

A LIFETIME TV EVENT



**BIG
DRIVER**

STEPHEN KING

WITH BONUS STORY *"FAIR EXTENSION"*

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KING

BIG DRIVER

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FAIR EXTENSION

*For Tabby
Still.*

BIG DRIVER

Tess accepted twelve compensated speaking engagements a year, if she could get them. At twelve hundred dollars each, that came to over fourteen thousand dollars. It was her retirement fund. She was still happy enough with the Willow Grove Knitting Society after twelve books, but didn't kid herself that she could go on writing them until she was in her seventies. If she did, what would she find at the bottom of the barrel? *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes to Terre Haute?* *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Visits the International Space Station?* No. Not even if the ladies' book societies who were her mainstay read them (and they probably would). No.

So she was a good little squirrel, living well on the money her books brought in . . . but putting away acorns for the winter. Each year for the last ten she had put between twelve and sixteen thousand dollars into her money market fund. The total wasn't as high as she might have wished, thanks to the gyrations of the stock market, but she told herself that if she kept on plugging, she'd probably be all right; she was the little engine that could. And she did at least three events each year gratis to salve her conscience. That often annoying organ should not have troubled her about taking honest money for honest work but sometimes it did. Probably because running her gums and signing her name didn't fit the concept of work as she had been raised to understand it.

Other than an honorarium of at least twelve hundred dollars, she had one other requirement: that she be able to drive to the location of her lecture, with not more than one overnight stop on the way to or from. This meant she rarely went farther south than Richmond or farther west than Cleveland. One night in a motel was tiring but acceptable; two made her useless for a week. And Fritzy, her cat, hated keeping house by himself. This he made clear when she came home, twining between her feet on the stairs and often making promiscuous use of his claws when he sat in her lap. And although Patsy McClain from next door was very good about feeding him, he rarely ate much until Tess came home.

It wasn't that she was afraid of flying, or hesitant about billing the organizations that engaged her for travel expenses just as she billed them for her motel rooms (always nice, never elegant). She just hated it: the crowding, the indignity of the full-body scans, the way the airlines now had their hands out for what used to be free, the delays . . . and the inescapable fact that you were not in charge. That was the worst. Once you went through the interminable security checkpoints and were allowed to board, you had put your most valuable possession—your life—into the hands of strangers.

Of course that was also true on the turnpikes and interstates she almost always used when she traveled, a drunk could lose control, jump the median strip, and end your life in a head-on collision (*they* would live; the drunks, it seemed, always did), but at least when she was behind the wheel of her car, she had the *illusion* of control. And she liked to drive. It was soothing. She had some of her best ideas when she was on cruise control with the radio off.

"I bet you were a long-haul trucker in your last incarnation," Patsy McClain told her once.

Tess didn't believe in past lifetimes, or future ones for that matter—in metaphysical terms, she thought what you saw was pretty much what you got—but she liked the idea of a life where she was not a small woman with an elfin face, a shy smile, and a job writing cozy mysteries, but a big guy with a big hat shading his sunburned brow and grizzled cheeks, letting a bulldog hood ornament lead him along the million roads that crisscrossed the country. No need to carefully match her clothes before public appearances in that life; faded jeans and boots with side-buckles would do. She liked to write, and she didn't mind public speaking, but what she really liked to do was drive. After her Chicopee appearance, this struck her as funny . . . but not funny in a way that made you laugh. No, not that kind of funny at all.

The invitation from Books & Brown Baggers filled her requirements perfectly. Chicopee was hardly more than sixty miles from Stoke Village, the engagement was to be a daytime affair, and the Three Bs were offering an honorarium of not twelve but fifteen hundred dollars. Plus expenses, of course, but those would be minimal—not even a stay at a Courtyard Suites or a Hampton Inn. The query letter came from one Ramona Norville, who explained that, although she was the head librarian at the Chicopee Public Library, she was writing in her capacity as President of Books & Brown Baggers, which put on a noon lecture each month. People were encouraged to bring their lunches, and the events were very popular. Janet Evanovich had been scheduled for October 12th, but had been forced to cancel because of a family matter—a wedding or a funeral, Ramona Norville wasn't sure which.

“I know this is short notice,” Ms. Norville said in her slightly wheedling final paragraph, “but Wikipedia says you live in neighboring Connecticut, and our readers here in Chicopee are *such* fans of the Knitting Society gals. You would have our undying gratitude as well as the above-mentioned honorarium.”

Tess doubted that the gratitude would last much longer than a day or two, and she already had a speaking engagement lined up for October (Literary Cavalcade Week in the Hamptons), but I-84 would take her to I-90, and from 90, Chicopee was a straight shot. Easy in, easy out; Fritzzy would hardly know she was gone.

Ramona Norville had of course included her email address, and Tess wrote her immediately, accepting the date and the honorarium amount. She also specified—as was her wont—that she would sign autographs for no more than an hour. “I have a cat who bullies me if I'm not home to feed him his supper personally,” she wrote. She asked for any further details, although she already knew most of what would be expected of her; she had been doing similar events since she was thirty. Still, organizational types like Ramona Norville

expected to be asked, and if you didn't, they got nervous and started to wonder if that day's hired writer was going to show up braless and tipsy.

It crossed Tess's mind to suggest that perhaps two thousand dollars would be more appropriate for what was, in effect, a triage mission, but she dismissed the idea. It would be taking advantage. Also, she doubted if all the Knitting Society books put together (there were an even dozen) had sold as many copies as any one of Stephanie Plum's adventures. Like it or not—and in truth, Tess didn't mind much one way or the other—she was Ramona Norville's Plan B. A surcharge would be close to blackmail. Fifteen hundred was more than fair. Of course when she was lying in a culvert, coughing out blood from her swollen mouth and nose, it didn't seem fair at all. But would two thousand have been any fairer? Or two million?

Whether or not you could put a price tag on pain, rape, and terror was a question the Knitting Society ladies had never taken up. The crimes they solved were really not much more than the *ideas* of crimes. But when Tess was forced to consider it, she thought the answer was no. It seemed to her that only one thing could possibly constitute payback for such a crime. Both Tom and Fritzzy agreed.

Ramona Norville turned out to be a broad-shouldered, heavy-breasted, jovial woman of sixty or so with flushed cheeks, a Marine haircut, and a take-no-prisoners handshake. She was waiting for Tess outside the library, in the middle of the parking space reserved for Today's Author of Note. Instead of wishing Tess a very good morning (it was quarter to eleven), or complimenting her on her earrings (diamond drops, an extravagance reserved for her few dinners out and engagements like this), she asked a man's question: had Tess come by the 84?

When Tess said she had, Ms. Norville widened her eyes and blew out her cheeks. "Glad you got here safe. 84's the worst highway in America, in my humble opinion. Also the long way around. We can improve the situation going back, if the Internet's right and you live in Stoke Village."

Tess agreed that she did, although she wasn't sure she liked strangers—even a pleasant librarian—knowing where she went to lay down her weary head. But it did no good to complain; everything was on the Internet these days.

"I can save you ten miles," Ms. Norville said as they mounted the library steps. "Have you got a GPS? That makes things easier than directions written on the back of an envelope. Wonderful gadgets."

Tess, who had indeed added a GPS to her Expedition's dashboard array (it was called a Tomtom and plugged into the cigarette lighter), said that ten miles off her return journey would be very nice.

"Better a straight shot through Robin Hood's barn than all the way around it," Ms. Norville said, and clapped Tess lightly on the back. "Am I right or am I right?"

"Absolutely," Tess agreed, and her fate was decided as simply as that. She had always been a sucker for a shortcut.

Les affaires du livre usually had four well-defined acts, and Tess's appearance at the monthly convocation of Books & Brown Baggers could have been a template for the general case. The only diversion from the norm was Ramona Norville's introduction, which was succinct to the point of terseness. She carried no disheartening pile of file cards to the podium, felt no need to rehash Tess's Nebraska farmgirl childhood, and did not bother producing bouquets of critical praise for the Willow Grove Knitting Society books. (This was good, because they were rarely reviewed, and when they were, the name of Miss Marple was usually invoked, not always in a good way.) Ms. Norville simply said that the books were hugely popular (a forgivable overstatement), and that the author had been extremely generous in donating her time on short notice (although, at fifteen hundred dollars, it was hardly a donation). Then she yielded the podium, to the enthusiastic applause of the four hundred or so in the library's small but adequate auditorium. Most were ladies of the sort who do not attend public occasions without first donning hats.

But the introduction was more of an *entr'acte*. Act One was the eleven o'clock reception, where the higher rollers got to meet Tess in person over cheese, crackers, and cups of lousy coffee (evening events featured plastic glasses of lousy wine). Some asked for autographs; many more requested pictures, which they usually took with their cell phones. She was asked where she got her ideas and made the usual polite and humorous noises in response. Half a dozen people asked her how you got an agent, the glint in their eyes suggesting they had paid the extra twenty dollars just to ask this question. Tess said you kept writing letters until one of the hungrier ones agreed to look at your stuff. It wasn't the whole truth—when it came to agents, there *was* no whole truth—but it was close.

Act Two was the speech itself, which lasted about forty-five minutes. This consisted chiefly of anecdotes (none too personal) and a description of how she worked out her stories (back to front). It was important to insert at least three

mentions of the current book's title, which that fall happened to be *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Spelunking* (she explained what that was for those who didn't already know).

Act Three was Question Time, during which she was asked where she got her ideas (humorous, vague response), if she drew her characters from real life ("my aunts"), and how one got an agent to look at one's work. Today she was also asked where she got her scrunchie (JCPenney, an answer which brought inexplicable applause).

The last act was Autograph Time, during which she dutifully fulfilled requests to inscribe happy birthday wishes, happy anniversary wishes, *To Janet, a fan of all my books*, and *To Leah—Hope to see you at Lake Toxaway again this summer!* (a slightly odd request, since Tess had never been there, but presumably the autograph-seeker had).

When all the books had been signed and the last few lingerers had been satisfied with more cellphone pictures, Ramona Norville escorted Tess into her office for a cup of real coffee. Ms. Norville took hers black, which didn't surprise Tess at all. Her hostess was a black-coffee type of chick if one had ever strode the surface of the earth (probably in Doc Martens on her day off). The only surprising thing in the office was the framed signed picture on the wall. The face was familiar, and after a moment, Tess was able to retrieve the name from the junkheap of memory that is every writer's most valuable asset.

"Richard Widmark?"

Ms. Norville laughed in an embarrassed but pleased sort of way. "My favorite actor. Had sort of a crush on him when I was a girl, if you want the whole truth. I got him to sign that for me ten years before he died. He was very old, even then, but it's a real signature, not a stamp. This is yours." For one crazed moment, Tess thought Ms. Norville meant the signed photo. Then she saw the envelope in those blunt fingers. The kind of envelope with a window, so you could peek at the check inside.

"Thank you," Tess said, taking it.

"No thanks necessary. You earned every penny."

Tess did not demur.

"Now. About that shortcut."

Tess leaned forward attentively. In one of the Knitting Society books, Doreen Marquis had said, *The two best things in life are warm croissants and a quick way home*. This was a case of the writer using her own dearly held beliefs to enliven her fiction.

“Can you program intersections in your GPS?”

“Yes, Tom’s very canny.”

Ms. Norville smiled. “Input Stagg Road and US 47, then. Stagg Road is very little used in this modern age—almost forgotten since that damn 84—but it’s scenic. You’ll ramble along it for, oh, sixteen miles or so. Patched asphalt, but not too bumpy, or wasn’t the last time I took it, and that was in the spring, when the worst bumps show up. At least that’s my experience.”

“Mine, too,” Tess said.

“When you get to 47, you’ll see a sign pointing you to I-84, but you’ll only need to take the turnpike for twelve miles or so, that’s the beauty part. And you’ll save tons of time and aggravation.”

“That’s also the beauty part,” Tess said, and they laughed together, two women of the same mind watched over by a smiling Richard Widmark. The abandoned store with the ticking sign was then still ninety minutes away, tucked snugly into the future like a snake in its hole. And the culvert, of course.

Tess not only had a GPS; she had spent extra for a customized one. She liked toys. After she had input the intersection (Ramona Norville leaned in the window as she did it, watching with manly interest), the gadget thought for a moment or two, then said, “Tess, I am calculating your route.”

“Whoa-ho, how about that!” Norville said, and laughed the way that people do at some amiable peculiarity.

Tess smiled, although she privately thought programming your GPS to call you by name was no more peculiar than keeping a fan foto of a dead actor on your office wall. “Thank you for everything, Ramona. It was all very professional.”

“We do our best at Three Bs. Now off you go. With my thanks.”

“Off I go,” Tess agreed. “And you’re very welcome. I enjoyed it.” This was true; she usually did enjoy such occasions, in an all-right-let’s-get-this-taken-care-of fashion. And her retirement fund would certainly enjoy the unexpected infusion of cash.

“Have a safe trip home,” Norville said, and Tess gave her a thumbs-up.

When she pulled away, the GPS said, “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

“Yes indeed,” she said. “And a good day for it, wouldn’t you say?”

Unlike the computers in science fiction movies, Tom was poorly equipped for light conversation, although Tess sometimes helped him. He told her to make a right turn four hundred yards ahead, then take her first left. The map on the Tomtom’s screen displayed green arrows and street names, sucking the information down from some whirling metal ball of technology high above.

She was soon on the outskirts of Chicopee, but Tom sent her past the turn for I-84 without comment and into countryside that was flaming with October color and smoky with the scent of burning leaves. After ten miles or so on something called Old County Road, and just as she was wondering if her GPS had made a mistake (as if), Tom spoke up again.

“In one mile, right turn.”

Sure enough, she soon saw a green Stagg Road sign so pocked with shotgun pellets it was almost unreadable. But of course, Tom didn't need signs; in the words of the sociologists (Tess had been a major before discovering her talent for writing about old lady detectives), he was other-directed.

You'll ramble along for sixteen miles or so, Ramona Norville had said, but Tess rambled for only a dozen. She came around a curve, spied an old dilapidated building ahead on her left (the faded sign over the pumpless service island still read ESSO), and then saw—too late—several large, splintered pieces of wood scattered across the road. There were rusty nails jutting from many of them. She jounced across the pothole that had probably dislodged them from some country bumpkin's carelessly packed load, then veered for the soft shoulder in an effort to get around the litter, knowing she probably wasn't going to make it; why else would she hear herself saying *Oh-oh?*

There was a *clack-thump-thud* beneath her as chunks of wood flew up against the undercarriage, and then her trusty Expedition began pogoing up and down and pulling to the left, like a horse that's gone lame. She wrestled it into the weedy yard of the deserted store, wanting to get it off the road so someone who happened to come tearing around that last curve wouldn't rear-end her. She hadn't seen much traffic on Stagg Road, but there'd been some, including a couple of large trucks.

"Goddam you, Ramona," she said. She knew it wasn't really the librarian's fault; the head (and probably only member) of The Richard Widmark Fan Appreciation Society, Chicopee Branch, had only been trying to be helpful, but Tess didn't know the name of the dummocks who had dropped his nail-studded shit on the road and then gone gaily on his way, so Ramona had to do.

"Would you like me to recalculate your route, Tess?" Tom asked, making her jump.

She turned the GPS off, then killed the engine, as well. She wasn't going anywhere for awhile. It was very quiet out here. She heard birdsong, a metallic ticking sound like an old wind-up clock, and nothing else. The good news was that the Expedition seemed to be leaning to the left front instead of just leaning. Perhaps it was only the one tire. She wouldn't need a tow, if that was the case; just a little help from Triple-A.

When she got out and looked at the left front tire, she saw a splintered piece of wood impaled on it by a large, rusty spike. Tess uttered a one-syllable expletive that had never crossed the lips of a Knitting Society member, and got her cell phone out of the little storage compartment between the bucket seats. She would now be lucky to get home before dark, and Fritzzy would have to be content with his bowl of dry food in the pantry. So much for Ramona Norville's shortcut . . . although to be fair, Tess supposed the same thing could have happened to her on the interstate; certainly she had avoided her share of potentially car-crippling crap on many thruways, not just I-84.

The conventions of horror tales and mysteries—even mysteries of the bloodless, one-corpse variety enjoyed by her fans—were surprisingly similar, and as she flipped open her phone she thought, *In a story, it wouldn't work*. This was a case of life imitating art, because when she powered up her Nokia, the words NO SERVICE appeared in the window. Of course. Being able to use her phone would be too simple.

She heard an indifferently muffled engine approaching, turned, and saw an old white van come around the curve that had done her in. On the side was a cartoon skeleton pounding a drum kit that appeared to be made out of cupcakes. Written in drippy horror-movie script above this apparition (*much* more peculiar than a fan foto of Richard Widmark on a librarian's office wall) were the words ZOMBIE BAKERS. For a moment Tess was too bemused to wave, and when she did, the driver of the Zombie Bakers truck was busy trying to avoid the mess on the road and didn't notice her.

He was quicker to the shoulder than Tess had been, but the van had a higher center of gravity than the Expedition, and for a moment she was sure it was going to roll and land on its side in the ditch. It stayed up—barely—and regained the road beyond the spilled chunks of wood. The van disappeared around the next curve, leaving behind a blue cloud of exhaust and a smell of hot oil.

"Damn you, Zombie Bakers!" Tess yelled, then began to laugh. Sometimes it was all you could do.

She clipped her phone to the waistband of her dress slacks, went out to the road, and began picking up the mess herself. She did it slowly and carefully, because up close it became obvious that all the pieces of wood (which were

painted white and looked as if they had been stripped away by someone in the throes of a home renovation project) had nails in them. Big ugly ones. She worked slowly because she didn't want to cut herself, but she also hoped to be out here, observably doing A Good Work of Christian Charity, when the next car came along. But by the time she'd finished picking up everything but a few harmless splinters and casting the big pieces into the ditch below the shoulder of the road, no other cars had come along. Perhaps, she thought, the Zombie Bakers had eaten everyone in this immediate vicinity and were now hurrying back to their kitchen to put the leftovers into the always-popular People Pies.

She walked back to the defunct store's weedy parking lot and looked moodily at her leaning car. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of rolling iron, four-wheel drive, independent disc brakes, Tom the Talking Tomtom . . . and all it took to leave you stranded was a piece of wood with a nail in it.

But of course they all had nails, she thought. In a mystery—or a horror movie—that wouldn't constitute carelessness; that would constitute a plan. A trap, in fact.

"Too much imagination, Tessa Jean," she said, quoting her mother . . . and that was ironic, of course, since it was her imagination that had ended up providing her with her daily bread. Not to mention the Daytona Beach home where her mother had spent the last six years of her life.

In the big silence she again became aware of that tinny ticking sound. The abandoned store was of a kind you didn't see much in the twenty-first century: it had a porch. The lefthand corner had collapsed and the railing was broken in a couple of places, but yes, it was an actual porch, charming even in its dilapidation. Maybe *because* of its dilapidation. Tess supposed general store porches had become obsolete because they encouraged you to sit a spell and chat about baseball or the weather instead of just paying up and hustling your credit cards on down the road to some other place where you could swipe them at the checkout. A tin sign hung askew from the porch roof. It was more faded than the Esso sign. She took a few steps closer, raising a hand to her forehead to shade her eyes. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Which was a slogan for what, exactly?

She had almost plucked the answer from her mental junkheap when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an engine. As she turned toward it,

sure that the Zombie Bakers had come back after all, the sound of the motor was joined by the scream of ancient brakes. It wasn't the white van but an old Ford F-150 pickup with a bad blue paintjob and Bondo around the headlights. A man in bib overalls and a gimme cap sat behind the wheel. He was looking at the litter of wood scraps in the ditch.

"Hello?" Tess called. "Pardon me, sir?"

He turned his head, saw her standing in the overgrown parking lot, flicked a hand in salute, pulled in beside her Expedition, and turned off his engine. Given the sound of it, Tess thought that an act tantamount to mercy killing.

"Hey, there," he said. "Did you pick that happy crappy up off the road?"

"Yes, all but the piece that got my left front tire. And—" *And my phone doesn't work out here*, she almost added, then didn't. She was a woman in her late thirties who went one-twenty soaking wet, and this was a strange man. A big one. "—and here I am," she finished, a bit lamely.

"I'll change it forya if you got a spare," he said, working his way out of his truck. "Do you?"

For a moment she couldn't reply. The guy wasn't big, she'd been wrong about that. The guy was a giant. He had to go six-six, but head-to-foot was only part of it. He was deep in the belly, thick in the thighs, and as wide as a doorway. She knew it was impolite to stare (another of the world's facts learned at her mother's knee), but it was hard not to. Ramona Norville had been a healthy chunk of woman, but standing next to this guy, she would have looked like a ballerina.

"I know, I know," he said, sounding amused. "You didn't think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?" Only he wasn't green; he was tanned a deep brown. His eyes were also brown. Even his cap was brown, although faded almost white in several places, as if it had been splattered with bleach at some point in its long life.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I was thinking you don't ride in that truck of yours, you wear it."

He put his hands on his hips and guffawed at the sky. "Never heard it put like that before, but you're sort of right. When I win the lottery, I'm going to buy myself a Hummer."

“Well, I can’t buy you one of those, but if you change my tire, I’d be happy to pay you fifty dollars.”

“You kiddin? I’ll do it for free. You saved me a mess of my own when you picked up that scrapwood.”

“Someone went past in a funny truck with a skeleton on the side, but he missed it.”

The big guy had been heading for Tess’s flat front tire, but now he turned back to her, frowning. “Someone went by and didn’t offer to help you out?”

“I don’t think he saw me.”

“Didn’t stop to pick up that mess for the next fellow, either, did he?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“Just went on his way?”

“Yes.” There was something about these questions she didn’t quite like. Then the big guy smiled and Tess told herself she was being silly.

“Spare under the cargo compartment floor, I suppose?”

“Yes. That is, I think so. All you have to do is—”

“Pull up on the handle, yep, yep. Been there, done that.”

As he ambled around to the back of her Expedition with his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his overalls, Tess saw that the door of his truck hadn’t shut all the way and the dome light was on. Thinking that the F-150’s battery might be as battered as the truck it was powering, she opened the door (the hinge screamed almost as loudly as the brakes) and then slammed it closed. As she did, she looked through the cab’s back window and into the pickup’s bed. There were several pieces of wood scattered across the ribbed and rusty metal. They were painted white and had nails sticking out of them.

For a moment, Tess felt as if she were having an out-of-body experience. The ticking sign, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU, now sounded not like an old-fashioned alarm clock but a ticking bomb.

She tried to tell herself the scraps of wood meant nothing, stuff like that only meant something in the kind of books she didn’t write and the kind of movies she rarely watched: the nasty, bloody kind. It didn’t work. Which left her with two choices. She could either go on trying to pretend because to do otherwise was terrifying, or she could take off running for the woods on the other side of the road.

Before she could decide, she smelled the whopping aroma of mansweat. She turned and he was there, towering over her with his hands in the side pockets of his overalls. “Instead of changing your tire,” he said pleasantly, “how about I fuck you? How would that be?”

Then Tess ran, but only in her mind. What she did in the real world was to stand pressed against his truck, looking up at him, a man so tall he blocked out the sun and put her in his shadow. She was thinking that not two hours ago four hundred people—mostly ladies in hats—had been applauding her in a small but entirely adequate auditorium. And somewhere south of here, Fritzzy was waiting for her. It dawned on her—laboriously, like lifting something heavy—that she might never see her cat again.

“Please don’t kill me,” some woman said in a very small and very humble voice.

“You bitch,” he said. He spoke in the tone of a man reflecting on the weather. The sign went on ticking against the eave of the porch. “You whiny whore bitch. Gosh sakes.”

His right hand came out of his pocket. It was a very big hand. On the pinky finger was a ring with a red stone in it. It looked like a ruby, but it was too big to be a ruby. Tess thought it was probably just glass. The sign ticked. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Then the hand turned into a fist and came speeding toward her, growing until everything else was blotted out.

There was a muffled metallic bang from somewhere. She thought it was her head colliding with the side of the pickup truck’s cab. Tess thought: *Zombie Bakers*. Then for a little while it was dark.

She came to in a large shadowy room that smelled of damp wood, ancient coffee, and prehistoric pickles. An old paddle fan hung crookedly from the ceiling just above her. It looked like the broken merry-go-round in that Hitchcock movie, *Strangers on a Train*. She was on the floor, naked from the waist down, and he was raping her. The rape seemed secondary to the weight: he was also crushing her. She could barely draw a breath. It had to be a dream. But her nose was swollen, a lump that felt the size of a small mountain had grown at the base of her skull, and splinters were digging into her buttocks. You didn't notice those sorts of details in dreams. And you didn't feel actual pain in dreams; you always woke up before the real pain started. This was happening. He was raping her. He had taken her inside the old store and he was raping her while golden dust motes twirled lazily in the slanting afternoon sun. Somewhere people were listening to music and buying products online and taking naps and talking on phones, but in here a woman was being raped and she was that woman. He had taken her underpants; she could see them frothing from the pocket in the bib of his overalls. That made her think of *Deliverance*, which she had watched at a college film retrospective, back in the days when she had been slightly more adventurous in her moviegoing. *Get them panties down*, one of the hillbillies had said before commencing to rape the fat townie. It was funny what crossed your mind when you were lying under three hundred pounds of country meat with a rapist's cock creaking back and forth inside you like an unoiled hinge.

"Please," she said. "Oh please, no more."

"Lots more," he said, and here came that fist again, filling her field of vision. The side of her face went hot, there was a click in the middle of her head, and she blacked out.

The next time she came to, he was dancing around her in his overalls, tossing his hands from side to side and singing “Brown Sugar” in a squalling, atonal voice. The sun was going down, and the abandoned store’s two west-facing windows—the glass dusty but miraculously unbroken by vandals—were filled with fire. His shadow danced behind him, capering down the board floor and up the wall, which was marked with light squares where advertising signs had once hung. The sound of his cludding workboots was apocalyptic.

She could see her dress slacks crumpled under the counter where the cash register must once have stood (probably next to a jar of boiled eggs and another of pickled pigs’ feet). She could smell mold. And oh God she hurt. Her face, her chest, most of all down below, where she felt torn open.

Pretend you’re dead. It’s your only chance.

She closed her eyes. The singing stopped and she smelled approaching mansweat. Sharper now.

Because he’s been exercising, she thought. She forgot about playing dead and tried to scream. Before she could, his huge hands gripped her throat and began to choke. She thought: *It’s over. I’m over.* They were calm thoughts, full of relief. At least there would be no more pain, no more waking to watch the monster-man dance in the burning sunset light.

She passed out.

When Tess swam back to consciousness the third time, the world had turned black and silver and she was floating.

This is what it's like to be dead.

Then she registered hands beneath her—big hands, *his* hands—and the barbwire circlet of pain around her throat. He hadn't choked her quite enough to kill her, but she was wearing the shape of his hands like a necklace, palms in front, fingers on the sides and the nape of her neck.

It was night. The moon was up. A full moon. He was carrying her across the parking lot of the deserted store. He was carrying her past his truck. She didn't see her Expedition. Her Expedition was gone.

Wherefore art thou, Tom?

He stopped at the edge of the road. She could smell his sweat and feel the rise and fall of his chest. She could feel the night air, cool on her bare legs. She could hear the sign ticking behind her, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

Does he think I'm dead? He can't think I'm dead. I'm still bleeding.

Or was she? It was hard to tell for sure. She lay limp in his arms, feeling like a girl in a horror movie, the one who's carried away by Jason or Michael or Freddy or whatever his name was after all the other ones are slaughtered. Carried to some slumpy deep-woods lair where she would be chained to a hook in the ceiling. In those movies there were always chains and hooks in the ceiling.

He got moving again. She could hear his work-shoes on the patched tar of Stagg Road: *clud-clump-clud*. Then, on the far side, scraping noises and clattering sounds. He was kicking away the chunks of wood she had so carefully cleaned up and thrown down here in the ditch. She could no longer hear the ticking sign, but she could hear running water. Not much, not a gush, only a trickle. He knelt down. A soft grunt escaped him.

Now he'll kill me for sure. And at least I won't have to listen to any more of his awful singing. It's the beauty part, Ramona Norville would say.

“Hey girl,” he said in a kindly voice.

She didn't reply, but she could see him bending over her, looking into her half-lidded eyes. She took great care to keep them still. If he saw them move, even a little . . . or a gleam of tears . . .

“Hey.” He popped the flat of his hand against her cheek. She let her head roll to the side.

“Hey!” This time he outright slapped her, but on the other cheek. Tess let her head roll back the other way.

He pinched her nipple, but he hadn't bothered to take off her blouse and bra and it didn't hurt too badly. She lay limp.

“I'm sorry I called you a bitch,” he said, still using the kindly voice. “You was a good fuck. And I like em a little older.”

Tess realized he really *might* think she was dead. It was amazing, but could be true. And all at once she wanted very badly to live.

He picked her up again. The mansweat smell was suddenly overwhelming. Beard bristles tickled the side of her face, and it was all she could do not to twitch away from them. He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Sorry I was a little rough.”

Then he was moving her again. The sound of the running water got louder. The moonlight was blotted out. There was a smell—no, a stench—of rotting leaves. He put her down in four or five inches of water. It was very cold, and she almost cried out. He pushed on her feet and she let her knees go up. *Boneless*, she thought. *Have to stay boneless*. They didn't go far before bumping against a corrugated metal surface.

“Fuck,” he said, speaking in a reflective tone. Then he shoved her.

Tess remained limp even when something—a branch—scrawled a line of hurt down the center of her back. Her knees bumped along the corrugations above her. Her buttocks pushed a spongy mass, and the smell of rotting vegetable matter intensified. It was as thick as meat. She felt a terrible urge to cough the smell away. She could feel a mat of wet leaves gathering in the small of her back, like a throw-pillow soaked with water.

If he figures it out now, I'll fight him. I'll kick him and kick him and kick him—

But nothing happened. For a long time she was afraid to open her eyes any wider or move them in the slightest. She imagined him crouching there, looking into the pipe where he'd stashed her, head to one side, tilting a question, waiting for just such a move. How could he not know she was alive? Surely he'd felt the thump of her heart. And what good would kicking be against the giant from the pickup? He'd grab her bare feet in one hand, haul her out, and recommence choking her. Only this time he wouldn't stop.

She lay in the rotting leaves and sluggish water, looking up at nothing from her half-lidded eyes, concentrating on playing dead. She passed into a gray fugue that was not quite unconsciousness, and there she stayed for a length of time that felt long but probably wasn't. When she heard a motor—his truck, surely his truck—Tess thought: *I'm imagining that sound. Or dreaming it. He's still here.*

But the irregular thump of the motor first swelled, then faded off down Stagg Road.

It's a trick.

That was almost certainly hysteria. Even if it wasn't, she couldn't stay here all night. And when she raised her head (wincing at the stab of pain in her abused throat) and looked toward the mouth of the pipe, she saw only an unimpeded silver circle of moonlight. Tess started wriggling toward it, then stopped.

It's a trick. I don't care what you heard, he's still here.

This time the idea was more powerful. Seeing nothing at the mouth of the culvert *made* it more powerful. In a suspense novel, this would be the moment of false relaxation before the big climax. Or in a scary movie. The white hand emerging from the lake in *Deliverance*. Alan Arkin springing out at Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*. She didn't like scary books and movies, but being raped and almost murdered seemed to have unlocked a whole vault of scary-movie memories, all the same. As if they were just there, in the air.

He *could* be waiting. If, for instance, he'd had an accomplice drive his truck away. He could be squatting on his hunkers beyond the mouth of the pipe in that patient way country men had.

"Get those panties down," she whispered, then covered her mouth. What if he heard her?

Five minutes passed. It might have been five. The water was cold and she began to shiver. Soon her teeth would begin to chatter. If he was out there, he would hear.

He drove away. You heard him.

Maybe. Maybe not.

And maybe she didn't need to leave the pipe the way she'd gone in. It was a culvert, it would go all the way under the road, and since she could feel water running under her, it wasn't blocked. She could crawl the length of it and look out into the deserted store's parking lot. Make sure his old truck was gone. She still wouldn't be safe if there was an accomplice, but Tess felt sure, deep down where her rational mind had gone to hide, that there was no accomplice. An accomplice would have insisted on taking his turn at her. Besides, giants worked alone.

And if he is gone? What then?

She didn't know. She couldn't imagine her life after her afternoon in the deserted store and her evening in the pipe with rotting leaves smooshed up into the hollow of her back, but maybe she didn't have to. Maybe she could concentrate on getting home to Fritzzy and feeding him a packet of Fancy Feast. She could see the Fancy Feast box very clearly. It was sitting on a shelf in her peaceful pantry.

She turned over on her belly and started to get up on her elbows, meaning to crawl the length of the pipe. Then she saw what was sharing the culvert with her. One of the corpses was not much more than a skeleton (stretching out bony hands as if in supplication), but there was still enough hair left on its head to make Tess all but certain it was the corpse of a woman. The other might have been a badly defaced department store mannequin, except for the bulging eyes and protruding tongue. This body was fresher, but the animals had been at it and even in the dark Tess could see the grin of the dead woman's teeth.

A beetle came lumbering out of the mannequin's hair and trundled down the bridge of her nose.

Screaming hoarsely, Tess backed out of the culvert and bolted to her feet, her clothes soaked to her body from the waist up. She was naked from the waist down. And although she did not pass out (at least she didn't think she

did), for a little while her consciousness was a queerly broken thing. Looking back on it, she would think of the next hour as a darkened stage lit by occasional spotlights. Every now and then a battered woman with a broken nose and blood on her thighs would walk into one of these spotlights. Then she would disappear back into darkness again.

