

HELLTOWN

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WORLD'S SCARIEST PLACES: BOOK THREE

JEREMY BATES

Ghillinein Books

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FIRST EDITION

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the novels in the *World's Scariest Places* series are set in real locations. The following are excerpts from the Wikipedia "Helltown" entry:

There are many legends regarding Helltown. The most popular ones regard Satanists and an abandoned house in the middle of the woods. Others regard the Boston Cemetery and the Boston Mills Road bridge, which is believed to be a crybaby bridge.

Stanford Road

Stanford Road, nicknamed "The Highway to Hell," features prominently in Helltown's myths and legends. A steep hill and sharp drop-off on the road, leading to a barricade, is known as "The End of the World." There is no longer a barricade at the end of Stanford Road with a road closed sign. All of the houses and "Helltown" regalia have been removed. Trails for the Cuyahoga Valley National Park have since been put in place.

The only remaining part of “Helltown” is the paved road which leads up the hill.

The School Bus

There was an abandoned school bus along Stanford Road near the End of the World that was supposedly haunted; at night a ghostly figure smoking a cigarette could be seen inside the bus. The bus has since been removed.

Satanists

Satanists have been said to practice rituals involving animal sacrifice at a Presbyterian church off of Boston Mills Road. Decorative fascia boards on the church had what appeared to be upside down crosses carved into them. These fascia boards were removed sometime in the early-to-mid 2000s. It was also reported that groups of black hooded figures, apparently Satanists, tried to stop occupants passing through Boston Village at night in cars by blocking the road. More recently, the myth has included the KKK in the place of Satanists. It's also said that an escaped mental patient roams the woods at night looking for victims.

Mutants

A rumor persists about the town being the site of a chemical spill or a chemical plant explosion in the area. Usually, a butane plant is the cause. This is often used to explain the local legend

of the “Peninsula Python,” a gigantic snake that wanders the area’s woods.

1987

PROLOGUE

“Abby doesn’t need a man anymore. The Devil is her
lover now!”

Abby (1974)

Inside the mold-infested abandoned house a brass Chinese gong reverberated dully, followed by liturgical music minced with electronically produced effects. The door at the far end of the room opened and a large woman emerged clothed in the customary habit and wimple of a nun. She held a cased ceremonial sword in one hand, a black candle in the other. The deacon and sub-deacon, both clad in floor-length robes, black and hooded, appeared next. The high priest came last. Unlike the others, his face was visible, the top of his head covered with a skin-tight cowl sprouting horns made of animal bones. He wore a black cassock and matching gabardine cape with scarlet lining. His

eyes were dark, shimmering, though his long bushy beard was far from Mephistophelean.

The procession congregated a few feet in front of the altar, the high priest in the middle, the mock-nun and deacon to his left, the sub-deacon to his right. They all bowed deeply, then looked down at the naked woman who lay atop the holy table. Her body was at right angles to its length, her arms outstretched crucifix-style, her legs spread wide, each limb secured in place with ropes anchored to iron eyelets in the floor. Her pale white skin contrasted sharply with her brightly made-up face and ebony hair. The number of the beast, 666, was scrawled in blood across her bare breasts. On the wall above her, painted in red, was the Sigil of Baphomet: a goat's head in an inverted pentagram within a circle. A large upside down cross hung directly before the face so that an eye peered ahead from either side of it.

The organist switched to *The Hymn to Satan*, a perversion of Bach's *Jesu Meine Freude*. The deacon rang a deeply toned bell nine times. Then the high priest raised his hands, palms downward, and said: "*In nomine Magni Dei Nostri Satanus, introibo ad altare Domini Inferi.*"

The black mass had begun.



The car in the driveway was the first in a string of bad omens for Darla Evans. It wasn't a pickup truck or even the rusted Ford Thunderbird that Mark's friend Henry Roberts drove. It was a little red Volkswagen Beetle. It occupied most of the small driveway, so Darla pulled up to the curb, bumper to bumper with

Mark's aging Camaro. She got out and retrieved her suitcase from the Golf's trunk, breathing in the crisp autumn air.

Seeing her recently purchased home, Darla felt a burst of nostalgia, even though she'd only been away in Akron at the career fair for two days. The house was a quaint turn of the century, three bedrooms, two baths, with a large backyard—a perfect place to start a family.

As Darla wheeled her suitcase up the front walk, her hand absently touching her barely noticeable baby bump, she glanced at the Bug. She wondered who it belonged to. Not the construction guys. They wouldn't be caught dead in anything so dainty. Someone to do with the wedding? Darla and Mark's mother Jennifer were taking care of most of the preparations, but Mark had been tasked with organizing the photographer.

Darla didn't bother fishing her keys from her handbag. Mark never locked up when he was home. Sure enough, the front door eased open, and she stepped into the small foyer. Stairs on the left climbed to the second floor; the living room opened to the right. The entranceway to the latter was sealed with transparent plastic. Through it she could see a jumble of masonry, a few scattered tools, and a gray coating of dust on the floor, marred with a zigzag of booted footprints. She and Mark were refinishing the original redbrick fireplace mantelpiece, which dated back to the 1920s.

Mark's loafers rested at the base of the cast-iron radiator, next to a pair of black pointed-toe sling-backs with high heels. A work associate? Darla wondered. She tilted her head, expecting to hear conversation. She heard nothing. She thought about calling out, announcing that she'd returned from the career fair

early, but given the silence she decided Mark and his guest were likely out on the back patio.

She left her suitcase standing upright and followed the hallway to the kitchen. She frowned at the two empty fishbowl wine glasses on the counter, next to an empty bottle of Merlot. Confusion stirred within her and, hovering beneath that, like a dark shadow, alarm. She told herself a perfectly innocent explanation existed as to why Mark would be sharing wine with someone who wore pumps and drove a red Bug. Of course there was. She and Mark had the ideal relationship. Everyone said so. They'd just bought the house, were expecting a baby. There was no room in that scenario for what the whisperings in her head suggested. She felt ashamed to be considering such a thing.

She continued to the rear of the kitchen and looked through the sliding glass doors. Plastic patio set, old barbeque, sagging shed—nobody anywhere in the yard. Darla thought about calling out again, but this time she kept quiet for a different reason. *Because you might disturb them? Because they might have time to—to what? Get themselves decent?* She returned the way she'd come, her head suddenly airy, her stomach nauseous.

Back in the foyer Darla stood at the bottom of the stairs, hesitating. She thought she heard a faint something, maybe someone speaking at a low volume. She started up the steps. Ten to the landing, right turn, six more. Carpeted, they didn't creak. The plan was to toss the carpet and restore the original hardwood hidden beneath.

When she reached the second floor, she confirmed what she'd thought she'd heard. Voices, murmurings, coming from the master bedroom. She started in that direction, floating now,

disconnected from herself. It was as though her body had flooded itself with a cocktail of potent chemicals to numb her from the inevitable pain lurking very close. She knew that men and women cheated on each other. It was a fact of life in a monogamous society. She just never imagined Mark doing it to *her*.

It can't be him in there, she thought irrationally. It has to be someone else.



Halfway through the third segment of the black mass, the Canon, the sub-deacon fetched a chamber pot from the shadows and presented it to the nun, who urinated into it, smiling beatifically, while the organist played a low-pitched, rumbling hymn. The high priest said, “In the name of Mary she maketh the font resound with the waters of mercy. She giveth the showers of blessing and poureth forth the tears of her shame. She suffereth long, and her humiliation is great, and she doth pour upon the earth with the joy of her mortification. Her cup runneth over, and her water is sublime. *Ave Maria ad micturiendum festinant.*”

When the nun finished urinating, the sub-deacon retrieved the font and held it before the high priest, who dipped a phallus-shaped aspergillum into the fluid. He turned to the four cardinal compass points, shaking the aspergillum three times at each. “In the name of Satan, we bless thee with this, the symbol of the seed of life. In the name of Lucifer, we bless thee with this, the symbol of the seed of life. In the name of Belial, we bless thee with this, the symbol of the seed of life. In the name of Levia-

than, we bless thee with this, the symbol of the seed of life.” He raised the phallic aspergillum breast-high in an attitude of offering to the Baphomet, kissed it, and placed it back on the altar. Then he uttered the purported last words of Jesus Christ upon the cross: “*Shemhamforash!*”

“Hail Satan!” the assemblage replied.



Darla stopped on the other side of the bedroom door. She could hear a woman’s voice purring, the words punctuated with throaty laughter. She wanted to turn around, leave, pretend this wasn’t happening, but she couldn’t do that. Steeling herself, she opened the door—and everything inside her collapsed at once. Her lungs, so it was hard to breathe. Her nervous system, so she became numb. Her heart, slit in half, emptied, hollow.

