely recognizable as human. They ripped at their own flesh, trying to pull off scabbed, burned, and rotted strips. They howled at their own pain. Others, those who appeared to have died more recently, screamed and wept and clawed at the tree instead. When they saw David, they closed in on him, lifting their bodies and sliding the ropes across the branches toward him, those who could still speak begging for his help, saying they shouldn't be there. They put their cold, bloody hands on David as if he could save them, surrounding him with their stench. They tried to pull him away from his clutch to the main trunk of the tree.

A woman in a western-style suit coat and jeans skittered across a branch, her cowboy boots dancing on the rotted, slippery wood. She looked like she might've still been warm to the touch if it weren't for the death in her eyes. David turned away from her and hugged the tree tighter, but a moment later he heard her raspy, gurgling breath by his ear.

"Where's my gun, boy?" she whispered, her breath reeking of decay. "You're gonna need it."

Then the whole tree started to shake and vibrate. David looked down and saw hundreds of yellow eyes, like fireflies swarming the tree below. The predator had caught up. It hadn't passed him by. The tree swayed as the crunching of wood continued. There was a loud crack, and then the top of the tree began to fall to the darkness. David expected to plunge into the grinding maw of the beast below her, but instead he landed hard in the mud. A voice whispered in his ear.

I'm coming

David tried to push away from the mud, but he was sucked into the soft surface. His arms sank up to his shoulders. For a brief

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moment he was reminded of hiking along wet riverbeds in the late spring, of his old job taking troubled teens on wilderness retreats. The image slipped away as the mud covered his face, filling his mouth and rushing up his nostrils.

\* \* \*

David awoke with a start, coughing and gagging in a small puddle of muddy water. He quickly pushed himself up, taking ragged breaths as the pain shot through aching body. He sat back against the large pine tree where he had dropped to rest.

How long ago? Hours? Days?

He cursed himself for losing consciousness, even though he knew he must have needed it. The forest was so thick he would only be given a few seconds warning of an attack, but David's body didn't seem to care. Maybe his mind didn't care anymore, either.

Dear God, how long have I been running?

The bark of the tree scraped against his raw back and the bed of pine needles stuck him, but David focused his attention on his battered shins and abused feet.

Has it been weeks? Who was the last human I saw?

Even with his wilderness training, the passing of the sun and moon meant nothing to David anymore. He woke and moved when he could, and he stopped and slept when he could move no farther. Dreams had become his reality as he stumbled through the thick forest, and often he didn't know where the line was drawn. He had seen so much horror during his waking hours. So why should he doubt the creatures creeping through the brush in the middle of the night?

David's feet throbbed in their boots, like his heart had relocated to his legs and was trying to make its escape out of the ends of his toes. He had been weighing a decision for days, but staring down at what felt like clubs at the ends of his legs, he knew what he had to do. He reached over for his pack, but it was gone. David wondered if he had it with him when he had stopped or if it was something he had lost long before today. Didn't matter now. Luckily, he still had his Leatherman multi-tool attached to his belt. He opened it up, pulling out the blade. Some time earlier, he had tried pulling off his boots, but the pain had been so excruciating that he had given up.

He had to do something; otherwise he wouldn't be able to continue moving. Each day, the pain in his swollen feet allowed him less distance.

Each day, he thought as he cut into his boots. How long can this last?

When he first fled the inferno in Canyon City, David tried hiding out in various parts of town. He attended to his wounds first, thankful for his wilderness EMT training even though he knew his condition was far beyond "first aid" and that he would never look even close to himself again. Half-insane with the grief of losing Ann and with the pain of his burned flesh, David attempted contact with friends, but each time it turned out to be a mistake. On one occasion, an old roommate, Erik Janes, had been so insistent on contacting the police, or at least getting him to a hospital, that David slipped out in the middle of the night after convincing Erik that he needed to sleep on it. Erik woke the next morning to find David gone, but two other friends, Jeff Burns and his girlfriend, Nancy, weren't so lucky.