She was in the store, in the big empty central room that had once been divided into aisles, with a frozen food case (maybe) at the back, and a beer cooler (for sure) running the length of the far wall. She was in the smell of departed coffee and pickles. He had either forgotten her dress slacks or meant to come back for them later—perhaps when he picked up the nail-studded scrapwood. She was fishing them out from under the counter. Beneath them were her shoes and her phone—smashed. Yes, at some point he would be back. Her scrunchie was gone. She remembered (vaguely, the way one remembers certain things from one's earliest childhood) some woman asking earlier today where she'd gotten it, and the inexplicable applause when she'd said JCPenney. She thought of the giant singing "Brown Sugar"—that squalling monotonous childish voice—and she went away again.

She was walking behind the store in the moonlight. She had a carpet remnant wrapped around her shivering shoulders, but couldn't remember where she had gotten it. It was filthy but it was warm, and she pulled it tighter. It came to her that she was actually *circling* the store, and this might be her second, third, or even fourth go-round. It came to her that she was looking for her Expedition, but each time she didn't find it behind the store, she forgot that she had looked and went around again. She forgot because she had been thumped on the head and raped and choked and was in shock. It came to her that her brain might be bleeding—how could you know, unless you woke up with the angels and they told you? The afternoon's light breeze had gotten a little stronger, and the ticking of the tin sign was a little louder. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

"7Up," she said. Her voice was hoarse but serviceable. "That's what it is. You like it and it likes you." She heard herself raising her own voice in song. She had a good singing voice, and being choked had given it a surprisingly pleasant rasp. It was like listening to Bonnie Tyler sing out here in the moonlight. "7Up tastes good . . . like a cigarette should!" It came to her that that wasn't right, and even if it was, she should be singing something better than fucked-up advertising jingles while she had that pleasing rasp in her voice; if you were going to be raped and left for dead in a pipe with two rotting corpses, something good should come out of it.

I'll sing Bonnie Tyler's hit record. I'll sing "It's a Heartache." I'm sure I know the words, I'm sure they're in the junkheap every writer has in the back of her . . .

But then she went away again.

She was sitting on a rock and crying her eyes out. The filthy carpet-remnant was still around her shoulders. Her crotch ached and burned. The sour taste in her mouth suggested to her that she had vomited at some point between walking around the store and sitting on this rock, but she couldn't remember doing it. What she remembered—

I was raped, I was raped, I was raped!

“You're not the first and you won't be the last,” she said, but this tough-love sentiment, coming out as it did in a series of choked sobs, was not very helpful.

He tried to kill me, he almost did kill me!

Yes, yes. And at this moment his failure did not seem like much consolation. She looked to her left and saw the store fifty or sixty yards down the road.

He killed others! They're in the pipe! Bugs are crawling on them and they don't care!

“Yes, yes,” she said in her raspy Bonnie Tyler voice, then went away again.

She was walking down the center of Stagg Road and singing “It’s a Heartache” when she heard an approaching motor from behind her. She whirled around, almost falling, and saw headlights brightening the top of a hill she must have just come over. It was him. The giant. He had come back, had investigated the culvert after finding her clothes gone, and seen she was no longer in it. He was looking for her.

Tess bolted down into the ditch, stumbled to one knee, lost hold of her makeshift shawl, got up, and blundered into the bushes. A branch drew blood from her cheek. She heard a woman sobbing with fear. She dropped down on her hands and knees with her hair hanging in her eyes. The road brightened as the headlights cleared the hill. She saw the dropped piece of carpeting very clearly, and knew the giant would see it too. He would stop and get out. She would try to run but he would catch her. She would scream, but no one would hear her. In stories like this, they never did. He would kill her, but first he would rape her some more.

The car—it was a car, not a pickup truck—went by without slowing. From inside came the sound of Bachman-Turner Overdrive, turned up loud: “B-B-B-Baby, you just ain’t seen n-n-nuthin yet.” She watched the taillights wink out of sight. She felt herself getting ready to go away again and slapped her cheeks with both hands.

“No!” she growled in her Bonnie Tyler voice. “No!”

She came back a little. She felt a strong urge to stay crouched in the bushes, but that was no good. It wasn’t just a long time until daylight, it was probably still a long time until midnight. The moon was low in the sky. She couldn’t stay here, and she couldn’t just keep . . . blinking out. She had to think.

Tess picked the piece of carpeting out of the ditch, started to wrap it around her shoulders again, then touched her ears, knowing what she’d find. The diamond drop earrings, one of her few real extravagances, were gone. She burst into tears again, but this crying fit was shorter, and when it ended she felt more

like herself. More *in* herself, a resident of her head and body instead of a specter floating around it.

Think, Tessa Jean!

All right, she would try. But she would walk while she did it. And no more singing. The sound of her changed voice was creepy. It was as if by raping her, the giant had created a new woman. She didn't *want* to be a new woman. She had liked the old one.

Walking. Walking in the moonlight with her shadow walking on the road beside her. What road? Stagg Road. According to Tom, she had been a little less than four miles from the intersection of Stagg Road and US 47 when she'd run into the giant's trap. That wasn't so bad; she walked at least three miles a day to keep in shape, treadmilling on days when it rained or snowed. Of course this was her first walk as the New Tess, she of the aching, bleeding snatch and the raspy voice. But there was an upside: she was warming up, her top half was drying out, and she was in flat shoes. She had almost worn her three-quarter heels, and that would have made this evening stroll very unpleasant, indeed. Not that it would have been fun under any circumstances, no no n—

Think!

But before she could start doing that, the road brightened ahead of her. Tess darted into the underbrush again, this time managing to hold onto the carpet remnant. It was another car, thank God, not his truck, and it didn't slow.

It could still be him. Maybe he switched to a car. He could have driven back to his house, his lair, and switched to a car. Thinking, she'll see it's a car and come out of wherever she's hiding. She'll wave me down and then I'll have her.

Yes, yes. That was what would happen in a horror movie, wasn't it? *Screaming Victims 4* or *Stagg Road Horror 2*, or—

She was trying to go away again, so she slapped her cheeks some more. Once she was home, once Fritz was fed and she was in her own bed (with all the doors locked and all the lights on), she could go away all she wanted. But not now. No no no. Now she had to keep walking, and hiding when cars came. If she could do those two things, she'd eventually reach US 47, and there might be a store. A *real* store, one with a pay phone, if she was lucky . . . and

she deserved some good luck. She didn't have her purse, her purse was still in her Expedition (wherever *that* was), but she knew her AT&T calling-card number by heart; it was her home phone number plus 9712. Easy-as-can-beezy.

Here was a sign at the side of the road. Tess read it easily enough in the moonlight:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING
COLEWICH TOWNSHIP
WELCOME, FRIEND!

"You like Colewich, it likes you," she whispered.

She knew the town, which the locals pronounced "Collitch." It was actually a small city, one of many in New England that had been prosperous back in the textile-mill days and continued to struggle along somehow in the new free-trade era, when America's pants and jackets were made in Asia or Central America, probably by children who couldn't read or write. She was on the outskirts, but surely she could walk to a phone.

Then what?

Then she would . . . would . . .

"Call a limousine," she said. The idea burst on her like a sunrise. Yes, that was exactly what she'd do. If this was Colewich, then her own Connecticut town was thirty miles away, maybe less. The limo service she used when she wanted to go to Bradley International or into Hartford or New York (Tess did not do city driving if she could help it) was based in the neighboring town of Woodfield. Royal Limousine boasted round-the-clock service. Even better, they would have her credit card on file.

Tess felt better and began to walk a little faster. Then headlights brightened the road and she once more hurried into the bushes and crouched down, as terrified as any hunted thing: doe fox rabbit. This vehicle *was* a truck, and she began to tremble. She went on trembling even when she saw it was a little white Toyota, nothing at all like the giant's old Ford. When it was gone, she tried to force herself to walk back to the road, but at first she couldn't. She was crying again, the tears warm on her chilly face. She felt herself getting ready to

step out of the spotlight of awareness once more. She couldn't let that happen. If she allowed herself to go into that waking blackness too many times, she might eventually lose her way back.

She made herself think of thanking the limo driver and adding a tip to the credit card form before making her way slowly up the flower-lined walk to her front door. Tilting up her mailbox and taking the extra key from the hook behind it. Listening to Fritzy meow anxiously.

The thought of Fritzy turned the trick. She worked her way out of the bushes and resumed walking, ready to dart back into cover the second she saw more headlights. The very second. Because he was out there somewhere. She realized that from now on he would always be out there. Unless the police caught him, that was, and put him in jail. But for that to occur she would have to report what had happened, and the moment this idea came into her mind, she saw a glaring black *New York Post*-style headline:

“WILLOW GROVE” SCRIBE RAPED AFTER LECTURE

Tabloids like the *Post* would undoubtedly run a picture of her from ten years ago, when her first Knitting Society book had been published. Back then she'd been in her late twenties, with long dark blond hair cascading down her back and good legs she liked to showcase in short skirts. Plus—in the evening—the kind of high-heeled slingbacks some men (the giant for one, almost certainly) referred to as fuckme shoes. They wouldn't mention that she was now ten years older, twenty pounds heavier, and had been dressed in sensible—almost dowdy—business attire when she was assaulted; those details didn't fit the kind of story the tabloids liked to tell. The copy would be respectful enough (if panting a trifle between the lines), but the picture of her old self would tell the real story, one that probably pre-dated the invention of the wheel: *She asked for it . . . and she got it.*

Was that realistic, or only her shame and badly battered sense of self-worth imagining the worst-case scenario? The part of her that might want to go on hiding in the bushes even if she managed to get off this awful road and out of this awful state of Massachusetts and back to her safe little house in Stoke Village? She didn't know, and guessed that the true answer lay somewhere in

between. One thing she *did* know was that she would get the sort of nationwide coverage every writer would like when she publishes a book and no writer wants when she has been raped and robbed and left for dead. She could visualize someone raising a hand during Question Time and asking, “Did you in any way encourage him?”

That was ridiculous, and even in her current state Tess knew it . . . but she also knew that if this came out, someone *would* raise his or her hand to ask, “Are you going to write about this?”

And what would she say? What *could* she say?

Nothing, Tess thought. *I would run off the stage with my hands over my ears.*

But no.

No no no.

The truth was she wouldn't be there in the first place. How could she ever do another reading, lecture, or autographing, knowing that *he* might turn up, smiling at her from the back row? Smiling from beneath that weird brown cap with the bleach spots on it? Maybe with her earrings in his pocket. Fondling them.

The thought of telling the police made her skin burn, and she could feel her face literally wincing in shame, even out here, alone in the dark. Maybe she wasn't Sue Grafton or Janet Evanovich, but neither was she, strictly speaking, a private person. She would even be on CNN for a day or two. The world would know a crazy, grinning giant had shot his load inside of the Willow Grove Scribe. Even the fact that he had taken her underwear as a souvenir might come out. CNN wouldn't report that part, but *The National Enquirer* or *Inside View* would have no such compunctions.

Sources inside the investigation say they found a pair of the Scribe's panties in the accused rapist's drawer: blue Victoria's Secret hip-huggers, trimmed with lace.

“I can't tell,” she said. “I won't tell.”

But there were others before you, there could be others after y—

She pushed this thought away. She was too tired to consider what might or might not be her moral responsibility. She'd work on that part later, if God meant to grant her a later . . . and it seemed He might. But not on this

deserted road where any set of approaching lights might have her rapist behind it.

Hers. He was hers now.

A mile or so after passing the Colewich sign, Tess began to hear a low, rhythmic thudding that seemed to come up from the road through her feet. Her first thought was of H. G. Wells's mutant Morlocks, tending their machinery deep in the bowels of the earth, but another five minutes clarified the sound. It was coming through the air, not from the ground, and it was one she knew: the heartbeat of a bass guitar. The rest of the band coalesced around it as she walked. She began to see light on the horizon, not headlights but the white of arc sodiums and the red gleam of neon. The band was playing "Mustang Sally," and she could hear laughter. It was drunken and beautiful, punctuated by happy party-down whoops. The sound made her feel like crying some more.

The roadhouse, a big old honkytonk barn with a huge dirt parking lot that looked full to capacity, was called The Stagger Inn. She stood at the edge of the glare cast by the parking lot lights, frowning. Why so many cars? Then she remembered it was Friday night. Apparently The Stagger Inn was the place to go on Friday nights if you were from Colewich or any of the surrounding towns. They would have a phone, but there were too many people. They would see her bruised face and leaning nose. They would want to know what had happened to her, and she was in no shape to make up a story. At least not yet. Even a pay phone outside was no good, because she could see people out there, too. Lots of them. Of course. These days you had to go outside if you wanted to smoke a cigarette. Also . . .

He could be there. Hadn't he been capering around her at one point, singing a Rolling Stones song in his awful tuneless voice? Tess supposed she might have dreamed that part—or hallucinated it—but she didn't think so. Wasn't it possible that after hiding her car, he'd come right here to The Stagger Inn, pipes all cleaned and ready to party the night away?

The band launched into a perfectly adequate cover of an old Cramps song: "Can Your Pussy Do the Dog." *No*, Tess thought, *but today a dog certainly did*

my pussy. The Old Tess would not have approved of such a joke, but the New Tess thought it was pretty goddam funny. She barked a hoarse laugh and got walking again, moving to the other side of the road, where the lights from the road-house parking lot did not quite reach.

As she passed the far side of the building, she saw an old white van backed up to the loading dock. There were no arc sodiums on this side of The Stagger Inn, but the moonlight was enough to show her the skeleton pounding its cupcake drums. No wonder the van hadn't stopped to pick up the nail-studded road litter. The Zombie Bakers had been late for the load-in, and that wasn't good, because on Friday nights, The Stagger Inn was hopping with the bopping, rolling with the strolling, and reeling with the feeling.

"Can your pussy do the dog?" Tess asked, and pulled the filthy carpet remnant a little tighter around her neck. It was no mink stole, but on a cool October night, it was better than nothing.

When Tess got to the intersection of Stagg Road and Route 47, she saw something beautiful: a Gas & Dash with two pay telephones on the cinder-block wall between the restrooms.

She used the Women's first, and had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry when her urine started to flow; it was as if someone had lit a book of matches in there. When she got up from the toilet, fresh tears were rolling down her cheeks. The water in the bowl was a pastel pink. She blotted herself—very gently—with a pad of toilet paper, then flushed. She would have taken another wad to fold into the crotch of her underwear, but of course she couldn't do that. The giant had taken her underpants as a souvenir.

“You bastard,” she said.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob, looking at the bruised, wide-eyed woman in the water-spotted metal mirror over the washbasin. Then she went out.

She discovered that using a pay telephone in this modern age had grown strangely difficult, even if you had your calling-card number memorized. The first phone she tried worked only one-way: she could hear the directory assistance operator, but the directory assistance operator couldn't hear her, and broke such connection as there was. The other phone was tilted askew on the cinder-block wall—not encouraging—but it worked. There was a steady annoying underwhine, but at least she and the operator could communicate. Only Tess had no pen or pencil. There were several writing implements in her purse, but of course her purse was gone.

“Can't you just connect me?” she asked the operator.

“No, ma'am, you have to dial it yourself in order to utilize your credit card.” The operator spoke in the voice of someone explaining the obvious to a stupid child. This didn't make Tess angry; she *felt* like a stupid child. Then she saw how dirty the cinder-block wall was. She told the operator to give her the number, and when it came, she wrote it in the dust with her finger.

Before she could start dialing, a truck pulled into the parking lot. Her heart launched itself into her throat with dizzying, acrobatic ease, and when two laughing boys in high school jackets got out and whipped into the store, she was glad it was up there. It blocked the scream that surely would have come out otherwise.

She felt the world trying to go away and leaned her head against the wall for a moment, gasping for breath. She closed her eyes. She saw the giant towering over her, hands in the pockets of his biballs, and opened her eyes again. She dialed the number written in dust on the wall.

She braced herself for an answering machine, or for a bored dispatcher telling her that they had no cars, of course they didn't, it was Friday night, were you born stupid, lady, or did you just grow that way? But the phone was answered on the second ring by a businesslike woman who identified herself as Andrea. She listened to Tess, and said they would send a car right out, her

driver would be Manuel. Yes, she knew exactly where Tess was calling from, because they ran cars out to The Stagger Inn all the time.

“Okay, but I’m not there,” Tess said. “I’m at the intersection about half a mile down from th—”

“Yes, ma’am, I have that,” Andrea said. “The Gas & Dash. Sometimes we go there, too. People often walk down and call if they’ve had a little too much to drink. It’ll probably be forty-five minutes, maybe even an hour.”

“That’s fine,” Tess said. The tears were falling again. Tears of gratitude this time, although she told herself not to relax, because in stories like this the heroine’s hopes so often turned out to be false. “That’s absolutely fine. I’ll be around the corner by the pay telephones. And I’ll be watching.”

Now she’ll ask me if I had a little too much to drink. Because I probably sound that way.

But Andrea only wanted to know if she would be paying with cash or credit.

“American Express. I should be in your computer.”

“Yes, ma’am, you are. Thank you for calling Royal Limousine, where every customer is treated like royalty.” Andrea clicked off before Tess could say she was very welcome.

She started to hang up the phone, and then a man—*him, it’s him*—ran around the corner of the store and right at her. This time there was no chance of screaming; she was paralyzed with terror.

It was one of the teenage boys. He went past without looking at her and hooked a left into the Men’s. The door slammed. A moment later she heard the enthusiastic, horselike sound of a young man voiding an awesomely healthy bladder.

Tess went down the side of the building and around back. There she stood beside a reeking Dumpster (*no, she thought, I’m not standing, I’m lurking*), waiting for the young man to finish and be gone. When he was, she walked back to the pay phones to watch the road. In spite of all the places where she hurt, her belly was rumbling with hunger. She had missed her dinner, had been too busy being raped and almost killed to eat. She would have been glad to have any of the snacks they sold in places like this—even some of those little nasty peanut butter crackers, so weirdly yellow, would have been a treat—but

she had no money. Even if she had, she wouldn't have gone in there. She knew what kind of lights they had in roadside convenience stores like Gas & Dash, those bright and heartless fluorescents that made even healthy people look like they were suffering from pancreatic cancer. The clerk behind the counter would look at her bruised cheeks and forehead, her broken nose and her swollen lips, and he or she might not say anything, but Tess would see the widening of the eyes. And maybe a quickly suppressed twitch of the lips. Because, face it, people could think a beat-up woman was funny. Especially on a Friday night. *Who tuned up on you, lady, and what did you do to deserve it? Wouldn't you come across after some guy spent his overtime on you?*

That reminded her of an old joke she'd heard somewhere: *Why are there three hundred thousand battered women each year in America? Because they won't . . . fuckin . . . listen.*

"Never mind," she whispered. "I'll have something to eat when I get home. Tuna salad, maybe."

It sounded good, but part of her was convinced that her days of eating tuna salad—or nasty yellow convenience-store peanut butter crackers, for that matter—were all over. The idea of a limo pulling up and driving her out of this nightmare was an insane mirage.

From somewhere to her left, Tess could hear cars rushing by on I-84—the road she would have taken if she hadn't been so pleased to be offered a shorter way home. Over there on the turnpike, people who had never been raped or stuffed in pipes were going places. Tess thought the sound of their blithe travel was the loneliest she'd ever heard.

The limo came. It was a Lincoln Town Car. The man behind the wheel got out and looked around. Tess observed him closely from the corner of the store. He was wearing a dark suit. He was a small, bespectacled fellow who didn't look like a rapist . . . but of course not all giants were rapists and not all rapists were giants. She had to trust him, though. If she were to get home and feed Fritzzy, there was no other option. So she dropped her filthy makeshift stole beside the pay phone that actually worked and walked slowly and steadily toward the car. The light shining through the store windows seemed blindingly bright after the shadows at the side of the building, and she knew what her face looked like.

He'll ask what happened to me and then he'll ask if I want to go to the hospital.

But Manuel (who might have seen worse, it wasn't impossible) only held the door for her and said, "Welcome to Royal Limousine, ma'am." He had a soft Hispanic accent to go with his olive skin and dark eyes.

"Where I'm treated like royalty," Tess said. She tried to smile. It hurt her swollen lips.

"Yes, ma'am." Nothing else. God bless Manuel, who might have seen worse—perhaps back where he'd come from, perhaps in the back of this very car. Who knew what secrets limo drivers kept? It was a question that might have a good book hidden in it. Not the kind she wrote, of course . . . only who knew what kind of books she might write after this? Or if she would write any more at all? Tonight's adventure might have turned that solitary joy out of her for awhile. Maybe even forever. It was impossible to tell.

She got into the back of the car, moving like an old woman with advanced osteoporosis. When she was seated and he had closed the door, she wrapped her fingers around the handle and watched closely, wanting to make sure it was Manuel who got in behind the wheel and not the giant in the bib overalls. In *Stagg Road Horror 2* it would have been the giant: one more turn of the screw before the credits. *Have some irony, it's good for your blood.*

But it was Manuel who got in. Of course it was. She relaxed.

“The address I have is 19 Primrose Lane, in Stoke Village. Is that correct?”

For a moment she couldn't remember; she had punched her calling-card number into the pay phone without a pause, but she was blanking on her own address.

Relax, she told herself. It's over. This isn't a horror movie, it's your life. You've had a terrible experience, but it's over. So relax.

“Yes, Manuel, that's right.”

“Will you want to be making any stops, or are we going right to your home?” It was the closest he came to mentioning what the lights of the Gas & Dash must have shown him when she walked to the Town Car.

It was only luck that she was still taking her oral contraceptive pills—luck and perhaps optimism, she hadn't had so much as a one-night stand for three years, unless you counted tonight—but luck had been in short supply today, and she was grateful for this short stroke of it. She was sure Manuel could find an all-night pharmacy somewhere along the way, limo drivers seem to know all that stuff, but she didn't think she would have been able to walk into a drugstore and ask for the morning-after pill. Her face would have made it all too obvious why she needed one. And of course there was the money problem.

“No other stops, just take me home, please.”

Soon they were on I-84, which was busy with Friday-night traffic. Stagg Road and the deserted store were behind her. What was ahead of her was her own house, with a security system and a lock for every door. And that was good.

It all went exactly as she had visualized: the arrival, the tip added to the credit card slip, the walk up the flower-lined path (she asked Manuel to stay, illuminating her with his headlights, until she was inside), the sound of Fritzy meowing as she tilted the mailbox and fished the emergency key off its hook. Then she was inside and Fritzy was twining anxiously around her feet, wanting to be picked up and stroked, wanting to be fed. Tess did those things, but first she locked the front door behind her, then set the burglar alarm for the first time in months. When she saw **ARMED** flash in the little green window above the keypad, she at last began to feel something like her true self. She looked at the kitchen clock and was astounded to see it was only quarter past eleven.

While Fritzy was eating his Fancy Feast, she checked the doors to the backyard and the side patio, making sure they were both locked. Then the windows. The alarm's command-box was supposed to tell you if something was open, but she didn't trust it. When she was positive everything was secure, she went to the front-hall closet and took down a box that had been on the top shelf so long there was a scrim of dust on the top.

Five years ago there had been a rash of burglaries and home invasions in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts. The bad boys were mostly drug addicts hooked on eighties, which was what its many New England fans called OxyContin. Residents were warned to be particularly careful and "take reasonable precautions." Tess had no strong feelings about handguns pro or con, nor had she felt especially worried about strange men breaking in at night (not then), but a gun seemed to come under the heading of reasonable precautions, and she had been meaning to educate herself about pistols for the next Willow Grove book, anyway. The burglary scare had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

She went to the Hartford gun store that rated best on the Internet, and the clerk had recommended a Smith & Wesson .38 model he called a Lemon

Squeezer. She bought it mostly because she liked that name. He also told her about a good shooting range on the outskirts of Stoke Village. Tess had dutifully taken her gun there once the forty-eight-hour waiting period was up and she was actually able to obtain it. She had fired off four hundred rounds or so over the course of a week, enjoying the thrill of banging away at first but quickly becoming bored. The gun had been in the closet ever since, stored in its box along with fifty rounds of ammunition and her carry permit.

She loaded it, feeling better—*safer*—with each filled chamber. She put it on the kitchen counter, then checked the answering machine. There was one message. It was from Patsy McClain next door. “I didn’t see any lights this evening, so I guess you decided to stay over in Chicopee. Or maybe you went to Boston? Anyway, I used the key behind the mailbox and fed Fritz. Oh, and I put your mail on the hall table. All adverts, sorry. Call me tomorrow before I go to work, if you’re back. Just want to know you got in safe.”

“Hey, Fritz,” Tess said, bending over to stroke him. “I guess you got double rations tonight. Pretty clever of y—”

Wings of grayness came over her vision, and if she hadn’t caught hold of the kitchen table, she would have gone sprawling full length on the linoleum. She uttered a cry of surprise that sounded faint and faraway. Fritz twitched his ears back, gave her a narrow, assessing look, seemed to decide she wasn’t going to fall over (at least not on him), and went back to his second supper.

Tess straightened up slowly, holding onto the table for safety’s sake, and opened the fridge. There was no tuna salad, but there was cottage cheese with strawberry jam. She ate it eagerly, scraping the plastic container with her spoon to get every last curd. It was cool and smooth on her hurt throat. She wasn’t sure she could have eaten flesh, anyway. Not even tuna out of a can.

She drank apple juice straight from the bottle, belched, then trudged to the downstairs bathroom. She took the gun along, curling her fingers outside the trigger guard, as she had been taught.

There was an oval magnifying mirror standing on the shelf above the washbasin, a Christmas gift from her brother in New Mexico. Written in gold-gilt script above it were the words PRETTY ME. The Old Tess had used it for tweezing her eyebrows and doing quick fixes to her makeup. The new one used it to examine her eyes. They were bloodshot, of course, but the pupils looked

the same size. She turned off the bathroom light, counted to twenty, then turned it back on and watched her pupils contract. That looked okay, too. So, probably no skull fracture. Maybe a concussion, a *light* concussion, but—

As if I'd know. I've got a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Connecticut and an advanced degree in old lady detectives who spend at least a quarter of each book exchanging recipes I crib from the Internet and then change just enough so I won't get sued for plagiarism. I could go into a coma or die of a brain hemorrhage in the night. Patsy would find me the next time she came in to feed the cat. You need to see a doctor, Tessa Jean. And you know it.

What she knew was that if she went to her doctor, her misfortune really could become public property. Doctors guaranteed confidentiality, it was a part of their oath, and a woman who made her living as a lawyer or a cleaning woman or a Realtor could probably count on getting it. Tess might get it herself, it was certainly possible. Probable, even. On the other hand, look what had happened to Farrah Fawcett: tabloid-fodder when some hospital employee blabbed. Tess herself had heard rumors about the psychiatric misadventures of a male novelist who had been a chart staple for years with his tales of lusty derring-do. Her own agent had passed the juiciest of these rumors on to Tess over lunch not two months ago . . . and Tess had listened.

I did more than listen, she thought as she looked at her magnified, beaten self. I passed that puppy on just as soon as I could.

Even if the doctor and his staff kept mum about the lady mystery writer who had been beaten, raped, and robbed on her way home from a public appearance, what about the other patients who might see her in the waiting room? To some of them she wouldn't be just another woman with a bruised face that practically screamed beating; she would be Stoke Village's resident novelist, you know the one, they made a TV movie about her old lady detectives a year or two ago, it was on Lifetime Channel, and my God, you should have *seen* her.

Her nose wasn't broken, after all. It was hard to believe anything could hurt that badly and *not* be broken, but it wasn't. Swollen (of course, poor thing), and it hurt, but she could breathe through it and she had some Vicodin upstairs that would manage the pain tonight. But she had a couple of

blooming shiners, a bruised and swollen cheek, and a ring of bruises around her throat. That was the worst, the sort of necklace people got in only one way. There were also assorted bumps, bruises, and scratches on her back, legs, and tushie. But clothes and hose would hide the worst of those.

Great. I'm a poet and I don't know it.

"The throat . . . I could wear a turtleneck . . ."

Absolutely. October was turtleneck weather. As for Patsy, she could say she'd fallen downstairs and hit her face in the night. Say that—

"That I thought I heard a noise and Fritzzy got between my feet when I went downstairs to check."

Fritzzy heard his name and meowed from the bathroom door.

"Say I hit my stupid face on the newel post at the bottom. I could even . . ."

Even put a little mark on the post, of course she could. Possibly with the meat-tenderizing hammer she had in one of her kitchen drawers. Nothing gaudy, just a tap or two to chip the paint. Such a story wouldn't fool a doctor (or a sharp old lady detective like Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society), but it would fool sweet Patsy McC, whose husband had surely never raised a hand to her a single time in the twenty years they'd been together.

"It's not that I have anything to be ashamed about," she whispered at the woman in the mirror. The New Woman with the crooked nose and the puffy lips. "It's not that." True, but public exposure would *make* her ashamed. She would be naked. A naked victim.

But what about the women, Tessa Jean? The women in the pipe?

She would have to think about them, but not tonight. Tonight she was tired, in pain, and harrowed to the bottom of her soul.

Deep inside her (in her harrowed soul) she felt a glowing ember of fury at the man responsible for this. The man who had put her in this position. She looked at the pistol lying beside the basin, and knew that if he were here, she would use it on him without a moment's hesitation. Knowing that made her feel confused about herself. It also made her feel a little stronger.

She chipped at the newel post with the meat-tenderizing hammer, by then so tired she felt like a dream in some other woman's head. She examined the mark, decided it looked too deliberate, and gave several more light taps around the edges of the blow. When she thought it looked like something she might have done with the side of her face—where the worst bruise was—she went slowly up the stairs and down the hall, holding her gun in one hand.

For a moment she hesitated outside her bedroom door, which was standing ajar. What if *he* was in there? If he had her purse, he had her address. The burglar alarm had not been set until she got back (so sloppy). He could have parked his old F-150 around the corner. He could have forced the kitchen door lock. It probably wouldn't have taken much more than a chisel.

If he was here, I'd smell him. That mansweat. And I'd shoot him. No "Lie down on the floor," no "Keep your hands up while I dial 911," no horror-movie bullshit. I'd just shoot him. But you know what I'd say first?

"You like it, it likes you," she said in her low rasp of a voice. Yes. That was it exactly. He wouldn't understand, but *she* would.

She discovered she sort of *wanted* him in her room. That probably meant the New Woman was more than a little crazy, but so what? If it all came out then, it would be worth it. Shooting him would make public humiliation bearable. And look at the bright side! It would probably help sales!

I'd like to see the terror in his eyes when he realized I really meant to do it. That might make at least some of this right.

It seemed to take her groping hand an age to find the bedroom light-switch, and of course she kept expecting her fingers to be grabbed while she fumbled. She took off her clothes slowly, uttering one watery, miserable sob when she unzipped her pants and saw dried blood in her pubic hair.

She ran the shower as hot as she could stand it, washing the places that could bear to be washed, letting the water rinse the rest. The clean hot water. She wanted his smell off her, and the mildewy smell of the carpet remnant,

too. Afterward, she sat on the toilet. This time peeing hurt less, but the bolt of pain that went through her head when she tried—very tentatively—to straighten her leaning nose made her cry out. Well, so what? Nell Gwyn, the famous Elizabethan actress, had had a bent nose. Tess was sure she had read that somewhere.

She put on flannel pajamas and shuffled to bed, where she lay with all the lights on and the Lemon Squeezer .38 on the night table, thinking she would never sleep, that her inflamed imagination would turn every sound from the street into the approach of the giant. But then Fritzy jumped up on the bed, curled himself beside her, and began to purr. That was better.

I'm home, she thought. *I'm home, I'm home, I'm home.*

When she woke up, the inarguably sane light of six AM was streaming through the windows. There were things that needed to be done and decisions that needed to be made, but for the moment it was enough to be alive and in her own bed instead of stuffed into a culvert.

This time peeing felt almost normal, and there was no blood. She got into the shower again, once more running the water as hot as she could stand it, closing her eyes and letting it beat on her throbbing face. When she'd had all of that she could take, she worked shampoo into her hair, doing it slowly and methodically, using her fingers to massage her scalp, skipping the painful spot where he must have hit her. At first the deep scratch on her back stung, but that passed and she felt a kind of bliss. She hardly thought of the shower scene in *Psycho* at all.

The shower was always where she had done her best thinking, a womblike environment, and if she had ever needed to think both hard and well, it was now.

I don't want to see Dr. Hedstrom, and I don't need to see Dr. Hedstrom. That decision's been made, although later—a couple of weeks from now, maybe, when my face looks more or less normal again—I'll have to get checked out for STDs . . .

“Don't forget the AIDS test,” she said, and the thought made her grimace hard enough to hurt her mouth. It was a scary thought. Nevertheless, the test would have to be taken. For her own peace of mind. And none of that addressed what she now recognized as this morning's central issue. What she did or didn't do about her own violation was her own business, but that was not true of the women in the pipe. They had lost far more than she. And what about the next woman the giant attacked? That there would be another she had no doubt. Maybe not for a month or a year, but there would be. As she turned off the shower Tess realized (again) that it might even be her, if he went back to check the culvert and found her gone. And her clothes gone from the store, of

course. If he'd looked through her purse, and surely he had, then he *did* have her address.

"Also my diamond earrings," she said. "Fucking pervert sonofabitch stole my earrings."

Even if he steered clear of the store and the culvert for awhile, those women belonged to her now. They were her responsibility, and she couldn't shirk it just because her picture might appear on the cover of *Inside View*.