Mark lay on his back on the queen bed, his well-toned body naked except for a pair of blue briefs. A tanned peroxide blonde straddled him, groin on groin. She wore nothing but a black frilly thong. In one hand she held a pink feather duster, in the other, a red candle, which she was using to drip scolding wax onto Mark’s chest.

Mark turned his head toward Darla, as if sensing her presence. Seeing her, he threw the woman off him and sat bolt upright. “Jesus!” he said, and for a moment he appeared furious, as if outraged that Darla would have the gall to walk in on him while he was getting it on. Very quickly, however, he adopted a suitably ashamed and worried countenance.

“Wha...?” The woman turned and saw Darla. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Get out,” Darla told her evenly, venomously.

“Hey, sorry, we should have gone somewhere else—”

“Get out!” she screamed.

“Okay, okay, like chill out.” Her casual tone was infuriating. She would walk away today and likely gossip about what happened with her friends. It wasn’t her life abruptly in shambles.

Darla marched over and grabbed the slut by the blow-dried hair and yanked her off the bed. The woman yelped.

“Hey, Dar, hold on,” Mark said. “Take it easy. Let’s talk.”

Ignoring him, Darla dragged the woman—bent over, shrieking, bare breasts flopping—across the room, shoved her into the hallway, slammed the door shut.

Then she whirled on Mark. She wanted to hurl every curse word she knew at him. But she could articulate nothing. She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

“Listen, Dar,” he said, scratching the back of his head, “it’s not what you—”

“Don’t give me that! Don’t you *dare* give me that!”

He closed his mouth and seemed at a loss for what to say next.

“How long?” she said.

He got off the bed, pulled on his acid-wash jeans.

“How long?” she demanded.

Banging at the door. “Mark! I need my clothes.”

Mark started toward Darla, thought better of it, kept his distance. “A few weeks,” he said.

“Who is she?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“*Who is she?*”

He shrugged. “Someone from the ski resort.”

“Hey!” the woman persisted. “I’ll go. I just need my clothes.”

“Let me send her off,” he said, “and we’ll talk.”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get out of this house.”

“Dar, you’re not thinking straight. Let me get rid of her—”

“Get the hell out of this house, Mark, or I swear to God I’m going to hit you.”

“Dar—”

“Go!”

He frowned, angry again, undecided. Then he scooped up his yellow Polo shirt with the embroidered logo of his auto repair business, a black bra, and a red tartan dress. He left his socks, inside out, on the floor. On his way to the door he stopped in front of Darla and tried to touch her on the shoulder. She slapped him across the cheek. He recoiled in shock. More anger, then weary resignation. He left the bedroom.

“Hey, thanks,” the blonde said, taking her dress. “And sorry about this—”

“Not now,” Mark snapped.

Darla remained where she was, arms folded across her chest, beginning to shake. The front door opened and closed. A car start started. Then another. Moments later the sound of the engines faded, and she was alone.



The high priest removed the black veil that covered the chalice and paten. He lifted the latter in both hands, on which rested a wafer of turnip, and said, “Blessed be the bread and wine of death. Blessed a thousand times more than the flesh and blood of life, for you have not been harvested by human hands nor did any human creature mill and grind you. It was our Lord Satan who took you to the mill of the grave, so that you should thus become the bread and blood of revelation and revulsion.” His voice became harsher, more guttural. “I spit upon you, I cast you down, because you preach punishment and shame to those who would emancipate themselves and repudiate the slavery of the church!” He inserted the host into the woman’s labia, removed it, and raised it to the Baphomet. “Vanish into nothingness, thou fool of fools, thou vile and abhorred pretender to the majesty of Satan, the true god of gods! Vanish into the void of thy empty Heaven, for thou wert never, nor shalt thou ever be!” He dropped the host into a small bowl and pulverized it with a pestle. He mixed what remained with charcoal and incense and set it aflame with a white candle. While it burned he picked up the Chalice of Ecstasy, which was filled not with blood or semen but his drink of choice, Kentucky bourbon. He raised it to the Baphomet and drank deeply. He replaced the chalice on the altar, covered it and the paten with the veil, then bowed and gave the blessing of Satan, extending his left hand in the Sign of the Horns: the two outermost fingers, representing the goat,

pointing upward in defiance of Heaven, the two innermost pointing down in denial of the Holy Trinity. “*Shemhamforash!*”

“Hail, Satan!”



Darla returned to the Golf with her unpacked suitcase and drove. She couldn't stand to be in the house any longer. Every room reminded her of Mark. The kitchen where they'd spent so many mornings in their housecoats making each other breakfast, the den where they'd snuggled up on the sofa together in the evenings to watch TV. Certainly not the bedroom. God, the tramp had been in her *bed*. How could Mark have allowed that? How could he violate the sanctity of the place where they'd conceived the baby that was growing inside her?

With this acid in her head, Darla tooled aimlessly around Boston Mills. She felt lost, confused, as if half her identity had been torn away from her—and in a sense she supposed it had. She'd been with Mark for ten years, ever since he'd asked her to their high school prom. He'd been the only stable fixture in her adult life.

Despair filled her. The house was Mark's. He'd paid the down-deposit with his savings, and the bank loan was in his name. So she couldn't stay there. She was homeless. Not only that, she had less than a hundred dollars in her bank account, no job, and a baby on the way. There had been a couple of jobs at the career fair she'd thought she might do okay at, but even if she was hired for one tomorrow, she likely wouldn't start for a

few weeks, and she wouldn't be paid for another few weeks after that.

Family, she thought. She still had family. Her parents had moved to Florida several years before, and her older brother was teaching English in Japan or South Korea or China—somewhere too distant to think about. But her sister, Leanne, was only forty minutes away in Cleveland. Darla could crash there for a bit, maybe even look for work in Cleveland.

Then again, that meant Darla would have to deal with Leanne's husband, Ray. He was a smug white-collar bank manager who'd always thought of Darla and Mark as uneducated country bumpkins. No, she couldn't show up on his doorstep pregnant and single and broke. It would be humiliating.

Darla began running through a mental list of her friends—and realized she didn't even know who her friends were anymore. They would have to take sides, wouldn't they? How many would choose her over Mark? Likely not many. It didn't matter that Mark was a cheating slime ball. He'd been the extrovert in their relationship, she the introvert. He had an easy way with people she didn't. He'd come out of this scandal unscathed, while she would end up ostracized, an outcast in the very town where she had grown up.

Suzy, she thought. Yes, Suzy. She was single, had just been through a brutal divorce herself. She would sympathize with Darla's predicament. She'd make some strong coffee, they'd sit down, she'd listen to Darla bawl, she wouldn't judge or take sides.

Suzy lived ten minutes away in Sagamore Hills. It would be fastest to travel north on Riverview Road, then east along West

Highland. But Darla decided to detour through Cuyahoga Valley National Park. It would give her a bit more time to get herself together.

She crossed over the Cuyahoga River, then turned left onto Stanford Road. Soon the trees of the national park closed around her—oak, ash, maple, walnut, hickory—and she began to feel calmer. Nature had a way of doing that to her, as she supposed it did for most people. Also, she enjoyed the isolation the park offered, the idea of being on her own. She felt free. *And now I am free*, she thought defiantly. *Mark's gone, out of my life. And maybe that's for the best. Better to find out about his cheating ways now than later on. I'm still young, only twenty-six. I'll meet someone new, start over again...*

Darla had been so preoccupied with her new-life fantasy she didn't realize it was nearly dark. That was the thing with October in Ohio: you had day, and you had night, and you had about ten minutes of dusk in between.

She clicked on her headlights—and in the rearview mirror noticed a car behind her do the same. She'd had no idea anyone had even been there.

The car seemed to be accelerating toward her. Darla watched it approach, waiting for it to overtake her. It didn't. Instead it came right up behind her and sat on her tail.

What was the idiot thinking?

Darla was about to pull over to the shoulder, to give the car more room to pass her on the narrow two-lane road, when it rammed her back bumper. She cried out in surprise. The car rammed her again, harder. The steering wheel jerked dangerously in her hands.

The lunatic was trying to run her off the road!

Was he drunk? On drugs?

Heart racing, Darla stomped on the gas, pushing the speedometer needle past fifty, past sixty. The car stuck behind her as the road angled upward steeply. Then the car rammed her once more. This time it remained glued to her ass, *pushing* her. She had to fight the steering wheel to keep it straight, and just as she thought she was going to lose control, the vehicle fell back.

Darla cried out in triumph a moment before the road disappeared in front of her—and she realized her mistake. This stretch of Stanford Road was nicknamed The End of the World because the hill culminated in a brief summit that dropped off sharply on the other side, creating the temporary illusion that you were driving off a cliff—or the end of the world.

Darla had breasted the summit at eighty miles an hour and shot clear into the air.