The mountains surrounding the Canyon City valley had boxed in the storm from that first night over the town for several days, and apparently the evil in with it. It was late the night David showed up at Jeff's place. He was going to just let himself in and explain himself in the morning, but hearing sounds coming from their apartment, David had knocked on the door. When there was no response, he stepped off the stoop onto the lawn and peered in one of the windows. He could see the shifting colors from a television cast on the walls of an otherwise dark living room. Circling the complex, David hopped the short fence surrounding their patch of backyard. Through the sliding door, he could see Jeff sitting on the couch with an arm over Nancy's shoulder, the TV flashing on their faces. He rapped lightly on the door, glancing around to make sure he wasn't drawing any other attention. Neither of the two moved from their spot on the couch.

David tried the door, and it slid open. He had already prepared his story to calm his friends' shock at seeing him in such a state, but when the stench of rotting food assaulted him from the apartment, he guessed it didn't matter what he had to say. Flies were gathering on two plates of crusted-over, half-eaten beef stroganoff on the coffee table in front of the couch. Just beneath the smell of the decay, David picked up another scent, faint traces like burnt gasoline. He stepped into the living room, already suspecting the worst, but

still he spoke their names, hoping to wake them from wherever they had gone. Their bloodshot eyes never wavered from the flickering television screen, even when David stepped in front of it. He turned and looked at the set. He doubted they were watching the Carlton Sheets infomercial. He stepped around the coffee table, leaned over and lowered their eyelids.

David turned off the television and stood in the dark. He didn't want to believe that this was the same thing that had happened at his house. Or even worse, that he was the cause of whatever had happened to his friends here. His mind reeled. Then the moon broke through the clouds, briefly casting a blue glow into the room, and for the first time since his flight from the inferno three days earlier, David had a moment of clarity. He needed to get into the woods. The wilderness had always been a favorite place for David, so much that he even found work in Colorado hiking and camping out with troubled youths. He never really considered his passion for the wilderness a link with "God," was actually never convinced there even was a God. But he believed in nature, and in nature, he believed in himself. His comfort in the wild felt like more of a connection to the powers of the earth, the natural flow without the interference of man, a place where he could be invisible, his mind free and clear.

With a sudden renewed energy at the prospect, David left the apartment. On his way out, he paused and looked at the keys to Jeff's pickup truck. He hesitated only a moment before pocketing the keys. He couldn't go back to his house for his own vehicle, and if Jeff was alive, David knew he would have let him take it. It was survival at this point.

He drove out of their apartment complex to the outskirts of town, where he broke into a sporting goods store. With the bare minimum necessities for staying alive, David drove away from civilization. He wound into the mountains, taking unfamiliar turns, intentionally trying to lose himself, until he came to a dead end, a Forest Service gate crossing the rutted dirt road. He backtracked until he found a short turnoff leading down beside a creek, hidden from the main road. He camped there for the night and the next morning abandoned the truck.

It had worked. He lost himself in the mountains. He knew that he could only make it so far before either the demon or the weather caught up to him. He would never survive a winter in this condition,

and that was just fine. Every day, he cursed himself for running away from the inferno where his love had burned to death, but he couldn't go back now, and he wouldn't give up without some sort of a fight. He would keep moving until he was overtaken or until he simply dropped.

Leaning against the tree, David wondered how much farther that point would be. He finished cutting off his boots and tossed them aside. The boots had put up a fight, but the relief was immediate, and he let out a heavy sigh as he fell back against the tree. Movement next to him caught his eye, and he twisted his body to the right, his hand drawing the knife, half-expecting to see a predator drawn to the smell of a wounded animal. Instead, his older brother stared back at him from beyond the grave.

Peter's eyes were sunken and ringed in black, his skin otherwise pale underneath streaks where it appeared tears had washed away the mortician's makeup. And his thick, bruised necktie showed through even starker than the day at the mortuary.

Not much longer at all, David thought.

He dropped his arm and sighed. He sat back and closed his eyes. This wasn't the first time he had seen his brother since fleeing the house in Colorado. "Never doubt your imaginings," David mumbled, his voice falling away in the dead quiet surrounding him. The forest felt like a black hole. Nothing moved. Not a whisper of air. Not a bird or insect. He wondered if he actually spoke aloud at all.

"Never disregard your imaginings."

For a moment, David wouldn't open his eyes, couldn't believe it to be true. It was the first time the vision of his older brother had spoken to him, but in truth, he just wanted Pete... hallucination, ghost, whatever... to go away. There had been so much loss, so much pain. He didn't want to see his brother. He didn't want to think about Ann. He just wanted to forget. He just wanted to die.