In the calm morning light of a suburban Connecticut morning, the answer was ridiculously simple: an anonymous call to the police. The fact that a professional novelist with ten years' experience hadn't thought of it right away almost deserved a yellow penalty card. She would give them the location—the deserted YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU store on Stagg Road—and she would describe the giant. How hard could it be to locate a man like that? Or a blue Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights?

Easy-as-can-beezy.

But while she was drying her hair, her eyes fell on her Lemon Squeezer .38 and she thought, *Too easy-as-can-beezy. Because . . .*

"What's in it for me?" she asked Fritzzy, who was sitting in the doorway and looking at her with his luminous green eyes. "Just what's in that for me?"

Standing in the kitchen an hour and a half later. Her cereal bowl soaking in the sink. Her second cup of coffee growing cold on the counter. Talking on the phone.

“Oh my God!” Patsy exclaimed. “I’m coming right over!”

“No, no, I’m fine, Pats. And you’ll be late for work.”

“Saturday mornings are strictly optional, and you should go to the doctor! What if you’re concussed, or something?”

“I’m not concussed, just colorful. And I’d be ashamed to go to the doctor, because I was three drinks over the limit. At least three. The only sensible thing I did all night was call a limo to bring me home.”

“You’re sure your nose isn’t broken?”

“Positive.” Well . . . *almost* positive.

“Is Fritzzy all right?”

Tess burst into perfectly genuine laughter. “I go downstairs half-shot in the middle of the night because the smoke detector’s beeping, trip over the cat and almost kill myself, and your sympathies are with the cat. Nice.”

“Honey, no—”

“I’m just teasing,” Tess said. “Go on to work and stop worrying. I just didn’t want you to scream when you saw me. I’ve got a couple of absolutely beautiful shiners. If I had an ex-husband, you’d probably think he’d paid me a visit.”

“Nobody would dare to put a hand on you,” Patsy said. “You’re feisty, girl.”

“That’s right,” Tess said. “I take no shit.”

“You sound hoarse.”

“On top of everything else, I’m getting a cold.”

“Well . . . if you need something tonight . . . chicken soup . . . a couple of old Percocets . . . a Johnny Depp DVD . . .”

“I’ll call if I do. Now go on. Fashion-conscious women seeking the elusive size six Ann Taylor are depending on you.”

“Piss off, woman,” Patsy said, and hung up, laughing.

Tess took her coffee to the kitchen table. The gun was sitting on it, next to the sugar bowl: not quite a Dalí image, but damn close. Then the image doubled as she burst into tears. It was the memory of her own cheery voice that did it. The sound of the lie she would now live until it felt like the truth. “You bastard!” she shouted. “You fuck-bastard! *I hate you!*”

She had showered twice in less than seven hours and still felt dirty. She had douched, but she thought she could still feel him in there, his . . .

“His cockslime.”

She bolted to her feet, from the corner of her eye glimpsed her alarmed cat racing down the front hall, and arrived at the sink just in time to avoid making a mess on the floor. Her coffee and Cheerios came up in a single hard contraction. When she was sure she was done, she collected her pistol and went upstairs to take another shower.

When she was done and wrapped in a comforting terry-cloth robe, she lay down on her bed to think about where she should go to make her anonymous call. Someplace big and busy would be best. Someplace with a parking lot so she could hang up and then scat. Stoke Village Mall sounded right. There was also the question of which authorities to call. Colewich, or would that be too Deputy Dawg? Maybe the State Police would be better. And she should write down what she meant to say . . . the call would go quicker . . . she'd be less likely to forget anyth . . .

Tess drifted off, lying on her bed in a bar of sunlight.

The telephone was ringing far away, in some adjacent universe. Then it stopped and Tess heard her own voice, the pleasantly impersonal recording that started *You have reached . . .* This was followed by someone leaving a message. A woman. By the time Tess struggled back to wakefulness, the caller had clicked off.

She looked at the clock on the night table and saw it was quarter to ten. She'd slept another two hours. For a moment she was alarmed: maybe she'd suffered a concussion or a fracture after all. Then she relaxed. She'd had a lot of exercise the previous night. Much of it had been extremely unpleasant, but exercise was exercise. Falling asleep again was natural. She might even take another nap this afternoon (another shower for sure), but she had an errand to run first. A responsibility to fulfill.

She put on a long tweed skirt and a turtleneck that was actually too big for her; it lapped the underside of her chin. That was fine with Tess. She had applied concealer to the bruise on her cheek. It didn't cover it completely, nor would even her biggest pair of sunglasses completely obscure her black eyes (the swollen lips were a lost cause), but the makeup helped, just the same. The very act of applying it made her feel more anchored in her life. More in charge.

Downstairs, she pushed the Play button on her answering machine, thinking the call had probably been from Ramona Norville, doing the obligatory day-after follow-up: we had fun, hope you had fun, the feedback was great, please come again (not bloody likely), blah-blah-blah. But it wasn't Ramona. The message was from a woman who identified herself as Betsy Neal. She said she was calling from The Stagger Inn.

"As part of our effort to discourage drinking and driving, our policy is to courtesy-call people who leave their cars in our lot after closing," Betsy Neal said. "Your Ford Expedition, Connecticut license plate 775 NSD, will be available for pickup until five PM this evening. After five it will be towed to Excellent Auto Repair, 1500 John Higgins Road, North Colewich, at your

expense. Please note that we don't have your keys, ma'am. You must have taken them with you." Betsy Neal paused. "We have other property of yours, so please come to the office. Remember that I'll need to see some ID. Thank you and have a nice day."

Tess sat down on her sofa and laughed. Before listening to the Neal woman's canned speech, she had been planning to drive her Expedition to the mall. She didn't have her purse, she didn't have her key-ring, she didn't have her damn *car*, but she had still planned to just walk out to the driveway, climb in, and—

She sat back against the cushion, whooping and pounding a fist on her thigh. Fritzzy was under the easy chair on the other side of the room, looking at her as if she were mad. *We're all mad here, so have another cup of tea*, she thought, and laughed harder than ever.

When she finally stopped (only it felt more like running down), she played the message again. This time what she focused on was the Neal woman saying they had other property of hers. Her purse? Perhaps even her diamond earrings? But that would be too good to be true. Wouldn't it?

Arriving at The Stagger Inn in a black car from Royal Limo might be a little too memorable, so she called Stoke Village Taxi. The dispatcher said they'd be glad to run her out to what he called "The Stagger" for a flat fifty-dollar fee. "Sorry to charge you so much," he said, "but the driver's got to come back empty."

"How do you know that?" Tess asked, bemused.

"Left your car, right? Happens all the time, specially on weekends. Although we also get calls after karaoke nights. Your cab'll be there in fifteen minutes or less."

Tess ate a Pop-Tart (swallowing hurt, but she had lost her first try at breakfast and was hungry), then stood at the living-room window, watching for the taxi and bouncing her spare Expedition key on her palm. She decided on a change of plan. Never mind Stoke Village Mall; once she'd collected her car (and whatever other property Betsy Neal was holding), she would drive the half a mile or so to the Gas & Dash and call the police from there.

It seemed only fitting.

When her cab turned onto Stagg Road, Tess's pulse began to rise. By the time they reached The Stagger Inn, it was flying along at what felt like a hundred and thirty beats a minute. The cabbie must have seen something in his rearview mirror . . . or maybe it was just the visible signs of the beating that prompted his question.

"Everything okay, ma'am?"

"Peachy," she said. "It's just that I didn't plan on coming back here this morning."

"Few do," the cabbie said. He was sucking on a toothpick, which made a slow and philosophical journey from one side of his mouth to the other. "They got your keys, I suppose? Left em with the bartender?"

"Oh, no trouble there," she said brightly. "But they're holding other property for me—the lady who called wouldn't say what, and I can't for the life of me think what it could be." *Good God, I sound like one of my old lady detectives.*

The cabbie rolled his toothpick back to its starting point. It was his only reply.

"I'll pay you an extra ten dollars to wait until I come out," Tess said, nodding at the roadhouse. "I want to make sure my car starts."

"No problem-o," the cabbie said.

And if I scream because he's in there, waiting for me, come on the run, okay?

But she wouldn't have said that even if she could have done so without sounding absolutely bonkers. The cabdriver was fat, fifty, and wheezy. He'd be no match for the giant if this was a setup . . . which in a horror movie, it would be.

Lured back, Tess thought dismally. Lured back by a phone call from the giant's girlfriend, who's just as crazy as he is.

Foolish, paranoid idea, but the walk to The Stagger Inn's door seemed long, and the hard-packed dirt made her walking shoes seem very loud: *clump-clud-clump*. The parking lot that had been a sea of cars last night was now deserted save for four automotive islands, one of which was her Expedition. It was at the very back of the lot—sure, he would not have wanted to be observed putting it there—and she could see the left front tire. It was a plain old blackwall that didn't match the other three, but otherwise it looked fine. He had changed her tire. Of course he had. How else could he have moved it away from his . . . his . . .

His recreational facility. His kill-zone. He drove it down here, parked, walked back to the deserted store, and then off he went in his old F-150. Good thing I didn't come to sooner; he'd have found me wandering around in a daze and I wouldn't be here now.

She looked back over her shoulder. In one of the movies she now could not stop thinking about, she surely would have seen the cab speeding away (*leaving me to my fate*), but it was still right there. She lifted a hand to the driver, and he lifted his in return. She was fine. Her car was here and the giant wasn't. The giant was at his house (his *lair*), quite possibly still sleeping off the previous evening's exertions.

The sign on the door said WE ARE CLOSED. Tess knocked and got no response. She tried the knob and when it turned, sinister movie plots returned to her mind. The really stupid plots where the knob always turns and the heroine calls out (in a tremulous voice), "Is anybody there?" Everyone knows she's crazy to go in, but she does anyway.

Tess looked back at the cab again, saw it was still right there, reminded herself that she was carrying a loaded gun in her spare purse, and went in anyway.

She entered a foyer that ran the length of the building on the parking lot side. The walls were decorated with publicity stills: bands in leather, bands in jeans, an all-girl band in miniskirts. An auxiliary bar stretched out beyond the coatracks; no stools, just a rail where you could have a drink while you waited for someone or because the bar inside was too packed. A single red sign glowed above the ranked bottles: BUDWEISER.

You like Bud, Bud likes you, Tess thought.

She took off her dark glasses so she could walk without stumbling into something and crossed the foyer to peep into the main room. It was vast and redolent of beer. There was a disco ball, now dark and still. The wooden floor reminded her of the roller-skating rink where she and her girlfriends had all but lived during the summer between eighth grade and high school. The instruments were still up on the bandstand, suggesting that The Zombie Bakers would be back tonight for another heaping bowl of rock n roll.

“Hello?” Her voice echoed.

“I’m right here,” a voice replied softly from behind her.

If it had been a man's voice, Tess would have shrieked. She managed to avoid that, but she still whirled around so quickly that she stumbled a little. The woman standing in the coat alcove—a skinny breath of a thing, no more than five feet three—blinked in surprise and took a step back. “Whoa, easy.”

“You startled me,” Tess said.

“I see I did.” The woman's tiny, perfect oval of a face was surrounded by a cloud of teased black hair. A pencil peeked from it. She had piquant blue eyes that didn't quite match. *A Picasso girl*, Tess thought. “I was in the office. Are you the Expedition lady or the Honda lady?”

“Expedition.”

“Have ID?”

“Yes, two pieces, but only one with my picture on it. My passport. The other stuff was in my purse. My other purse. I thought that was what you might have.”

“No, sorry. Maybe you stashed it under the seat, or something? We only look in the glove compartments, and of course we can't even do that if the car is locked. Yours wasn't, and your phone number was on the insurance card. But probably you know that. Maybe you'll find your purse at home.” Neal's voice suggested that this wasn't likely. “One photo ID will be okay if it looks like you, I guess.”

Neal led Tess to a door at the back of the coat area, then down a narrow curving corridor that skirted the main room. There were more band photos on the walls. At one point they passed through a fume of chlorine that stung Tess's eyes and tender throat.

“If you think the johns smell now, you should be here when the joint is going full tilt,” Neal said, then added, “Oh, I forgot—you were.”

Tess made no comment.

At the end of the hallway was a door marked OFFICE STAFF ONLY. The room beyond was large, pleasant, and filled with morning sunshine. A framed

picture of Barack Obama hung on the wall, above a bumper sticker bearing the YES WE CAN slogan. Tess couldn't see her cab—the building was in the way—but she could see its shadow.

That's good. Stay right there and get your ten bucks. And if I don't come out, don't come in. Just call the police.

Neal went to the desk in the corner and sat down. "Let's see your ID."

Tess opened her purse, fumbled past the .38, and brought out her passport and her Authors Guild card. Neal gave the passport photo only a cursory glance, but when she saw the Guild card, her eyes widened. "You're the Willow Grove lady!"

Tess smiled gamely. It hurt her lips. "Guilty as charged." Her voice sounded foggy, as though she were getting over a bad cold.

"My gran loves those books!"

"Many grans do," Tess said. "When the affection finally filters down to the next generation—the one not currently living on fixed incomes—I'm going to buy myself a château in France."

Sometimes this earned her a smile. Not from Ms. Neal, however. "I hope that didn't happen here." She wasn't more specific and didn't have to be. Tess knew what she was talking about, and Betsy Neal knew she knew.

Tess thought of revisiting the story she'd already told Patsy—the beeping smoke detector alarm, the cat under her feet, the collision with the newel post—and didn't bother. This woman had a look of daytime efficiency about her and probably visited The Stagger Inn as infrequently as possible during its hours of operation, but she was clearly under no illusions about what sometimes happened here when the hour grew late and the guests grew drunk. She was, after all, the one who came in early on Saturday mornings to make the courtesy calls. She had probably heard her share of morning-after stories featuring midnight stumbles, slips in the shower, etc., etc.

"Not here," Tess said. "Don't worry."

"Not even in the parking lot? If you ran into trouble there, I'll have to have Mr. Rumble talk with the security staff. Mr. Rumble's the boss, and security's supposed to check the video monitors regularly on busy nights."

"It happened after I left."

I really do have to make the report anonymously now, if I mean to report it at all. Because I'm lying, and she'll remember.

If she meant to report it at all? Of course she did. Right?

"I'm very sorry." Neal paused, seeming to debate with herself. Then she said, "I don't mean to offend you, but you probably don't have any business in a place like this to begin with. It didn't turn out so well for you, and if it got into the papers . . . well, my gran would be very disappointed."

Tess agreed. And because she could embellish convincingly (it was the talent that paid the bills, after all), she did. "A bad boyfriend is sharper than a serpent's tooth. I think the Bible says that. Or maybe it's Dr. Phil. In any case, I've broken up with him."

"A lot of women say that, then weaken. And a guy who does it once—"

"Will do it again. Yes, I know, I was very foolish. If you don't have my purse, what property of mine *do* you have?"

Ms. Neal turned in her swivel chair (the sun licked across her face, momentarily highlighting those unusual blue eyes), opened one of her file cabinets, and brought out Tom the Tomtom. Tess was delighted to see her old traveling buddy. It didn't make things all better, but it was a step in the right direction.

"We're not supposed to remove anything from patrons' cars, just get the address and the phone number if we can, then lock it up, but I didn't like to leave this. Thieves don't mind breaking a window to get a particularly tasty item, and it was sitting right there on your dashboard."

"Thank you." Tess felt tears springing into her eyes behind her dark glasses and willed them back. "That was very thoughtful."

Betsy Neal smiled, which transformed her stern Ms. Taking Care of Business face to radiant in an instant. "Very welcome. And when that boyfriend of yours comes crawling back, asking for a second chance, think of my gran and all your other loyal readers and tell him no way Jose." She considered. "But do it with the chain on your door. Because a bad boyfriend really *is* sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"That's good advice. Listen, I have to go. I told the cab to wait while I made sure I was really going to get my car."

And that might have been all—it really might have been—but then Neal asked, with becoming diffidence, if Tess would mind signing an autograph for her grandmother. Tess told her of course not, and in spite of all that had happened, watched with real amusement as Neal found a piece of business stationery and used a ruler to tear off the Stagger Inn logo at the top before handing it across the desk.

“Make it ‘To Mary, a true fan.’ Can you do that?”

Tess could. And as she was adding the date, a fresh confabulation came to mind. “A man helped me when my boyfriend and I were . . . you know, tussling. If not for him, I might have been hurt a lot worse.” *Yes! Raped, even!* “I’d like to thank him, but I don’t know his name.”

“I doubt if I could do you much good there. I’m just the office help.”

“But you’re local, right?”

“Yes . . .”

“I met him at the little store down the road.”

“The Gas & Dash?”

“I think that’s the name. It’s where my boyfriend and I had our argument. It was about the car. I didn’t want to drive and I wouldn’t let him. We were arguing about it all the time we walked down the road . . . staggered down the road . . . staggered down Stagg Road . . .”

Neal smiled as people do when they’ve heard a joke many times before.

“Anyway, this guy came along in an old blue pickup truck with that plastic stuff for rust around the headlights—”

“Bondo?”

“I think that’s what it’s called.” Knowing damn well that was what it was called. Her father had supported the company almost single-handed. “Anyway, I remember thinking when he got out that he wasn’t really riding in that truck, he was wearing it.”

When she handed the signed sheet of paper back across the desk, she saw that Betsy Neal was now actually grinning. “Oh my God, I might actually know who he was.”

“Really?”

“Was he big or was he *real* big?”

“Real big,” Tess said. She felt a peculiar watchful happiness that seemed located not in her head but in the center of her chest. It was the way she felt when the strings of some outlandish plot actually started to come together, pulling tight like the top of a nicely crafted tote-bag. She always felt both surprised and not surprised when this happened. There was no satisfaction like it.

“Did you happen to notice if he was wearing a ring on his little finger? Red stone?”

“Yes! Like a ruby! Only too big to be real. And a brown hat—”

Neal was nodding. “With white splatters on it. He’s been wearing the damn thing for ten years. That’s Big Driver you’re talking about. I don’t know where he lives, but he’s local, either Colewich or Nestor Falls. I see him around—supermarket, hardware store, Walmart, places like that. And once you see him, you don’t forget him. His real name is Al Something-Polish. You know, one of those hard-to-pronounce names. Strelkowicz, Stancowitz, something like that. I bet I could find him in the phone book, because he and his brother own a trucking company. Hawkline, I think it’s called. Or maybe Eagle Line. Something with a bird in it, anyway. Want me to look him up?”

“No, thanks,” Tess said pleasantly. “You’ve been helpful enough, and my cabdriver’s waiting.”

“Okay. Just do yourself a favor and stay away from that boyfriend of yours. And stay away from The Stagger. Of course, if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll have to find you and kill you.”

“Fair enough,” Tess said, smiling. “I’d deserve it.” At the doorway, she turned back. “A favor?”

“If I can.”

“If you happen to see Al Something-Polish around town, don’t mention that you talked to me.” She smiled more widely. It hurt her lips, but she did it. “I want to surprise him. Give him a little gift, or something.”

“Not a problem.”

Tess lingered a bit longer. “I love your eyes.”

Neal shrugged and smiled. “Thanks. They don’t quite match, do they? It used to make me self-conscious, but now . . .”

“Now it works for you,” Tess said. “You grew into them.”

“I guess I did. I even picked up some work modeling in my twenties. But sometimes, you know what? It’s better to grow out of things. Like a taste for bad-tempered men.”

To that there seemed to be nothing to say.

She made sure her Expedition would start, then tipped the cabdriver twenty instead of ten. He thanked her with feeling, then drove away toward the I-84. Tess followed, but not until she'd plugged Tom back into the cigarette lighter receptacle and powered him up.

"Hello, Tess," Tom said. "I see we're taking a trip."

"Just home, Tommy-boy," she said, and pulled out of the parking lot, very aware she was riding on a tire that had been mounted by the man who had almost killed her. Al Something-Polish. A truck-driving son of a gun. "One stop on the way."

"I don't know what you're thinking, Tess, but you should be careful."

If she had been home instead of in her car, Fritzzy would have been the one to say this, and Tess would have been equally unsurprised. She had been making up voices and conversations since childhood, although at the age of eight or nine, she'd quit doing it around other people, unless it was for comic effect.

"I don't know what I'm thinking, either," she said, but this was not quite true.

Up ahead was the US 47 intersection, and the Gas & Dash. She signaled, turned in, and parked with the Expedition's nose centered between the two pay phones on the side of the building. She saw the number for Royal Limousine on the dusty cinder block between them. The numbers were crooked, straggling, written by a finger that hadn't been able to stay steady. A chill shivered its way up her back, and she wrapped her arms around herself, hugging hard. Then she got out and went to the pay phone that still worked.

The instruction card had been defaced, maybe by a drunk with a car key, but she could still read the salient information: no charge for 911 calls, just lift the handset and punch in the numbers. Easy-as-can-beezy.

She punched 9, hesitated, punched 1, then hesitated again. She visualized a piñata, and a woman poised to hit it with a stick. Soon everything inside

would come tumbling out. Her friends and associates would know she had been raped. Patsy McClain would know the story about stumbling over Fritzzy in the dark was a shame-driven lie . . . and that Tess hadn't trusted her enough to tell the truth. But really, those weren't the main things. She supposed she could stand up to a little public scrutiny, especially if it kept the man Betsy Neal had called Big Driver from raping and killing another woman. Tess realized that she might even be perceived as a heroine, a thing that had been impossible to even consider last night, when urinating hurt enough to make her cry and her mind kept returning to the image of her stolen panties in the center pocket of the giant's bib overalls.

Only . . .

"What's in it for me?" she asked again. She spoke very quietly, while looking at the telephone number she'd written in the dust. "What's in that for me?"

And thought: *I have a gun and I know how to use it.*

She hung up the phone and went back to her car. She looked at Tom's screen, which was showing the intersection of Stagg Road and Route 47. "I need to think about this some more," she said.

"What's to think about?" Tom asked. "If you were to kill him and then get caught, you'd go to jail. Raped or not."

"That's what I need to think about," she said, and turned onto US 47, which would take her to I-84.

Traffic on the big highway was Saturday-morning light, and being behind the wheel of her Expedition was good. Soothing. Normal. Tom was quiet until she passed the sign reading EXIT 9 STOKE VILLAGE 2 MILES. Then he said, "Are you sure it was an accident?"

"What?" Tess jumped, startled. She had heard Tom's words coming out of her mouth, spoken in the deeper voice she always used for the make-believe half of her make-believe conversations (it was a voice very little like Tom the Tomtom's actual robo-voice), but it didn't feel like her *thought*. "Are you saying the bastard raped me by *accident*?"

"No," Tom replied. "I'm saying that if it had been up to you, you would have gone back the way you came. *This* way. I-84. But somebody had a better idea, didn't they? Somebody knew a shortcut."

“Yes,” she agreed. “Ramona Norville did.” She considered it, then shook her head. “That’s pretty far-fetched, my friend.”

To this Tom made no reply.

Leaving the Gas & Dash, she had planned to go online and see if she could locate a trucking company, maybe a small independent, that operated out of Colewich or one of the surrounding towns. A company with a bird name, probably hawk or eagle. It was what the Willow Grove ladies would have done; they loved their computers and were always texting each other like teenagers. Other considerations aside, it would be interesting to see if her version of amateur sleuthing worked in real life.

Driving up the I-84 exit ramp a mile and a half from her house, she decided that she would do a little research on Ramona Norville first. Who knew, she might discover that, besides presiding over Books & Brown Baggers, Ramona was president of the Chicopee Rape Prevention Society. It was even plausible. Tess's hostess had pretty clearly been not just a lesbian but a *dyke* lesbian, and women of that persuasion were often not fond of men who were *non-rapists*.

"Many arsonists belong to their local volunteer fire departments," Tom observed as she turned onto her street.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Tess asked.

"That you shouldn't eliminate anyone based on their public affiliations. The Knitting Society ladies would never do that. But by all means check her out online." Tom spoke in a be-my-guest tone that Tess hadn't quite expected. It was mildly irritating.

"How kind of you to give me permission, Thomas," she said.

But when she was in her office with her computer booted up, she only stared at the Apple welcome screen for the first five minutes, wondering if she was really thinking of finding the giant and using her gun, or if that was just the sort of fantasy to which liars-for-profit such as herself were prone. A revenge fantasy, in this case. She avoided those kinds of movies, too, but she knew they were out there; you couldn't avoid the vibe of your culture unless you were a total recluse, and Tess wasn't. In the revenge movies, admirably muscular fellows like Charles Bronson and Sylvester Stallone didn't bother with the police, they got the baddies on their own. Frontier justice. Do you feel lucky, punk. She believed that even Jodie Foster, one of Yale's more famous graduates, had made a movie of this type. Tess couldn't quite remember the title. *The Courageous Woman*, maybe? It was something like that, anyway.

Her computer flipped to the word-of-the-day screen-saver. Today's word was *cormorant*, which just happened to be a bird.

"When you send your goodies by Cormorant Trucking, you'll think you're flying," Tess said in her deep pretending-to-be-Tom voice. Then she tapped a key and the screen-saver disappeared. She went online, but not to one of the search engines, at least not to begin with. First she went to YouTube and typed in RICHARD WIDMARK, with no idea at all why she was doing it. No conscious one, anyway.

Maybe I want to find out if the guy's really worthy of fan-ship, she thought. *Ramona certainly thinks so.*

There were lots of clips. The top-rated one was a six-minute compilation titled **HE'S BAD, HE'S REALLY BAD**. Several hundred thousand people had viewed it. There were scenes from three movies, but the one that transfixed her was the first. It was black-and-white, it looked on the cheap side . . . but it was definitely one of *those* movies. Even the title told you so: *Kiss of Death*.

Tess watched the entire video, then returned to the *Kiss of Death* segment twice. Widmark played a giggling hood menacing an old lady in a wheelchair.

He wanted information: “Where’s that squealin’ son of yours?” And when the old lady wouldn’t tell him: “You know what I do to squealers? I let em have it in the belly, so they can roll around for a long time, thinkin’ it over.”

He didn’t shoot the old lady in the belly, though. He tied her into her wheelchair with a lamp cord and pushed her down the stairs.

Tess exited YouTube, Binged Richard Widmark, and found what she expected, given the power of that brief clip. Although he had played in many subsequent movies, more and more often as the hero, he was best known for *Kiss of Death*, and the giggling, psychotic Tommy Udo.

“Big deal,” Tess said. “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

“Meaning what?” Fritzzy asked from the windowsill where he was sunning himself.

“Meaning Ramona probably fell in love with him after seeing him play a heroic sheriff or a courageous battleship commander, or something like that.”

“She must have,” Fritzzy agreed, “because if you’re right about her sexual orientation, she probably doesn’t idolize men who murder old ladies in wheelchairs.”

Of course that was true. Good thinking, Fritzzy.

The cat regarded Tess with a skeptical eye and said, “But maybe you’re not right about that.”

“Even if I’m not,” Tess said, “*nobody* roots for psycho bad guys.”

She recognized this for the stupidity it was as soon as it was out of her mouth. If people didn’t root for psychos, they wouldn’t still be making movies about the nut in the hockey mask and the burn victim with scissors for fingers. But Fritzzy did her the courtesy of not laughing.

“You better not,” Tess said. “If you’re tempted, remember who fills your food dish.”

She googled *Ramona Norville*, got forty-four thousand hits, added *Chicopee*, and got a more manageable twelve hundred (although even most of those, she knew, would be coincidental dreck). The first relevant one was from the *Chicopee Weekly Reminder*, and concerned Tess herself: LIBRARIAN RAMONA NORVILLE ANNOUNCES “WILLOW GROVE FRIDAY.”

“There I am, the starring attraction,” Tess murmured. “Hooray for Tessa Jean. Now let’s see my supporting actress.” But when she pulled up the

clipping, the only photo Tess saw was her own. It was the bare-shoulders publicity shot her part-time assistant routinely sent out. She wrinkled her nose and went back to Google, not sure why she wanted to look at Ramona again, only knowing that she did. When she finally found a photo of the librarian, she saw what her subconscious might already have suspected, at least judging by Tom's comments on the ride back to her house.

It was in a story from the August 3 issue of the *Weekly Reminder*. BROWN BAGGERS ANNOUNCE SPEAKING SCHEDULE FOR FALL, the headline read. Below it, Ramona Norville stood on the library steps, smiling and squinting into the sun. A bad photograph, taken by a part-timer without much talent, and a bad (but probably typical) choice of clothes on Norville's part. The man-tailored blazer made her look as wide in the chest as a pro football tackle. Her shoes were ugly brown flatboats. A pair of too-tight gray slacks showcased what Tess and her friends back in middle school had called "thunder thighs."

"Holy fucking shit, Fritzzy," she said. Her voice was watery with dismay. "Look at this." Fritzzy didn't come over to look and didn't reply—how could he, when she was too upset to make his voice?

Make sure of what you're seeing, she told herself. You've had a terrible shock, Tessa Jean, maybe the biggest shock a woman can have, short of a mortal diagnosis in a doctor's office. So make sure.

She closed her eyes and summoned the image of the man from the old Ford pickup truck with the Bondo around the headlights. He had seemed so friendly at first. *Didn't think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?*

Only he *hadn't* been green, he'd been a tanned hulk of a man who didn't ride in his pickup but wore it.

Ramona Norville, not a Big Driver but certainly a Big Librarian, was too old to be his sister. And if she was a lesbian now, she hadn't always been one, because the resemblance was unmistakable.

Unless I'm badly mistaken, I'm looking at a picture of my rapist's mother.

She went to the kitchen and had a drink of water, but water wasn't getting it. An old half-filled bottle of tequila had been brooding in a back corner of a kitchen cabinet for donkey's years. She took it out, considered a glass, then nipped directly from the bottle. It stung her mouth and throat, but had a positive effect otherwise. She helped herself to more—a sip rather than a nip—and then put the bottle back. She had no intention of getting drunk. If she had ever needed her wits about her, she needed them about her today.

Rage—the biggest, truest rage of her adult life—had invaded her like a fever, but it wasn't like any fever she had known previously. It circulated like weird serum, cold on the right side of her body, then hot on the left, where her heart was. It seemed to come nowhere near her head, which remained clear. Clearer since she'd had the tequila, actually.

She paced a series of rapid circles around the kitchen, head down, one hand massaging the ring of bruises around her throat. It did not occur to her that she was circling her kitchen as she had circled the deserted store after crawling out of the pipe Big Driver had meant for her tomb. Did she really think Ramona Norville had sent her, Tess, to her psychotic son like some kind of sacrifice? Was that likely? It was not. Could she even be sure that the two of them were mother and son, based on one bad photograph and her own memory?

But my memory's good. Especially my memory for faces.

Well, so she thought, but probably everyone did. Right?

Yes, and the whole idea's crazy. You have to admit it is.

She did admit it, but she had seen crazier things on true-crime programs (which she *did* watch). The ladies with the apartment house in San Francisco who had spent years killing their elderly tenants for their Social Security checks and burying them in the backyard. The airline pilot who murdered his wife, then froze the body so he could run her through the woodchipper behind the garage. The man who had doused his own children with gasoline and cooked

them like Cornish game hens to make sure his wife never got the custody the courts had awarded her. A woman sending victims to her own son was shocking and unlikely . . . but not impossible. When it came to the dark fuckery of the human heart, there seemed to be no limit.

“Oh boy,” she heard herself saying in a voice that combined dismay and anger. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.”

Find out. Find out for sure. If you can.

She went back to her trusty computer. Her hands were trembling badly, and it took her three tries to enter COLEWICH TRUCKING FIRMS in the search field at the top of the Google page. Finally she got it right, hit enter, and there it was, at the top of the list: RED HAWK TRUCKING. The entry took her to the Red Hawk website, which featured a badly animated big rig with what she assumed was a red hawk on the side and a bizarre smiley-head man behind the wheel. The truck crossed the screen from right to left, flipped and came back left to right, then flipped again. An endless crisscross journey. The company’s motto flashed red, white, and blue above the animated truck: THE SMILES COME WITH THE SERVICE!

For those wishing to journey beyond the welcome screen, there were four or five choices, including phone numbers, rates, and testimonials from satisfied customers. Tess skipped these and clicked on the last one, which read CHECK OUT THE NEWEST ADDITION TO OUR FLEET! And when the picture came up, the final piece fell into place.

It was a much better photograph than the one of Ramona Norville standing on the library steps. In it, Tess’s rapist was sitting behind the wheel of a shiny cab-over Pete with RED HAWK TRUCKING COLEWICH, MASSACHUSETTS written on the door in fancy script. He wasn’t wearing his bleach-splattered brown cap, and the bristly blond crewcut revealed by its absence made him look even more like his mother, almost eerily so. His cheerful, you-can-trust-me grin was the one Tess had seen yesterday afternoon. The one he’d still been wearing when he said *Instead of changing your tire, how about I fuck you? How would that be?*

Looking at the photo made the weird rageserum cycle faster through her system. There was a pounding in her temples that wasn’t exactly a headache; in fact, it was almost pleasant.

He was wearing the red glass ring.

The caption below the picture read: "Al Strehlke, President of Red Hawk Trucking, seen here behind the wheel of the company's newest acquisition, a 2008 Peterbilt 389. This horse of a hauler is now available to our customers, who are THE FINEST IN ALL THE LAND. Say! Doesn't Al look like a Proud Papa?"

She heard him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and clenched her hands into fists. She felt her fingernails sinking into her palms and clenched them even tighter, relishing the pain.

Proud Papa. That was what her eyes kept returning to. *Proud Papa.* The rage moved faster and faster, circling through her body the way she had circled her kitchen. The way she had circled the store last night, moving in and out of consciousness like an actress through a series of spotlights.

You're going to pay, Al. And never mind the cops, I'm the one coming to collect.