When the Golf crashed violently back to earth, the front bumper tore free in a fiery display of sparks. The vehicle wrenched to the left, plowed through the smaller shrubbery lining the verge, into the forest, and struck the trunk of a large tree, coming to an abrupt, bone-crushing halt.



With the human sacrifice now at hand, the organist began to play deep, furious chords, while the gong-ringer struck the instrument with the heavy mallet rhythmically, continually. The nun handed the high priest the ceremonial sword. He held it aloft with both hands and recited Lovecraft in a loud, command-

ing voice, “Oh, friend and companion of the night, thou who rejoiceth in the baying of dogs and spilt blood, who wanderest in the midst of shades among the tombs, who longest for blood and bringest terror to mortals—Gorgo, Mormo, thousand-faced moon—look favorably on our sacrifice and win forgiveness for me and for all those for whom I have offered it. *Tuere nos, Domine Satanus!*”

“Shield us, Lord Satan!” the assemblage cried.

“*Protege nos, Domine Satanus!*” he shouted.

“Protect us, Lord Satan!”

“*Shemhamforash!*”

“Hail Satan! Hail Satan! Hail Satan!”

The high priest sank the sword into the woman’s belly.



Mark’s infidelity, detouring through Cuyahoga Valley National Park, the maniac in the car behind her—these were the first thoughts Darla had entertained, or at least the first ones she could recall, since the crash. But with each passing second she felt herself becoming more lucid, more self-aware. It was as if she’d been in a black abyss deep underwater, and now she was floating upward toward the surface, to the world of the senses. Indeed, she could hear voices, she could smell some kind of incense, she could feel...oh God, the pain! Her body throbbed, nowhere and everywhere at once. Still, she held onto the pain, she wouldn’t let it go, because where there was pain there was consciousness.

The surface drifted closer. She could almost reach out and touch it.

Darla's eyes cracked open. She made out several men hovering over her, their faces lost in the shadows of their cowls.

A fireball exploded in her abdomen, far worse than the pain that had lured her from the void, and with wide, glassy eyes she saw that the blade of a sword protruded from her navel, blood pooling around the wound, coloring the surrounding flesh a blackish red.

She screamed.

CHAPTER 1

“Groovy!”

Evil Dead II (1987)

The headlights punched ghostly tunnels through the shifting fog. Birch stripped bare of their fiery Autumn colors and towering evergreens lined the margins of the two-lane rural road. A cold rind of moon hung high in the starless sky, glowing bluish-white behind a raft of eastward-drifting clouds.

Steve slipped on his reading glasses, which he kept on a cord around his neck, and squinted at the roadmap he'd taken from the BMW's glove compartment. “We're on Stanford Road, right?” he said.

“Yup,” Jeff said, one hand gripping the leather steering wheel casually. He was eyeing the rearview mirror, either

making sure their friends were still following behind them in the other car, or admiring his reflection.

Steve wouldn't be surprised if it were the latter. Jeff was about as vain as you could get. And Steve supposed he had the right to be. Not only was he tall, bronzed, and blond, he was also athletic, successful, and charismatic—the proverbial stud every guy wanted to be, and every girl wanted to date.

Steve himself wasn't bad looking. He kept in shape, had neat brown hair, intelligent brown eyes, and a friendly manner that girls found attractive. However, whenever he was hanging out with Jeff he couldn't help but feel more unremarkable than remarkable, intimidated even.

"I don't see this End of World road anywhere," Steve said, pushing the glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"No duh, genius," Jeff said. "The End of the World's a nickname."

"For Stanford Road?"

"Yup," Jeff said.

"Why's it called The End of the World?" Mandy asked from the backseat. "Does it just end?"

"I'm not walking anywhere," Jenny said. She was seated next to Mandy.

"Will you two give it a rest?" Jeff said, annoyed. "I have everything planned, all right?"

Mandy stuck her head up between the seats to study the map herself. Her wavy red hair smelled of strawberries and brushed Steve's forearm. "Hey, the road *does* just end," she said. "What gives, Jeff? Can you tell us what we're doing out here already?"

“Sit your ass down, Mandy,” he told her. “I can’t see out the back.”

“Noah’s still behind you, don’t worry.”

“Sit down!”

“Jeez,” she said, and flopped back down. She mumbled something to Jenny, and they giggled. They’d been doing that all car trip: mumbling and giggling with each other, like they were schoolgirls. Steve found it hard to comprehend how they could be so comfortable with one another, considering they had met for the first time only a few hours before.

Jeff glared at them in the rearview mirror, but said conversationally to Steve: “You know, legend has it that cutthroats and thieves hang out along this road and rob anyone driving through.”

“That’s bull,” Mandy said. “How do you rob someone in a car?”

“With a giant magnet,” Jenny said, pulling her blonde hair into a ponytail, which she secured with an elastic band. “It drags the car right off the road, like in the cartoons. Pow!”

“Right, just like that,” Jeff said. “And you’re in med school?”

“So how?” Mandy asked.

“Because the road doesn’t just end,” Jeff told them. “Part of it was closed down, yeah. But you can still go around the barricade and drive on the closed-down part. You have to go super slow though because it’s really narrow and twisting. That’s how the cutthroats get you. They just slip out of the woods and—” He hit the brakes. Inertia slammed everyone forward against their seatbelts. Mandy and Jenny yelped.

Laughing, Jeff accelerated. Behind them, Noah blared his horn.

“God, Jeff!” Mandy said. “You’re such a dick!”

“A small dick I’ve heard,” Jenny added, and the two of them broke into more giggles.

Jeff scowled. “A small dick, huh?” he said. “You’ve never had any complaints, have you, babe?”

Mandy rolled her eyes.

“Well?” he demanded.

“No, hon,” she said. “No complaints.”



Mandy turned her attention to the haunting black forest whisking past outside her window. It really did look like the type of woods that would be home to a ruthless band of cutthroats. The shadowed maple and oak and elm had already shed all of their foliage, leaving their spindly branches denuded and shivering in the southing wind. They stood interwoven with the larger pine, spruce, and cedar, the great needle-covered boughs sprouting from the trunks like dark wings, masking whatever may lay behind.

What if Jeff was telling the truth? she wondered. What if when they eventually got to this closed-off road and had to slow down a deranged man—worse, a *pack* of deranged men—swarmed the car, dragged her out by the hair, and slit her throat?

What if—

No. Mandy banished the “what ifs” from her mind. There were no cutthroats living in the forest. She was safe. They were

all safe. Jeff was full of it. Not only that, he was full of *himself* too. *You've never had any complaints, have you, babe?* Who said stuff like that? The answer, of course, was Jeff. His ego was so big it couldn't see its shoes on a cloudy day.

Mandy and Jeff had been at a party a short time back, a "model party," or at least that's what everybody called it. It had been hosted by Smirnoff vodka. The models had been hired for the glam factor. There were no Christy Brinkleys or Brook Shields in attendance. The models all hailed from the no-name talent agencies that dotted the backstreets of New York City. They were the D-list hired out for photo shoots in obscure magazines or low-budget cable TV commercials. Not that you'd know this by talking to them. Everyone Mandy had mingled with had a tale about brushing shoulders with Burt Reynolds or Christian Slater—and missing out on their big break by inches because of some unfortunate reason or another.

Anyway, they did have their looks going for them. Mandy knew she was attractive. She'd been told this her entire life. People often said she resembled a red-haired Michelle Pfeiffer, even though Mandy thought her eyes were a little too close together, her nose a bit too pointy. Yet the no-name models made her feel positively average. They were all taller than her, had the flawless, thin bodies of fourteen-year-old boys, although with breasts, and most importantly, they knew how to flaunt their sex appeal.

At the end of the evening, while waiting for a cab, Jeff, tip-sy, had said, "Did you see that guy? The one with the long hair?"

"They all had long hair," Mandy told him.

“White shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest.”

Mandy had seen him. He’d been gorgeous. “What about him?”

“You think he was good looking?”

“Ha! You’re jealous,” she said.

“Hardly. But I’ll tell you this much. He’s probably the first guy I’ve ever seen who’s better looking than me.”

Mandy stared at Jeff, thinking he must be kidding. He wasn’t. Up until that point in his twenty-six years of existence, Jeff had seriously considered himself to be the best looking man on the planet.

Mandy blinked now, and instead of the trees and the blackness beyond the car window, she saw her glass-caught reflection. It was vaguely visible, transparent, ghostlike. It gave her a case of the creeps.

Shivering, she faced forward again. No one had spoken since Jeff had challenged her to find fault with his love-making.

Mandy didn’t like prolonged silences, they made her uneasy, and she said, “Complaints, huh?” She wrapped a lock of her hair around a finger. “Do we have time? This could take a while.”

“Name one,” Jeff said.

She leaned close to Jenny—who she’d been happy to discover shortly after they met shared a similar goofy sense of humor—and whispered: “He has a hairy butt.”