But his brother didn't care.

"This is not your time," Peter said. His voice was barely above a whisper, but it sounded rough, like he had gravel in his throat. Finally David opened his eyes and looked at him. "You have to push on," Peter continued. "Not much farther now."

Peter winced as he spoke, and David could see that even in death, his brother hadn't been spared the pain.

David shook his head. "I don't want to go on," he said, instantly ashamed of how childish he sounded, but he couldn't contain it. "I just want to rest. I'm seeing things. Night, day, awake, dreaming. I don't know what's real anymore. I don't even know if I'm really in these mountains." David's own voice cracked. A tear escaped his right eye, where his vision was still hazy from the fire. "Maybe none of this is real, and I'm still in Colorado," he said. "Maybe there's still time to save her." He waited for his brother to respond, to say something. Anything. Even just a comforting clasp on his shoulder. But Peter only stared back. "Am I dreaming now, Pete?" David asked.

"Does it matter?"

David considered his brother's question for a moment. After airing out his feelings, hearing his own words aloud to someone else, real or imagined, he felt better, if only just a little. Maybe he wasn't ready to die. "No, I guess it doesn't matter."

"You're alive because you were supposed to make it to this day," Peter said. "You have to keep going. Not much farther now."

A clap of thunder broke the unnatural silence surrounding the two. David looked up through the canopy of branches. Thin clouds had softened the previously stark blue sky. When he looked back, Peter was gone. Time to get going.

There were no thunderheads yet. He still had some time, but not that much. Dream or no dream, the storm didn't care. And neither did its rider.

David cut strips from his already tattered jeans, and wrapped them around his feet. Every muscle in his back seemed to tear as he pulled himself away from the tree and rose to his feet. Instinctively, he staggered to his left and started moving again, the forward momentum of his upper body dragging his legs along to keep up. The thinning of the evergreens gave him hope that he was moving in the right direction, toward a road maybe. Or a ranch.

The trees continued to thin until he broke through them completely and stood looking into a huge valley. Sharp granite peaks jutted up in the distance above a lush tree line. The ridge on his side sloped quickly down to form the oblong bowl of the valley. Not exactly a cliff, but steep. At the base of the slope, about four or five hundred yards away, stood a cabin. Two vehicles were parked there, and a thin trail of smoke rose from the chimney.

So that's where it would happen. That's where the demon would try to come through again. Not that much farther. But experience had taught him that time grew short. The clouds had arrived faster than David anticipated, and the sky turned dark. Against the will of his screaming legs, he started to clamber down the ridge to the cabin, just as he felt the first drop of rain.

## CHAPTER 3

Dr. Robert Marrick thought that the feeling in the Jeep could only be described as electric. He felt happier than he had in months as he bounced over the dirt road, twisting through the mountains with his family on the way to the new Montana cabin. His fifteen-year-old daughter hadn't complained once since leaving Boston, and a couple of times he even caught Judy looking over at him the way she did when they were younger and more carefree. They exchanged sly smiles. Maybe now everybody could be happy.

"How much longer, Daddy?" Jeannie asked from the backseat, "This bumpy road makes me need to pee."

"Now, honey," Judy said, looking over her shoulder at their daughter, "that's not very ladylike." But when a giggle escaped Judy, the scolding was lost between the two. Judy turned back around. "How much farther, Bob?" she asked.

Robert looked down at the odometer and then at his watch. He frowned briefly and then smiled. "Probably about five more miles," he said. "We should be there in about ten minutes." He looked in the rearview mirror at his daughter. "I think you can wait ten minutes, sweetie."

Jeannie tried to look put out, but Robert just laughed.

Only your mom can pull that one off, kiddo, he thought.

Actually, Robert wasn't exactly sure how much farther it was to the cabin. Surprisingly, he had lost track of the mileage since turning off the paved road. He had made the trip a few times before the

actual purchase and had already started his mental map of the area. A familiar curve here. A rotted log there. But now he realized that he wasn't sure where they were or how far they had gone.

The Jeep took a hard dip into a pothole on the left side and then quickly hopped out again. Jeannie let out a whoop from the back seat.

"You're supposed to be watching out for those, sweetie," Robert said to his daughter. "Or maybe you'd rather drive, and I'll be the one watching for the holes."