And then there was Ramona Norville. The proud papa's proud mama. Although Tess was still not sure of her. Partly it was not wanting to believe that a woman could allow something so horrible to happen to another woman, but she could also see an innocent explanation. Chicopee wasn't that far from Colewich, and Ramona would have used the Stagg Road shortcut all the time when she went there.

"To visit her son," Tess said, nodding. "To visit the proud papa with the new cab-over Pete. For all I know, she might be the one who took the picture of him behind the wheel." And why wouldn't she recommend her favorite route to that day's speaker?

But why didn't she say, "I go that way all the time to visit my son"? Wouldn't that be natural?

"Maybe she doesn't talk to strangers about the Strehlke phase of her life," Tess said. "The phase before she discovered short hair and comfortable shoes." It was possible, but there was the scatter of nail-studded boards to think about. The trap. Norville had sent her that way, and the trap had been set ahead of time. Because she had called him? Called him and said *I'm sending you a juicy one, don't miss out?*

It still doesn't mean she was involved . . . or not knowingly involved. The proud papa could keep track of her guest speakers, how hard would that be?

“Not hard at all,” Fritzzy said after leaping up on her filing cabinet. He began to lick one of his paws.

“And if he saw a photo of one he liked . . . a reasonably attractive one . . . I suppose he'd know his mother would send her back by . . .” She stopped. “No, that doesn't scan. Without some input from Ma, how would he know I wasn't driving to my home in Boston? Or flying back to my home in New York City?”

“You googled *him*,” Fritzzy said. “Maybe he googled *you*. Just like she did. Everything's on the Internet these days; you said so yourself.”

That hung together, if only by a thread.

She thought there was one way to find out for sure, and that was to pay Ms. Norville a surprise visit. Look in her eyes when she saw Tess. If there was nothing in them but surprise and curiosity at the Return of the Willow Grove Scribe . . . to Ramona's home rather than her library . . . that would be one thing. But if there was fear in them as well, the kind that might be prompted by the thought *why are you here instead of in a rusty culvert on the Stagg Road* . . . well . . .

“That would be different, Fritzzy. Wouldn't it?”

Fritzzy looked at her with his cunning green eyes, still licking his paw. It looked harmless, that paw, but there were claws hidden inside it. Tess had seen them, and on occasion felt them.

She found out where I lived; let's see if I can return the favor.

Tess went back to her computer, this time searching for a Books & Brown Baggers website. She was quite sure she'd find one—everybody had websites these days, there were prisoners doing life for murder who had websites—and she did. The Brown Baggers posted newsy notes about their members, book reviews, and informal summaries—not quite minutes—of their meetings. Tess chose the latter and began scrolling. It did not take her long to discover that the June 10 meeting had been held at Ramona Norville's home in Brewster. Tess had never been to this town, but knew where it was, had passed a green turnpike sign pointing to it while on her way to yesterday's gig. It was only two or three exits south of Chicopee.

Next she went to the Brewster Township tax records and scrolled down until she found Ramona's name. She had paid \$913.06 in property taxes the year before; said property at 75 Lacemaker Lane.

"Found you, dear," Tess murmured.

"You need to think about how you're going to handle this," Fritzzy said. "And about how far you're willing to go."

"If I'm right," Tess said, "maybe quite far."

She started to turn off her computer, then thought of one more thing worth checking out, although she knew it might come to nothing. She went to the *Weekly Reminder's* home page and clicked on OBITUARIES. There was a place to enter the name you were interested in, and Tess typed STREHLKE. There was a single hit, for a man named Roscoe Strehlke. According to the 1999 obit, he had died suddenly in his home, at the age of forty-eight. Survived by his wife, Ramona, and two sons: Alvin (23) and Lester (17). For a mystery writer, even of the bloodless sort known as "cozies," *died suddenly* was a red flag. She searched the *Reminder's* general database and found nothing more.

She sat still for a moment, drumming her fingers restlessly against the arms of her chair as she did when she was working and found herself stuck for a word, a phrase, or a way of describing something. Then she looked for a list of newspapers in western and southern Massachusetts, and found the *Springfield Republican*. When she typed the name of Ramona Norville's husband, the headline that came up was stark and to the point: CHICOPEE BUSINESSMAN COMMITS SUICIDE.

Strehlke had been discovered in his garage, hanging from a rafter. There was no note and Ramona wasn't quoted, but a neighbor said that Mr. Strehlke had been distraught over "some trouble his older boy had been in."

"What kind of trouble was Al in that got you so upset?" Tess asked the computer screen. "Was it something to do with a girl? Assault, maybe? Sexual battery? Was he working up to bigger things, even then? If that's why you hung yourself, you were one chickenshit daddy."

"Maybe Roscoe had help," Fritzzy said. "From Ramona. Big strong woman, you know. You *ought* to know; you saw her."

Again, that didn't sound like the voice she made when she was essentially talking to herself. She looked at Fritzzy, startled. Fritzzy looked back: green eyes asking *who, me?*

What Tess wanted to do was drive directly to Lacemaker Lane with her gun in her purse. What she *ought* to do was stop playing detective and call the police. Let them handle it. It was what the Old Tess would have done, but she was no longer that woman. That woman now seemed to her like a distant relative, the kind you sent a card to at Christmas and forgot for the rest of the year.

Because she couldn't decide—and because she hurt all over—she went upstairs and back to bed. She slept for four hours and got up almost too stiff to walk. She took two extra-strength Tylenol, waited until they improved matters, then drove down to Blockbuster video. She carried the Lemon Squeezer in her purse. She thought she would always carry it now while she was riding alone.

She got to Blockbuster just before closing and asked for a Jodie Foster movie called *The Courageous Woman*. The clerk (who had green hair, a safety pin in one ear, and looked all of eighteen years old) smiled indulgently and told her the film was actually called *The Brave One*. Mr. Retro Punk told her that for an extra fifty cents, she could get a bag of microwave popcorn to go with. Tess almost said no, then reconsidered. “Why the fuck not?” she asked Mr. Retro Punk. “You only live once, right?”

He gave her a startled, reconsidering look, then smiled and agreed that it was a case of one life to a customer.

At home, she popped the corn, inserted the DVD, and plopped onto the couch with a pillow at the small of her back to cushion the scrape there. Fritzzy joined her and they watched Jodie Foster go after the men (the *punks*, as in *do you feel lucky, punk*) who had killed her boyfriend. Foster got assorted other punks along the way, and used a pistol to do it. *The Brave One* was very much *that* kind of a movie, but Tess enjoyed it just the same. She thought it made perfect sense. She also thought that she had been missing something all these years: the low but authentic catharsis movies like *The Brave One* offered. When it was over, she turned to Fritzzy and said, “I wish Richard Widmark had met Jodie Foster instead of the old lady in the wheelchair, don't you?”

Fritzzy agreed one thousand percent.

Lying in bed that night with an October wind getting up to dickens around the house and Fritzzy beside her, curled up nose to tail, Tess made an agreement with herself: if she woke up tomorrow feeling as she did now, she would go to see Ramona Norville, and perhaps after Ramona—depending on how things turned out on Lacemaker Lane—she would pay a visit to Alvin “Big Driver” Strehlke. More likely she’d wake up with some semblance of sanity restored and call the police. No anonymous call, either; she’d face the music and dance. Proving actual rape forty hours and God knew how many showers after the fact might be difficult, but the signs of sexual battery were written all over her body.

And the women in the pipe: she was their advocate, like it or not.

Tomorrow all these revenge ideas will seem silly to me. Like the kind of delusions people have when they’re sick with a high fever.

But when she woke up on Sunday, she was still in full New Tess mode. She looked at the gun on the night table and thought, *I want to use it. I want to take care of this myself, and given what I’ve been through, I deserve to take care of it myself.*

“But I need to make sure, and I don’t want to get caught,” she said to Fritzzy, who was now on his feet and stretching, getting ready for another exhausting day of lying around and snacking from his bowl.

Tess showered, dressed, then took a yellow legal pad out to the sunporch. She stared at her back lawn for almost fifteen minutes, occasionally sipping at a cooling cup of tea. Finally she wrote DON’T GET CAUGHT at the top of the first sheet. She considered this soberly, and then began making notes. As with each day’s work when she was writing a book, she started slowly, but picked up speed.

By ten o'clock she was ravenous. She cooked herself a huge brunch and ate every bite. Then she took her movie back to Blockbuster and asked if they had *Kiss of Death*. They didn't, but after ten minutes of browsing, she settled on a substitute called *Last House on the Left*. She took it home and watched closely. In the movie, men raped a young girl and left her for dead. It was so much like what had happened to her that Tess burst into tears, crying so loudly that Fritzzy ran from the room. But she stuck with it and was rewarded with a happy ending: the parents of the young girl murdered the rapists.

She returned the disc to its case, which she left on the table in the hall. She would return it tomorrow, if she were still alive tomorrow. She planned to be, but nothing was certain; there were many strange twists and devious turns as one hopped down the overgrown bunny-trail of life. Tess had found this out for herself.

With time to kill—the daylight hours seemed to move so slowly—she went back online, searching for information about the trouble Al Strehlke had been in before his father committed suicide. She found nothing. Possibly the neighbor was full of shit (neighbors so often were), but Tess could think of another scenario: the trouble might have occurred while Strehlke was still a minor. In cases like that, names weren't released to the press and the court records (assuming the case had even gone to court) were sealed.

"But maybe he got worse," she told Fritzzy.

"Those guys often do get worse," Fritzzy agreed. (This was rare; Tom was usually the agreeable one. Fritzzy's role tended to be devil's advocate.)

"Then, a few years later, something else happened. Something worse. Say Mom helped him to cover it up—"

"Don't forget the younger brother," Fritzzy said. "Lester. He might have been in on it, too."

"Don't confuse me with too many characters, Fritz. All I know is that Al Fucking Big Driver raped me, and his mother may have been an accessory.

That's enough for me."

"Maybe Ramona's his aunt," Fritzzy speculated.

"Oh, shut up," Tess said, and Fritzzy did.

She lay down at four o'clock, not expecting to sleep a wink, but her healing body had its own priorities. She went under almost instantly, and when she woke to the insistent *dah-dah-dah* of her bedside clock, she was glad she had set the alarm. Outside, a gusty October breeze was combing leaves from the trees and sending them across her backyard in colorful skitters. The light had gone that strange and depthless gold which seems the exclusive property of late-fall afternoons in New England.

Her nose was better—the pain there down to a dull throb—but her throat was still sore and she hobbled rather than walked to the bathroom. She got into the shower and stayed in the stall until the bathroom was as foggy as an English moor in a Sherlock Holmes story. The shower helped. A couple of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet would help even more.

She dried her hair, then swiped a clear place on the mirror. The woman in the glass looked back from eyes haunted by rage and sanity. The glass didn't stay clear for long, but it was long enough for Tess to realize that she really meant to do this, no matter the consequences.

She dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and black cargo pants with big flap pockets. She tied her hair up in a bun and then yanked on a big black gimme cap. The bun made the cap bulge a little behind, but at least no potential witness would be able to say, *I didn't get a good look at her face, but she had long blond hair. It was tied back in one of those scrunchie things. You know, the kind you can buy at JCPenney.*

She went down to the basement where her kayak had been stored since Labor Day and took the reel of yellow boat-line from the shelf above it. She used the hedge clippers to cut off four feet, wound it around her forearm, then slipped the coil into one of her big pants pockets. Upstairs again in the kitchen, she tucked her Swiss Army knife into the same pocket—the left. The right pocket was for the Lemon Squeezer .38 . . . and one other item, which she took from the drawer next to the stove. Then she spooned out double

rations for Fritzzy, but before she let him start eating, she hugged him and kissed the top of his head. The old cat flattened his ears (more in surprise than distaste, probably; she wasn't ordinarily a kissy mistress) and hurried to his dish as soon as she put him down.

"Make that last," Tess told him. "Patsy will check on you eventually if I don't come back, but it could be a couple of days." She smiled a little and added, "I love you, you scruffy old thing."

"Right, right," Fritzzy said, then got busy eating.

Tess checked her DON'T GET CAUGHT memo one more time, mentally inventorying her supplies as she did so and going over the steps she intended to take once she got to Lacemaker Lane. She thought the most important thing to keep in mind was that things wouldn't go as she hoped they would. When it came to things like this, there were always jokers in the deck. Ramona might not be at home. Or she might be home but with her rapist-murderer son, the two of them cozied up in the living room and watching something uplifting from Blockbuster. *Saw*, maybe. The younger brother—no doubt known in Colewich as Little Driver—might be there, as well. For all Tess knew, Ramona might be hosting a Tupperware party or a reading circle tonight. The important thing was not to get flummoxed by unexpected developments. If she couldn't improvise, Tess thought it very likely that she really was leaving her house in Stoke Village for the last time.

She burned the DON'T GET CAUGHT memo in the fireplace, stirred the ashes apart with the poker, then put on her leather jacket and a pair of thin leather gloves. The jacket had a deep pocket in the lining. Tess slipped one of her butcher knives into it, just for good luck, then told herself not to forget it was there. The last thing she needed this weekend was an accidental mastectomy.

Just before stepping out the door, she set the burglar alarm.

The wind surrounded her immediately, flapping the collar of her jacket and the legs of her cargo pants. Leaves swirled in mini-cyclones. In the not-quite-dark sky above her tasteful little piece of Connecticut suburbia, clouds scudded across the face of a three-quarter moon. Tess thought it was a fine night for a horror movie.

She got into her Expedition and closed the door. A leaf spun down on the windshield, then dashed away. “I’ve lost my mind,” she said matter-of-factly. “It fell out and died in that culvert, or when I was walking around the store. It’s the only explanation for this.”

She started the engine. Tom the Tomtom lit up and said, “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

“That’s right, my friend.” Tess leaned forward and programmed 75 Lacemaker Lane into Tom’s tidy little mechanical head.

She had checked out Ramona's neighborhood on Google Earth, and it looked the same when she got there. So far, so good. Brewster was a small New England town, Lacemaker Lane was on the outskirts, and the houses were far apart. Tess cruised past number 75 at a sedately suburban twenty miles an hour, determining that the lights were on and only a single car—a late-model Subaru that almost screamed librarian—was in the driveway. There was no sign of a cab-over Pete or any other big rig. No old Bondo-patched pickup, either.

The street ended in a turnaround. Tess took it, came back, and turned into Norville's driveway without giving herself a chance to hesitate. She killed the lights and the motor, then took a long, deep breath.

"Come back safe, Tess," Tom said from his place on the dashboard. "Come back safe and I'll take you to your next stop."

"I'll do my best." She grabbed her yellow legal pad (there was now nothing written on it) and got out of her car. She held the pad to the front of her jacket as she walked to Ramona Norville's door. Her moonshadow—perhaps all that was left of the Old Tess—walked beside her.

Norville's front door had beveled glass strips on either side. They were thick and warped the view, but Tess could make out nice wallpaper and a hallway floored with polished wood. There was an end table with a couple of magazines on it. Or maybe they were catalogues. There was a big room at the end of the hall. The sound of a TV came from there. She heard singing, so Ramona probably wasn't watching *Saw*. In fact—if Tess was right and the song was “Climb Ev'ry Mountain”—Ramona was watching *The Sound of Music*.

Tess rang the doorbell. From inside came a run of chimes that sounded like the opening notes of “Dixie”—a strange choice for New England, but then, if Tess was right about her, Ramona Norville was a strange woman.

Tess heard the clump of big feet and made a half-turn, so the light from the beveled glass would catch only a bit of her face. She lowered her blank pad from her chest and made writing motions with one gloved hand. She let her shoulders slump a little. She was a woman taking some kind of survey. It was Sunday evening, she was tired, all she wanted was to discover the name of this woman's favorite toothpaste (or maybe if she had Prince Albert in a can) and then go home.

Don't worry, Ramona, you can open the door, anybody can see that I'm harmless, the kind of woman who wouldn't say boo to a goose.

From the corner of her eye she glimpsed a distorted fish-face swim into view behind the beveled glass. There was a pause that seemed to last a very long time, then Ramona Norville opened the door. “Yes? Can I help y—”

Tess turned back. The light from the open door fell on her face. And the shock she saw on Norville's face, the utter drop-jaw shock, told her everything she needed to know.

“*You?* What are *you* doing h—”

Tess pulled the Lemon Squeezer .38 from her right front pocket. On the drive from Stoke Village she had imagined it getting stuck in there—had imagined it with nightmarish clarity—but it came out smoothly.

“Move back from the door. If you try to shut it, I’ll shoot you.”

“You won’t,” Norville said. She didn’t move back, but she didn’t shut the door, either. “Are you crazy?”

“Get inside.”

Norville was wearing a big blue housecoat, and when Tess saw the front of it rise precipitously, she raised the gun. “If you even start to yell, I’ll shoot. You better believe me, bitch, because I’m not even close to kidding.”

Norville’s large bosom deflated. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth and her eyes were shifting from side to side in their sockets. She didn’t look like a librarian now, and she didn’t look jovial and welcoming. To Tess she looked like a rat caught outside its hole.

“If you fire that gun, the whole neighborhood will hear.”

Tess doubted that, but didn’t argue. “It won’t matter to you, because you’ll be dead. Get inside. If you behave yourself and answer my questions, you might still be alive tomorrow morning.”

Norville backed up, and Tess came in through the open door with the gun held stiffly out in front of her. As soon as she closed the door—she did it with her foot—Norville stopped moving. She was standing by the little table with the catalogues on it.

“No grabbing, no throwing,” Tess said, and saw by the twitch of the other woman’s mouth that grabbing and throwing had indeed been in Ramona’s mind. “I can read you like a book. Why else would I be here? Keep backing up. All the way down to the living room. I just love the Trapp Family when they’re really rocking.”

“You’re crazy,” Ramona said, but she began to back up again. She was wearing shoes. Even in her housecoat she was wearing big ugly shoes. Men’s laceups. “I have no idea what you’re doing here, but—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Mommy. Don’t you *dare*. It was all on your face when you opened the door. Every bit of it. You thought I was dead, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“It’s just us girls, so why not fess up?”

They were in the living room now. There were sentimental paintings on the walls—clowns, waifs with big eyes—and lots of shelves and tables cluttered with knickknacks: snowglobes, troll babies, Hummel figures, Care Bears, a

ceramic candy house à la Hansel and Gretel. Although Norville was a librarian, there were no books in evidence. Facing the TV was a La-Z-Boy with a hassock in front of it. There was a TV tray beside the chair. On it was a bag of Cheez Doodles, a large bottle of Diet Coke, the remote control, and a *TV Guide*. On top of the television was a framed photograph of Ramona and another woman with their arms around each other and their cheeks pressed together. It looked as if it had been taken at an amusement park or a county fair. In front of the photo was a glass candy dish that gleamed with sparkle-points of light beneath the overhead fixture.

“How long have you been doing it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How long have you been pimping for your homicidal rapist of a son?”

Norville’s eyes flickered, but again she denied it . . . which presented Tess with a problem. When she had come here, killing Ramona Norville had seemed not just an option but the most likely outcome. Tess had been almost positive she could do it, and that the boat-rope in the left front pocket of her cargo pants would go unused. Now, however, she discovered she couldn’t go ahead unless the woman admitted her complicity. Because what had been written on her face when she’d seen Tess standing at her door, bruised but otherwise very much alive, wasn’t enough.

Not quite enough.

“When did it start? How old was he? Fifteen? Did he claim he was ‘just foolin around’? That’s what a lot of them claim when they first start.”

“I have no idea what you mean. You come to the library and put on a perfectly acceptable presentation—lackluster, obviously you were only there for the money, but at least it filled the open date on our calendar—and the next thing I know you’re on my doorstep, pointing a gun and making all sorts of wild—”

“It’s no good, Ramona. I saw his picture on the Red Hawk website. Ring and all. He raped me and tried to kill me. He thought he *did* kill me. *And you sent me to him.*”

Norville’s mouth dropped open in a gruesome combination of shock, dismay, and guilt. “*That’s not true! You stupid cunt, you don’t know what you’re talking about!*” She started forward.

Tess raised the gun. “Nuh-uh, don’t do that. No.”

Norville stopped, but Tess didn’t think she would stay stopped for long. She was nerving herself up for either fight or flight. And because she had to know Tess would follow her if she tried to run deeper into the house, it would probably be fight.

The Trapp Family was singing again. Given the situation Tess was in—that she had put herself in—all that happy choral crap was maddening. Keeping the Lemon Squeezer trained on Norville with her right hand, Tess picked up the remote with her left and muted the TV. She started to put the remote down again, then froze. There were two things on top of the TV, but at first she had only registered the picture of Ramona and her girlfriend; the candy dish had just earned a glance.

Now she saw that the sparkles she had assumed were coming from the cut-glass sides of the dish weren’t coming from the sides at all. They were coming from something inside. Her earrings were in the dish. Her diamond earrings.

Norville grabbed the Hansel and Gretel candy house from its shelf and threw it. She threw it hard. Tess ducked and the candy house went an inch over her head, shattering on the wall behind her. She stepped backward, tripped over the hassock, and went sprawling. The gun flew from her hand.

They both went for it, Norville dropping to her knees and slamming her shoulder against Tess’s arm and shoulder like a football tackle intent on sacking the quarterback. She grabbed the gun, at first juggling it and then securing her grip. Tess reached inside her jacket and closed her hand around the handle of the butcher knife that was her backup, aware that she was going to be too late. Norville was too big . . . and too maternal. Yes, that was it. She had protected that rogue son of hers for years, and was intent on protecting him now. Tess should have shot her in the hall, the moment the door was shut behind her.

But I couldn’t, she thought, and even at this moment, knowing it was the truth brought some comfort. She got up on her knees, hand still inside the jacket, facing Ramona Norville.

“You’re a shitty writer and you were a shitty guest speaker,” Norville said. She was smiling, speaking faster and faster. Her voice had a nasal auctioneer’s lilt. “You phoned in your talk the same way you phone in your stupid books. You were perfect for him and he was going to do someone, I know the signs. I

sent you that way and it worked out right and I'm glad he fucked you. I don't know what you thought you were going to do, coming here, but this is what you get."

She pulled the trigger and there was nothing but a dry click. Tess had taken lessons when she bought the gun, and the most important had been not to put a bullet in the chamber that would first fall under the hammer. Just in case the trigger was pulled by accident.

An expression of almost comical surprise came over Norville's face. It made her young again. She looked down at the gun, and when she did, Tess drew the knife from the inside pocket of the jacket, stumbled forward, and jammed it up to the hilt in Norville's belly.

The woman made a glassy "OOO-OOOO" sound that tried to be a scream and failed. Tess's pistol dropped and Ramona staggered back against the wall, looking down at the handle of the knife. One flailing arm struck a rank of Hummel figures. They tumbled from the shelf and shattered on the floor. She made that "OOO-OOOO" sound again. The front of the housecoat was still unstained, but blood began to patter from beneath its hem, onto Ramona Norville's manshoes. She put her hands on the haft of the knife, tried to tug it free, and made the "OOO-OOOO" for the third time.

She looked up at Tess, unbelieving. Tess looked back. She was remembering something that had happened on her tenth birthday. Her father had given her a slingshot, and she had gone out looking for things to shoot with it. At some point, five or six blocks from her house, she had seen a raggedy-eared stray dog rooting in a garbage can. She had put a small rock in her slingshot and fired at it, only meaning to scare the dog away (or so she told herself), but hitting it in the rump instead. The dog had made a miserable *ike-ike-ike* sound and run away, but before it did, it gave Tess a look of reproach she had never forgotten. She would have given anything to take that casual shot back, and she had never fired her slingshot at another living thing. She understood that killing was a part of life—she felt no compunction about swatting mosquitoes, put down traps when she saw mouse-droppings in the cellar, and had eaten her fair share of Mickey D's Quarter Pounders—but then she had believed she would never again be able to hurt something that way without feeling remorse or regret. She suffered neither in the living room of the house on Lacemaker

Lane. Perhaps because, in the end, it had been self-defense. Or perhaps that wasn't it at all.

"Ramona," she said, "I'm feeling a certain kinship to Richard Widmark right now. This is what we do to squealers, honey."

Norville was standing in a puddle of her own blood and her housecoat was at last blooming with blood-poppies. Her face was pale. Her dark eyes were huge and glittery with shock. Her tongue came out and swiped slowly across her lower lip.

"Now you can roll around for a long time, thinkin' it over—how would that be?"

Norville began to slide. Her manshoes made squittering sounds in the blood. She groped for one of the other shelves and pulled it off the wall. A platoon of Care Bears tilted forward and committed suicide.

Although she still felt no regret or remorse, Tess found that, in spite of her big talk, she had very little inner Tommy Udo; she had no urge to watch or prolong Norville's suffering. She bent and picked up the .38. From the right front pocket of her cargo pants she removed the item she had taken from the kitchen drawer beside her stove. It was a quilted oven glove. It would silence a single pistol shot quite effectively, as long as the caliber wasn't too big. She had learned this while writing *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes on a Mystery Cruise*.

"You don't understand." Norville's voice was a harsh whisper. "You can't do this. It's a mistake. Take me . . . hospital."

"The mistake was yours." Tess pulled the oven glove over the pistol, which was in her right hand. "It was not having your son castrated as soon as you found out what he was." She put the oven glove against Ramona Norville's temple, turned her head slightly to one side, and pulled the trigger. There was a low, emphatic *pluh* sound, like a big man clearing his throat.

That was all.

She hadn't googled Al Strehlke's home address; she had been expecting to get that from Norville. But, as she had already reminded herself, things like this never went according to plan. What she had to do now was keep her wits about her and carry the job through to the end.

Norville's home office was upstairs, in what had probably been meant as a spare bedroom. There were more Care Bears and Hummels here. There were also half a dozen framed pictures, but none of her sons, her main squeeze, or the late great Roscoe Strehlke; these were autographed photos of writers who had spoken to the Brown Baggers. The room reminded Tess of the Stagger Inn's foyer, with its band photos.

She didn't ask for an autograph on my photo, Tess thought. Of course not, why would she want to be reminded of a shitty writer like me? I was basically just a talking head to fill a hole in her schedule. Not to mention meat for her son's meatgrinder. How lucky for them that I came along at the right time.

On Norville's desk, below a bulletin board buried in circulars and library correspondence, was a desktop Mac very much like Tess's. The screen was dark, but the glowing light on the CPU told her it was only sleeping. She pushed one of the keys with a gloved fingertip. The screen refreshed and she was looking at Norville's electronic desktop. No need for those pesky passwords, how nice.

Tess clicked the address book icon, scrolled down to the R's, and found Red Hawk Trucking. The address was 7 Transport Plaza, Township Road, Colewich. She scrolled further, to the S's, and found both her overgrown acquaintance from Friday night and her acquaintance's brother, Lester. Big Driver and Little Driver. They both lived on Township Road, near the company they must have inherited from their father: Alvin at number 23, Lester at number 101.

If there was a third brother, she thought, they'd be The Three Little Truckers. One in a house of straw, one in a house of sticks, one in a house of

bricks. Alas, there are only two.

Downstairs again, she plucked her earrings from the glass dish and put them in her coat pocket. She looked at the dead woman sitting against the wall as she did it. There was no pity in the glance, only the sort of parting acknowledgment anyone may give to a piece of hard work that has now been finished. There was no need to worry about trace evidence; Tess was confident she had left none, not so much as a single strand of hair. The oven-glove—now with a hole blown in it—was back in her pocket. The knife was a common item sold in department stores all over America. For all she knew (or cared), it matched Ramona's own set. So far she was clean, but the hard part might still be ahead. She left the house, got in her car, and drove away. Fifteen minutes later she pulled into the lot of a deserted strip mall long enough to program 23 Township Road, Colewich, into her GPS.

With Tom's guidance, Tess found herself near her destination not long after nine o'clock. The three-quarter moon was still low in the sky. The wind was blowing harder than ever.

Township Road branched off US 47, but at least seven miles from The Stagger Inn and even farther from Colewich's downtown. Transport Plaza was at the intersection of the two roads. According to the signage, three trucking firms and a moving company were based here. The buildings that housed them had an ugly prefab look. The smallest belonged to Red Hawk Trucking. All were dark on this Sunday night. Beyond them were acres of parking lot surrounded by Cyclone fence and lit with high-intensity arc lights. The depot lot was full of parked cabs and freight haulers. At least one of the cab-overs had RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side, but Tess didn't think it was the one pictured on the website, the one with the Proud Papa behind the wheel.

There was a truck stop adjacent to the depot area. The pumps—over a dozen—were lit by the same high-intensity arcs. Bright white fluorescents spilled out from the right side of the main building; the left side was dark. There was another building, this one U-shaped, to the rear. A scattering of cars and trucks was parked there. The sign out by the road was a huge digital job, loaded with bright red information.

RICHEL'S TOWNSHIP ROAD TRUCK STOP
"YOU DRIVE 'EM, WE FILL 'EM"
REG \$2.99 GAL
DIESEL \$2.69 GAL
NEWEST LOTTERY TIX ALWAYS AVAILABLE
RESTAURANT CLOSED SUN. NITE
SORRY NO SHOWERS SUN. NITE
STORE & MOTEL "ALWAYS OPEN"
RVS "ALWAYS WELCOME"

And at the bottom, badly spelled but fervent:

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS!
WIN IN AFGANDISTAN!

With truckers coming and going, fueling up both their rigs and themselves (even with its lights off, Tess could tell that, when open, the restaurant was of the sort where chicken-fried steak, meatloaf, and Mom's Bread Pudding would always be on the menu), the place would probably be a beehive of activity during the week, but on Sunday night it was a graveyard because there was nothing out here, not even a roadhouse like The Stagger.

There was only a single vehicle parked at the pumps, facing out toward the road with a pump nozzle stuck in its gas hatch. It was an old Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights. It was impossible to read the color in the harsh lighting, but Tess didn't have to. She had seen that truck close up, and knew the color. The cab was empty.

"You don't seem surprised, Tess," Tom said as she slowed to a stop on the shoulder of the road and squinted at the store. She could make out a couple of people in there in spite of the glare from the harsh outside lighting, and she could see that one of them was big. *Was he big or real big?* Betsy Neal had asked.

"I'm not surprised at all," she said. "He lives out here. Where else would he go to gas up?"

"Maybe he's getting ready to take a trip."

"This late on Sunday night? I don't think so. I think he was at home, watching *The Sound of Music*. I think he drank up all of his beer and came down here for more. He decided to top off his tank while he was at it."

"You could be wrong, though. Hadn't you better pull in behind the store and follow him when he leaves?"

But Tess didn't want to do that. The front of the truck-stop store was all glass. He might look out and see her when she drove in. Even if the bright lighting above the pump islands made it hard for him to see her face, he might recognize the vehicle. There were lots of Ford SUVs on the road, but after Friday night, Al Strehlke had to be particularly sensitized to black Ford

Expeditions. And there was her license plate—surely he would have noticed her Connecticut license plate on Friday, when he pulled up beside her in the gone-to-weeds parking lot of the deserted store.

There was something else. Something even more important. She got rolling again, putting Richie's Township Road Truck Stop in the rearview.

"I don't want to be behind him," she said. "I want to be ahead of him. I want to be waiting for him."

"What if he's married, Tess?" Tom asked. "What if he's got a wife waiting for him?"

The idea startled her for a moment. Then she smiled, and not just because the only ring he'd been wearing was the one too big to be a ruby. "Guys like him don't have wives," she said. "Not ones that stick around, anyway. There was only one woman in Al's life, and she's dead."

Unlike Lacemaker Lane, there was nothing suburban about Township Road; it was as country as Travis Tritt. The houses were glimmering islands of electric light beneath the glow of the rising moon.

“Tess, you are approaching your destination,” Tom said in his non-imaginary voice.

She breasted a rise, and there on her left was a mailbox marked STREHLKE and 23. The driveway was long, rising on a curve, paved with asphalt, smooth as black ice. Tess turned in without hesitation, but apprehension dropped over her as soon as Township Road was behind her. She had to fight to keep from jamming on the brakes and backing out again. Because if she kept going, she had no choice. She’d be like a bug in a bottle. And even if he *wasn’t* married, what if someone else was up there at the house? Brother Les, for instance? What if Big Driver had been at Tommy’s buying beer and snacks not for one but for two?

Tess killed her headlights and drove on by moonlight.

In her keyed-up state, the driveway seemed to go on forever, but it could have been no more than an eighth of a mile before she saw the lights of Strehlke’s house. It was at the top of the hill, a tidy-looking place that was bigger than a cottage but smaller than a farmhouse. Not a house of bricks, but not a humble house of straw, either. In the story of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf, Tess reckoned this would have been the house of sticks.

Parked on the left side of the house was a long trailer-box with RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side. Parked at the end of the driveway, in front of the garage, was the cab-over Pete from the website. It looked haunted in the moonlight. Tess slowed as she approached it, and then she was flooded with a white glare that dazzled her eyes and lit the lawn and the driveway. It was a motion-activated pole light, and if Strehlke came back while it was on, he would be able to see its glow at the foot of his driveway. Maybe even while he was still approaching on Township Road.

She jammed on the brakes, feeling as she had when, as a teenager, she'd dreamed of finding herself in school with no clothes on. She heard a woman groaning. She supposed it was her, but it didn't sound or feel like her.

"This isn't good, Tess."

"Shut up, Tom."

"He could come back any minute, and you don't know how long the timer on that thing is. You had trouble with the mother. He's *much* bigger than her."

"I said shut *up*!"