“Grody!” Jenny whispered back.

“And he likes to be spanked—it’s like spanking a monkey!”

They broke up in laughter, and when Mandy’s eyes met Jeff’s in the rearview mirror, she stuck out her tongue at him.

“Real mature, Amanda,” he muttered.

“Whatever,” she said, and continued laughing.



Jeff clenched the steering wheel tighter. Mandy could be a real pain in the ass sometimes. He wondered why he put up with her. He was a securities trader clearing a hundred grand a year, for Christ’s sake. He could have any woman he wanted. Didn’t she realize that?

He needed someone smarter, someone more on his level, someone, well, like Jenny. She wasn’t only a long-legged blonde bombshell; she was a medical school student to boot. He visualized the two of them on paper: Wall Street Trader and Cardiovascular Surgeon. It was certainly more impressive than Wall Street Trader and Makeup Artist. And was that all Mandy was going to aspire to in life? Really, how much difference was there between a makeup artist and a carny face painter? He chuckled to himself, considered mentioning this comparison out loud, but decided not to sink to her childish level.

Jeff focused on the road ahead. The occluding fog was as thick as pea soup, as his grandmother had been fond of saying, and he needed to pay attention. Last thing he wanted was to run into a deer or a bear. The 1987 BMW M5 was less than a month old, in pristine condition, and he would like to keep it that way. Did he need the car? No. He took cabs to work every day and rarely left the city. Same went for the prewar Tribeca co-op he’d been renting since last July. It was far too big for just him, he rarely set foot in the two spare bedrooms, but they were good to have to show off when people came over. Success, he had

learned, was more than earning a six-figure salary. It was cultivating an image that people envied and respected.

And Mandy wasn't jiving with that image, was she? They'd been together for four years now, and she was still as clueless to business and politics and world events as when he'd met her. What was it she'd said to Congressman Franzen the other week while he'd been discussing with Jeff the recent armistice reached in the Iran-Iraq war? Why don't they call it the Middle *West*? Good God, she was becoming an embarrassment.

Jeff's thoughts turned to Jenny again. He visualized her wearing a white doctor's coat, a stethoscope around her neck, and nothing else. What a fantasy that would be! Of course, that's all it was: a fantasy. Steve was his good friend. He wasn't about to hijack his girlfriend, even though he was sure he could if he wanted to. No, there were plenty of other smart, successful women out there.

Through the mist, a bridge appeared ahead of them.

"Hell yeah!" Jeff cried out. "There she is!" He crunched on to the gravel shoulder just before the bridge and killed the engine.

"What's going on?" Steve asked, looking up from the map and removing his glasses.

"Crybaby bridge!" Jeff announced.

"Are you for real?" Steve said.

"Crybaby bridge?" Mandy said, poking her head up between the seats once more. "Why have I heard of that?"

"It's an urban legend," Steve told her. "A baby gets thrown off a bridge, it dies, you can hear its ghost crying in the middle of the night. Crybaby bridges are all over the country."

“Yeah, but this one’s different,” Jeff said.

Steve looked at him. “How so?”

He grinned wickedly. “Cause this crybaby’s genuinely haunted.”



Steve undid his seatbelt, stuffed the map back into the glove compartment, and got out of the car. The night air was cool and fresh and damp, the way it is after a storm. It accentuated the raw scent of pine and hemlock. Fog swirled around his legs, sinuous, amorphous, reminding him of the dry ice used in horror movies to turn a mundane graveyard into a hellish nightmare crammed full of the shuffling dead. He tilted his head, looking up. Directly above the bridge the canopy had receded to reveal a patch of black sky framing a full moon.

Steve howled. It was a mournful, lupine sound, the effect of which turned out to be surprisingly eerie and realistic.

“Nice one, Wolfman!” Jeff said, tossing his head back and joining in gleefully.

“Boys will be boys,” Jenny said, sighing with put-upon melodrama.

Mandy said, “You know they’re going to be trying to scare us all night?”

“Let them,” Jenny said. “I can handle a werewolf, or vampire. I have a black belt in judo.”

Steve’s lungs faltered. His howl cracked. He looked at Jenny and said, “You have a black belt in judo?”

“I trained with Chinese Buddhist monks.”

“Nice try. Judo’s Japanese.”

“What do Chinese monks practice?” Mandy asked.

“Kung fu,” Steve said.

“Well, maybe the Chinese monks Jenny trained with also practiced judo too.”

Jeff’s wolf howl sputtered into chuckles. He began shaking his head.

“What?” Mandy said, planting her fists on her hips.

“No comment,” he said, shooting Steve a this-is-what-I-deal-with-everyday look.

“Hey,” Mandy said. “Shouldn’t we put our Halloween costumes on?”

Everyone agreed and went to the BMW’s trunk. Steve scrounged through his backpack for the white navy cap he’d brought, found it at the bottom of the bag, and tugged it on over his head.

He heard a zipper unzip behind him. He started to turn around only to be told by Mandy to stop peeking.

“Peeking at what?” he said.

“I’m changing,” Mandy said.

“Right there?”

“Hey, bro, stop perving on my girl,” Jeff said, eyeing Steve up and down: the white navy cap, the red pullover, the pale trousers. “Who the hell are you supposed to be?”

“Gilligan,” Steve said.

Jeff guffawed and turned his attention to Jenny, who was slipping on a pair of cat ears to go with her black eye mask and bowtie. “Come on, help me out,” he said to her. “A dog? Wait, a

mouse? Hold on—someone who is completely fucking unoriginal?”

“What are you?” Steve asked him.

Jeff shrugged out of his pastel blue blazer and yellow necktie—he had come straight from work to pick Steve and Jenny up out front NYU’s Greenberg Hall—and exchanged them for a black leather jacket. He held his arms out in a ta-da type of way.

“No idea,” Steve said.

“Michael Knight! You know, from that *Knight Rider* show.” He whistled. “Sexy mama!”

Steve turned to find Mandy adjusting her boobs inside a skintight orange bodysuit with a plunging neckline. Accentuating this were shiny orange boots, yellow tights, and a feisty yellow wig with black highlights. In the center of her chest was the ThunderCats logo: a black silhouette of a cat’s head on a red background.

“Cheetara,” she said, smiling hopefully.

Noah, Austin, and Cherry were approaching from Noah’s green Jeep Wrangler, appearing and disappearing in the swiftly morphing clouds of mist. Austin, carrying an open bottle of beer, was in the lead. He’d shaved the sides of his head and styled the middle strip of hair into a Mohawk a year or so ago. With his satellite ears and angular face, however, he looked more like Stripe from *Gremlins* rather than a punk rocker. A flock of crows, tattooed in black ink, encircled his torso, originating at his navel and ending on the left side of his neck, below his ear. Now only a couple of the birds were visible, seeming to fly up out of the head hole cut into the cardboard box he wore. Condoms were taped all over box, some taken out of the pack-

ages and filled with a gluey substance that surely couldn't be semen.

"You get one guess each," Austin told them, tipping the beer to his lips.

"A homeless bum," Steve said.

"A total jackass," Jeff said.

"Homework," Mandy said.

Austin frowned at her. "Homework?"

"That box is a desk, right?"

"Right—I dressed up as homework."

"Don't keep us in suspense," Jeff said.

"A one-night stand, mate!"

Steve and Jeff broke into fits. After a moment Mandy laughed hesitantly. Then she said "Oh!" and laughed harder.

"Gnarly, hey?" Austin said, smiling proudly. "So, how the fuck is everyone?"

"Not as good as you apparently," Jeff said.

"This is my first beer. Right, Cher?"

"I've lost count," Cherry said. She was perhaps five feet on tip toes, though her teased hair gave her a couple more inches. Jeff called her Mighty Mouse, which always ticked her off. She'd grown up in the Philippines, but moved to the States to work as a registered nurse a few years ago. She had nutmeg skin, sleepy sloe Asian eyes, a cute freckled nose, and the kind of sultry lips that would look good sucking a lollipop on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, or blowing an air-kiss to a sailor shipping off.

Noah joined Steve and took a swig from a bottle of red wine. He was the polar opposite of Austin: wavy dark hair, unassum-

ing good looks, mellow, disciplined. Even more, he was an up-and-coming sculptor. His first exhibit a couple months back had been well-received by critics, and he'd even sold a few pieces.

"You a boxer?" Steve said to him, referring to the black shoe polish he'd smeared around his left eye. He'd also drawn a large P in black marker on the chest of his white long-sleeved shirt.

"A black-eyed pea, dude." Noah nodded at Austin and Cherry, who had gravitated toward Jeff and the others, and said, "Those two are a nightmare together." He was speaking quietly so only Steve could hear.

"Fun drive?" Steve said.