"I'm not old enough to drive," Jeannie said. "Yet."

"Thank heavens for small favors," Robert said. "We better enjoy the last couple of safe months of our lives." He started laughing. Again Jeannie tried to put on a sour face, but it barely masked a grin.

Judy managed a chuckle, but Robert sensed that it was forced. A year earlier, to Robert's astonishment, Judy had told him in counseling that she felt threatened by the attention he doted on Jeannie. Robert had tried to be understanding, but he wasn't about to ignore the fact that Jeannie was special. Every father likes to think this about his child, but it wasn't until sixth grade, when Jeannie's teachers told the Marricks that they should think about not only advancing Jeannie at least one grade but also seriously consider a private school, that Robert knew his daughter would do great things. Judy and Robert had argued that night for almost two hours before deciding to go ahead with the advancement.

Still, Robert knew Judy didn't like it. It was definitely an issue they were still working through. Judy just had to understand. Robert looked over at his wife, but he didn't catch her eye this time. She stared out at the thick patches of evergreens rushing past her open window. She shivered, then reached over and pushed the dial on the control panel to warm.

"Are you kidding?" Robert asked. "It's the middle of the day."

"I just got a little chilly," Judy said.

"Then roll up your window."

"But I like the smell of the air," Judy said.

Robert shook his head. "Jeannie, sweetie, if you get too hot back there, let me know and I'll put down the other window."

"I'm okay, thanks."

Judy huffed and looked back out of her window as the edge of the woods receded from the road and the valley widened.

"There it is!" Robert exclaimed.

In Robert's opinion, they couldn't have found a better place. It was as if God had cupped His very own hands and let the earth grow up around it. The dirt road broke out of the mountain pass and opened up to the most beautiful place on earth. The jagged landscape retreated almost immediately and gave way to a lush green meadow that spread out in front of them for almost a mile before sloping up about three hundred yards to a forested plateau that ringed the small valley. Only a handful of trees actually dotted the base of the bowl itself. Their realtor, Barbara Stack, told them that it was the result of a microburst, a small-scale, severe storm downdraft that acted like a steamroller down the slope many years ago, taking the trees with it.

Robert slowed the Jeep to take in their new view. It matched almost precisely the image in his mind's eye when they started talking about buying property in Montana two years ago. The log cabin sat at the far end of the meadow, built closer to the base of the slope. A stream, maybe five feet wide, ran along the side of the dirt road. Barb Stack told them the creek originated at a lake farther up in the mountains.

"Say, kiddo, have you ever wanted to catch a fish?" Robert asked Jeannie. "I'll bet we could dam up this creek and make ourselves a nice little pond." Robert looked at his wife. "What do you think, babe?" he asked. "You haven't fished in years."

"It has been awhile," she said and smiled.

Robert reached across and rested his hand on her thigh. "It will be better," he said. "I promise." Judy put her hand on top of Robert's.

"Hey, look," Jeannie said. "Somebody's already here."

Robert returned his attention to the road. Sure enough, as they wound up to the cabin, he saw the dark-blue Jetta parked on the side. So Barb had already arrived. It never ceased to amaze Robert that the Jetta made it up the road without busting an axle.

"Who is it?" Jeannie asked.

"It's Ms. Stack," Judy answered. "She's the woman who sold us the house."

"And made a healthy little cut for herself," Robert muttered.

"Oh, Bob," Judy sighed. "Barb worked hard to find us this place."

"I know, I know," Robert said. "I was just hoping we could get up here a little bit before her."

“She won’t be here long.”

“I still don’t understand why we couldn’t take care of this without having her on our first day.”

“She likes to be at a property when the new owners arrive for the first time. You know, hand over the keys. It’s part of her charm.”

“Just because she’s a friend of your boss’s wife doesn’t necessitate congeniality. And besides-”

“Wow, look at that!” Jeannie interrupted as they pulled to a stop in front of the cabin. “Eagles. Check it out, Mom, eagles!” She pointed to the sky just above the ridgeline. Two birds looped around and over each other.

Robert looked up and squinted. “I think those are just hawks, sweetie,” he said. “They’re too small to be eagles. Pretty cool, though. Don’t see those in the city.” Robert watched the birds as their circles grew larger, then wound tighter. Each time they neared each other, the two birds seemed to attack before the circles widened again. The sky had started to darken. Gray clouds were rolling in. Robert was amazed by how quickly they were moving.