She tried to think, but that blaring light made it hard. Shadows from the parked cab-over and the long-box to her left seemed to reach for her with sharp black fingers—boogeyman fingers. Goddam pole light! Of *course* a man like him would have a pole light! She ought to go right now, just turn around on his lawn and drive back down to the road as fast as she could, but she would meet him if she did. She knew it. And with the element of surprise gone, she would die.

Think, Tessa Jean, think!

And oh God, just to make things a little worse, a dog started barking. There was a dog in the house. She imagined a pit bull with a headful of jutting teeth.

"If you're going to stay, you need to get out of sight," Tom said . . . and no, that didn't sound like her voice. Or not *exactly* like her voice. Perhaps it was the one that belonged to her deepest self, the survivor. And the killer—her, too. How many unsuspected selves could a person have, hiding deep inside? She was beginning to think the number might be infinite.

She glanced into her rearview mirror, chewing at her still-swollen lower lip. No approaching headlights yet. But would she even be able to tell, given the combined brilliance of the moon and that Christing pole light?

"It's on a timer," Tom said, "but I'd do something before it goes out, Tess. If you move the car after it does, you'll only trip it again."

She threw the Expedition into four-wheel, started to swing around the cab-over, then stopped. There was high grass on that side. In the pitiless glare of the pole light, he couldn't help but see the tracks she would leave. Even if the Christing light went out, it would come back on again when he drove up and then he would see them.

Inside, the dog continued to weigh in: *Yark! Yark! YarkYarkYark!*

“Drive across the lawn and put it behind the long-box,” Tom said.

“The tracks, though! The *tracks!*”

“You have to hide it somewhere,” Tom returned. He spoke apologetically but firmly. “At least the grass is mown on that side. Most people are pretty unobservant, you know. Doreen Marquis says that all the time.”

“Strehlke’s not a Knitting Society lady, he’s a fucking lunatic.”

But because there was really no choice—not now that she was up here—Tess drove onto the lawn and toward the parked silver long-box through a glare that seemed as bright as a summer noonday. She did it with her bottom slightly raised off the seat, as if by doing that she could somehow magically render the tracks of the Expedition’s passage less visible.

“Even if the motion light is still on when he comes back, he may not be suspicious,” Tom said. “I’ll bet deer trip it all the time. He might even have a light like that to scare them out of his vegetable garden.”

This made sense (and it sounded like her special Tom-voice again), but it did not comfort her much.

Yark! Yark! YarkYark! Whatever it was, it sounded like it was shitting nickels in there.

The ground behind the silver box was bumpy and bald—other freight-boxes had no doubt been parked on it from time to time—but solid enough. She drove the Expedition as deep into the long-box’s shadow as she could, then killed the engine. She was sweating heavily, producing a rank aroma no deodorant would be able to defeat.

She got out, and the motion light went out when she slammed the door. For one superstitious moment Tess thought she had done it herself, then realized the scary fucking thing had just timed out. She leaned over the warm hood of the Expedition, pulling in deep breaths and letting them out like a runner in the last quarter-mile of a marathon. It might come in handy to know how long it had been on, but that was a question she couldn’t answer. She’d been too scared. It had seemed like hours.

When she had herself under control again, she took inventory, forcing herself to move slowly and methodically. Pistol and oven glove. Both present and accounted for. She didn’t think the oven glove would muffle another shot, not with a hole in it; she’d have to count on the isolation of the little hilltop

house. It was okay that she'd left the knife in Ramona's belly; if she were reduced to trying to take out Big Driver with a butcher knife, she'd be in serious trouble.

And there are only four shots left in the gun, you better not forget that and just start spraying him. Why didn't you bring any more bullets, Tessa Jean? You thought you were planning, but I don't think you did a very good job.

"Shut up," she whispered. "Tom or Fritzzy or whoever you are, just shut up."

The scolding voice ceased, and when it did, Tess realized the real world had also gone silent. The dog had ceased its mad barking when the pole light went off. Now the only sound was the wind and the only light was the moon.

With that terrible glare gone, the long-box provided excellent cover, but she couldn't stay there. Not if she meant to do what she had come here to do. Tess scurried around the back of the house, terrified of tripping another motion light, but feeling she had no choice. There was no light to trip, but the moon went behind a cloud and she stumbled over the cellar bulkhead, almost hitting her head on a wheel barrow when she went to her knees. For a moment as she lay there, she wondered again what she had turned into. She was a member of the Authors Guild who had shot a woman in the head not long ago. After stabbing her in the stomach. *I've gone entirely off the reservation.* Then she thought of him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and quit caring about whether she was on or off the reservation. It was a stupid saying, anyway. And racist in the bargain.

Strehlke *did* have a garden behind his house, but it was small and apparently not worth protecting from the depredations of the deer with a motion light. There was nothing left in it anyway except for a few pumpkins, most now rotting on the vine. She stepped over the rows, rounded the far corner of the house, and there was the cab-over. The moon had come out again and turned its chrome to the liquid silver of sword blades in fantasy novels.

Tess came up behind it, walked along the left side, and knelt by the chin-high (to her, at least) front wheel. She took the Lemon Squeezer out of her pocket. He couldn't drive into his garage because the cab-over was in the way. Even if it hadn't been, the garage was probably full of bachelor rickrack: tools, fishing gear, camping gear, truck parts, cases of discount soda.

That's just guessing. It's dangerous to guess. Doreen would scold you for it.

Of course she would, no one knew the Knitting Society ladies better than Tess did, but those dessert-loving babies rarely took chances. When you did take them, you were forced to make a certain number of guesses.

Tess looked at her watch and was astounded to see it was only twenty-five to ten. It seemed that she had fed Fritz double rations and left the house four

years ago. Maybe five. She thought she heard an approaching engine, then decided she didn't. She wished the wind wasn't blowing so hard, but wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first. It was a saying no Knitting Society lady had ever voiced—Doreen Marquis and her friends were more into things like *soonest begun, soonest done*—but it was a true saying, just the same.

Maybe he really *was* going on a trip, Sunday night or not. Maybe she was still going to be here when the sun came up, chilled to her already aching bones by the constant wind combing this lonely hilltop where she was crazy to be.

No, he's the crazy one. Remember how he danced? His shadow dancing on the wall behind him? Remember how he sang? His squalling voice? You wait for him, Tessa Jean. You wait until hell freezes over. You've come too far to turn back.

She was afraid of that, actually.

It can't be a decorous drawing-room murder. You understand that, don't you?

She did. This particular killing—if she was able to bring it off—would be more *Death Wish* than *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Backstage*. He would pull in, hopefully right up to the cab-over she was hiding behind. He would douse the lights of the pickup, and before his eyes could adjust—

It wasn't the wind this time. She recognized the badly tuned thump of the engine even before the headlights splashed up the curve of the drive. Tess got on one knee and yanked the brim of her cap down so the wind wouldn't blow it off. She would have to approach, and that meant her timing would have to be exquisite. If she tried to shoot him from ambush, she would quite likely miss, even at close range; the gun instructor had told her she could only count on the Lemon Squeezer at ten feet or less. He had recommended she buy a more reliable handgun, but she never had. And getting close enough to make sure of killing him wasn't all. She had to make sure it was Strehlke in the truck, and not the brother or some friend.

I have no plan.

But it was too late to plan, because it was the truck and when the pole light came on, she saw the brown cap with the bleach-splatters on it. She also saw

him wince against the glare, as she had, and knew he was momentarily blinded. It was now or not at all.

I am the Courageous Woman.

With no plan, without even thinking, she walked around the back of the cab-over, not running but taking big, calm strides. The wind gusted around her, flapping her cargo pants. She opened the passenger door and saw the ring with the red stone on his hand. He was grabbing a paper bag with the shape of a square box inside it. Beer, probably a twelve-pack. He turned toward her and something terrible happened: she divided in two. The Courageous Woman saw the animal that had raped her, choked her, and put her in a pipe with two other rotting bodies. Tess saw the slightly broader face and lines around the mouth and eyes that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon. But even as she was registering these things, the Lemon Squeezer barked twice in her hand. The first bullet punctured Strehlke's throat, just below the chin. The second opened a black hole above his bushy right eyebrow and shattered the driver's side window. He fell backward against the door, the hand that had been grasping the top of the paper bag dropping away. He gave a monstrous whole-body twitch, and the hand with the ring on it thudded against the middle of the steering wheel, honking the horn. Inside the house, the dog began to bark again.

"No, it's him!" She stood at the open door with the gun in her hand, staring in. "*It's got to be him!*"

She rushed around the front of the pickup, lost her balance, went to one knee, got up, and yanked open the driver's side door. Strehlke fell out and hit his dead head on the smooth asphalt of his driveway. His hat fell off. His right eye, pulled out of true by the bullet that had entered his head just above it, stared up at the moon. The left one stared at Tess. And it wasn't the face that finally convinced her—the face with lines on it she was seeing for the very first time, the face pitted with old acne scars that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon.

Was he big or real big? Betsy Neal had asked.

Real big, Tess had replied, and he had been . . . but not as big as this man. Her rapist had been six-six, she had thought when he got out of the truck (*this* truck, she was in no doubt about that). Deep in the belly, thick in the thighs,

and as wide as a doorway. But this man had to be at least six-*nine*. She had come hunting a giant and killed a leviathan.

“Oh my God,” Tess said, and the wind whipped her words away. “Oh my dear God, what have I done?”

“You killed me, Tess,” the man on the ground said . . . and that certainly made sense, given the hole in his head and the one in his throat. “You went and killed Big Driver, just like you meant to.”

The strength left her muscles. She went to her knees beside him. Overhead, the moon beamed down from the roaring sky.

“The ring,” she whispered. “The hat. The *truck*.”

“He wears the ring and the hat when he goes hunting,” Big Driver said. “And he drives the pickup. When he goes hunting, I’m on the road in a Red Hawk cab-over and if anyone sees him—especially if he’s sitting down—they think they’re seeing me.”

“Why would he do that?” Tess asked the dead man. “You’re his *brother*.”

“Because he’s crazy,” Big Driver said patiently.

“And because it worked before,” Doreen Marquis said. “When they were younger and Lester got in trouble with the police. The question is whether Roscoe Strehlke committed suicide because of that first trouble, or because Ramona made big brother Al take the blame for it. Or maybe Roscoe was going to tell and Ramona killed him. Made it look like suicide. Which way was it, Al?”

But on this subject Al was quiet. Dead quiet, in fact.

“I’ll tell you how I think it was,” Doreen said in the moonlight. “I think Ramona knew that if your little brother wound up in an interrogation room with an even half-smart policeman, he might confess to something a lot worse than touching a girl on the schoolbus or peeking into cars on the local lovers’ lane or whatever ten-cent crime it was he’d been accused of. I think she talked *you* into taking the blame, and she talked her husband into dummifying up. Or browbeat him into it, that’s more like it. And either because the police never asked the girl to make a positive identification or because she wouldn’t press charges, they got away with it.”

Al said nothing.

Tess thought, *I'm kneeling here talking in imaginary voices. I've lost my mind.*

Yet part of her knew she was trying to *keep* her mind. The only way to do it was to understand, and she thought the story she was telling in Doreen's voice was either true or close to true. It was based on guesswork and slopped-on deduction, but it made sense. It fit in with what Ramona had said in her last moments.

You stupid cunt, you don't know what you're talking about.

And: You don't understand. It's a mistake.

It was a mistake, all right. Everything she'd done tonight had been a mistake.

No, not everything. She was in on it. She knew.

"Did you know?" Tess asked the man she had killed. She reached out to grab Strehlke's arm, then drew away. It would be still warm under his sleeve. Still thinking it was alive. "*Did you?*"

He didn't answer.

"Let me try," Doreen said. And in her kindest, you-can-tell-me-everything old lady voice, the one that always worked in the books, she asked: "How *much* did you know, Mr. Driver?"

"I sometimes suspected," he said. "Mostly I didn't think about it. I had a business to run."

"Did you ever ask your mother?"

"I might have," he said, and Tess thought his strangely cocked right eye evasive. But in that wild moonlight, who could tell about such things? Who could tell for sure?

"When girls disappeared? Is that when you asked?"

To this Big Driver made no reply, perhaps because Doreen had begun to sound like Fritzy. And like Tom the Tomtom, of course.

"But there was never any proof, was there?" This time it was Tess herself. She wasn't sure he would answer her voice, but he did.

"No. No proof."

"And you didn't *want* proof, did you?"

No answer this time, so Tess got up and walked unsteadily to the bleach-spattered brown hat, which had blown across the driveway and onto the lawn.

Just as she picked it up, the pole light went off again. Inside, the dog stopped barking. This made her think of Sherlock Holmes, and standing there in the windy moonlight, Tess heard herself voicing the saddest chuckle to ever come from a human throat. She took off her hat, stuffed it into her jacket pocket, and put his on in its place. It was too big for her, so she took it off again long enough to adjust the strap in back. She returned to the man she had killed, the one she judged perhaps not quite innocent . . . but surely too innocent to deserve the punishment the Courageous Woman had meted out.

She tapped the brim of the brown hat and asked, “Is this the one you wear when you go on the road?” Knowing it wasn’t.

Strehlke didn’t answer, but Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society, did. “Of course not. When you’re driving for Red Hawk, you wear a Red Hawk cap, don’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” Strehlke said.

“And you don’t wear your ring, either, do you?”

“No. Too gaudy for customers. Not businesslike. And what if someone at one of those skanky truck-stops—someone too drunk or stoned to know better—saw it and thought it was real? No one would risk mugging me, I’m too big and strong for that—at least I was until tonight—but someone might shoot me. And I don’t deserve to be shot. Not for a fake ring, and not for the terrible things my brother might have done.”

“And you and your brother never drive for the company at the same time, do you, dear?”

“No. When he’s out on the road, I mind the office. When I’m out on the road, he . . . well. I guess you know what he does when I’m out on the road.”

“You should have *told!*” Tess screamed down at him. “Even if you only suspected, you should have *told!*”

“He was scared,” Doreen said in her kindly voice. “Weren’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” Al said. “I was scared.”

“Of your brother?” Tess asked, either unbelieving or not wanting to believe. “Scared of your *kid brother?*”

“Not him,” Al Strehlke said. “Her.”

When Tess got back in her car and started the motor, Tom said: “There was no way you could know, Tess. And it all happened so fast.”

That was true, but it ignored the central looming fact: by going after her rapist like a vigilante in a movie, she had sent herself to hell.

She raised the gun to her temple, then lowered it again. She couldn't, not now. She still had an obligation to the women in the pipe, and any other women who might join them if Lester Strehlke escaped. And after what she had just done, it was more important than ever that he not escape.

She had one more stop to make. But not in her Expedition.

The driveway at 101 Township Road wasn't long, and it wasn't paved. It was just a pair of ruts with bushes growing close enough to scrape the sides of the blue F-150 pickup truck as she drove it up to the little house. Nothing neat about this one; this one was a huddled old creep-manse that could have been straight out of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. How life did imitate art, sometimes. And the cruder the art, the closer the imitation.

Tess made no attempt at stealth—why bother to kill the headlights when Lester Strehlke would know the sound of his brother's truck almost as well as the sound of his brother's voice?

She was still wearing the bleach-splattered brown cap Big Driver wore when he wasn't on the road, the lucky cap that turned out to be unlucky in the end. The ring with the fake ruby stone was far too big for any of her fingers, so she had put it into the left front pocket of her cargo pants. Little Driver had dressed and driven as his big brother when he went out hunting, and while he might never have time enough (or brains enough) to appreciate the irony of his last victim coming to him with the same accessories, Tess did.

She parked by the back door, turned off the engine, and got out. She carried the gun in one hand. The door was unlocked. She stepped into a shed that smelled of beer and spoiled food. A single sixty-watt bulb hung from the ceiling on a length of dirty cord. Straight ahead were four overflowing plastic garbage cans, the thirty-two-gallon kind you could buy at Walmart. Behind them, stacked against the shed wall, were what looked like five years' worth of *Uncle Henry's* swap guide. To the left was another door, up a single step. It would lead to the kitchen. It had an old-fashioned latch rather than a knob. The door squalled on unoiled hinges when she depressed the latch and pushed it open. An hour ago, such a squall would have terrified her into immobility. Now it didn't bother her in the slightest. She had work to do. That was all it came down to, and it was a relief to be free of all that emotional baggage. She

stepped into the smell of whatever greasy meat Little Driver had fried for his supper. She could hear a TV laugh-track. Some sitcom. *Seinfeld*, she thought.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Lester Strehlke called from the vicinity of the laugh-track. “I ain’t got but a beer and a half left, if that’s what you came for. I’m gonna drink up and then go to bed.” She followed the sound of his voice. “If you’d a called, I coulda saved you the tr—”

She came into the room. He saw her. Tess hadn’t speculated on what his reaction might be to the reappearance of his last victim, carrying a gun and wearing the hat Lester himself wore when his urges came over him. Even if she had, she could never have predicted the extremity of the one she saw. His mouth dropped open, and then his entire face froze. The can of beer he was holding dropped from his hand and fell into his lap, spraying foam onto his only article of clothing, a pair of yellowing Jockey shorts.

He’s seeing a ghost, she thought as she walked toward him, raising the gun. *Good.*

There was time to see that, although the living room was a bachelor mess and there were no snowglobes or cutie-poo figurines, the TV-watching setup was the same as the one at his mother’s house on Lacemaker Lane: the La-Z-Boy, the TV tray (here holding a final unopened can of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a bag of Doritos instead of Diet Coke and Cheez Doodles), the same *TV Guide*, the one with Simon Cowell on it.

“You’re dead,” he whispered.

“No,” Tess replied. She put the barrel of the Lemon Squeezer against the side of his head. He made one feeble effort to grab her wrist, but it was far too little and much too late. “That’s you.”

She pulled the trigger. Blood came out of his ear and his head snapped briskly to the side. He looked like a man trying to free up a kink in his neck. On the TV, George Costanza said, “I was in the pool, I was in the pool.” The audience laughed.

It was almost midnight, and the wind was blowing harder than ever. When it gusted, Lester Strehlke's whole house shook, and each time Tess thought of the little pig who had built his house out of sticks.

The little piggy who had lived in this one would never have to worry about his shitty house blowing away, because he was dead in his La-Z-Boy. *And he wasn't a little piggy, anyway*, Tess thought. *He was a big bad wolf.*

She was sitting in the kitchen, writing on the pages of a grimy Blue Horse tablet she had found in Strehlke's upstairs bedroom. There were four rooms on the second floor, but the bedroom was the only one not stuffed with junk, everything from iron bedsteads to an Evinrude boat-motor that looked as if it might have been dropped from the top of a five-story building. Because it would take weeks or months to go through those caches of the useless, the worthless, and the pointless, Tess turned all her attention on Strehlke's bedroom and searched it carefully. The Blue Horse tablet was a bonus. She had found what she was looking for in an old travel-tote pushed to the very back of the closet shelf, where it had been camouflaged—not very successfully—with old issues of *National Geographic*. In it was a tangle of women's underwear. Her own panties were on top. Tess put them in her pocket and, packrat-like, replaced them with the coil of yellow boat-line. Nobody would be surprised to find rope in a rapist-killer's suitcase of trophy lingerie. Besides, she would not be needing it.

"Tonto," said the Lone Ranger, "our work here is done."

What she wrote, as *Seinfeld* gave way to *Frasier* and *Frasier* gave way to the local news (one Chicopee resident had won the lottery and another had suffered a broken back after falling from a scaffolding, so *that* balanced out), was a confession in the form of a letter. As she reached page five, the TV news gave way to an apparently endless commercial for Almighty Cleanse. Danny Vierra was saying, "Some Americans have a bowel movement only once every

two or three *days*, and because this has gone on for years, *they believe it's normal!* Any doctor worth his salt will tell you *it's not!*”

The letter was headed *TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES*, and the first four pages consisted of a single paragraph. In her head it sounded like a scream. Her hand was tired, and the ballpoint pen she'd found in a kitchen drawer (RED HAWK TRUCKING printed in fading gilt on the barrel) was showing signs of drying up, but she was, thank God, almost done. While Little Driver went on not watching TV from where he sat in his La-Z-Boy, she at last started a new paragraph at the top of page five.

I will not make excuses for what I have done. Nor can I say that I did it while of unsound mind. I was furious and I made a mistake. It's that simple. Under other circumstances—those less terrible, I mean—I might say, “It was a natural mistake, the two of them look almost enough alike to be twins.” But these are not other circumstances.

I have thought of atonement as I sat here, writing these pages and listening to his television and to the wind—not because I hope for forgiveness, but because it seems wrong to do wrong without at least trying to balance it out with something right. (Here Tess thought of how the lottery winner and the man with the broken back evened out, but the concept would be difficult to express when she was so tired, and she wasn't sure it was germane, anyway.) I thought of going to Africa and working with AIDS victims. I thought about going down to New Orleans and volunteering at a homeless shelter or a food bank. I thought about going to the Gulf to clean oil off birds. I thought of donating the million dollars or so I have put away for my retirement to some group that works to end violence against women. There must be such a society in Connecticut, perhaps even several of them.

But then I thought of Doreen Marquis, from the Knitting Society, and what she says once in every book . . .

What Doreen said at least once in every book was *murderers always overlook the obvious. You may depend on it, dears.* And even as Tess wrote

about atonement, she realized it would be impossible. Because Doreen was absolutely right.

Tess had worn a cap so that she wouldn't leave hair that could be analyzed for DNA. She had worn gloves which she had never taken off, even while driving Alvin Strehlke's pickup. It was not too late to burn this confession in Lester's kitchen woodstove, drive to Brother Alvin's considerably nicer house (house of bricks instead of house of sticks), get into her Expedition, and head back to Connecticut. She could go home, where Fritzzy was waiting. At first glance she looked clear, and it might take the police a few days to get to her, but get to her they would. Because while she had been concentrating on the forensic molehills, she had overlooked the obvious mountain, exactly like the killers in the Knitting Society books.

The obvious mountain had a name: Betsy Neal. A pretty woman with an oval face, mismatched Picasso eyes, and a cloud of dark hair. She had recognized Tess, had even gotten her autograph, but that wasn't the clincher. The clincher was going to be the bruises on her face (*I hope that didn't happen here*, Neal had said), and the fact that Tess had asked about Alvin Strehlke, describing his truck and recognizing the ring when Neal mentioned it. *Like a ruby*, Tess had agreed.

Neal would see the story on TV or read it in the newspaper—with three dead from the same family, how could she avoid it?—and she would go to the police. The police would come to Tess. They would check the Connecticut gun-registration records as a matter of course and discover that Tess owned a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver known as a Lemon Squeezer. They would ask her to produce it so they could test-fire it and do comparisons to the bullets found in the three victims. And what was she going to say? Was she going to look at them from her blackened eyes and say (in a voice still hoarse from the choking Lester Strehlke had given her) that she lost it? Would she continue to stick to that story even after the dead women were found in the culvert pipe?

Tess picked up her borrowed pen and began writing again.

. . . what she says once in every book: murderers always overlook the obvious. Doreen also once took a leaf from Dorothy Sayers's book and left a murderer with a loaded gun, telling him to take the honorable way

out. I have a gun. My brother Mike is my only surviving close relative. He lives in Taos, New Mexico. I suppose he may inherit my estate. It depends on the legal ramifications of my crimes. If he does, I hope the authorities who find this letter will show it to him, and convey my wish that he donate the bulk to some charitable organization that works with women who have been sexually abused.

I am sorry about Big Driver—Alvin Strehlke. He was not the man who raped me, and Doreen is sure he didn't rape and kill those other women, either.

Doreen? No, *her*. Doreen wasn't real. But Tess was too tired to go back and change it. And what the hell—she was near the end, anyway.

For Ramona and that piece of garbage in the other room, I make no apologies. They are better off dead.

So, of course, am I.

She paused long enough to look back over the pages and see if there was anything she had forgotten. There didn't appear to be, so she signed her name—her final autograph. The pen ran dry on the last letter and she put it aside.

“Got anything to say, Lester?” she asked.

Only the wind replied, gusting hard enough to make the little house groan in its joints and puff drafts of cold air.

She went back into the living room. She put the hat on his head and the ring on his finger. That was the way she wanted them to find him. There was a framed photo on the TV. In it, Lester and his mother stood with their arms around each other. They were smiling. Just a boy and his mum. She looked at it for awhile, then left.

She felt that she should go back to the deserted store where it had happened and finish her business there. She could sit for awhile in the weedy lot, listen to the wind ticking the old sign (YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU), thinking about whatever people think about in the final moments of a life. In her case that would probably be Fritzzy. She guessed Patsy would take him, and that would be fine. Cats were survivors. They didn't much care who fed them, as long as the bowl was full.

It wouldn't take long to get to the store at this hour, but it still seemed too far. She was very tired. She decided she would get into Al Strehlke's old truck and do it there. But she didn't want to splatter her painfully written confession with her blood, that seemed very wrong considering all the bloodshed detailed within it, and so—

She took the pages from the Blue Horse tablet into the living room, where the TV played on (a young man who looked like a criminal was now selling a robot floorwasher), and dropped them in Strehlke's lap. "Hold that for me, Les," she said.

"No problem," he replied. She noted that a portion of his diseased brains was now drying on his bony naked shoulder. That was all right.

Tess went out into the windy dark and slowly climbed behind the wheel of the pickup truck. The scream of the hinge when the driver's door swung shut was oddly familiar. But no, not so odd; hadn't she heard it at the store? Yes. She had been trying to do him a favor, because he was going to do her one—he was going to change her tire so she could go home and feed her cat. "I didn't want his battery to run down," she said, and laughed.

She put the short barrel of the .38 against her temple, then reconsidered. A shot like that wasn't always effective. She wanted her money to help women who had been hurt, not to pay for her care as she lay unconscious year after year in some home for human vegetables.

The mouth, that was better. Surer.

The barrel was oily against her tongue, and she could feel the small nub of the sight digging into the roof of her mouth.

I've had a good life—pretty good, anyway—and although I made a terrible mistake at the end of it, maybe that won't be held against me if there's something after this.

Ah, but the night wind was very sweet. So were the fragile fragrances it carried through the half-open driver's side window. It was a shame to leave, but what choice? It was time to go.

Tess closed her eyes, tightened her finger on the trigger, and that was when Tom spoke up. It was strange that he could do that, because Tom was in her Expedition, and the Expedition was at the other brother's house, almost a mile down the road from here. Also, the voice she heard was nothing like the one she usually manufactured for Tom. Nor did it sound like her own. It was a cold voice. And she—she had a gun in her mouth. She couldn't talk at all.

"She was never a very good detective, was she?"

She took it out. "Who? Doreen?"

In spite of everything, she was shocked.

"Who else, Tessa Jean? And why *would* she be a good one? She came from the old you. Didn't she?"

Tess supposed that was true.

"Doreen believes Big Driver didn't rape and kill those other women. Isn't that what you wrote?"

"*Me*," Tess said. "*I'm* sure. I was just tired, that's all. And shocked, I suppose."

"Also guilty."

"Yes. Also guilty."

"Do guilty people make good deductions, do you think?"

No. Perhaps they didn't.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That you only solved part of the mystery. Before you could solve all of it—you, not some cliché-ridden old lady detective—something admittedly unfortunate happened."

"Unfortunate? Is that what you call it?" From a great distance, Tess heard herself laugh. Somewhere the wind was making a loose gutter click against an

eave. It sounded like the 7Up sign at the deserted store.

“Before you *shoot* yourself,” the new, strange Tom said (he was sounding more female all the time), “why don’t you *think* for yourself? But not here.”

“Where, then?”

Tom didn’t answer this question, and didn’t have to. What he said was, “And take that fucking confession with you.”

Tess got out of the truck and went back inside Lester Strehlke’s house. She stood in the dead man’s kitchen, thinking. She did it aloud, in Tom’s voice (which sounded more like her own all the time). Doreen seemed to have taken a hike.

“Al’s housekey will be on the ring with his ignition key,” Tom said, “but there’s the dog. You don’t want to forget the dog.”

No, that would be bad. Tess went to Lester’s refrigerator. After a little rummaging, she found a package of hamburger at the back of the bottom shelf. She used an issue of *Uncle Henry’s* to double-wrap it, then went back into the living room. She plucked the confession from Strehlke’s lap, doing it gingerly, very aware that the part of him that had hurt her—the part that had gotten three people killed tonight—lay just beneath the pages. “I’m taking your ground chuck, but don’t hold it against me. I’m doing you a favor. It smells punky-going-on-rotten.”

“A thief as well as a murderer,” Little Driver said in his droning deadvoice. “Isn’t that nice.”

“Shut up, Les,” she said, and left.

Before you shoot yourself, why don't you think for yourself?

As she drove the old pickup back down the windy road to Alvin Strehlke's house, she tried to do that. She was starting to think Tom, even when he wasn't in the vehicle with her, was a better detective than Doreen Marquis on her best day.

"I'll keep it short," Tom said. "If you don't think Al Strehlke was part of it—and I mean a *big* part—you're crazy."

"Of course I'm crazy," she replied. "Why else would I be trying to convince myself that I didn't shoot the wrong man when I know I *did*?"

"That's guilt talking, not logic," Tom replied. He sounded maddeningly smug. "He was no innocent little lamb, not even a half-black sheep. Wake up, Tessa Jean. They weren't just brothers, they were partners."

"*Business* partners."

"Brothers are never just business partners. It's always more complicated than that. Especially when you've got a woman like Ramona for a mother."

Tess turned up Al Strehlke's smoothly paved driveway. She supposed Tom could be right about that. She knew one thing: Doreen and her Knitting Society friends had never met a woman like Ramona Norville.

The pole light went on. The dog started up: *yark-yark, yarkyarkyark*. Tess waited for the light to go out and the dog to quiet down.

"There's no way I'll ever know for sure, Tom."

"You can't be certain of that unless you look."

"Even if he knew, *he wasn't the one who raped me.*"

Tom was silent for a moment. She thought he'd given up. Then he said, "When a person does a bad thing and another person knows but doesn't stop it, they're equally guilty."

"In the eyes of the law?"

"Also in the eyes of *me*. Say it was just Lester who did the hunting, the raping, and the killing. I don't think so, but say it was. If big brother knew and

said nothing, that makes him worth killing. In fact, I'd say bullets were too good for him. Impaling on a hot poker would be closer to justice."

Tess shook her head wearily and touched the gun on the seat. One bullet left. If she had to use it on the dog (and really, what was one more killing among friends), she would have to hunt for another gun, unless she meant to try and hang herself, or something. But guys like the Strehlkes usually had firearms. That was the beauty part, as Ramona would have said.

"If he knew, yes. But an if that big didn't deserve a bullet in the head. The mother, yes—on that score, the earrings were all the proof I needed. But there's no proof here."

"Really?" Tom's voice was so low Tess could barely hear it. "Go see."

The dog didn't bark when she clumped up the steps, but she could picture it standing just inside the door with its head down and its teeth bared.

"Goober?" What the hell, it was as good a name for a country dog as any. "My name's Tess. I have some hamburger for you. I also have a gun with one bullet in it. I'm going to open the door now. If I were you, I'd choose the meat. Okay? Is it a deal?"

Still no barking. Maybe it took the pole light to set him off. Or a juicy female burglar. Tess tried one key, then another. No good. Those two were probably for the trucking office. The third one turned in the lock, and she opened the door before she could lose her courage. She had been visualizing a bulldog or a Rottweiler or a pit bull with red eyes and slavering jaws. What she saw was a Jack Russell terrier who was looking at her hopefully and thumping its tail.

Tess put the gun in her jacket pocket and stroked the dog's head. "Good God," she said. "To think I was *terrified* of you."

"No need to be," Goober said. "Say, where's Al?"

"Don't ask," she said. "Want some hamburger? I warn you, it may have gone off."

"Give it to me, baby," Goober said.

Tess fed him a chunk of the hamburger, then came in, closed the door, and turned on the lights. Why not? It was only her and Goober, after all.

Alvin Strehlke had kept a neater house than his younger brother. The floors and walls were clean, there were no stacks of *Uncle Henry's Swap Guide*, and she actually saw a few books on the shelves. There were also several clusters of Hummel figures, and a large framed photo of Momzilla on the wall. Tess found that a touch suggestive, but it was hardly proof positive. Of anything. *If there was a photo of Richard Widmark in his famous Tommy Udo role, that might be different.*

"What are you smiling about?" Goober asked. "Want to share?"

“Actually, no,” Tess said. “Where should we start?”

“I don’t know,” Goober said. “I’m just the dog. How about some more of that tasty cow?”

Tess fed him some more meat. Goober got up on his hind legs and turned around twice. Tess wondered if she were going insane.

“Tom? Anything to say?”

“You found your underpants at the other brother’s house, right?”

“Yes, and I took them. They’re torn . . . and I’d never want to wear them again even if they weren’t . . . but they’re *mine*.”

“And what else did you find besides a bunch of undies?”

“What do you mean, what else?”

But Tom didn’t need to tell her that. It wasn’t a question of what she had found; it was a question of what she hadn’t: no purse and no keys. Lester Strehlke had probably thrown the keys into the woods. It was what Tess herself would have done in his place. The bag was a different matter. It had been a Kate Spade, very pricey, and inside was a sewn-in strip of silk with her name on it. If the bag—and the stuff in the bag—wasn’t at Lester’s house, and if he didn’t throw it into the woods with her keys, where is it?

“I vote for here,” Tom said. “Let’s look around.”

“Meat!” Goober cried, and did another pirouette.

Where should she start?

“Come on,” Tom said. “Men keep most of their secrets in one of two places: the study or the bedroom. Doreen might not know that, but you do. And this house doesn’t have a study.”