"How about I drive you and Jenny back. Jeff can deal with them in his car. We almost crashed into an eighteen-wheeler when Austin was getting into that stupid box." He took another swig of wine, glanced about at the trees and vegetation deadened by the mist, and said, "So what's the deal? Why'd we pulled over here?"

Steve shrugged. "First stop on the haunted Ohio tour."

"Can't believe we agreed to this."

"Hey, you never know—we might actually see a ghost."

"Yeah, and Austin will get through the night without spewing."

"I'd put my money on seeing a ghost."

"He's already had four or five beers in the car."

"Maybe he'll puke *on* a ghost. That'd be something."

Jeff released Austin from a headlock, kicked him in the ass, and hooted with laughter when Austin whimpered. Then Jeff clapped his hands loudly, to get everyone's attention. "Okay, listen up, ladies and dicks," he said, immediately commanding

attention the way he could. “This bridge—it’s called Crybaby Bridge, and it’s the real deal.”

“Why do I feel like I’m being sold blue chip stock?” Jenny said.

“Snake oil,” Mandy said.

“I’m being one hundred percent legit,” Jeff said. “Hundreds of people have verified that this bridge is haunted. *Verified*, pussies. And if you want to—”

“How’d they verify it?” Steve asked.

“With those spectrometers the Ghostbusters use,” Noah said.

Jeff darkened. “Will you two twits listen up?” He dangled his car keys in the air. “This is my spare set. I left the other set in the ignition.”

“Why would you do that?” Mandy asked.

“Cause the legend goes, you leave your keys in the ignition, lock the car, and take off for a bit—”

“How long?” Mandy asked.

“I don’t know. Ten minutes.”

“And go where?”

“Down the bank to the river, I guess. Fuck, Mandy, who gives a shit? We just have to be out of sight of the car. Then we wait ten minutes. When we come back, the car should be running.”

“You’re serious?” Steve said.

“As a snake.” Jeff stuffed the spare keys in his pocket and started down the bank to the river.

Steve glanced at Noah, who shrugged.

“As a snake,” Noah said, and followed.

CHAPTER 2

“It’s Halloween, everyone’s entitled to one good scare.”

Halloween (1978)

Thick colonies of blood-red chokecherries and bracken fern and other shrubbery overran the bank, so Steve couldn’t see where he stepped. He lost his footing twice on the uncertain terrain, but didn’t fall. He called back to the others to be careful. A second later Austin stampeded past him, his arms pin-wheeling. Steve was certain his momentum was going to propel him onto his face. However, he crashed into Jeff’s back—on purpose, it seemed—which brought him to an abrupt halt, his beer sloshing everywhere.

“Thanks, mate,” Austin said jocularly, slapping Jeff on the shoulder and sucking on the foaming mouth of the bottle. Lately

he'd been adopting a British accent when he was drunk because he got off on saying words like "lad" and "mate" and "geezer."

Jeff scowled. "I'm giving you the bill for the dry cleaning."

"Fancy rich chap like you can pony up a couple bucks."

Steve stumbled down the last few feet and stopped beside Jeff, who had produced a mickey of vodka from the inside pocket of his now beer-stained jacket. Jenny appeared next, emerging from the fog like a wraith. She was moving slowly, cautious of where she stepped. Her leather pants clung to her long legs, the black elastic top to her small breasts, outlining the triangular cups of her bra. She frowned at the vegetation as she passed through it and said, "I hope there wasn't any poison ivy in there. I got it once as a kid. It bubbles between your fingers."

Steve said, "That'll make gross anatomy interesting."

"I know, right? No one will want us on their dissection team if we can't hold a scalpel."

"Yo, nerds," Jeff told them, "check it out." He pointed to the bridge's piers and abutments. "That's the foundation from the original bridge."

"The original one?" Mandy said, pushing through the last of the ferns. Then, higher pitched: "Oh shoot! My tights!" A good three-inch tear had appeared in the yellow Spandex high on her upper right thigh, revealing white flesh beneath. "Stupid branch!"

"Are you wearing underwear?" Jeff asked.

"Jeff!"

"I can't see any."

"Stop it!"

“Anywho,” Jeff said, “the original bridge was an old wooden thing that washed away a while back during a flood. This one replaced it.”

“Isn’t that bad news for your ghost?” Steve said, trying to ignore Mandy, who was fussing over the tear and inadvertently making it bigger.

“What do you mean?” Jeff said.

“Ghosts haunt old places. Once something’s gone, they’re gone.”

“You’re an expert on hauntings now?”

“When was the last time you heard of a ghost haunting something new? You don’t go out and buy a new Ford and find it comes with a poltergeist in the trunk.”

“You’re blind wrong there, my dear castaway. Ghosts haunt the places where they died. The baby died here, so it haunts here. It doesn’t matter if this bridge is rebuilt a dozen times, it’s still going to haunt here.”

“What’s so scary about a baby haunting anyway?” Austin opined. “I’m telling you, I see any baby ghost waving its spectral rattler at me, I’m gonna punt it so far downriver it’ll shit its diapers before it touches down again.”

Steve ducked beneath the bridge and was surprised to find almost no fog there at all, as if the area was somehow off limits. And was it cooler? Or was that his imagination? He took a box of matches from his pocket and ignited a match off his thumb, illuminating the sandy loam before him.

“One, two, Freddy’s coming for you...” Austin sang.

Ignoring him, Steve troll-walked forward. The dried riverbed was littered with dead leaves that had blown beneath the bridge. He heard someone following him and turned to find Jenny there.

“Where are you going, mister?” she said, tucking her blonde hair behind her ears.

“Seeing what’s under here,” he said.

“I imagine we would have heard the baby by now if there was one.”

“I’m expecting a Garbage Pail-ish thing.”

“Cindy Lopper.”

“Bony Joanie.” She paused. “Hey, where’s the fog?”

“Strange, I know.”

The bridge was less than twenty feet in diameter, and Steve could make out the other side where the inky shadows gave to the mist-shrouded night once more.

He didn’t see the baby shoes until he was nearly on top of them.

They were newish, white, and so small they would only fit a newborn.

“What is it?” Jenny asked, moving up beside him. “Hey!” she exclaimed. “Baby shoes!”

“Some kids probably left them there to propagate the legend.”

Jenny studied the ground ahead of them, then turned and studied the ground behind them. “There aren’t any other footprints except for ours.”

She was right, he realized. “Guess they raked them away.”

“It doesn’t look like the sand’s been raked.”

“Well, a baby ghost didn’t leave its shoes here, Jen.”

“Doesn’t this bother you, Steve? Seriously—look at them! They’re just here, in the middle of perfectly undisturbed sand.”

“Ow!” The flame had winnowed its way down the matchstick to Steve’s fingertips. He tossed the match away. He lit another and said, “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I’ve seen one before,” Jenny stated.

“Where?”

“In my bedroom.”

“When?”

“A long time ago. I was just a kid. I woke up in the middle of the night, and a face was staring in my window.”

“Maybe it was a neighborhood perv?”

“My bedroom was on the second floor.”

“Did your bedroom face the street?”

“It did, as a matter of fact.”

“Maybe it was the reflection of a streetlamp?”

“I don’t think there were streetlamps on my street.”

“It could have been anything, Jen. That’s the thing with ghosts and UFOs and stuff like that—just because you can’t immediately explain them doesn’t mean they’re real.”

“It doesn’t mean they’re not real either. I’m simply keeping an open mind.”

“I’ve spent the last year cutting open dead people and sorting through their insides. I’ve yet to find any evidence of a lurking spirit. Have you?”

“We share different metaphysical beliefs. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Not so fast,” Steve said. “I’m having a hard time believing an intelligent person such as yourself, a future doctor no less, believes in the boogie monster.”

“I don’t believe in the boogie monster, Steve.”

“You said you saw something peeking in your window. That’s what boogie monsters do, isn’t it?”

“I said a ghost. They’re two very different things.”

He shrugged. “Okay, a ghost, whatever. But can you tell me why a ghost would want to peek in your window? I mean, you’d have to be a borderline megalomaniac to think something made the effort to cross dimensions just to spy on you when you were sleeping.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.”

“Shakespeare’s not going to bail you out of this one, babe.”

Jenny cocked an eyebrow. “Babe?”

Steve frowned. “What?”

“I’m not a ‘babe,’ thank you very much.”

“Jeff calls Mandy babe.”

“Maybe Mandy likes being a babe, but I haven’t spent the last year of my life, studying eighty hours a week, to become someone’s possession.”

“Possession?”

“Calling a woman a babe diminishes her to a younger and therefore more controllable state—so, yes, a possession.”

“So what am I supposed to call you?”

“There are plenty of other terms of affection that don’t have the same degrading connotations, but I can’t help you there. It’s your job as my partner to choose one. You have to think of something that represents the complexities of my personality.”

“I’ll give it a hard think, princess.”

“And it shouldn’t be condescending.”