“Hey, y’all!” It was Barb. She walked out of the house, crossed the deck and started descending the steps. She wore a dark green suitcoat with jeans and cowboy boots.

Only in Montana, Robert thought.

“I thought you’d never make it,” Barb said and laughed. “I’d swear you city folks don’t know how to drive that fancy rig you got there.”

“Hi, Barb,” Robert said and got out of the Jeep.

“Howdy, Bob.” Barb walked around to Judy. “Hey, Judy,” she said and hugged her. “How are you doin’, lady?”

Judy looked surprised, then hugged Barb back. “I’m well, Barb.”

“I think I’m going to walk around a little,” Jeannie said. “Just take a look. Is that okay, Mom?”

“Sure, honey,” Judy said. “Just don’t go too far, okay?”

“She might want to wait on that, Judy,” Barb said. “We got a storm comin’ in real fast. Why don’t y’all come inside. We’ll have a cup of tea and I can go over the last of the details. By then, the storm should’ve passed, and I can get outta’ your hair.”

“Aw, do I have to?” Jeannie asked, sounding younger than her years. She quickly corrected her tone. “I mean, that’s just boring adult stuff. Besides, I don’t care about getting a little wet.”

"I don't know about a little wet, darlin'," Barb said. "We're fixin' to have ourselves a good burst of rain. We'd have to put you in the dryer after this one. Besides, it'll be a lot more fun after the rain. The sun will come back, and if you're lucky, you might be able to chase down some toads."

"Gross." Jeannie scowled, clearly not convinced that it was going to rain, but as the group crossed the pebbled driveway toward the cabin, a low rumble rolled into the valley. Robert's first thought was subway train, but he quickly dismissed his city inclinations. Probably not many passengers looking for a ride out here. He chuckled.

Barb looked to the sky. "This is my favorite time of year. Storms roll in about mid-afternoon, cool everything off, and then roll right back out. You can almost set your watch to it." Another clap of thunder filled the valley, much louder this time. "Looks like the ol' 4:15 is a little ahead of schedule." Barb laughed again.

Robert looked up the slope before stepping onto the porch. Most of the sky had already darkened. A fat drop of rain splashed on his left shoulder. Other drops rustled the grass around the house.

"C'mon in," Barb said. "I've already started a little fire. Temperature'll probably dip about ten, maybe fifteen degrees here in the next little bit, but we'll be nice and cozy."

Robert stepped into the house. Jeannie edged past the adults and down the hall to her new bedroom, already pulling out one of the teen magazines from her backpack. Robert stood in the main living area of the house and smiled. It had been a couple of months since they last saw the place, but it already felt like home, and the great room was Robert's favorite part. The living room and dining area had high vaulted ceilings. A flight of stairs led up to the master bedroom and an open den that overlooked the downstairs. A fireplace was on the wall opposite the main entrance with a stone chimney running all the way up. Four skylights were installed in the ceiling of the great room, and Robert watched as large drops of rain exploded on the glass panes. The storm was picking up.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Barb said. Robert wondered if the thick drawl might also be part of Barb's "charm," part of the show for the city folk. She walked over next to him and followed his gaze. "This is going to be a big one, I think."

As if in confirmation, another clap of thunder filled the little valley, rattling the windows just slightly.

“What did I tell you,” Barb said. “Come have some tea, Bob, and we can take care of those papers.”

“I think I’ll go for coffee,” Robert said. “I have some out in the Jeep.”

“Now you’re getting into the Montana way.” Barb gave him a playful slug on his arm. Robert chuckled, a little in spite of himself. She could be annoying sometimes, but Barb was a good enough woman. And even with her commission, they had made out like bandits.

Bandits, Robert thought. I really am in Montana.

Robert stepped out onto the porch and down the stairs. The rain still fell light enough that it wasn’t completely drenching, even though it felt close. He walked to the Jeep and rummaged through the things until he found a box that was marked kitchen. He pulled the box out, shut the door and walked around the Jeep toward the cabin, looking at the slope that ran up behind the house to a forested ridge. He stopped in his tracks and watched in amazement as a curtain of rain swept over the tops of the trees and then dropped off the ridge, rolling down the slope toward the cabin. The few drops of rain hitting Robert now were nothing. That moving wall carried the real storm.