She went into Al Strehlke’s bedroom (trailed by Goober), where she found an extra-long double bed made up in no-nonsense military style. Tess looked under it. Nada. She started to turn toward the closet, paused, then pivoted back to the bed. She lifted the mattress. Looked. After five seconds—maybe ten—she uttered a single word in a dry flat voice.

“Jackpot.”

Lying on the box spring were three ladies’ handbags. The one in the middle was a cream-colored clutch that Tess would have recognized anywhere. She flipped it open. There was nothing inside but some Kleenex and an eyebrow pencil with a cunning little lash-comb hidden in the top half. She looked for the silk strip with her name on it, but it was gone. It had been removed carefully, but she saw one tiny cut in the fine Italian leather where the stitches had been unpicked.

“Yours?” Tom asked.

“You know it is.”

“What about the eyebrow pencil?”

“They sell those things by the thousands in drugstores all over Amer—”

“Is it yours?”

“Yes. It is.”

“Are you convinced yet?”

“I . . .” Tess swallowed. She was feeling something, but she wasn’t sure what it was. Relief? Horror? “I guess I am. But *why?* Why *both* of them?”

Tom didn’t say. He didn’t need to. Doreen might not know (or want to admit it if she did, because the old ladies who followed her adventures didn’t like the ooky stuff), but Tess supposed she did. Because Mommy fucked both

of them up. That's what a psychiatrist would say. Lester was the rapist; Al was the fetishist who participated vicariously. Maybe he even helped with one or both of the women in the pipe. She'd never know for sure.

"It would probably take until dawn to search the whole house," Tom said, "but you can search the rest of this room, Tessa Jean. He probably destroyed everything from the purse—cut up the credit cards and tossed them in the Colewich River, would be my guess—but you have to make sure, because anything with your name on it would lead the police right to your door. Start with the closet."

Tess didn't find her credit cards or anything else belonging to her in the closet, but she did find something. It was on the top shelf. She got off the chair she'd been standing on and studied it with growing dismay: a stuffed duck that might have been some child's favorite toy. One of its eyes was missing and its synthetic fur was matted. That fur was actually gone in places, as if the duck had been petted half to death.

On the faded yellow beak was a dark maroon splash.

"Is that what I think it is?" Tom asked.

"Oh Tom, I think so."

"The bodies you saw in the culvert . . . could one of them have been a child's body?"

No, neither of them had been that small. But maybe the culvert running beneath Stagg Road hadn't been the Strehlke brothers' only body dump.

"Put it back on the shelf. Leave it for the police to find. You need to make sure he doesn't have a computer with stuff on it about you. Then you need to get the hell out of here."

Something cold and wet nuzzled Tess's hand. She almost screamed. It was Goober, looking up at her with bright eyes.

"More meat!" Goober said, and Tess gave him some.

"If Al Strehlke has a computer," Tess said, "you can be sure it's password-protected. And his probably won't be open for me to poke around in."

"Then take it and throw it in the goddam river when you go home. Let it sleep with the fishes."

But there was no computer.

At the door, Tess fed Goober the rest of the hamburger. He would probably puke it all up on the rug, but that wasn't going to bother Big Driver.

Tom said, "Are you satisfied, Tessa Jean? Are you satisfied you didn't kill an innocent man?"

She supposed she must be, because suicide no longer seemed like an option. "What about Betsy Neal, Tom? What about her?"

Tom didn't answer . . . and once again didn't need to. Because, after all, he was she.

Wasn't she?

Tess wasn't entirely sure about that. And did it matter, as long as she knew what to do next? As for tomorrow, it was another day. Scarlett O'Hara had been right about that much.

What mattered most was that the police had to know about the bodies in the culvert. If only because somewhere there were friends and relatives who were still wondering. Also because . . .

"Because the stuffed duck says there might be more."

That was her own voice.

And that was all right.

At seven-thirty the next morning, after less than three hours of broken, nightmare-haunted sleep, Tess booted up her office computer. But not to write. Writing was the farthest thing from her mind.

Was Betsy Neal single? Tess thought so. She had seen no wedding ring that day in Neal's office, and while she might have missed that, there had been no family pictures, either. The only picture she could remember seeing was a framed photo of Barack Obama . . . and *he* was already married. So yes—Betsy Neal was probably divorced or single. And probably unlisted. In which case, a computer search would do her no good at all. Tess supposed she could go to The Stagger Inn and find her there . . . but she didn't *want* to go back to The Stagger. Ever again.

"Why are you buying trouble?" Fritzy said from the windowsill. "At least check the telephone listings for Colewich. And what's that I smell on you? Is that *dog*?"

"Yes. That's Goober."

"Traitor," Fritzy said contemptuously.

Her search turned up an even dozen Neals. One was an E Neal. E for Elizabeth? There was one way to find out.

With no hesitation—that would have almost certainly have caused her to lose her courage—Tess punched in the number. She was sweating, and her heart was beating rapidly.

The phone rang once. Twice.

It's probably not her. It could be an Edith Neal. An Edwina Neal. Even an Elvira Neal.

Three times.

If it is Betsy Neal's phone, she's probably not even there. She's probably on vacation in the Catskills—

Four times.

—or shacked up with one of the Zombie Bakers, how about that? The lead guitarist. They probably sing “Can Your Pussy Do the Dog” together in the shower after they—

The phone was picked up, and Tess recognized the voice in her ear at once.

“Hello, you’ve reached Betsy, but I can’t come to the phone right now. There’s a beep coming, and you know what to do when you hear it. Have a nice day.”

I had a bad day, thanks, and last night was ever so much w—

The beep came, and Tess heard herself talking before she was even aware she meant to. “Hello, Ms. Neal, this is Tessa Jean calling—the Willow Grove Lady? We met at The Stagger Inn. You gave me back my Tomtom and I signed an autograph for your gran. You saw how marked up I was and I told you some lies. It wasn’t a boyfriend, Ms. Neal.” Tess began to speak faster, afraid that the message tape would run out before she finished . . . and she discovered she badly wanted to finish. “I was raped and that was bad, but then I tried to make it right and . . . I . . . I have to talk to you about it because—”

There was a click on the line and then Betsy Neal herself was in Tess’s ear. “Start again,” she said, “but go slow. I just woke up and I’m still half asleep.”

They met for lunch on the Colewich town common. They sat on a bench near the bandstand. Tess didn't think she was hungry, but Betsy Neal forced a sandwich on her, and Tess found herself eating it in large bites that made her think of Goober snarfing up Lester Strehlke's hamburger.

"Start at the beginning," Betsy said. She was calm, Tess thought—almost preternaturally so. "Start from the beginning and tell me everything."

Tess began with the invitation from Books & Brown Baggers. Betsy Neal said little, only occasionally adding an "Uh-huh" or "Okay" to let Tess know she was still following the story. Telling it was thirsty work. Luckily, Betsy had also brought two cans of Dr. Brown's cream soda. Tess took one and drank it greedily.

When she finished, it was past one in the afternoon. The few people who had come to the common to eat their lunches were gone. There were two women walking babies in strollers, but they were a good distance away.

"Let me get this straight," Betsy Neal said. "You were going to kill yourself, and then some phantom voice told you to go back to Alvin Strehlke's house, instead."

"Yes," Tess replied. "Where I found my purse. And the duck with the blood on it."

"Your panties you found in the younger brother's house."

"Little Driver's, yes. They're in my Expedition. And the purse. Do you want to see them?"

"No. What about the gun?"

"That's in the car, too. With one bullet left in it." She looked at Neal curiously, thinking: *The girl with the Picasso eyes*. "Aren't you afraid of me? You're the one loose end. The only one I can think of, anyway."

"We're in a public park, Tess. Also, I've got quite the confession on my answering machine at home."

Tess blinked. Something else she hadn't thought of.

“Even if you somehow managed to kill me without those two young mothers over there noticing—”

“I’m not up for killing anyone else. Here or anywhere.”

“Good to know. Because even if you took care of me and my answering machine tape, sooner or later someone would find the cabdriver who brought you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. And when the police got to you, they’d find you wearing a load of incriminating bruises.”

“Yes,” Tess said, touching the worst of them. “That’s true. So what now?”

“For one thing, I think you’d be wise to stay out of sight as much as you can until your pretty face looks pretty again.”

“I think I’m covered there,” Tess said, and told Betsy the tale she had confabulated for Patsy McClain’s benefit.

“That’s pretty good.”

“Ms. Neal . . . Betsy . . . do you believe me?”

“Oh yes,” she said, almost absently. “Now listen. Are you listening?”

Tess nodded.

“We’re a couple of women having a little picnic in the park, and that’s fine. But after today, we’re not going to see each other again. Right?”

“If you say so,” Tess said. Her brain felt the way her jaw did after the dentist gave her a healthy shot of novocaine.

“I do. And you need to have another story made up and ready, just in case the cops talk to either the limo driver who took you home—”

“Manuel. His name was Manuel.”

“—or the taxi driver who took you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. I don’t think anybody will make the connection between you and the Strehlkes as long as none of your ID shows up, but when the story breaks, this is going to be big news and we can’t assume the investigation won’t touch you.” She leaned forward and tapped Tess once above the left breast. “I’m counting on you to make sure that it never touches *me*. Because I don’t deserve that.”

No. She absolutely didn’t.

“What story could you tell the cops, hon? Something good without me in it. Come on, you’re the writer.”

Tess thought for a full minute. Betsy let her.

“I’d say Ramona Norville told me about the Stagg Road shortcut after my appearance—which is true—and that I saw The Stagger Inn when I drove by. I’d say I stopped for dinner a few miles down the road, then decided to go back and have a few drinks. Listen to the band.”

“That’s good. They’re called—”

“I know what they’re called,” Tess said. Maybe the novocaine was wearing off. “I’d say I met some guys, drank a bunch, and decided I was too blitzed to drive. You’re not in this story, because you don’t work nights. I could also say —”

“Never mind, that’s enough. You’re pretty good at this stuff once you get cooking. Just don’t embellish too much.”

“I won’t,” Tess said. “And this is one story I might not ever have to tell. Once they have the Strehlkes and the Strehlkes’ victims, they’ll be looking for a killer a lot different than a little book-writing lady like me.”

Betsy Neal smiled. “Little book-writing lady, my ass. You’re one bad bitch.” Then she saw the look of startled alarm on Tess’s face. “What? What *now*?”

“They *will* be able to tie the women in the pipe to the Strehlkes, won’t they? At least to Lester?”

“Did he put on a rubber before he raped you?”

“No. God, no. His stuff was still on my thighs when I got home. And inside me.” She shuddered.

“Then he’ll have gone in bareback with the others. Plenty of evidence. They’ll put it together. As long as those bad boys really got rid of your ID, you should be home and dry. And there’s no sense worrying about what you can’t control, is there?”

“No.”

“As for you . . . not planning on going home and cutting your wrists in the bathtub, are you? Or using that last bullet?”

“No.” Tess thought of how sweet the night air had smelled as she sat in the truck with the short barrel of the Lemon Squeezer in her mouth. “No, I’m good.”

“Then it’s time for you to leave. I’ll sit here a little longer.”

Tess started to get off the bench, then sat down again. “There’s something I need to know. You’re making yourself an accessory after the fact. Why would

you do that for a woman you don't even know? A woman you only met once?"

"Would you believe because my gran loves your books and would be very disappointed if you went to jail for a triple murder?"

"Not a bit," Tess said.

Betsy said nothing for a moment. She picked up her can of Dr. Brown's, then put it back down again. "Lots of women get raped, wouldn't you say? I mean, you're not unique in that respect, are you?"

No, Tess knew she was not unique in that respect, but knowing it did not make the pain and shame any less. Nor would it help with her nerves while she waited for the results of the AIDS test she'd soon be taking.

Betsy smiled. There was nothing pleasant about it. Or pretty. "Women all over the world are being raped as we speak. Girls, too. Some who undoubtedly have favorite stuffed toys. Some are killed, and some survive. Of the survivors, how many do you think report what happened to them?"

Tess shook her head.

"I don't know, either," Betsy said, "but I know what the National Crime Victimization Survey says, because I googled it. Sixty per cent of rapes go unreported, according to them. Three in every five. I think that might be low, but who can say for sure? Outside of math classes, it's hard to prove a negative. Impossible, really."

"Who raped you?" Tess asked.

"My stepfather. I was twelve. He held a butter knife to my face while he did it. I kept still—I was scared—but the knife slipped when he came. Probably not on purpose, but who can say?"

Betsy pulled down the lower lid of her left eye with her left hand. The right she cupped beneath it, and the glass eye rolled neatly into that palm. The empty socket was mildly red and uptilted, seeming to stare out at the world with surprise.

"The pain was . . . well, there's no way to describe pain like that, not really. It seemed like the end of the world to me. There was blood, too. Lots. My mother took me to the doctor. She said I was to tell him I was running in my stocking feet and slipped on the kitchen linoleum because she'd just waxed it. That I pitched forward and put out my eye on the corner of the kitchen counter. She said the doctor would want to speak to me alone, and she was

depending on me. ‘I know he did a terrible thing to you,’ she said, ‘but if people find out, they’ll blame me. Please, baby, do this one thing for me and I’ll make sure nothing bad ever happens to you again.’ So that’s what I did.”

“And did it happen again?”

“Three or four more times. And I always kept still, because I only had one eye left to donate to the cause. Listen, are we done here or not?”

Tess moved to embrace her, but Betsy cringed back—*like a vampire who sees a crucifix*, Tess thought.

“Don’t do that,” Betsy said.

“But—”

“I know, I know, mucho thanks, solidarity, sisterhood forever, blah-blah-blah. I don’t like to be hugged, that’s all. Are we done here, or not?”

“We’re done.”

“Then go. And I’d throw that gun of yours in the river on your way back home. Did you burn the confession?”

“Yes. You bet.”

Betsy nodded. “And I’ll erase the message you left on my answering machine.”

Tess walked away. She looked back once. Betsy Neal was still sitting on the bench. She had put her eye back in.

In her Expedition, Tess realized it might be an extremely good idea to delete her last few journeys from her GPS. She pushed the power button, and the screen brightened. Tom said: “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

Tess finished making her deletions, then turned the GPS unit off again. No trip, not really; she was only going home. And she thought she could find the way by herself.

FAIR EXTENSION

Streeter only saw the sign because he had to pull over and puke. He puked a lot now, and there was very little warning—sometimes a flutter of nausea, sometimes a brassy taste in the back of his mouth, and sometimes nothing at all; just *urk* and out it came, howdy-do. It made driving a risky proposition, yet he also drove a lot now, partly because he wouldn't be able to by late fall and partly because he had a lot to think about. He had always done his best thinking behind the wheel.

He was out on the Harris Avenue Extension, a broad thoroughfare that ran for two miles beside the Derry County Airport and the attendant businesses: mostly motels and warehouses. The Extension was busy during the daytime, because it connected Derry's west and east sides as well as servicing the airport, but in the evening it was nearly deserted. Streeter pulled over into the bike lane, snatched one of his plastic barf-bags from the pile of them on the passenger seat, dropped his face into it, and let fly. Dinner made an encore appearance. Or would have, if he'd had his eyes open. He didn't. Once you'd seen one bellyful of puke, you'd seen them all.

When the puking phase started, there hadn't been pain. Dr. Henderson had warned him that would change, and over the last week, it had. Not agony as yet; just a quick lightning-stroke up from the gut and into the throat, like acid indigestion. It came, then faded. But it would get worse. Dr. Henderson had told him that, too.

He raised his head from the bag, opened the glove compartment, took out a wire bread-tie, and secured his dinner before the smell could permeate the car. He looked to his right and saw a providential litter basket with a cheerful lop-eared hound on the side and a stenciled message reading **DERRY DAWG SEZ "PUT LITTER IN ITS PLACE!"**

Streeter got out, went to the Dawg Basket, and disposed of the latest ejecta from his failing body. The summer sun was setting red over the airport's flat (and currently deserted) acreage, and the shadow tacked to his heels was long and grotesquely thin. It was as if it were four months ahead of his body, and already fully ravaged by the cancer that would soon be eating him alive.

He turned back to his car and saw the sign across the road. At first—probably because his eyes were still watering—he thought it said HAIR EXTENSION. Then he blinked and saw it actually said FAIR EXTENSION. Below that, in smaller letters: FAIR PRICE.

Fair extension, fair price. It sounded good, and almost made sense.

There was a gravel area on the far side of the Extension, outside the Cyclone fence marking the county airport's property. Lots of people set up roadside stands there during the busy hours of the day, because it was possible for customers to pull in without getting tailgated (if you were quick and remembered to use your blinker, that was). Streeter had lived his whole life in the little Maine city of Derry, and over the years he'd seen people selling fresh fiddleheads there in the spring, fresh berries and corn on the cob in the summer, and lobsters almost year-round. In mud season, a crazy old guy known as the Snowman took over the spot, selling scavenged knickknacks that had been lost in the winter and were revealed by the melting snow. Many years ago Streeter had bought a good-looking rag dolly from this man, intending to give it to his daughter May, who had been two or three back then. He made the mistake of telling Janet that he'd gotten it from the Snowman, and she made him throw it away. "Do you think we can boil a rag doll to kill the germs?" she asked. "Sometimes I wonder how a smart man can be so stupid."

Well, cancer didn't discriminate when it came to brains. Smart or stupid, he was about ready to leave the game and take off his uniform.

There was a card table set up where the Snowman had once displayed his wares. The pudgy man sitting behind it was shaded from the red rays of the lowering sun by a large yellow umbrella that was cocked at a rakish angle.

Streeter stood in front of his car for a minute, almost got in (the pudgy man had taken no notice of him; he appeared to be watching a small portable TV), and then curiosity got the better of him. He checked for traffic, saw none—the Extension was predictably dead at this hour, all the commuters at home eating dinner and taking their noncancerous states for granted—and crossed the four empty lanes. His scrawny shadow, the Ghost of Streeter Yet to Come, trailed out behind him.

The pudgy man looked up. "Hello there," he said. Before he turned the TV off, Streeter had time to see the guy was watching *Inside Edition*. "How are we

tonight?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been better,” Streeter said. “Kind of late to be selling, isn’t it? Very little traffic out here after rush hour. It’s the backside of the airport, you know. Nothing but freight deliveries. Passengers go in on Witcham Street.”

“Yes,” the pudgy man said, “but unfortunately, the zoning goes against little roadside businesses like mine on the busy side of the airport.” He shook his head at the unfairness of the world. “I was going to close up and go home at seven, but I had a feeling one more prospect might come by.”

Streeter looked at the table, saw no items for sale (unless the TV was), and smiled. “I can’t really be a prospect, Mr.—?”

“George Elvid,” the pudgy man said, standing and extending an equally pudgy hand.

Streeter shook with him. “Dave Streeter. And I can’t really be a prospect, because I have no idea what you’re selling. At first I thought the sign said *hair extension*.”

“Do you *want* a hair extension?” Elvid asked, giving him a critical once-over. “I ask because yours seems to be thinning.”

“And will soon be gone,” Streeter said. “I’m on chemo.”

“Oh my. Sorry.”

“Thanks. Although what the point of chemo can be . . .” He shrugged. He marveled at how easy it was to say these things to a stranger. He hadn’t even told his kids, although Janet knew, of course.

“Not much chance?” Elvid asked. There was simple sympathy in his voice—no more and no less—and Streeter felt his eyes fill with tears. Crying in front of Janet embarrassed him terribly, and he’d done it only twice. Here, with this stranger, it seemed all right. Nonetheless, he took his handkerchief from his back pocket and swiped his eyes with it. A small plane was coming in for a landing. Silhouetted against the red sun, it looked like a moving crucifix.

“No chance is what I’m hearing,” Streeter said. “So I guess the chemo is just . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Knee-jerk triage?”

Streeter laughed. “That’s it exactly.”

“Maybe you ought to consider trading the chemo for extra painkillers. Or, you could do a little business with me.”

“As I started to say, I can’t really be a prospect until I know what you’re selling.”

“Oh, well, most people would call it snake-oil,” Elvid said, smiling and bouncing on the balls of his feet behind his table. Streeter noted with some fascination that, although George Elvid was pudgy, his shadow was as thin and sick-looking as Streeter’s own. He supposed everyone’s shadow started to look sick as sunset approached, especially in August, when the end of the day was long and lingering and somehow not quite pleasant.

“I don’t see the bottles,” Streeter said.

Elvid tented his fingers on the table and leaned over them, looking suddenly businesslike. “I sell extensions,” he said.

“Which makes the name of this particular road fortuitous.”

“Never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. Although sometimes a cigar is just a smoke and a coincidence is just a coincidence. Everyone wants an extension, Mr. Streeter. If you were a young woman with a love of shopping, I’d offer you a credit extension. If you were a man with a small penis—genetics can be so cruel—I’d offer you a dick extension.”

Streeter was amazed and amused by the baldness of it. For the first time in a month—since the diagnosis—he forgot he was suffering from an aggressive and extremely fast-moving form of cancer. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh, I’m a great kidder, but I never joke about business. I’ve sold dozens of dick extensions in my time, and was for awhile known in Arizona as *El Pene Grande*. I’m being totally honest, but, fortunately for me, I neither require nor expect you to believe it. Short men frequently want a height extension. If you *did* want more hair, Mr. Streeter, I’d be *happy* to sell you a hair extension.”

“Could a man with a big nose—you know, like Jimmy Durante—get a smaller one?”

Elvid shook his head, smiling. “Now you’re the one who’s kidding. The answer is no. If you need a reduction, you have to go somewhere else. I specialize only in extensions, a very American product. I’ve sold love extensions, sometimes called *potions*, to the lovelorn, loan extensions to the cash-strapped—plenty of those in this economy—time extensions to those

under some sort of deadline, and once an eye extension to a fellow who wanted to become an Air Force pilot and knew he couldn't pass the vision test."

Streeter was grinning, having fun. He would have said having fun was now out of reach, but life was full of surprises.

Elvid was also grinning, as if they were sharing an excellent joke. "And once," he said, "I swung a *reality* extension for a painter—very talented man—who was slipping into paranoid schizophrenia. *That* was expensive."

"How much? Dare I ask?"

"One of the fellow's paintings, which now graces my home. You'd know the name; famous in the Italian Renaissance. You probably studied him if you took an art appreciation course in college."

Streeter continued to grin, but he took a step back, just to be on the safe side. He had accepted the fact that he was going to die, but that didn't mean he wanted to do so today, at the hands of a possible escapee from the Juniper Hill asylum for the criminally insane in Augusta. "So what are we saying? That you're kind of . . . I don't know . . . immortal?"

"Very long-lived, certainly," Elvid said. "Which brings us to what I can do for you, I believe. You'd probably like a *life* extension."

"Can't be done, I suppose?" Streeter asked. Mentally he was calculating the distance back to his car, and how long it would take him to get there.

"Of course it can . . . for a price."

Streeter, who had played his share of Scrabble in his time, had already imagined the letters of Elvid's name on tiles and rearranged them. "Money? Or are we talking about my soul?"

Elvid flapped his hand and accompanied the gesture with a roguish roll of his eyes. "I wouldn't, as the saying goes, know a soul if it bit me on the buttocks. No, money's the answer, as it usually is. Fifteen percent of your income over the next fifteen years should do it. An agenting fee, you could call it."

"That's the length of my extension?" Streeter contemplated the idea of fifteen years with wistful greed. It seemed like a very long time, especially when he stacked it next to what actually lay ahead: six months of vomiting, increasing pain, coma, death. Plus an obituary that would undoubtedly

include the phrase “after a long and courageous battle with cancer.” Yada-yada, as they said on *Seinfeld*.

Elvid lifted his hands to his shoulders in an expansive who-knows gesture. “Might be twenty. Can’t say for sure; this is not rocket science. But if you’re expecting immortality, fuggeddaboutit. All I sell is fair extension. Best I can do.”

“Works for me,” Streeter said. The guy had cheered him up, and if he needed a straight man, Streeter was willing to oblige. Up to a point, anyway. Still smiling, he extended his hand across the card table. “Fifteen percent, fifteen years. Although I have to tell you, fifteen percent of an assistant bank manager’s salary won’t exactly put you behind the wheel of a Rolls-Royce. A Geo, maybe, but—”

“That’s not quite all,” Elvid said.

“Of course it isn’t,” Streeter said. He sighed and withdrew his hand. “Mr. Elvid, it’s been very nice talking to you, you’ve put a shine on my evening, which I would have thought was impossible, and I hope you get help with your mental prob—”

“Hush, you stupid man,” Elvid said, and although he was still smiling, there was nothing pleasant about it now. He suddenly seemed taller—at least three inches taller—and not so pudgy.

It’s the light, Streeter thought. *Sunset light is tricky*. And the unpleasant smell he suddenly noticed was probably nothing but burnt aviation fuel, carried to this little graveled square outside the Cyclone fence by an errant puff of wind. It all made sense . . . but he hushed as instructed.

“Why does a man or woman need an extension? Have you ever asked yourself that?”

“Of course I have,” Streeter said with a touch of asperity. “I work in a bank, Mr. Elvid—Derry Savings. People ask me for loan extensions all the time.”

“Then you know that people need *extensions* to compensate for *shortfalls*—short credit, short dick, short sight, et cetera.”

“Yeah, it’s a short-ass world,” Streeter said.

“Just so. But even things not there have weight. *Negative* weight, which is the worst kind. Weight lifted from you must go somewhere else. It’s simple physics. *Psychic* physics, we could say.”

Streeter studied Elvid with fascination. That momentary impression that the man was taller (and that there were too many teeth inside his smile) had gone. This was just a short, rotund fellow who probably had a green outpatient card in his wallet—if not from Juniper Hill, then from Acadia Mental Health in Bangor. If he *had* a wallet. He certainly had an extremely well-developed delusional geography, and that made him a fascinating study.

“Can I cut to the chase, Mr. Streeter?”

“Please.”

“You have to transfer the weight. In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.”

“I see.” And he did. Elvid was back on message, and the message was a classic.

“But it can’t be just anyone. The old anonymous sacrifice has been tried, and it doesn’t work. It has to be someone you hate. Is there someone you hate, Mr. Streeter?”

“I’m not too crazy about Kim Jong-il,” Streeter said. “And I think jail’s *way* too good for the evil bastards who blew up the USS *Cole*, but I don’t suppose they’ll ever—”

“Be serious or begone,” Elvid said, and once again he seemed taller. Streeter wondered if this could be some peculiar side-effect of the medications he was taking.

“If you mean in my personal life, I don’t hate anyone. There are people I don’t *like*—Mrs. Denbrough next door puts out her garbage cans without the lids, and if a wind is blowing, crap ends up all over my law—”

“If I may misquote the late Dino Martino, Mr. Streeter, everybody hates somebody sometime.”

“Will Rogers said—”

“He was a rope-twirling fabricator who wore his hat down around his eyes like a little kid playing cowboy. Besides, if you really hate nobody, we can’t do business.”

Streeter thought it over. He looked down at his shoes and spoke in a small voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I suppose I hate Tom Goodhugh.”

“Who is he in your life?”

Streeter sighed. “My best friend since grammar school.”

There was a moment of silence before Elvid began bellowing laughter. He strode around his card table, clapped Streeter on the back (with a hand that felt cold and fingers that felt long and thin rather than short and pudgy), then strode back to his folding chair. He collapsed into it, still snorting and roaring. His face was red, and the tears streaming down his face also looked red—bloody, actually—in the sunset light.

“*Your best . . . since grammar . . . oh, that’s . . .*”

Elvid could manage no more. He went into gales and howls and gut-shaking spasms, his chin (strangely sharp for such a chubby face) nodding and dipping at the innocent (but darkening) summer sky. At last he got himself under control. Streeter thought about offering his handkerchief, and decided he didn’t want it on the extension salesman’s skin.

“This is excellent, Mr. Streeter,” he said. “We can do business.”

“Gee, that’s great,” Streeter said, taking another step back. “I’m enjoying my extra fifteen years already. But I’m parked in the bike lane, and that’s a traffic violation. I could get a ticket.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Elvid said. “As you may have noticed, not even a single *civilian* car has come along since we started dickering, let alone a minion of the Derry PD. Traffic never interferes when I get down to serious dealing with a serious man or woman; I see to it.”

Streeter looked around uneasily. It was true. He could hear traffic over on Witcham Street, headed for Upmile Hill, but here, Derry was utterly deserted. *Of course*, he reminded himself, *traffic’s always light over here when the working day is done*.

But *absent?* Completely *absent?* You might expect that at midnight, but not at seven-thirty PM.

“Tell me why you hate your best friend,” Elvid invited.

Streeter reminded himself again that this man was crazy. Anything Elvid passed on wouldn’t be believed. It was a liberating idea.

“Tom was better-looking when we were kids, and he’s *far* better-looking now. He lettered in three sports; the only one I’m even halfway good at is miniature golf.”

“I don’t think they have a cheerleading squad for that one,” Elvid said.

Streeter smiled grimly, warming to his subject. “Tom’s plenty smart, but he lazed his way through Derry High. His college ambitions were nil. But when his grades fell enough to put his athletic eligibility at risk, he’d panic. And then who got the call?”

“You did!” Elvid cried. “Old Mr. Responsible! Tutored him, did you? Maybe wrote a few papers as well? Making sure to misspell the words Tom’s teachers got used to him misspelling?”

“Guilty as charged. In fact, when we were seniors—the year Tom got the State of Maine Sportsman award—I was really *two* students: Dave Streeter and Tom Goodhugh.”

“Tough.”

“Do you know what’s tougher? I had a girlfriend. Beautiful girl named Norma Witten. Dark brown hair and eyes, flawless skin, beautiful cheekbones —”

“Tits that wouldn’t quit—”

“Yes indeed. But, sex appeal aside—”

“Not that you ever *did* put it aside—”

“—I loved that girl. Do you know what Tom did?”

“Stole her from you!” Elvid said indignantly.

“Correct. The two of them came to me, you know. Made a clean breast of it.”

“Noble!”

“Claimed they couldn’t help it.”

“Claimed they were in *love*, L-U-V.”

“Yes. Force of nature. This thing is bigger than both of us. And so on.”

“Let me guess. He knocked her up.”

“Indeed he did.” Streeter was looking at his shoes again, remembering a certain skirt Norma had worn when she was a sophomore or a junior. It was cut to show just a flirt of the slip beneath. That had been almost thirty years ago, but sometimes he still summoned that image to mind when he and Janet made love. He had never made love with Norma—not the Full Monty sort, anyway; she wouldn’t allow it. Although she had been eager enough to drop her pants for Tom Goodhugh. *Probably the first time he asked her.*

“And left her with a bun in the oven.”

“No.” Streeter sighed. “He married her.”

“Then divorced her! Possibly after beating her silly?”

“Worse still. They’re still married. Three kids. When you see them walking in Basse Park, they’re usually holding hands.”

“That’s about the crappiest thing I’ve ever heard. Not much could make it worse. Unless . . .” Elvid looked shrewdly at Streeter from beneath bushy brows. “Unless *you’re* the one who finds himself frozen in the iceberg of a loveless marriage.”

“Not at all,” Streeter said, surprised by the idea. “I love Janet very much, and she loves me. The way she’s stood by me during this cancer thing has been just extraordinary. If there’s such a thing as harmony in the universe, then Tom and I ended up with the right partners. Absolutely. But . . .”

“But?” Elvid looked at him with delighted eagerness.

Streeter became aware that his fingernails were sinking into his palms. Instead of easing up, he bore down harder. Bore down until he felt trickles of blood. “But he *fucking stole her!*” This had been eating him for years, and it felt good to shout the news.

“Indeed he did, and we never cease wanting what we want, whether it’s good for us or not. Wouldn’t you say so, Mr. Streeter?”

Streeter made no reply. He was breathing hard, like a man who has just dashed fifty yards or engaged in a street scuffle. Hard little balls of color had surfaced in his formerly pale cheeks.

“And is that all?” Elvid spoke in the tones of a kindly parish priest.

“No.”

“Get it all out, then. Drain that blister.”

“He’s a millionaire. He shouldn’t be, but he is. In the late eighties—not long after the flood that damn near wiped this town out—he started up a garbage company . . . only he called it Derry Waste Removal and Recycling. Nicer name, you know.”

“Less germy.”

“He came to me for the loan, and although the proposition looked shaky to everyone at the bank, I pushed it through. Do you know *why* I pushed it through, Elvid?”

“Of course! Because he’s your friend!”

“Guess again.”

“Because you thought he’d crash and burn.”

“Right. He sank all his savings into four garbage trucks, and mortgaged his house to buy a piece of land out by the Newport town line. For a landfill. The kind of thing New Jersey gangsters own to wash their dope-and-whore money and use as body-dumps. I thought it was crazy and I couldn’t wait to write the loan. He still loves me like a brother for it. Never fails to tell people how I stood up to the bank and put my job on the line. ‘Dave carried me, just like in high school,’ he says. Do you know what the kids in town call his landfill now?”

“Tell me!”

“Mount Trashmore! It’s huge! I wouldn’t be surprised if it was radioactive! It’s covered with sod, but there are KEEP OUT signs all around it, and there’s probably a Rat Manhattan under that nice green grass! *They’re* probably radioactive, as well!”

He stopped, aware that he sounded ridiculous, not caring. Elvid was insane, but—surprise! Streeter had turned out to be insane, too! At least on the subject of his old friend. Plus . . .

In cancer veritas, Streeter thought.

“So let’s recap.” Elvid began ticking off the points on his fingers, which were not long at all but as short, pudgy, and inoffensive as the rest of him. “Tom Goodhugh was better-looking than you, even when you were children. He was gifted with athletic skills you could only dream of. The girl who kept her smooth white thighs closed in the backseat of your car opened them for Tom. He married her. They are still in love. Children okay, I suppose?”