Steve and Jenny continued to the far side of the bridge. When Steve emerged from beneath it and was standing erect again, he stretched his back, popping a joint in the process.

Jenny, still crouching next to him, cupped her hands to her mouth, and shouted: “People! There’re some rad baby shoes under the bridge, if you’re interested!”

“We’re shaking!” Jeff called back.

“For real!” Jenny replied.

Austin said something, though Steve couldn’t hear what he said.

“Nice friend you have,” Jenny said.

“What did he say?” Steve asked.

“Not something I’d care to repeat,” she said, and started up the bank.

Steve followed, grasping shrubs and saplings for purchase, his glasses bumping against his chest on their cord. At the top, parked on the shoulder of the road, Jeff’s BMW was exactly how they’d left it: dark, empty, clearly not idling.

“So much for the legend,” he said.



The night was cold and getting colder, and Noah wished he’d brought a jacket, considering all he wore on his upper body was the shirt with the hand-drawn P. To make matters worse, an icy wind had begun to blow. It came and went in unpredictable

gusts and was strong enough to tousle everyone's hair and to rattle the skeletal branches of the nearby trees.

Shivering, Noah unfolded his arms from across his chest and produced from his pocket a joint he'd rolled earlier. He was not only cold but restless from the three-hour drive from New York City and wanted to unwind. Moreover, he had a feeling they were going to be in for one long slog of a night. Getting high would be the only way to make it remotely interesting. He wondered again why he had agreed to come. He wasn't superstitious. In fact, ghosts and ghouls and all that jive didn't interest him in the least. He didn't watch horror movies, didn't read Stephen King. Growing up, he hadn't even liked Halloween. He'd appreciated the candy, sure, but the idea of witches on broomsticks and skeletons lurking in closets and Frankenstein monsters eating brains never did anything for him. He guessed he simply didn't have a scary bone, the way some uptight people didn't have a funny bone.

Noah sparked the joint, took a couple tokes, and passed it to Mandy, who was standing to his right. She took a mini puff and blew the smoke out of her mouth quickly, probably not inhaling. Noah had to make a conscious effort not to stare at her tits, which were practically bursting out of her top. He thought Jeff was crazy for not appreciating her the way he should. She was drop-dead gorgeous, a real sweetheart too, a rare combination. And she put up with Jeff's bullshit. Someone "more on his level"—a phrase he'd been using a lot lately to describe his ideal woman—likely wouldn't. They'd be clashing nonstop. In fact, they'd be just like Austin and Cherry, a recipe for disaster, each with one eye constantly on the big red nuke button.

Noah suspected Steve and Jenny had the best chance of sticking it out together. Even so, this was no guarantee either. They both had another two or three years of med school ahead of them, then equally long and brutal residencies. How much quality time could they possibly spend together? Then again, maybe their workloads would be an advantage. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?

The joint did the rounds and returned to Noah, almost finished. He took a drag, then ground the roach out under his shoe just as another blast of wind swooped through the trees, whipping everyone's hair and clothes into a frenzy. Noah turned his face out of the worst of it and found himself looking at Mandy's breasts. Her nipples poked against the thin Spandex of her costume.

Abruptly Jenny called to them from the far side of the bridge: "People! There're some rad baby shoes under the bridge, if you're interested!"

Noah could just make out Jenny and Steve's silhouettes.

"We're shaking!" Jeff called back.

"For real!"

"Blow me!" Austin said.

Jeff slapped him on the back of the head. "Don't be so crass."

Austin frowned. "What's your damage?"

"You barely know her. None of us do. Show a bit more class."

"Why do you care?"

“It’s called respect, dickweed.” Jeff turned to the others. “So, what do you guys think? Wanna take a look under the bridge for these shoes?”

“It’s pitch black,” Cherry said.

“You’ll be fine,” Jeff told her. “You won’t even have to crouch.”

She glared at him.

Austin said, “Respect, huh?”

“Hey,” Jeff said to Cherry, “where’s your costume?”

Cherry was wearing an everyday fluorescent green blouse, denim miniskirt, and pink leg warmers.

Austin scowled. “She wouldn’t do it.”

“Do what?” Jeff asked.

“She didn’t bring a costume, so on the ride down here—”

“He told me to take off my clothes and wear my underwear around,” Cherry finished.

“Right,” Austin said. “A lingerie model.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” Jeff said, looking at Cherry with X-ray eyes.

Mandy harrumphed and Jeff pulled his eyes away and said, “Well, whatever, Mighty Mouse, if you’re too scared to come, stay here. No skin off my back. Noah, Mandy, Austin, let’s roll.” Without waiting for a response, he turned and ducked-walked into the darkness beneath the bridge.



While waiting at the BMW for the others to return from the riverbed, Steve and Jenny were playing a tongue-in-cheek game

which involved one-upping the experiences they'd had thus far at med school.

"Pathology is snooze-worthy," Steve said. He was leaning against the hood of the car, his arms folded across his chest to ward off the chill, studying the trees and thinking about those cutthroats Jeff had mentioned. Although he knew Jeff was only trying to scare them, he couldn't help being on edge, his eyes trying to pick out anything moving in the dark that shouldn't be moving.

"You used that last time," Jenny said.

"Fine...don't ask others about their grades."

"I know! I hate gunners," she said. "Okay. Umm...you'll at some point walk down the street still wearing your stethoscope and people will look at you like you're crazy."

"Or like you're a pompous asshole." He thought for a moment. "You'll learn that for almost any set of symptoms the answer could be diabetes, pregnancy, SLE, or thyroid problems."

Jenny nodded. "Good one. Okay. At least once a week a professor will think fifty minutes is long enough to get through one hundred slides."

"And fail."

"Miserably."

Just then movement in the vegetation caused Steve to start. He pushed himself off the car, wired. A moment later Jeff appeared, tall and lean, clawing through the shrubbery lining the bank.

Steve relaxed.

“Thanks for the wild goose chase, you two!” Jeff called, crossing the road toward them.

Noah and Austin and the girls appeared behind him, one after the other, single file.

“You didn’t see the shoes?” Steve said.

“We checked everywhere, mate,” Austin said, tossing his empty beer bottle over his shoulder into the trees. Glass shattered. “But I did smell something foul down there.”

“Something dead,” Mandy said.

“A chipmunk,” Cherry said.

Steve looked from Jeff to Austin to the others. “Are you guys having me on?”

“You don’t know when to give up, do you?” Jeff said. “But I gotta say, I appreciate the effort.”

Steve chuffed to himself, shaking his head. Then he started away from the car.

“What are you doing?” Jenny asked him.

“Getting the shoes to convert the unbelievers.”



Steve made his way down the bank, keeping to the path they’d already forged through the chokecherries and bracken fern. At the bottom he stopped in the center of the riverbed and faced the vacuous blackness that had gathered beneath the bridge. It seemed somehow blacker than it had earlier, threatening even.

It’s all in your head, Steve. Now get on with it.

He lit a match off his thumb, picked out his and Jenny’s original footprints among all the others, and followed them

beneath the bridge to the baby shoes—or where the baby shoes had been.

Because now they were gone.

Frowning, he turned in a circle, searching the sand—and heard a noise behind him. He jerked around and squinted into the darkness. Nothing there. He wondered if it had been the wind. Only right then there was no wind. The night was tomb-still. Besides, since when did wind sound like chattering teeth?

Chattering teeth...or a baby's rattle?

This thought raised the hackles on the back of his neck.

“Hello?” he said, though he didn’t wait for a reply. He scurried out from beneath the bridge and up the bank, irrationally convinced a rotting baby corpse was going to latch onto his legs and drag him back down to the riverbed, where the sand and the silt and the clay would swallow him whole just as it had swallowed the baby shoes.

This didn’t happen, of course, and when he was on the road again, the night sky above him, he chided himself for spooking so easily.

Everybody was back inside the two vehicles. Headlights pierced the omnipresent fog, turning it iridescent so that it seemed to glow with a radiance of its own. Jeff honked the BMW’s horn impatiently.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve mumbled, swallowing the lump in his throat. “I’m coming.”

CHAPTER 3

“You know that part in scary movies when somebody does something really stupid and everyone hates them for it? This is it.”

Jeepers Creepers (2001)

As soon as Steve climbed into the front passenger seat, the cool leather crackling beneath his weight, Jeff said, “Well?”

Steve looked at him. “Well what?”

“Show me the shoes.”

“Did you take them?”

“Take them?” Jeff said. He was chewing a shoot of beard grass, which dangled from his mouth like a long, limp cigarette.

“Are you really going to play dumb?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The baby shoes,” Steve said patiently. “You took them.”

“They weren’t there?” Jenny said.

Steve shook his head. “They took them.”