He was about to continue inside when movement up on the slope caught his eye. Something about three-quarters of the way up was making its way down. The storm followed just behind it. Robert squinted and tried to focus his vision, but the rain kept hitting his face and making him blink. And then the thing disappeared. The front line of the storm had overtaken it.

Probably just a deer or an elk.

He quickened his step up the stairs and joined the two women in the kitchen. They stood by the industrial stove, the gas flames licking the sides of the tea kettle. Three mugs and a package of Montana Sunshine herbal tea rested on the island in the center of the kitchen. Barb hadn’t missed a trick.

“How’s it looking out there?” Barb asked.

“Tremendous,” Robert said. “Something big coming in.” He plugged in the coffee maker and filled the pot at the sink. “It’s amazing, babe,” he said to Judy. “When it tapers off, you should go outside and stand in it. It’s so...” Robert searched for the right word, “refreshing. So much cleaner than the city.”

Judy smiled. "I'll have to do that," she said. "Maybe we can go for a walk."

Robert laughed. "Is it time for the walk already?" He knew that it was Judy's solution to getting Robert to relax on vacations. It usually took him at least three days of being away from his patients before he could start to unwind. Judy had said in more than one counseling session that she thought if he didn't slow down, Robert would end up in the hospital himself before he was fifty.

Barb clapped her hands together. "Well, let's get wrapped up so I can leave you folks alone," she said.

Just then the rain really hit the cabin, pounding violently on the metal roof. Judy jumped a little, and Robert rushed over to the windows. The rain fell so heavy that he could barely see the vehicles in the driveway.

The storm had arrived.

"There it is," Barb said and sipped calmly from her cup.

Judy let out a nervous laugh. "Is it always like this?"

"More or less," Barb said. She stood from her stool and peered out the kitchen window. "I've got to say, this is one of the stronger bursts I've seen. At least it's not hail, which isn't completely uncommon for this time of year. Why, it wasn't more than three years ago that we had a blizzard that swept across Montana at the beginning of June. Dropped snow as low as three thousand feet." She shook her head, as if still in disbelief. "Don't worry, hon. You'll get used to it. And like they say around here, if you don't like the weather, wait fifteen minutes, and it'll change."

Judy shivered as the din grew. "I'm going to check on Jeannie," she said and left her spot by the counter. She made it halfway down the hallway when she heard a crash from the front of the cabin. She rushed back to the living room just as Robert ran in.

"What the—" Robert started, but stopped when he saw the ragged person lying face down in the entryway. The figure lay sprawled halfway across the threshold; the wind bounced the door between the doorstep and his right shoulder. He was half-covered by tattered clothes, and thick, dark mud was clumped on his body.

Barb nearly ran into Robert when she hurried from the kitchen, and the three stood motionless until Robert's professional side kicked in. He kneeled down beside the man. He rolled the emaciated body over, and both women gasped. Even Robert was taken aback. The young man's face was horribly scarred on the right side. Robert

thought they looked like burn scars, but with no attempt at medical reconstruction. The man's eyes bulged and rolled in their sockets, one of them blue and the other a milky gray color. The man's right arm shot up and spasmed, his hand clutching at empty space. His breath was ragged, and he was mumbling something. Robert leaned closer to hear.

"Close the door," he gasped, "must close the door."

Rain was already starting to puddle in the room. "Judy, get the door," Robert said.

Judy rushed over and pushed the door shut against the wind. The man let out a raspy cough and clutched Robert's shirt. The tendons in the man's neck strained as he lifted his head from the floor, and he pulled Robert closer. "Must...not...open...again," he whispered, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and his body went limp.

## CHAPTER 4

“He’s unconscious,” Robert said.

“What’s going on?” Jeannie had stepped out of her room to peer down the hallway.

Judy rushed over to her. “It’s nothing to worry about, honey,” she said and tried to guide Jeannie back to the room.

“Who’s that man?” Jeannie asked, looking past her mother.

“I don’t know, honey,” Judy said, “but he’s very sick. Your father will take care of him, but you shouldn’t be around. We don’t want you getting sick.”