“Healthy and beautiful!” Streeter spat. “One getting married, one in college, one in high school! *That* one’s captain of the football team! Chip off the old fucking block!”

“Right. And—the cherry on the chocolate sundae—he’s rich and you’re knocking on through life at a salary of sixty thousand or so a year.”

“I got a bonus for writing his loan,” Streeter muttered. “For showing *vision*.”

“But what you actually wanted was a promotion.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m a businessman now, but at one time I was a humble salaryman. Got fired before striking out on my own. Best thing that ever happened to me. I know how these things go. Anything else? Might as well get it all off your chest.”

“He drinks Spotted Hen Microbrew!” Streeter shouted. “Nobody in Derry drinks that pretentious shit! Just him! Just Tom Goodhugh, the Garbage King!”

“Does he have a sports car?” Elvid spoke quietly, the words lined with silk.

“No. If he did, I could at least joke with Janet about sports car menopause. He drives a goddam *Range Rover*.”

“I think there might be one more thing,” Elvid said. “If so, you might as well get that off your chest, too.”

“He doesn’t have cancer.” Streeter almost whispered it. “He’s fifty-one, just like me, and he’s as healthy . . . as a fucking . . . *horse*.”

“So are you,” Elvid said.

“*What?*”

“It’s done, Mr. Streeter. Or, since I’ve cured your cancer, at least temporarily, may I call you Dave?”

“You’re a very crazy man,” Streeter said, not without admiration.

“No, sir. I’m as sane as a straight line. But notice I said *temporarily*. We are now in the ‘try it, you’ll buy it’ stage of our relationship. It will last a week at least, maybe ten days. I urge you to visit your doctor. I think he’ll find remarkable improvement in your condition. But it won’t last. Unless . . .”

“Unless?”

Elvid leaned forward, smiling chummily. His teeth again seemed too many (and too big) for his inoffensive mouth. “I come out here from time to time,” he said. “Usually at this time of day.”

“Just before sunset.”

“Exactly. Most people don’t notice me—they look through me as if I wasn’t there—but you’ll be looking. Won’t you?”

“If I’m better, I certainly will,” Streeter said.

“And you’ll bring me something.”

Elvid’s smile widened, and Streeter saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the man’s teeth weren’t just too big or too many. They were *sharp*.

* * *

Janet was folding clothes in the laundry room when he got back. “There you are,” she said. “I was starting to worry. Did you have a nice drive?”

“Yes,” he said. He surveyed his kitchen. It looked different. It looked like a kitchen in a dream. Then he turned on a light, and that was better. Elvid was the dream. Elvid and his promises. Just a loony on a day pass from Acadia Mental.

She came to him and kissed his cheek. She was flushed from the heat of the dryer and very pretty. She was fifty herself, but looked years younger. Streeter thought she would probably have a fine life after he died. He guessed May and Justin might have a stepdaddy in their future.

“You look good,” she said. “You’ve actually got some color.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” She gave him an encouraging smile that was troubled just beneath. “Come talk to me while I fold the rest of these things. It’s so boring.”

He followed her and stood in the door of the laundry room. He knew better than to offer help; she said he even folded dish-wipers the wrong way.

“Justin called,” she said. “He and Carl are in Venice. At a youth hostel. He said their cabdriver spoke very good English. He’s having a ball.”

“Great.”

“You were right to keep the diagnosis to yourself,” she said. “You were right and I was wrong.”

“A first in our marriage.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Jus has so looked forward to this trip. But you’ll have to fess up when he gets back. May’s coming up from Searsport for Gracie’s wedding, and that would be the right time.” Gracie was Gracie Goodhugh, Tom and Norma’s oldest child. Carl Goodhugh, Justin’s traveling companion, was the one in the middle.

“We’ll see,” Streeter said. He had one of his puke-bags in his back pocket, but he had never felt less like upchucking. Something he *did* feel like was eating. For the first time in days.

Nothing happened out there—you know that, right? This is just a little psychosomatic elevation. It’ll recede.

“Like my hairline,” he said.

“What, honey?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, and speaking of Gracie, Norma called. She reminded me it was their turn to have us to dinner at their place Thursday night. I said I’d ask you, but that you were awfully busy at the bank, working late hours, all this bad-mortgage stuff. I didn’t think you’d want to see them.”

Her voice was as normal and as calm as ever, but all at once she began crying big storybook tears that welled in her eyes and then went rolling down her cheeks. Love grew humdrum in the later years of a marriage, but now his swelled up as fresh as it had been in the early days, the two of them living in a crappy apartment on Kossuth Street and sometimes making love on the living-room rug. He stepped into the laundry room, took the shirt she was folding out of her hands, and hugged her. She hugged him back, fiercely.

“This is just so hard and unfair,” she said. “We’ll get through it. I don’t know how, but we will.”

“That’s right. And we’ll start by having dinner on Thursday night with Tom and Norma, just like we always do.”

She drew back, looking at him with her wet eyes. “Are you going to tell them?”

“And spoil dinner? Nope.”

“Will you even be able to eat? Without . . .” She put two fingers to her closed lips, puffed her cheeks, and crossed her eyes: a comic puke-pantomime that made Streeter grin.

“I don’t know about Thursday, but I could eat something now,” he said. “Would you mind if I rustled myself up a hamburger? Or I could go out to McDonald’s . . . maybe bring you back a chocolate shake . . .”

“My God,” she said, and wiped her eyes. “It’s a miracle.”

* * *

“I wouldn’t call it a miracle, exactly,” Dr. Henderson told Streeter on Wednesday afternoon. “But . . .”

It was two days since Streeter had discussed matters of life and death under Mr. Elvid's yellow umbrella, and a day before the Streeters' weekly dinner with the Goodhughs, this time to take place at the sprawling residence Streeter sometimes thought of as The House That Trash Built. The conversation was taking place not in Dr. Henderson's office, but in a small consultation room at Derry Home Hospital. Henderson had tried to discourage the MRI, telling Streeter that his insurance wouldn't cover it and the results were sure to be disappointing. Streeter had insisted.

"But what, Roddy?"

"The tumors appear to have shrunk, and your lungs seem clear. I've never seen such a result, and neither have the two other docs I brought in to look at the images. More important—this is just between you and me—the MRI tech has never seen anything like it, and those are the guys I really trust. He thinks it's probably a computer malfunction in the machine itself."

"I feel good, though," Streeter said, "which is why I asked for the test. Is that a malfunction?"

"Are you vomiting?"

"I have a couple of times," Streeter admitted, "but I think that's the chemo. I'm calling a halt to it, by the way."

Roddy Henderson frowned. "That's very unwise."

"The unwise thing was starting it in the first place, my friend. You say, 'Sorry, Dave, the chances of you dying before you get a chance to say Happy Valentine's Day are in the ninetieth percentile, so we're going to fuck up the time you have left by filling you full of poison. You might feel worse if I injected you with sludge from Tom Goodhugh's landfill, but probably not.' And like a fool, I said okay."

Henderson looked offended. "Chemo is the last best hope for—"

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter," Streeter said with a goodnatured grin. He drew a deep breath that went all the way down to the bottom of his lungs. It felt *wonderful*. "When the cancer's aggressive, chemo isn't for the patient. It's just an agony surcharge the patient pays so that when he's dead, the doctors and relatives can hug each other over the coffin and say 'We did everything we could.'"

"That's harsh," Henderson said. "You know you're apt to relapse, don't you?"

“Tell that to the tumors,” Streeter said. “The ones that are no longer there.”

Henderson looked at the images of Deepest Darkest Streeter that were still flicking past at twenty-second intervals on the conference room’s monitor and sighed. They were good pictures, even Streeter knew that, but they seemed to make his doctor unhappy.

“Relax, Roddy.” Streeter spoke gently, as he might once have spoken to May or Justin when a favorite toy got lost or broken. “Shit happens; sometimes miracles happen, too. I read it in the *Reader’s Digest*.”

“In my experience, one has never happened in an MRI tube.” Henderson picked up a pen and tapped it against Streeter’s file, which had fattened considerably over the last three months.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Streeter said.

* * *

Thursday evening in Derry; dusk of a summer night. The declining sun casting its red and dreamy rays over the three perfectly clipped, watered, and landscaped acres Tom Goodhugh had the temerity to call “the old backyard.” Streeter sat in a lawn chair on the patio, listening to the rattle of plates and the laughter of Janet and Norma as they loaded the dishwasher.

Yard? It’s not a yard, it’s a Shopping Channel fan’s idea of heaven.

There was even a fountain with a marble child standing in the middle of it. Somehow it was the bare-ass cherub (pissing, of course) that offended Streeter the most. He was sure it had been Norma’s idea—she had gone back to college to get a liberal arts degree, and had half-assed Classical pretensions—but still, to see such a thing here in the dying glow of a perfect Maine evening and know its presence was a result of Tom’s garbage monopoly . . .

And, speak of the devil (*or the Elvid, if you like that better*, Streeter thought), enter the Garbage King himself, with the necks of two sweating bottles of Spotted Hen Microbrew caught between the fingers of his left hand. Slim and erect in his open-throated Oxford shirt and faded jeans, his lean face perfectly lit by the sunset glow, Tom Goodhugh looked like a model in a magazine beer ad. Streeter could even see the copy: *Live the good life, reach for a Spotted Hen.*

“Thought you might like a fresh one, since your beautiful wife says she’s driving.”

“Thanks.” Streeter took one of the bottles, tipped it to his lips, and drank. Pretentious or not, it was good.

As Goodhugh sat down, Jacob the football player came out with a plate of cheese and crackers. He was as broad-shouldered and handsome as Tom had been back in the day. *Probably has cheerleaders crawling all over him*, Streeter thought. *Probably has to beat them off with a damn stick.*

“Mom thought you might like these,” Jacob said.

“Thanks, Jake. You going out?”

“Just for a little while. Throw the Frisbee with some guys down in the Barrens until it gets dark, then study.”

“Stay on this side. There’s poison ivy down there since the crap grew back.”

“Yeah, we know. Denny caught it when we were in junior high, and it was so bad his mother thought he had cancer.”

“Ouch!” Streeter said.

“Drive home carefully, son. No hot-dogging.”

“You bet.” The boy put an arm around his father and kissed his cheek with a lack of self-consciousness that Streeter found depressing. Tom not only had his health, a still-gorgeous wife, and a ridiculous pissing cherub; he had a handsome eighteen-year-old son who still felt all right about kissing his dad goodbye before going out with his best buds.

“He’s a good boy,” Goodhugh said fondly, watching Jacob mount the stairs to the house and disappear inside. “Studies hard and makes his grades, unlike his old man. Luckily for me, I had you.”

“Lucky for both of us,” Streeter said, smiling and putting a goo of Brie on a Triscuit. He popped it into his mouth.

“Does me good to see you eating, chum,” Goodhugh said. “Me n Norma were starting to wonder if there was something wrong with you.”

“Never better,” Streeter said, and drank some more of the tasty (and no doubt expensive) beer. “I’ve been losing my hair in front, though. Jan says it makes me look thinner.”

“That’s one thing the ladies don’t have to worry about,” Goodhugh said, and stroked a hand back through his own locks, which were as full and rich as

they had been at eighteen. Not a touch of gray in them, either. Janet Streeter could still look forty on a good day, but in the red light of the declining sun, the Garbage King looked thirty-five. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink to excess, and he worked out at a health club that did business with Streeter's bank but which Streeter could not afford himself. His middle child, Carl, was currently doing the European thing with Justin Streeter, the two of them traveling on Carl Goodhugh's dime. Which was, of course, actually the Garbage King's dime.

O man who has everything, thy name is Goodhugh, Streeter thought, and smiled at his old friend.

His old friend smiled back, and touched the neck of his beer bottle to Streeter's. "Life is good, wouldn't you say?"

"Very good," Streeter agreed. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Goodhugh raised his eyebrows. "Where'd you get that?"

"Made it up, I guess," Streeter said. "But it's true, isn't it?"

"If it is, I owe a lot of my pleasant nights to you," Goodhugh said. "It has crossed my mind, old buddy, that I owe you my life." He toasted his insane backyard. "The tenderloin part of it, anyway."

"Nah, you're a self-made man."

Goodhugh lowered his voice and spoke confidentially. "Want the truth? The woman made this man. The Bible says 'Who can find a good woman? For her price is above rubies.' Something like that, anyway. And you introduced us. Don't know if you remember that."

Streeter felt a sudden and almost irresistible urge to smash his beer bottle on the patio bricks and shove the jagged and still foaming neck into his old friend's eyes. He smiled instead, sipped a little more beer, then stood up. "Think I need to pay a little visit to the facility."

"You don't buy beer, you only rent it," Goodhugh said, then burst out laughing. As if he had invented this himself, right on the spot.

"Truer words, et cetera," Streeter said. "Excuse me."

"You really are looking better," Goodhugh called after him as Streeter mounted the steps.

"Thanks," Streeter said. "Old buddy."

* * *

He closed the bathroom door, pushed in the locking button, turned on the lights, and—for the first time in his life—swung open the medicine cabinet door in another person's house. The first thing his eye lighted on cheered him immensely: a tube of Just For Men shampoo. There were also a few prescription bottles.

Streeter thought, *People who leave their drugs in a bathroom the guests use are just asking for trouble.* Not that there was anything sensational: Norma had asthma medicine; Tom was taking blood pressure medicine—Atenolol—and using some sort of skin cream.

The Atenolol bottle was half full. Streeter took one of the tablets, tucked it into the watch-pocket of his jeans, and flushed the toilet. Then he left the bathroom, feeling like a man who has just snuck across the border of a strange country.

* * *

The following evening was overcast, but George Elvid was still sitting beneath the yellow umbrella and once again watching *Inside Edition* on his portable TV. The lead story had to do with Whitney Houston, who had lost a suspicious amount of weight shortly after signing a huge new recording contract. Elvid disposed of this rumor with a twist of his pudgy fingers and regarded Streeter with a smile.

“How have you been feeling, Dave?”

“Better.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Vomiting?”

“Not today.”

“Eating?”

“Like a horse.”

“And I'll bet you've had some medical tests.”

“How did you know?”

“I’d expect no less of a successful bank official. Did you bring me something?”

For a moment Streeter considered walking away. He really did. Then he reached into the pocket of the light jacket he was wearing (the evening was chilly for August, and he was still on the thin side) and brought out a tiny square of Kleenex. He hesitated, then handed it across the table to Elvid, who unwrapped it.

“Ah, Atenolol,” Elvid said. He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed.

Streeter’s mouth opened, then closed slowly.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Elvid said. “If you had a high-stress job like mine, you’d have blood pressure problems, too. And the reflux I suffer from, oy. You don’t want to know.”

“What happens now?” Streeter asked. Even in the jacket, he felt cold.

“Now?” Elvid looked surprised. “Now you start enjoying your fifteen years of good health. Possibly twenty or even twenty-five. Who knows?”

“And happiness?”

Elvid favored him with the roguish look. It would have been amusing if not for the coldness Streeter saw just beneath. And the *age*. In that moment he felt certain that George Elvid had been doing business for a very long time, reflux or no reflux. “The happiness part is up to you, Dave. And your family, of course—Janet, May, and Justin.”

Had he told Elvid their names? Streeter couldn’t remember.

“Perhaps the children most of all. There’s an old saying to the effect that children are our hostages to fortune, but in fact it’s the children who take the *parents* hostage, that’s what I think. One of them could have a fatal or disabling accident on a deserted country road . . . fall prey to a debilitating disease . . .”

“Are you saying—”

“No, no, no! This isn’t some half-assed morality tale. I’m a *businessman*, not a character out of ‘The Devil and Daniel Webster.’ All I’m saying is that your happiness is in your hands and those of your nearest and dearest. And if you think I’m going to show up two decades or so down the line to collect your

soul in my moldy old pocketbook, you'd better think again. The souls of humans have become poor and transparent things."

He spoke, Streeter thought, as the fox might have done after repeated leaps had proved to it that the grapes were really and truly out of reach. But Streeter had no intention of saying such a thing. Now that the deal was done, all he wanted to do was get out of here. But still he lingered, not wanting to ask the question that was on his mind but knowing he had to. Because there was no gift-giving going on here; Streeter had been making deals in the bank for most of his life, and he knew a horse-trade when he saw one. Or when he smelled it: a faint, unpleasant stink like burned aviation fuel.

In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.

But stealing a single hypertension pill wasn't exactly doing the dirty. Was it?

Elvid, meanwhile, was yanking his big umbrella closed. And when it was furled, Streeter observed an amazing and disheartening fact: it wasn't yellow at all. It was as gray as the sky. Summer was almost over.

"Most of my clients are perfectly satisfied, perfectly happy. Is that what you want to hear?"

It was . . . and wasn't.

"I sense you have a more pertinent question," Elvid said. "If you want an answer, quit beating around the bush and ask it. It's going to rain, and I want to get undercover before it does. The last thing I need at my age is bronchitis."

"Where's your car?"

"Oh, was that your question?" Elvid sneered openly at him. His cheeks were lean, not in the least pudgy, and his eyes turned up at the corners, where the whites shaded to an unpleasant and—yes, it was true—cancerous black. He looked like the world's least pleasant clown, with half his makeup removed.

"Your teeth," Streeter said stupidly. "They have *points*."

Your question, Mr. Streeter!

"Is Tom Goodhugh going to get cancer?"

Elvid gaped for a moment, then started to giggle. The sound was wheezy, dusty, and unpleasant—like a dying calliope.

"No, Dave," he said. "Tom Goodhugh isn't going to get cancer. Not *him*."

"What, then? What?"

The contempt with which Elvid surveyed him made Streeter's bones feel weak—as if holes had been eaten in them by some painless but terribly corrosive acid. “Why would you care? You hate him, you said so yourself.”

“But—”

“Watch. Wait. *Enjoy*. And take this.” He handed Streeter a business card. Written on it was THE NON-SECTARIAN CHILDREN'S FUND and the address of a bank in the Cayman Islands.

“Tax haven,” Elvid said. “You'll send my fifteen percent there. If you short me, I'll know. And then woe is you, kiddo.”

“What if my wife finds out and asks questions?”

“Your wife has a personal checkbook. Beyond that, she never looks at a thing. She trusts you. Am I right?”

“Well . . .” Streeter observed with no surprise that the raindrops striking Elvid's hands and arms smoked and sizzled. “Yes.”

“Of course I am. Our dealing is done. Get out of here and go back to your wife. I'm sure she'll welcome you with open arms. Take her to bed. Stick your mortal penis in her and pretend she's your best friend's wife. You don't deserve her, but lucky you.”

“What if I want to take it back,” Streeter whispered.

Elvid favored him with a stony smile that revealed a jutting ring of cannibal teeth. “You can't,” he said.

That was in August of 2001, less than a month before the fall of the Towers.

* * *

In December (on the same day Winona Ryder was busted for shoplifting, in fact), Dr. Roderick Henderson proclaimed Dave Streeter cancer-free—and, in addition, a bona fide miracle of the modern age.

“I have no explanation for this,” Henderson said.

Streeter did, but kept his silence.

Their consultation took place in Henderson's office. At Derry Home Hospital, in the conference room where Streeter had looked at the first pictures of his miraculously cured body, Norma Goodhugh sat in the same chair where Streeter had sat, looking at less pleasant MRI scans. She listened numbly as her

doctor told her—as gently as possible—that the lump in her left breast was indeed cancer, and it had spread to her lymph nodes.

“The situation is bad, but not hopeless,” the doctor said, reaching across the table to take Norma’s cold hand. He smiled. “We’ll want to start you on chemotherapy immediately.”

* * *

In June of the following year, Streeter finally got his promotion. May Streeter was admitted to the Columbia School of Journalism grad school. Streeter and his wife took a long-deferred Hawaii vacation to celebrate. They made love many times. On their last day in Maui, Tom Goodhugh called. The connection was bad and he could hardly talk, but the message got through: Norma had died.

“We’ll be there for you,” Streeter promised.

When he told Janet the news, she collapsed on the hotel bed, weeping with her hands over her face. Streeter lay down beside her, held her close, and thought: *Well, we were going home, anyway.* And although he felt bad about Norma (and sort of bad for Tom), there was an upside: they had missed bug season, which could be a bitch in Derry.

In December, Streeter sent a check for just over fifteen thousand dollars to The Non-Sectarian Children’s Fund. He took it as a deduction on his tax return.

* * *

In 2003, Justin Streeter made the Dean’s List at Brown and—as a lark—invented a video game called Walk Fido Home. The object of the game was to get your leashed dog back from the mall while avoiding bad drivers, objects falling from tenth-story balconies, and a pack of crazed old ladies who called themselves the Canine-Killing Grannies. To Streeter it sounded like a joke (and Justin assured them it *was* meant as a satire), but Games, Inc. took one look and paid their handsome, good-humored son seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the rights. Plus royalties. Jus bought his parents matching Toyota Pathfinder SUVs, pink for the lady, blue for the gentleman. Janet wept

and hugged him and called him a foolish, impetuous, generous, and altogether splendid boy. Streeter took him to Roxie's Tavern and bought him a Spotted Hen Microbrew.

In October, Carl Goodhugh's roommate at Emerson came back from class to find Carl facedown on the kitchen floor of their apartment with the grilled cheese sandwich he'd been making for himself still smoking in the frypan. Although only twenty-two years of age, Carl had suffered a heart attack. The doctors attending the case pinpointed a congenital heart defect—something about a thin atrial wall—that had gone undetected. Carl didn't die; his roommate got to him just in time and knew CPR. But he suffered oxygen deprivation, and the bright, handsome, physically agile young man who had not long before toured Europe with Justin Streeter became a shuffling shadow of his former self. He was not always continent, he got lost if he wandered more than a block or two from home (he had moved back with his still-grieving father), and his speech had become a blurred blare that only Tom could understand. Goodhugh hired a companion for him. The companion administered physical therapy and saw that Carl changed his clothes. He also took Carl on biweekly "outings." The most common "outing" was to Wishful Dishful Ice Cream, where Carl would always get a pistachio cone and smear it all over his face. Afterward the companion would clean him up, patiently, with Wet-Naps.

Janet stopped going with Streeter to dinner at Tom's. "I can't bear it," she confessed. "It's not the way Carl shuffles, or how he sometimes wets his pants—it's the look in his eyes, as if he remembers how he was, and can't quite remember how he got to where he is now. And . . . I don't know . . . there's always something *hopeful* in his face that makes me feel like everything in life is a joke."

Streeter knew what she meant, and often considered the idea during his dinners with his old friend (without Norma to cook, it was now mostly takeout). He enjoyed watching Tom feed his damaged son, and he enjoyed the hopeful look on Carl's face. The one that said, "This is all a dream I'm having, and soon I'll wake up." Jan was right, it was a joke, but it was sort of a good joke.

If you really thought about it.

* * *

In 2004, May Streeter got a job with the *Boston Globe* and declared herself the happiest girl in the USA. Justin Streeter created Rock the House, which would be a perennial bestseller until the advent of Guitar Hero made it obsolete. By then Jus had moved on to a music composition computer program called You Moog Me, Baby. Streeter himself was appointed manager of his bank branch, and there were rumors of a regional post in his future. He took Janet to Cancún, and they had a fabulous time. She began calling him “my nuzzle-bunny.”

Tom’s accountant at Goodhugh Waste Removal embezzled two million dollars and departed for parts unknown. The subsequent accounting review revealed that the business was on very shaky ground; that bad old accountant had been nibbling away for years, it seemed.

Nibbling? Streeter thought, reading the story in *The Derry News*. *Taking it a chomp at a time is more like it.*

Tom no longer looked thirty-five; he looked sixty. And must have known it, because he stopped dying his hair. Streeter was delighted to see that it hadn’t gone white underneath the artificial color; Goodhugh’s hair was the dull and listless gray of Elvid’s umbrella when he had furled it. The hair-color, Streeter decided, of the old men you see sitting on park benches and feeding the pigeons. Call it Just For Losers.

* * *

In 2005, Jacob the football player, who had gone to work in his father’s dying company instead of to college (which he could have attended on a full-boat athletic scholarship), met a girl and got married. Bubbly little brunette named Cammy Dorrington. Streeter and his wife agreed it was a beautiful ceremony, even though Carl Goodhugh hooted, gurgled, and burbled all the way through it, and even though Goodhugh’s oldest child—Gracie—tripped over the hem of her dress on the church steps as she was leaving, fell down, and broke her leg in two places. Until that happened, Tom Goodhugh had looked almost like his former self. Happy, in other words. Streeter did not begrudge him a little happiness. He supposed that even in hell, people got an occasional sip of water,

if only so they could appreciate the full horror of unrequited thirst when it set in again.

The honeymooning couple went to Belize. *I'll bet it rains the whole time*, Streeter thought. It didn't, but Jacob spent most of the week in a rundown hospital, suffering from violent gastroenteritis and pooping into paper didies. He had only drunk bottled water, but then forgot and brushed his teeth from the tap. "My own darn fault," he said.

Over eight hundred US troops died in Iraq. Bad luck for those boys and girls.

Tom Goodhugh began to suffer from gout, developed a limp, started using a cane.

That year's check to The Non-Sectarian Children's Fund was of an extremely good size, but Streeter didn't begrudge it. It was more blessed to give than to receive. All the best people said so.

* * *

In 2006, Tom's daughter Gracie fell victim to pyorrhea and lost all her teeth. She also lost her sense of smell. One night shortly thereafter, at Goodhugh and Streeter's weekly dinner (it was just the two men; Carl's attendant had taken Carl on an "outing"), Tom Goodhugh broke down in tears. He had given up microbrews in favor of Bombay Sapphire gin, and he was very drunk. "I don't understand what's happened to me!" he sobbed. "I feel like . . . I don't know . . . *fucking Job!*"

Streeter took him in his arms and comforted him. He told his old friend that clouds always roll in, and sooner or later they always roll out.

"Well, these clouds have been here a fuck of a long time!" Goodhugh cried, and thumped Streeter on the back with a closed fist. Streeter didn't mind. His old friend wasn't as strong as he used to be.

Charlie Sheen, Tori Spelling, and David Hasselhoff got divorces, but in Derry, David and Janet Streeter celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary. There was a party. Toward the end of it, Streeter escorted his wife out back. He had arranged fireworks. Everybody applauded except for Carl Goodhugh. He

tried, but kept missing his hands. Finally the former Emerson student gave up on the clapping thing and pointed at the sky, hooting.

* * *

In 2007, Kiefer Sutherland went to jail (not for the first time) on DUI charges, and Gracie Goodhugh Dickerson's husband was killed in a car crash. A drunk driver veered into his lane while Andy Dickerson was on his way home from work. The good news was that the drunk wasn't Kiefer Sutherland. The bad news was that Gracie Dickerson was four months pregnant and broke. Her husband had let his life insurance lapse to save on expenses. Gracie moved back in with her father and her brother Carl.

"With their luck, that baby will be born deformed," Streeter said one night as he and his wife lay in bed after making love.

"Hush!" Janet cried, shocked.

"If you say it, it won't come true," Streeter explained, and soon the two nuzzle-bunnies were asleep in each other's arms.

That year's check to the Children's Fund was for thirty thousand dollars. Streeter wrote it without a qualm.

* * *

Gracie's baby came at the height of a February snowstorm in 2008. The good news was that it wasn't deformed. The bad news was that it was born dead. That damned family heart defect. Gracie—toothless, husbandless, and unable to smell anything—dropped into a deep depression. Streeter thought that demonstrated her basic sanity. If she had gone around whistling "Don't Worry, Be Happy," he would have advised Tom to lock up all the sharp objects in the house.

A plane carrying two members of the rock band Blink-182 crashed. Bad news, four people died. Good news, the rockers actually survived for a change . . . although one of them would die not much later.

"I have offended God," Tom said at one of the dinners the two men now called their "bachelor nights." Streeter had brought spaghetti from Cara Mama, and cleaned his plate. Tom Goodhugh barely touched his. In the other room,

Gracie and Carl were watching *American Idol*, Gracie in silence, the former Emerson student hooting and gabbling. “I don’t know how, but I have.”

“Don’t say that, because it isn’t true.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I *do*,” Streeter said emphatically. “It’s foolish talk.”

“If you say so, buddy.” Tom’s eyes filled with tears. They rolled down his cheeks. One clung to the line of his unshaven jaw, dangled there for a moment, then plinked into his uneaten spaghetti. “Thank God for Jacob. *He’s* all right. Working for a TV station in Boston these days, and his wife’s in accounting at Brigham and Women’s. They see May once in awhile.”

“Great news,” Streeter said heartily, hoping Jake wouldn’t somehow contaminate his daughter with his company.

“And you still come and see me. I understand why Jan doesn’t, and I don’t hold it against her, but . . . I look forward to these nights. They’re like a link to the old days.”

Yes, Streeter thought, *the old days when you had everything and I had cancer.*

“You’ll always have me,” he said, and clasped one of Goodhugh’s slightly trembling hands in both of his own. “Friends to the end.”

* * *

2008, what a year! Holy fuck! China hosted the Olympics! Chris Brown and Rihanna became nuzzle-bunnies! Banks collapsed! The stock market tanked! And in November, the EPA closed Mount Trashmore, Tom Goodhugh’s last source of income. The government stated its intention to bring suit in matters having to do with groundwater pollution and illegal dumping of medical wastes. *The Derry News* hinted that there might even be criminal action.

Streeter often drove out along the Harris Avenue Extension in the evenings, looking for a certain yellow umbrella. He didn’t want to dicker; he only wanted to shoot the shit. But he never saw the umbrella or its owner. He was disappointed but not surprised. Deal-makers were like sharks; they had to keep moving or they’d die.

He wrote a check and sent it to the bank in the Caymans.

* * *

In 2009, Chris Brown beat the hell out of his Number One Nuzzle-Bunny after the Grammy Awards, and a few weeks later, Jacob Goodhugh the ex-football player beat the hell out of his bubbly wife Cammy after Cammy found a certain lady's undergarment and half a gram of cocaine in Jacob's jacket pocket. Lying on the floor, crying, she called him a son of a bitch. Jacob responded by stabbing her in the abdomen with a meat fork. He regretted it at once and called 911, but the damage was done; he'd punctured her stomach in two places. He told the police later that he remembered none of this. He was in a blackout, he said.

His court-appointed lawyer was too dumb to get a bail reduction. Jake Goodhugh appealed to his father, who was hardly able to pay his heating bills, let alone provide high-priced Boston legal talent for his spouse-abusing son. Goodhugh turned to Streeter, who didn't let his old friend get a dozen words into his painfully rehearsed speech before saying *you bet*. He still remembered the way Jacob had so unselfconsciously kissed his old man's cheek. Also, paying the legal fees allowed him to question the lawyer about Jake's mental state, which wasn't good; he was racked with guilt and deeply depressed. The lawyer told Streeter that the boy would probably get five years, hopefully with three of them suspended.

When he gets out, he can go home, Streeter thought. He can watch American Idol with Gracie and Carl, if it's still on. It probably will be.

"I've got my insurance," Tom Goodhugh said one night. He had lost a lot of weight, and his clothes bagged on him. His eyes were bleary. He had developed psoriasis, and scratched restlessly at his arms, leaving long red marks on the white skin. "I'd kill myself if I thought I could get away with making it look like an accident."

"I don't want to hear talk like that," Streeter said. "Things will turn around."

In June, Michael Jackson kicked the bucket. In August, Carl Goodhugh went and did him likewise, choking to death on a piece of apple. The companion might have performed the Heimlich maneuver and saved him, but the companion had been let go due to lack of funds sixteen months before. Gracie heard Carl gurgling but said she thought "it was just his usual bullshit."

The good news was Carl also had life insurance. Just a small policy, but enough to bury him.

After the funeral (Tom Goodhugh sobbed all the way through it, holding onto his old friend for support), Streeter had a generous impulse. He found Kiefer Sutherland's studio address and sent him an AA Big Book. It would probably go right in the trash, he knew (along with the countless other Big Books fans had sent him over the years), but you never knew. Sometimes miracles happened.

* * *

In early September of 2009, on a hot summer evening, Streeter and Janet rode out to the road that runs along the back end of Derry's airport. No one was doing business on the graveled square outside the Cyclone fence, so he parked his fine blue Pathfinder there and put his arm around his wife, whom he loved more deeply and completely than ever. The sun was going down in a red ball.

He turned to Janet and saw that she was crying. He tilted her chin toward him and solemnly kissed the tears away. That made her smile.

"What is it, honey?"

"I was thinking about the Goodhughs. I've never known a family to have such a run of bad luck. *Bad* luck?" She laughed. "*Black* luck is more like it."

"I haven't, either," he said, "but it happens all the time. One of the women killed in the Mumbai attacks was pregnant, did you know that? Her two-year-old lived, but the kid was beaten within an inch of his life. And—"

She put two fingers to her lips. "Hush. No more. Life's not fair. We know that."

"But it *is!*" Streeter spoke earnestly. In the sunset light his face was ruddy and healthy. "Just look at me. There was a time when you never thought I'd live to see 2009, isn't that true?"

"Yes, but—"

"And the marriage, still as strong as an oak door. Or am I wrong?"

She shook her head. He wasn't wrong.

"You've started selling freelance pieces to *The Derry News*, May's going great guns with the *Globe*, and our son the geek is a media mogul at twenty-

five.”

She began to smile again. Streeter was glad. He hated to see her blue.

“Life *is* fair. We all get the same nine-month shake in the box, and then the dice roll. Some people get a run of sevens. Some people, unfortunately, get snake-eyes. It’s just how the world is.”