“Whatever you say, li’l buddy.” Jeff tossed the beard grass in the foot well, swallowed a belt of vodka from the bottle in his hand, then tucked the bottle neatly into his jacket’s inner pocket. He turned the key in the ignition slot. The engine vroomed to life. Hot air roared from the vents. “Need You Tonight” by INXS blasted from the speakers.

“I like these guys!” Mandy said. “They’re from the UK or Scotland, I think.”

Jeff snorted laughter.

“Australia,” Steve told her, deciding not to point out that the UK included Scotland. He turned down the volume. “Anyway, I’m serious. Let me see them.”

Jeff seemed pleasantly exasperated. “There were no fucking baby shoes, bro,” he said. “Mandy—tell him.”

“We didn’t see them,” she said.

Steve shook his head; he didn’t care. He knew they were having him on. In fact, now that he thought about it, he wouldn’t be surprised if one of them had leaned over the side of the bridge and made that noise he’d heard.

He was about to mention this when a black car thundered past them so fast it left a wake of air that rattled the BMW.

“Fucking hell!” Jeff said, the curse drowned out by Mandy and Jenny’s exclamations of surprise.

“Asshole!” Mandy said.

“That was a hearse,” Steve said, noting the vehicle’s distinctive quarter panels.

“Bloody kids!” Jeff said.

“It was a hearse!” Steve repeated.

In the distance the red taillights flashed, angry red eyes in the eddying fog.

“Look, it’s stopping,” Mandy said.

The brake lights disappeared, replaced by the sweep of the headlights as the vehicle turned to face them. Two small, bright orbs glowed malevolently.

“Are they coming back?” Jenny said, a tremble in her voice.

“Maybe we should turn around?” Mandy said.

The hearse high beamed them.

“Oh the little pricks!” Jeff said, grinning. “They’ve got balls!” He flashed his high beams back.

“What are you doing?” Mandy demanded. “Jeff? Answer me!”

Jeff buzzed down his window, stuck his fist out, and effed them off with his middle finger. It was a pointless gesture, considering there was no way they could see his finger through the mist.

The hearse’s engine revved, building into a chainsaw-like screech. Then the vehicle shot toward them.

Jeff released the parking brake, shoved the transmission into first, popped the clutch, and goosed the gas. The tires squealed as the car lurched forward.

“Jeff!” Mandy wailed. “Don’t you dare!”

“Stop!” Jenny cried. “Please! I want to get out!”

Jeff smashed through the gears, reaching third and sixty miles an hour in a few seconds.

The g-forces flattened Steve to his seat. He fumbled for his seatbelt, tugged it across his chest, buckled it. He wanted to tell

Jeff to stop, but the girls were already shouting at him to do exactly that, and he wasn't listening.

As soon as they shot past the end of the bridge the canopy knitted together and blotted out the sky once more, creating the sensation that they were bulleting down the bore of a pistol.

Jeff stared intensely ahead at the road, his mouth twisted into a bitter grimace, his hands gripping the steering wheel in the ten and two positions tight enough to squeeze the blood from his knuckles.

He was a man who'd just gone all in on the pot of a lifetime, and right then Steve knew that he wasn't going to yield the road.

Steve was suddenly furious. He couldn't believe Jeff was risking a potentially fatal head-on collision, risking all of their futures, to prove he wasn't a chicken.

Mandy and Jenny gave up yelling and buckled their belts. A fear-soaked silence followed, magnifying the purr of the engine and the hum of the tires.

Only a handful of seconds had passed since Jeff gunned the gas, but it felt like much longer. Steve's fear had warped his perception of time, slowed it down, and for a crazy moment some mordant part of his brain contemplated jumping out of the speeding vehicle. But it was traveling too fast. He would break his back or neck—and likely get run over by the oncoming hearse. Besides, he was frozen stiff. All he could move were his eyeballs, which he strained to the left so he could read the speedometer. The needle wavered just below seventy miles per hour.

He looked back at the road. The hearse was sixty yards away, the headlights bleeding together to form a blinding wall of shimmering white.

Fifty yards.

We're going to die, Steve thought.

Forty.

He braced his hands against the dash.

Thirty.

“Jeff!” Mandy shrieked.

Twenty.

“*Jeff!*”

Jeff swerved to the left. The hearse screamed past. Jeff yanked the wheel to the right but overcompensated. The car knifed across the dotted line toward the opposite shoulder. He yanked the wheel left again. Right, left, right, left, trying to regain control of the now fishtailing vehicle.

They careened off the road and plowed through a small tree, shattering bark and branches. They hit something that launched the BMW into an airborne somersault. For a moment Steve floated in zero gravity, and he was thinking this was it, this was how he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it—

The car struck the ground nose first. The impact accordioned the engine block and slammed Steve with the force of a sledgehammer to the chest. The seatbelt strap bit into his flesh and held him suspended above the dash, which was no longer in front of him but below him. The handstanding vehicle crunched forward onto the roof, where it rocked back and forth before coming to rest in the still, silent forest.

Noah had been seconds away from getting out of the Jeep and going to talk to Jeff about the assholes in the hearse when the BMW's rear tires squealed and literally burned rubber. Through wafts of smoke, he watched the car shoot away down the road.

"He's playing chicken!" Austin exclaimed from beside him.

Noah didn't know what to do, but he knew he couldn't sit there doing nothing. He shoved the Jeep into gear and accelerated.

"He's not going to give!" Austin said. "Jeff's not going to give. The motherfucker's going to get them all killed."

"The hearse will give," Noah said automatically.

"Don't get too close," Cherry said from the backseat in a borderline terrified voice. "Stay to the shoulder. Do you hear me? *Stay to the shoulder.*"

"I'm straddling the goddamn shoulder!" Noah said. In fact, he could hear loose gravel spraying the Jeep's undercarriage.

Then, ahead, Jeff arced sharply to the left. For a moment it appeared as though the hearse had plowed straight *through* the BMW, but Noah knew that had to be a trick of the fog and the glare of the headlights. He eased fully onto the shoulder and slowed.

Two seconds later the hearse thundered past, hogging the center of the road, bovine horn moaning. Noah tried to glimpse the driver, but the hearse's headlights had blinded him. No one turned to watch the morbid vehicle depart. No one said anything. They were all staring in horror at the slewing BMW ahead

of them. In the next instant it bucketed off the left side of the road into the mix of evergreen and deciduous trees.

Cherry sobbed and screamed in the same breath.

Austin shouted: "Go!"

Noah was already accelerating again.



When Steve realized he wasn't dead, and when his shock subsided, he heard moaning from behind him. "Jen?" he said. "Mandy?" He tried to crane his neck around to check on them, and that's when he saw Jeff in the darkened cabin, crawling through a hole in the windshield. Then he realized Jeff wasn't crawling; his lower body was ragdoll limp.

Steve couldn't see the upper half of his friend, the half that had been launched through the windshield, because the glass had gone gummy and opaque with cracks.

"Fuck Jeff," Steve mumbled. "You stupid fucking fuck..."

"Steve?" Mandy said shrilly. "What's wrong? What happened to Jeff? Is he dead? *Is he dead?*"

Steve unclasped his seatbelt and collapsed onto the car's ceiling. He twisted himself around so he could see Mandy and Jenny. They were both layered in shadows, hanging upside down like bats. Mandy was sobbing into her hands. Jenny was either unconscious or dead.

In the distance came the unmistakable drone of an approaching vehicle. The hearse coming back for them?

Steve maneuvered his body in the awkward space so he could grasp the door handle. He tugged it. The door was stuck.

Tires screeched to a halt.

Steve drove his heels into the window. The glass spider webbed. He kicked it again, harder, and again, harder still, until his feet stamped through it. He rolled onto his hands and knees and scrambled through the shattered window. He heard branches snapping, vegetation crackling, and he was suddenly filled with an exquisite terror, sure the driver of the hearse was going to be something with a hole for a face and leathery wings and—

Austin shouted Jeff's name; Noah, Steve's.

"Here!" Steve managed, standing and swooning into the upturned car. Austin and Noah and Cherry burst through the thicket. They came to an abrupt standstill.

"Oh no," Austin said, those two words barely audible but powerful enough to halt a marching band. "No, no, no..."

Steve pushed himself away from the car on splintered pegs for legs and faced the wreckage. In the frosty light he could see it clearly enough. Jeff's head and shoulders protruded from the windshield like a half-eaten meal. He lay on his back. Given that the vehicle rested upside down on top of him, his nose kissed the hood.

Noah brushed past Steve, dropped to his knees, and pried open the back door. He climbed in and spoke calmly to Mandy while attempting to extract her.

Steve wobbled around the front of the car—the BMW's distinctive headlights and kidney-shaped grille were an unrecognizable mash of metal—and all but collapsed next to Jenny's door. Blood smeared the window. He gripped the handle and pulled, expecting the door to be stuck. It swung open with ease. He felt one of Jenny's dangling wrists for a pulse, but his hands

were shaking too badly to perform this action correctly. He unbuckled her seatbelt, lowered her body into his arms, then dragged her out onto the leaf litter. The fog billowed around her, caressed her. He noticed her chest moving up and down and said a silent prayer of thanks.