“Yeah, but-” Jeannie started, but Judy managed to get her into the room and shut the door behind them.

As for the stranger, passing out had apparently done him some good. His breathing calmed. After checking his vital signs, Robert stood up and crossed his arms. “Is this normal in Montana, Barb?” he asked. “Did this guy just wander off a compound somewhere?”

Barb stared at him. “Your guess is as good as mine,” she said. “Whoever he is, we need to call an ambulance. Do you folks have a cellular phone? I can’t seem to get any service up here on mine today. Must be the storm.”

Robert walked over to his coat and pulled out his phone. He turned it on, and after a moment, shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. He walked around the cabin, holding it up and trying to get a signal, but the “out of service area” message remained. What was

once another charming aspect of the new vacation home now took on a darker tone. "Okay, we're going to need to think about this."

"I don't see what there is to think about," Judy said. Robert hadn't noticed her coming out of their daughter's room.

"How's Jeannie?" he asked her.

"She's fine," Judy said. "Barely shaken up, but we need to get this man-

Robert cut her off. "Barb, you're going to have to drive into town. Take Judy and Jeannie with you. I'll stay here and keep an eye on our friend."

"What if he wakes up and attacks you?" Judy asked.

"Try using your head, Judy," Robert snapped. She pursed her lip and turned on her glare, so Robert toned it down. "I don't see another alternative," he said. "He's not going to attack anybody. Even if he did, I would rather it be me than one of you. He's half my size. And besides, I'm the doctor. I don't think he's in critical condition, but just in case something happened, I wouldn't."

"So why don't you drive him into town," Judy said. "Wouldn't that make the most sense if he's not in critical condition and you're certain he won't attack? It would certainly be the quickest way. And if he seemed to get worse on the way, like you said, you're the doctor."

"Yes, but..." Robert started. He clenched his jaw. "You're probably right. I'll go start the Jeep." He put on his coat and walked over to the front door, splashing in the puddle in the entryway. He stopped and looked at Judy with his eyebrows raised. "Could you get this?" he said and motioned to the floor. Judy tensed, and then headed into the kitchen to get the roll of paper towels. He was reaching for the knob on the door when Barb stopped him.

"Bob, wait. Maybe we better think about this," she said. "He's not gonna die just yet, right?"

Robert turned back toward Barb. "My wife is right, Barb. As a doctor, I need to get this man help. I don't see that there's much more to think about."

"Well, that's because you're from the city," she said. "No offense, but it's true."

"Really? What do we do in Montana, Barb? Sew up his cuts with a little horsetail hair and send him on his way?" Robert cracked.

"Bob," Judy scolded on her return to the great room.

"It's alright, Judy," Barb said. "What I'm about to say might sound just a little crazier, but you got me thinking earlier, Bob. Now, there's generally only two reasons you find a young man in this poor of condition so far from civilization. One, he's a college boy that got himself lost in our little maze of mountains. The other possibility is that this boy's never seen civilization in the first place. Lots of families live in these mountains, I'd imagine. Someone may be looking for this kid, some backwoods family or even a cult. The last thing you want is for them to track him here while you're gone. I'm not saying that's the case. It's probably not. But why take any chances? And what did he say to you just before he passed out, Bob?"

"He said something about how we shouldn't open the door."

"You see? Someone's chasing this boy, and even if it's not some wacko, it could be the authorities, which means he could be dangerous."

"Well, I'm certainly not taking all of you in the Jeep," Robert stated. "You think I'd expose Jeannie to that?"

"That's not what I'm suggesting," Barb said. "I think your plan is a good one, but it just needs a little polishing. You folks don't own a firearm, am I right?"

"Not with Jeannie," Robert said. "I bought some bear mace before we left for hiking."

"That's a start. Now, here's what you're going to do." Barb stopped and looked at Robert. "You okay with this?" she asked, as if she'd known a man or two in her life who didn't take too kindly to being told what to do. Robert wasn't used to it either, but he just shrugged, and she continued. "Judy, you get your daughter ready to go. You two will be following Bob and me in my Jetta. I've got a .38 snub nose under the seat of my car. It's mostly in case I hit an animal and need to put it out of its misery. I'll ride with Bob and our new friend here, and keep the revolver trained on him just in case he wakes up and tries anything funny."