Meanwhile, Austin had crawled into the gap beneath the hood and now he shouted, “Jeff’s alive! He’s breathing!”

While Noah and Austin discussed what to do next in urgent tones, Steve patted Jenny on the cheek, urging her to wake up. All the while his heart was filled with guilt. He had invited her on this trip. She had wanted to spend the weekend studying, but he’d insisted they needed a break from school, he’d wanted her to finally meet his friends, and now here she was, lying on the damp earth, bloody and broken.

Her eyes fluttered open.

“Jenny!” he said. “Thank God! Are you okay?”

“Okay...”

“You hit your head.”

“Hurts...”

“It’s just a little—”

The rest of the sentence died on his lips.

He could smell gasoline.



Gas? Jenny thought slowly. What was Steve talking about? Were people camping nearby?

“We have to move away from the car,” Steve was telling her now, though it remained difficult to hear him through the ringing in her ears. “I’m going to carry you.”

“I can...okay...”

Steve helped her to her feet. Pain flared in the left side of her head. She almost toppled over, but Steve caught her in his arms.

“Let me carry you,” he insisted.

“No, I...” She couldn’t find the right word. “Just...dizzy.”

Jenny allowed him to lead her away from the wreckage. Without warning her trembling legs gave out beneath her. She dropped to her knees. Steve was saying something to her, though the words seemed suddenly far away. Her vision blurred, darkened—and then she was floating above her body, which was lying on the operation table in the cadaver lab, nude and lifeless. Nine fellow students were gathered around the table, everyone wearing brown lab coats and dishwashing gloves to protect against formaldehyde. Nobody seemed shocked or saddened that Jenny was the cadaver today. Professor Booth was giving some sort of eulogy in Latin that she couldn’t understand. She wanted to tell them she wasn’t dead, but she couldn’t speak, only hover, insubstantial, like a ghost.

Belinda Collins stepped to the table. She was one of the gunners in the class, ambitious to a fault. Ever since Jenny scored higher than her on their first assignment, Belinda had done her best to make life miserable for Jenny, and Jenny knew she would be thrilled to be performing the dissection.

Belinda raised her scalpel to make the first incision. Jenny squeezed her eyes shut against the anticipated pain. She felt nothing. Surprised, she opened her eyes again. The cadaver lab

had disappeared, replaced by a cold night filled with nacreous fog and towering trees.

“Jen? Jen!” Steve said. “Can you hear me?” He was cradling her head in his lap.

“Where...?” she said, disorientated. Then she remembered with a punch of dread: the hearse, the accident. “Jeff? Mandy?”

“Mandy’s fine. Jeff’s...okay. I have to go help get him out of the car. Are you going to be all right for a couple minutes?”

She tried to sit up. It took all her strength, but she managed. She saw the upside down BMW for the first time. Mandy and Cherry stood on one side of it, Noah and Austin on the other. Everyone was speaking and gesturing wildly.

“Where’s Jeff?” she asked.

“He’s still inside the car,” Steve said. “I’ll be right back—” He frowned.

“What?” she said.

“How do you feel?”

“Pummeled.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Two. Steve, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You hit your head though. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Yet the concern that had appeared on his face a few moments ago was still there. She suddenly wondered whether she’d been disfigured somehow. She touched her lips, her nose.

“What’s wrong with me, Steve?”

“Nothing.”

“Steve!”

“Nothing—it’s just your eyes. One’s dilated a bit more than the other. Probably nothing more than a mild TBI. It’s not a big deal.”

Jenny went cold. A traumatic brain injury. If it was indeed mild, she had nothing to worry about. But Steve had no way of knowing whether it was mild or not. It could very easily be moderate or severe. She could have intracranial hemorrhage or brain herniation, both of which could lead to disability or even death. She’d need a CT scan to determine the true extent of her injury.

Noah and Austin, she noticed, had started working to get Jeff out of the BMW. Jenny said, “Go help them.”

Steve glanced at the car, then back to her. “You’re not going to pass out again, are you?”

“No.”

“Because you can’t pass out—”

“I know! Now go. I’m fine.”

He hesitated, nodded, and hurried off.



Steve reached Noah and Austin just as they were easing Jeff out of the mangled cab and onto the ground. Bloody lacerations raked Jeff’s face in a dozen places. Several of them appeared deep enough to require stitches. A chunk of glass was embedded in his left cheek like a grisly jewel.

“We have to move him farther away from the car,” Steve said.

Noah shook his head. “I don’t think we should move him anywhere.”

“Can’t you smell the gas?”

Noah and Austin raised their noses and sniffed, like prairie dogs trying to catch wind of prey.

“Shit, you’re right!” Austin said. He eyed the car apprehensively. “You think it might explode?”

“No,” Steve said simply. He didn’t know much about cars, but he was pretty sure you’d have to shove a torch into the gas tank for something as dramatic as an explosion to happen. But the fact they could smell gas meant the seam between the fuel tank and the rest of the fuel system had been broken, or the fuel lines had been sheared. Either way, gas was leaking from somewhere, and an electrical spark could turn it into a full-out blaze.

He faced Mandy, who had come around the vehicle. She was knuckling her mouth and staring at Jeff, her complexion bloodless. “Mandy, give us a hand moving him,” he told her.

She didn’t respond.

“Mandy!”

She blinked, pulled her eyes away from Jeff. “What?”

“We need help moving Jeff.”

Abruptly flames whooshed to life in the BMW’s engine.

“It’s gonna blow!” Austin cried hysterically. “Grab him!”

Steve took Jeff’s arms, Noah and Austin his legs, and they dragged Jeff twenty feet from the burning wreckage to where Steve had brought Jenny—only now she was on her side, eyes closed, limbs askew.

“Jen!” Steve dropped Jeff’s arms and dashed over to her. “Jen? Jen!” He turned to the others. “We have to get her and Jeff to the hospital. Now!”

“Do you know where it is?” Noah asked.

“Someone in town can tell us.” He scooped Jenny into his arms and stood. “You guys carry Jeff.”

Noah and Cherry grasped Jeff’s legs, Austin and Mandy, his arms. On the count of three they lifted him off the ground. However, they only made it a few steps this time when Jeff’s eyes flailed open and he screamed.

“Set him down!” Steve ordered.

They rested Jeff on his back. He continued to scream with tremendous force. When he expelled the last of the air from his lungs, he began to hyperventilate. His eyes, glossy and as wide as silver dollars, stared at the black sky overhead.

“Jeff?” Steve said. He’d set Jenny down on the ground and was bending over his friend. “Jeff? Can you hear me?”

“It hurts!” Jeff bleated through clenched teeth. “It hurts it hurts it hurts!”

“Where does it hurt?” Steve asked him. The calmness in his voice didn’t match the panic chilling his blood.

“Back...my back...” Jeff’s face had flushed liver pink. It was sheathed in perspiration. The tendons in his neck were bunched into ropey cords.

Steve took Jeff’s hand, as if they were shaking, and instructed him to squeeze it.

Jeff let loose another choked scream and crushed Steve’s hand in his. He squeezed tighter and screamed louder before falling abruptly silent. His eyes slid closed. His grip slackened.

Steve snatched his hand back and clenched and unclenched it against his chest.

“What the hell was that?” Austin said, running his hands through his Mohawk. The wildness in his eyes made him appear ten years older.

“He said his back,” Mandy mumbled. Tears streaked her cheeks, while her hands were clamped over her ears, as if in anticipation of more screams. “Did he break it?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“But he squeezed your hand,” Austin said. “So he’s not paralyzed, right? At least he’s not paralyzed?”

“He could be from the waist down,” Steve said.

“Don’t say that,” Mandy whispered.

“It’s not going to change the fact if he is.”

She sobbed and turned away.

“Maybe we did it,” Austin blurted. “We moved him. You’re not supposed to move someone with a broken back. Maybe we made it worse.”

“If we left him in the car,” Steve said, “he would be dead right now.”

They all glanced at the burning BMW. Stout yellow and orange flames now engulfed the entire vehicle, feeding off the foam and leather seats and other combustible items. Grayish smoke streamed upward into the black night.

Noah broke the silence. “How are we going to move him now?” he said quietly.

“We’re not,” Steve said. “Austin, Mandy, Cherry—you guys stay here with Jeff. Noah and I will take Jenny to the hospital and bring help back.”

“What do we do if Jeff comes to again?” Mandy asked. She’d finally removed her hands from her ears.

“Just talk to him. Tell him an ambulance is coming. But don’t move him.”

“That’s all?” she said.

“That’s all,” he said. “We’ll be back soon.”