Robert thought about this for a moment. "Maybe it would be safer if you drove, and I held the gun."

Judy laughed. "How many times have you ever held a gun, Bob?"

"He doesn't know that," Robert said.

Barb stepped in. "I appreciate that, Bob, but I think we should stick with my plan. I'm pretty familiar with the .38, and would prefer handling it myself."

“Fine,” Robert said.

No one moved for a moment. “I’ll get Jeannie ready,” Judy said and hustled down the hall to her daughter’s room.

Robert and Barb just stared at each other, before the realtor broke the silence. “I’ll go get my .38 in case he wakes up sooner.”

Barb opened the closet and pulled out her raincoat. Robert couldn’t believe the words he was hearing from the realtor. He had to force back a crazy grin that threatened to break loose.

Life in Montana, he thought. And people called New York wild.

Barb put on her coat and was reaching for the handle of the door, when she stopped and turned around. “Bob, if you give me your keys, I can move the Jeep closer to the porch.”

“They’re on the table next to you,” Robert said.

Barb pocketed the keys. She stared at Robert, as if she expected him to do something, but for a moment he couldn’t figure out what she wanted. Finally it hit him. “I’ll get some dry clothes and get him ready to move.”

Barb nodded and opened the door. A burst of cold air rushed in, threatening to put out the fire in the living room, but she pushed out into the storm, tugging the door shut behind her.

She stepped onto the porch and shivered. This was actually one of the worst storms Barb had seen, but she hadn’t wanted to say it to Judy earlier. She rushed down the steps in the rain to her Jetta and quickly pulled the .38 from under her seat and slipped it in the front pocket of her raincoat. A flash of light, followed immediately by a crack of thunder, almost sent Barb to the ground for fear of being struck, but she kept her footing in the muddy driveway and dashed over to the Jeep. Locked. She cursed Bob as she fumbled with the keys. Finally finding the right one, she unlocked the door and hopped in. She put the key in the ignition and twisted.

Another flash lit up the valley, and a crack of thunder seemed to shake the earth as the Jeep’s engine fired to life. Barb had her hand on the gearshift and was about to put it in reverse, but she froze.

As the only child in her family, Barb had been on more than a few hunting trips with her father. He always told her that she had “a good sense about her, even for a girl.” More than just seeing or hearing an animal, when she hiked in the wilderness, she could almost feel when an animal was close.

Barb had that feeling now. And she didn’t like it. Something was out there. She didn’t think it was any deer or elk, but the rain fell so

hard that Barb barely could see past the hood, even with the wipers on. Bear, maybe. If only she knew what the creature was, then she would know how to deal with it.

Barb pulled the .38 out of her pocket and undid the snap on the canvas holster just as a huge dark form crossed in front of the Jeep and faded into the rain just beyond the passenger side.

“Shit.”

Bigger than a bear. Or maybe it just looked that way. What kind of animal wouldn't be seeking the shelter of the woods or its den in this kind of deluge? Maybe it just got caught in the storm. Barb removed the revolver from the holster, set it on the seat next to her and waited for a minute. Two minutes. When she didn't see anything else, she put the Jeep in reverse and turned to look behind her just as the black hulk passed behind the vehicle. Barb let out a surprised yelp. Something banged into the driver's side door, and she pushed herself out of her seat, over the center console, and scooted up against the passenger door with the revolver pointed in front of her. Another crash rocked the Jeep on its shocks. Barb looked behind her at the looming silhouette of the cabin. Whatever animal was ramming into the Jeep, it was on the driver's side. She thought she could make it if she did it right.

She was wrong.

She swung open the passenger door, dashed out a few steps and then swung around with the .38 pointed it at the Jeep. Nothing moved. She continued to backstep toward the cabin. Something above her caught her attention, and Barb looked up just as the darkness fell upon her and she dropped to the ground.

\* \* \*

When the woman lying in the driveway opened her eyes, she smiled and stood up. The Jeep was still idling. She wiped the gravel off her backside, then walked over and closed the passenger door before crossing to the driver's side. Reaching in, she pulled the keys out of the ignition and popped the hood. She lifted it up and stared at the engine for a moment before reaching in and yanking out a handful of wires, which she tossed into the tall grass. She lowered the hood, and then proceeded to do the same to the green Jetta.