She put her arms around him. “I love you, sweetie. You always look on the bright side.”

Streeter shrugged modestly. “The law of averages favors optimists, any banker would tell you that. Things have a way of balancing out in the end.”

Venus came into view above the airport, glimmering against the darkening blue.

“Wish!” Streeter commanded.

Janet laughed and shook her head. “What would I wish for? I have everything I want.”

“Me too,” Streeter said, and then, with his eyes fixed firmly on Venus, he wished for more.



STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty worldwide bestsellers. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.



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“A page turner. . . . King . . . seems able to write compact tales or gargantuan ones with equal ease.”

—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

This title is also available from Simon & Schuster Audio

Stephen King shines against a pitch-black canvas with these dark tales . . .

“I believe there is another man inside every man, a stranger,” writes Wilfred Leland James in “**1922**,” and it was that stranger that set off a gruesome train of murder and madness when his wife, Arlette,

proposed selling off the family homestead. . . . “**Big Driver**” follows a mystery writer down a Massachusetts back road, where she is violated and left for dead. But plotting revenge brings her face-to-face with another dangerous stranger: herself. . . . Making a deal with the devil not only saves Henry Streeter from a fatal cancer but provides rich recompense for a lifetime of resentment, in “**Fair Extension.**” . . . And, with her husband away on business, Darcy Anderson looks for batteries in their garage—and makes a horrifying discovery that definitively ends “**A Good Marriage.**”

“*Full Dark, No Stars* is an extraordinary collection, thrillingly merciless, and a career high point.”

—*The Telegraph* (UK)

“These tales show how a skilled storyteller with a good tale to tell can make unsettling fiction compulsively readable.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“King [is] the most wonderfully gruesome man on the planet. . . . The pages practically turn themselves.”

—*USA Today*

And be sure to read
UNDER THE DOME

Stephen King's #1 *New York Times* bestseller . . . his boldest novel since *The Stand*

“It has the scope and flavor of literary Americana, even if King’s particular patch of American turf is located smack in the middle of the Twilight Zone.”

—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

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“A clever blend of *Lord of the Flies*, Malthus, Machiavelli, and *Lost*. . . Wildly entertaining.”

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“King readers will rejoice.”

—*Library Journal*

“One of his most powerful novels ever . . . and our stock of literature in the great American Gothic tradition is brilliantly replenished because of it.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Impressive.”

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“Irresistibly compelling. . . . A nonstop thrill ride as well as a disturbing, moving meditation on our capacity for good and evil.”

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“Moves so fast and grips the reader so tightly that it’s practically incapacitating.”

—*Newsday* (NY)

AFTERWORD

The stories in this book are harsh. You may have found them hard to read in places. If so, be assured that I found them equally hard to write in places. When people ask me about my work, I have developed a habit of skirting the subject with jokes and humorous personal anecdotes (which you can't quite trust; never trust anything a fiction writer says about himself). It's a form of deflection, and a little more diplomatic than the way my Yankee forebears might have answered such questions: *It's none of your business, chummy*. But beneath the jokes, I take what I do very seriously, and have since I wrote my first novel, *The Long Walk*, at the age of eighteen.

I have little patience with writers who *don't* take the job seriously, and none at all with those who see the art of story-fiction as essentially worn out. It's not worn out, and it's not a literary game. It's one of the vital ways in which we try to make sense of our lives, and the often terrible world we see around us. It's the way we answer the question, *How can such things be?* Stories suggest that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—there's a *reason*.

From the start—even before a young man I can now hardly comprehend started writing *The Long Walk* in his college dormitory room—I felt that the best fiction was both propulsive and assaultive. It gets in your face. Sometimes it shouts in your face. I have no quarrel with literary fiction, which usually concerns itself with extraordinary people in ordinary situations, but as both a reader and a writer, I'm much more interested by ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I want to provoke an emotional, even visceral, reaction in my readers. Making them think *as they read* is not my deal. I put that in italics, because if the tale is good enough and the characters vivid enough, thinking will supplant emotion when the tale has been told and the book set aside (sometimes with relief). I can remember reading George Orwell's *1984* at the age of thirteen or so with growing dismay, anger, and outrage, charging through the

pages and gobbling up the story as fast as I could, and what's wrong with that? Especially since I continue to think about it to this day when some politician (I'm thinking of Sarah Palin and her scurrilous "death-panel" remarks) has some success in convincing the public that white is really black, or vice-versa.

Here's something else I believe: if you're going into a very dark place—like Wilf James's Nebraska farmhouse in "1922"—then you should take a bright light, and shine it on everything. If you don't want to see, why in God's name would you dare the dark at all? The great naturalist writer Frank Norris has always been one of my literary idols, and I've kept what he said on this subject in mind for over forty years: "I never truckled; I never took off my hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth."

But Steve, you say, you've made a great many pennies during your career, and as for truth . . . that's variable, isn't it? Yes, I've made a good amount of money writing my stories, but the money was a side effect, never the goal. Writing fiction for money is a mug's game. And sure, truth is in the eye of the beholder. But when it comes to fiction, the writer's only responsibility is to look for the truth inside his own heart. It won't always be the reader's truth, or the critic's truth, but as long as it's the *writer's* truth—as long as he or she doesn't truckle, or hold out his or her hat to Fashion—all is well. For writers who knowingly lie, for those who substitute unbelievable human behavior for the way people really act, I have nothing but contempt. Bad writing is more than a matter of shit syntax and faulty observation; bad writing usually arises from a stubborn refusal to tell stories about what people actually do—to face the fact, let us say, that murderers sometimes help old ladies cross the street.

I have tried my best in *Full Dark, No Stars* to record what people might do, and how they might behave, under certain dire circumstances. The people in these stories are not without hope, but they acknowledge that even our fondest hopes (and our fondest wishes for our fellowmen and the society in which we live) may sometimes be vain. Often, even. But I think they also say that nobility most fully resides not in success but in trying to do the right thing . . . and that when we fail to do that, or willfully turn away from the challenge, hell follows.

“1922” was inspired by a nonfiction book called *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), written by Michael Lesy and featuring photographs taken in the small city of Black River Falls, Wisconsin. I was impressed by the rural isolation of these photographs, and the harshness and deprivation in the faces of many of the subjects. I wanted to get that feeling in my story.

In 2007, while traveling on Interstate 84 to an autographing in western Massachusetts, I stopped at a rest area for a typical Steve King Health Meal: a soda and a candybar. When I came out of the refreshment shack, I saw a woman with a flat tire talking earnestly to a long-haul trucker parked in the next slot. He smiled at her and got out of his rig.

“Need any help?” I asked.

“No, no, I got this,” the trucker said.

The lady got her tire changed, I’m sure. I got a Three Musketeers and the story idea that eventually became “Big Driver.”

In Bangor, where I live, a thoroughfare called the Hammond Street Extension skirts the airport. I walk three or four miles a day, and if I’m in town, I often go out that way. There’s a gravel patch beside the airport fence about halfway along the Extension, and there any number of roadside vendors have set up shop over the years. My favorite is known locally as Golf Ball Guy, and he always appears in the spring. Golf Ball Guy goes up to the Bangor Municipal Golf Course when the weather turns warm, and scavenges up hundreds of used golf balls that have been abandoned under the snow. He throws away the really bad ones and sells the rest at the little spot out on the Extension (the windshield of his car is lined with golf balls—a nice touch). One day when I spied him, the idea for “Fair Extension” came into my mind. Of course I set it in Derry, home of the late and unlamented clown Pennywise, because Derry is just Bangor masquerading under a different name.

The last story in this book came to my mind after reading an article about Dennis Rader, the infamous BTK (bind, torture, and kill) murderer who took the lives of ten people—mostly women, but two of his victims were children—over a period of roughly sixteen years. In many cases, he mailed pieces of his victims’ identification to the police. Paula Rader was married to this monster for thirty-four years,

and many in the Wichita area, where Rader claimed his victims, refuse to believe that she could live with him and not know what he was doing. I did believe—I *do* believe—and I wrote this story to explore what might happen in such a case if the wife suddenly found out about her husband's awful hobby. I also wrote it to explore the idea that it's impossible to fully know anyone, even those we love the most.

All right, I think we've been down here in the dark long enough. There's a whole other world upstairs. Take my hand, Constant Reader, and I'll be happy to lead you back into the sunshine. I'm happy to go there, because I believe most people are essentially good. I know that I am.

It's *you* I'm not entirely sure of.

Bangor, Maine
December 23, 2009

GALLERY BOOKS PRESENTS

"UNDER THE WEATHER"

A NEW STORY FROM
STEPHEN KING...

I've been having this bad dream for a week now, but it must be one of the lucid ones, because I'm always able to back out before it turns into a nightmare. Only this time it seems to have followed me, because Ellen and I aren't alone. There's something under the bed. I can hear it chewing.

You know how it is when you're really scared, right? Your heart seems to stop, your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, your skin goes cold and goose bumps rise up all over your body. Instead of meshing, the cogs in your head just spin and the whole engine heats up. I almost scream, I really do. I think, *It's the thing I don't want to look at. It's the thing in the window seat.*

Then I see the fan overhead, the blades turning at their slowest speed. I see a crack of early morning light running down the middle of the pulled drapes. I see the graying milkweed fluff of Ellen's hair on the other side of the bed. I'm here on the Upper East Side, fifth floor, and everything's okay. The dream was just a dream. As for what's under the bed—

I toss back the covers and slide out onto my knees, like a man who means to pray. But instead of that, I lift the flounce and peer under the bed. I only see a dark shape at first. Then the shape's head turns and two eyes gleam at me. It's Lady. She's not supposed to be under there, and I guess she knows it (hard to tell what a dog knows and what it doesn't), but I must have left the door open when I came to bed. Or maybe it didn't quite latch and she pushed it open with her snout. She must have brought one of her toys with her from the basket in the hall. At least it wasn't the blue bone or the red rat. Those have squeakers in them, and would have wakened Ellen for sure. And Ellen needs her rest. She's been under the weather.

"Lady," I whisper. "Lady, come out of there."

She only looks at me. She's getting on in years and not so steady on her pins as she used to be, but—as the saying goes—she ain't stupid. She's under Ellen's side, where I can't reach her. If I raise my voice she'll have to come, but she knows (I'm pretty sure she knows) that I won't do that, because if I raise my voice, that will wake Ellen.

As if to prove this, Lady turns away from me and the chewing recommences.

Well, I can handle that. I've been living with Lady for eleven years, nearly half my married life. There are three things that get her on her feet. One is the rattle of her leash and a call of "Elevator!" One is the thump of her food dish on the floor. The third—

I get up and walk down the short hall to the kitchen. From the cupboard I take the bag of Snackin' Slices, making sure to rattle it. I don't have to wait long for the muted clitter of cockerclaws. Five seconds and she's right there. She doesn't even bother to bring her toy.

I show her one of the little carrot shapes, then toss it into the living room. A little mean, maybe, and I know she didn't mean to scare the life out of me, but she did. Besides, the fat old thing can use the exercise. She chases her treat. I linger long enough to start the coffeemaker, then go back into the bedroom. I'm careful to pull the door all the way shut.

Ellen's still sleeping, and getting up early has one benefit: no need for the alarm. I turn it off. Let her sleep a little later. It's a bronchial infection. I was scared for a while there, but now she's on the mend.

I go into the bathroom and officially christen the day by brushing my teeth (I've read that in the morning a person's mouth is as germicidally dead as it ever gets, but the habits we learn as children are hard to break). I turn on the shower, get it good and hot, and step in.

The shower's where I do my best thinking, and this morning I think about the dream. Five nights in a row I've had it. (But who's counting.) Nothing really awful happens, but in a way that's the worst part. Because in the dream I know—absolutely *know*—that something awful *will* happen. If I let it.

I'm in an airplane, in business class. I'm in an aisle seat, which is where I prefer to be, so I don't have to squeeze past anybody if I have to go to the toilet. My tray table is down. On it is a bag of peanuts and an orange drink that looks like a vodka sunrise, a drink I've never ordered in real life. The ride is smooth. If there are clouds, we're above them. The cabin is filled with sunlight. Someone is sitting in the window seat, and I know if I look at him (or her, or possibly *it*), I'll see something that will turn my bad dream into a nightmare. If I look into the face of my seatmate, I may lose my mind.

It could crack open like an egg and all the darkness there is might pour out.

I give my soapy hair a quick rinse, step out, dry off. My clothes are folded on a chair in the bedroom. I take them and my shoes into the kitchen, which is now filling with the smell of coffee. Nice. Lady's curled up by the stove, looking at me reproachfully.

"Don't go giving me the stinkeye," I tell her, and nod toward the closed bedroom door. "You know the rules."

She puts her snout down on the floor between her paws.

* * *

I choose cranberry juice while I wait for the coffee. There's OJ, which is my usual morning drink, but I don't want it. Too much like the drink in the dream, I suppose. I have my coffee in the living room with CNN on mute, just reading the crawl at the bottom, which is all a person really needs. Then I turn it off and have a bowl of All-Bran. Quarter to eight. I decide that if the weather's nice when I walk Lady, I'll skip the cab and walk to work.

The weather's nice all right, spring edging into summer and a shine on everything. Carlo, the doorman, is under the awning, talking on his cell phone. "Yuh," he says. "Yuh, I finally got hold of her. She says go ahead, no problem as long as I'm there. She don't trust nobody, and I don't blame her. She got a lot of nice things up there. You come when? Three? You can't make it earlier?" He tips me a wave with one white-gloved hand as I walk Lady down to the corner.

We've got this down to a science, Lady and I. She does it at pretty much the same place every day, and I'm fast with the poop bag. When I come back, Carlo stoops to give her a pat. Lady waves her tail back and forth most fetchingly, but no treat is forthcoming from Carlo. He knows she's on a diet. Or supposed to be.

"I finally got hold of Mrs. Warshawski," Carlo tells me. Mrs. Warshawski is in 5-C, but only technically. She's been gone for a couple of months now. "She was in Vienna."

"Vienna, is that so," I say.

"She told me to go ahead with the exterminators. She was horrified when I told her. You're the only one on four, five, or six who

hasn't complained. The rest of them . . ." He shakes his head and makes a *whoo* sound.

"I grew up in a Connecticut mill town. It pretty well wrecked my sinuses. I can smell coffee, and Ellie's perfume if she puts it on thick, but that's about all."

"In this case, that's probably a blessing. How is Mrs. Nathan? Still under the weather?"

"It'll be a few more days before she's ready to go back to work, but she's a hell of a lot better. She gave me a scare for a while."

"Me, too. She was going out one day—in the rain, naturally—"

"That's El," I say. "Nothing stops her. If she feels like she has to go somewhere, she goes."

"—and I thought to myself, 'That's a real graveyard cough.'" He raises one of his gloved hands in a *stop* gesture. "Not that I really thought—"

"It was on the way to being a hospital cough, anyway. But I finally got her to see the doctor, and now . . . road to recovery."

"Good. Good." Then, returning to what's really on his mind: "Mrs. Warshawski was pretty grossed out when I told her. I said we'd probably just find some spoiled food in the fridge, but I know it's worse than that. So does anybody else on those floors with an intact smeller." He gives a grim little nod. "They're going to find a dead rat in there, you mark my words. Food stinks, but not like that. Only dead things stink like that. It's a rat, all right, maybe a couple of them. She probably put down poison and doesn't want to admit it." He bends down to give Lady another pat. "*You* smell it, don't you, girl? You bet you do."

* * *

There's a litter of purple notes around the coffee-maker. I take the purple pad they came from to the kitchen table and write another.

Ellen: Lady all walked. Coffee ready. If you feel well enough to go out to the park, go! Just not too far. Don't want you to overdo now that you're finally on the mend. Carlo told me again that he "smells a rat." I guess so does everyone else in the neighborhood of 5-C. Lucky for us that you're plugged up and I'm "olfac'trilly challenged."

Haha! If you hear people in Mrs. W's, it's the exterminators. Carlo will be with them, so don't worry. I'm going to walk to work. Need to think summore about the latest male wonder drug. Wish they'd consulted us before they hung that name on it. Remember, DON'T OVERDO. Love you—love you.

I jot half a dozen X's just to underline the point, and sign it with a B in a heart. Then I add it to the other notes around the coffeemaker. I refill Lady's water dish before I leave.

It's twenty blocks or so, and I don't think about the latest male wonder drug. I think about the exterminators, who will be coming at three. Earlier, if they can make it.

* * *

The walk might have been a mistake. The dreams have interrupted my sleep cycle, I guess, and I almost fall asleep during the morning meeting in the conference room. But I come around in a hurry when Pete Wendell shows a mock-up poster for the new Petrov Vodka campaign. I've seen it already, on his office computer while he was fooling with it last week, and looking at it again I know where at least one element of my dream came from.

"Petrov Vodka," Aura McLean says. Her admirable breasts rise and fall in a theatrical sigh. "If that's an example of the new Russian capitalism, it's dead on arrival." The heartiest laughter at this comes from the younger men, who'd like to see Aura's long blond hair spread on a pillow next to them. "No offense to you intended, Pete, it's a great leader."

"None taken," Pete says with a game smile. "We do what we can."

The poster shows a couple toasting each other on a balcony while the sun sinks over a harbor filled with expensive pleasure boats. The cutline beneath reads SUNSET. THE PERFECT TIME FOR A VODKA SUNRISE.

There's some discussion about the placement of the Petrov bottle—right? left? center? below?—and Frank Bernstein suggests that actually adding the recipe might prolong the page view, especially in mags like *Playboy* and *Esquire*. I tune out, thinking about the drink sitting on the tray in my airplane dream, until I realize George

Slattery is calling on me. I'm able to replay the question, and that's a good thing. You don't ask George to chew his cabbage twice.

"I'm actually in the same boat as Pete," I say. "The client picked the name, I'm just doing what I can."

There's some good-natured laughter. There have been many jokes about Vonnell Pharmaceutical's newest drug product.

"I may have something to show you by Monday," I tell them. I'm not looking at George, but he knows where I'm aiming. "By the middle of next week for sure. I want to give Billy a chance to see what he can do." Billy Ederle is our newest hire, and doing his break-in time as my assistant. He doesn't get an invite to the morning meetings yet, but I like him. Everybody at Andrews-Slattery likes him. He's bright, he's eager, and I bet he'll start shaving in a year or two.

George considers this. "I was really hoping to see a treatment today. Even rough copy."

Silence. People study their nails. It's as close to a public rebuke as George gets, and maybe I deserve it. This hasn't been my best week, and laying it off on the kid doesn't look so good. It doesn't feel so good, either.

"Okay," George says at last, and you can feel the relief in the room. It's like a light cool breath of breeze, there and then gone. No one wants to witness a conference room caning on a sunny Friday morning, and I sure don't want to get one. Not with all the other stuff on my mind.

George smells a rat, I think.

"How's Ellen doing?" he asks.

"Better," I tell him. "Thanks for asking."

There are a few more presentations. Then it's over. Thank God.

* * *

I'm almost dozing when Billy Ederle comes into my office twenty minutes later. Check that: I *am* dozing. I sit up fast, hoping the kid just thinks he caught me deep in thought. He's probably too excited to have noticed either way. In one hand he's holding a piece of

poster board. I think he'd look right at home in Podunk High School, putting up a big notice about the Friday night dance.

"How was the meeting?" he asks.

"It was okay."

"Did they bring us up?"

"You know they did. What have you got for me, Billy?"

He takes a deep breath and turns his poster board around so I can see it. On the left is a prescription bottle of Viagra, either actual size or close enough not to matter. On the right—the power side of the ad, as anyone in advertising will tell you—is a prescription bottle of our stuff, but much bigger. Beneath is the cutline: PO-10S, TEN TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VIAGRA!

As Billy looks at me looking at it, his hopeful smile starts to fade. "You don't like it."

"It's not a question of like or don't like. In this business it never is. It's a question of what works and what doesn't. This doesn't."

Now he's looking sulky. If George Slattery saw that look, he'd take the kid to the woodshed. I won't, although it might feel that way to him because it's my job to teach him. In spite of everything else on my mind, I'll try to do that. Because I love this business. It gets very little respect, but I love it anyway. Also, I can hear Ellen say, you don't let go. Once you get your teeth in something, they stay there. Determination like that can be a little scary.

"Sit down, Billy."

He sits.

"And wipe that pout off your puss, okay? You look like a kid who just dropped his binky in the toilet."

He does his best. Which I like about him. Kid's a trier, and if he's going to work in the Andrews-Slattery shop, he'd better be.

"Good news is I'm not taking it away from you, mostly because it's not your fault Vonnell Pharmaceutical saddled us with a name that sounds like a multivitamin. But we're going to make a silk purse out of this sow's ear. In advertising, that's the main job seven times out of every ten. Maybe eight. So pay attention."

He gets a little grin. "Should I take notes?"

"Don't be a smart-ass. First, when you're shouting a drug, you *never* show a prescription bottle. The logo, sure. The pill itself,

sometimes. It depends. You know why Pfizer shows the Viagra pill? Because it's blue. Consumers like blue. The shape helps, too. Consumers have a very positive response to the shape of the Viagra tab. But people *never like to see the prescription bottle their stuff comes in*. Prescription bottles make them think of sickness. Got that?"

"So maybe a little Viagra pill and a big Po-10s pill? Instead of the bottles?" He raises his hands, framing an invisible cutline. "'Po-10s, ten times bigger, ten times better.' Get it?"

"Yes, Billy, I get it. The FDA will get it, too, and they won't like it. In fact, they could make us take ads with a cutline like that out of circulation, which would cost a bundle. Not to mention a very good client."

"*Why?*" It's almost a bleat.

"Because it *isn't* ten times bigger, and it isn't ten times better. Viagra, Cialis, Levitra, Po-10s, they all have about the same penis-elevation formula. Do your research, kiddo. And a little refresher course in advertising law wouldn't hurt. Want to say Blowhard's Bran Muffins are ten times tastier than Bigmouth's Bran Muffins? Have at it, taste is a subjective judgment. What gets your prick hard, though, and for how long . . ."

"Okay," he says in a small voice.

"Here's the other half. 'Ten times more' anything is—speaking in erectile dysfunction terms—pretty limp. It went out of vogue around the same time as Two Cs in a K."

He looks blank.

"Two cunts in a kitchen. It's how advertising guys used to refer to their TV ads on the soaps back in the fifties."

"You're joking!"

"Afraid not. Now here's something I've been playing with." I jot on a pad, and for a moment I think of all those notes scattered around the coffeemaker back in good old 5-B—why are they still there?

"Can't you just tell me?" the kid asks from a thousand miles away.

"No, because advertising isn't an oral medium," I say. "Never trust an ad that's spoken out loud. Write it down and show it to someone. Show it to your best friend. Or your . . . you know, your wife."

"Are you okay, Brad?"

“Fine. Why?”

“I don’t know, you just looked funny for a minute.”

“Just as long as I don’t look funny when I present on Monday. Now—what does this say to you?” I turn the pad around and show him what I’ve printed there: PO-10S . . . FOR MEN WHO WANT TO DO IT THE HARD WAY.

“It’s like a dirty joke!” he objects.

“You’ve got a point, but I’ve printed it in block caps. Imagine it in a soft italic type, almost a girly type. Maybe even in parentheses.” I add them, although they don’t work with the caps. But they will. It’s a thing I just know, because I can see it. “Now, playing off that, think of a photo showing a big, burly guy. In low-slung jeans that show the top of his underwear. And a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, let’s say. See him with some grease and dirt on his guns.”

“Guns?”

“Biceps. And he’s standing beside a muscle car with the hood up. Now, is it still a dirty joke?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, not for sure, but my gut tells me it’ll pull the plow. But not quite as is. The cutline still doesn’t work, you’re right about that, and it’s got to, because it’ll be the basis of the TV and ’Net ads. So play with it. Make it work. Just remember the key word . . .”

Suddenly, just like that, I know where the rest of that damn dream came from.

“Brad?”

“The key word is *hard*,” I say. “Because a man . . . when something’s not working—his prick, his plan, his *life*—he *takes* it hard. He doesn’t want to give up. He remembers how it was, and he wants it that way again.”

Yes, I think. Yes he does.

Billy smirks. “I wouldn’t know.”

I manage a smile. It feels god-awful heavy, as if there are weights hanging from the corners of my mouth. All at once it’s like being in the bad dream again. Because there’s something close to me I don’t want to look at. Only this isn’t a lucid dream I can back out of. This is lucid reality.

* * *

After Billy leaves, I go down to the can. It's ten o'clock, and most of the guys in the shop have off-loaded their morning coffee and are taking on more in our little caff, so I have it to myself. I drop my pants so if someone wanders in and happens to look under the door he won't think I'm weird, but the only business I've come in here to do is thinking. Or remembering.

Four years after coming on board at Andrews-Slattery, the Fasprin Pain Reliever account landed on my desk. I've had some special ones over the years, some breakouts, and that was the first. It happened fast. I opened the sample box, took out the bottle, and the basis of the campaign—what admen sometimes call the heartwood—came to me in an instant. I ditzed around a little, of course—you don't want to make it look *too* easy—then did some comps. Ellen helped. This was just after we found out she couldn't conceive. It was something to do with a drug she'd been given when she had rheumatic fever as a kid. She was pretty depressed. Helping with the Fasprin comps took her mind off it, and she really threw herself into the thing.

Al Andrews was still running things back then, and he was the one I took the comps to. I remember sitting in front of his desk in the sweat-seat with my heart in my mouth as he shuffled slowly through the comps we'd worked up. When he finally put them down and raised his shaggy old head to look at me, the pause seemed to go on for at least an hour. Then he said, "These are good, Bradley. More than good, terrific. We'll meet with the client tomorrow afternoon. You do the prez."

I did the prez, and when the Dugan Drug VP saw the picture of the young working woman with the bottle of Fasprin poking out of her rolled-up sleeve, he flipped for it. The campaign brought Fasprin right up there with the big boys—Bayer, Anacin, Bufferin—and by the end of the year we were handling the whole Dugan account. Billing? Seven figures. Not a low seven, either.

I used the bonus to take Ellen to Nassau for ten days. We left from Kennedy, on a morning that was pelting down rain, and I still remember how she laughed and said, "Kiss me, beautiful," when the

plane broke through the clouds and the cabin filled with sunlight. I did kiss her, and the couple on the other side of the aisle—we were flying in business class—applauded.

That was the best. The worst came half an hour later, when I turned to her and for a moment thought she was dead. It was the way she was sleeping, with her head cocked over on her shoulder and her mouth open and her hair kind of sticking to the window. She was young, we both were, but the idea of sudden death had a hideous possibility in Ellen's case.

"They used to call your condition 'barren,' Mrs. Franklin," the doctor said when he gave us the bad news, "but in your case, the condition could more accurately be called a blessing. Pregnancy puts a strain on the heart, and thanks to a disease that was badly treated when you were a child, yours isn't strong. If you did happen to conceive, you'd be in bed for the last four months of the pregnancy, and even then the outcome would be dicey."

She wasn't pregnant when we left on that trip, but she'd been excited about it for the last two weeks. The climb up to cruising altitude had been plenty rough . . . and she didn't look like she was breathing.

Then she opened her eyes. I settled back into my aisle seat, letting out a long and shaky breath.

She looked at me, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. The way you were sleeping, that's all."

She wiped at her chin. "Oh God, did I drool?"

"No." I laughed. "But for a minute there you looked . . . well, dead."

She laughed, too. "And if I was, you'd ship the body back to New York, I suppose, and take up with some Bahama mama."

"No," I said. "I'd take you, anyway."

"What?"

"Because I wouldn't accept it. No way would I."

"You'd have to after a few days. I'd get all smelly."

She was smiling. She thought it was still a game, because she hadn't really understood what the doctor was telling her that day. She hadn't—as the saying goes—taken it to heart. And she didn't know how she'd looked, with the sun shining on her winter-pale cheeks and smudged eyelids and slack mouth. But I'd seen, and I'd

taken it to heart. She *was* my heart, and I guard what's in my heart. Nobody takes it away from me.

"You wouldn't," I said. "I'd keep you alive."

"Really? How? Necromancy?"

"By refusing to give up. And by using an adman's most valuable asset."

"Which is what, Mr. Fasprin?"

"Imagination. Now can we talk about something more pleasant?"

* * *

The call I've been expecting comes around three-thirty. It's not Carlo. It's Berk Ostrow, the building super. He wants to know what time I'm going to be home, because the rat everybody's been smelling isn't in 5-C, it's in our place next door. Ostrow says the exterminators have to leave by four to get to another job, but that isn't the important thing. What's important is what's wrong in there, and by the way, Carlo says no one's seen your wife in over a week. Just you and the dog.

I explain about my deficient sense of smell, and Ellen's bronchitis. In her current condition, I say, she wouldn't know the drapes were on fire until the smoke detector went off. I'm sure Lady smells it, I tell him, but to a dog, the stench of a decaying rat probably smells like Chanel No. 5.

"I get all that, Mr. Franklin, but I still need to get in there to see what's what. And the exterminators will have to be called back. I think you're probably going to be on the hook for their bill, which is apt to be quite high. I could let myself in with the passkey, but I'd really be more comfortable if you were—"

"Yes, I'd be more comfortable, too. Not to mention my wife."

"I tried calling her, but she didn't answer the phone." I can hear the suspicion creeping back into his voice. I've explained everything, advertising men are good at that, but the convincing effect only lasts for sixty seconds or so.

"She's probably got it on mute. Plus, the medication the doctor gave her makes her sleep quite heavily."

“What time will you be home, Mr. Franklin? I can stay until seven; after that there’s only Alfredo.” The disparaging note in his voice suggests I’d be better off dealing with a no-English wetback.

Never, I think. I’ll never be home. In fact, I was never there in the first place. Ellen and I enjoyed the Bahamas so much we moved to Cable Beach, and I took a job with a little firm in Nassau. I shouted Cruise Ship Specials, Stereo Blowout Sales, and supermarket openings. All this New York stuff has just been a lucid dream, one I can back out of at any time.

“Mr. Franklin? Are you there?”

“Sure. Just thinking.” What I’m thinking is that if I leave right now, and take a taxi, I can be there in twenty minutes. “I’ve got one meeting I absolutely can’t miss, but why don’t you meet me in the apartment around six?”

“How about in the lobby, Mr. Franklin? We can go up together.”

I think of asking him how he believes I’d get rid of my murdered wife’s body at rush hour—because that *is* what he’s thinking. Maybe it’s not at the very front of his mind, but it’s not all the way in back, either. Does he think I’d use the service elevator? Or maybe dump her down the incinerator chute?

“The lobby is absolutely okey-fine,” I say. “Six. Quarter of, if I can possibly make it.”

I hang up and head for the elevators. I have to pass the caff to get there. Billy Ederle’s leaning in the doorway, drinking a Nozzy. It’s a remarkably lousy soda, but it’s all we vend. The company’s a client.

“Where are you off to?”

“Home. Ellen called. She’s not feeling well.”

“Don’t you want your briefcase?”

“No.” I don’t expect to be needing my briefcase for a while. In fact, I may never need it again.

“I’m working on the new Po-10s direction. I think it’s going to be a winner.”

“I’m sure,” I say, and I am. Billy Ederle will soon be movin’ on up, and good for him. “I’ve got to get a wiggle on.”

“Sure, I understand.” He’s twenty-four and understands nothing. “Give her my best.”

* * *

We take on half a dozen interns a year at Andrews-Slattery; it's how Billy Ederle got started. Most are terrific, and at first Fred Willits seemed terrific, too. I took him under my wing, and so it became my responsibility to fire him—I guess you'd say that, although interns are never actually "hired" in the first place—when it turned out he was a klepto who had decided our supply room was his private game preserve. God knows how much stuff he lifted before Maria Ellington caught him loading reams of paper into his suitcase-sized briefcase one afternoon. Turned out he was a bit of a psycho, too. He went nuclear when I told him he was through. Pete Wendell called security while the kid was yelling at me in the lobby and had him removed forcibly.

Apparently old Freddy had a lot more to say, because he started hanging around my building and haranguing me when I came home. He kept his distance, though, and the cops claimed he was just exercising his right to free speech. But it wasn't his mouth I was afraid of. I kept thinking he might have lifted a box cutter or an X-ACTO knife as well as printer cartridges and about fifty reams of copier paper. That was when I got Alfredo to give me a key to the service entrance, and I started going in that way. All that was in the fall of the year, September or October. Young Mr. Willits gave up and took his issues elsewhere when the weather turned cold, but Alfredo never asked for the return of the key, and I never gave it back. I guess we both forgot.

That's why, instead of giving the taxi driver my address, I get him to let me out on the next block. I pay him, adding a generous tip—hey, it's only money—and then walk down the service alley. I have a bad moment when the key doesn't work, but when I jiggle it a little, it turns. The service elevator has brown quilted movers' pads hanging from the walls. Previews of the padded cell they'll put me in, I think, but of course that's just melodrama. I'll probably have to take a leave of absence from the shop, and what I've done is a lease breaker for sure, but—

What *have* I done, exactly?

For that matter, what have I been doing for the last week?

“Keeping her alive,” I say as the elevator stops at the fifth floor. “Because I couldn’t bear for her to be dead.”

She *isn’t* dead, I tell myself, just under the weather. It sucks as a cutline, but for the last week it has served me very well, and in the advertising biz the short term is what counts.

I let myself in. The air is still and warm, but I don’t smell anything. So I tell myself, and in the advertising biz imagination is *also* what counts.

“Honey, I’m home,” I call. “Are you awake? Feeling any better?”

I guess I forgot to close the bedroom door before I left this morning, because Lady slinks out. She’s licking her chops. She gives me a guilty glance, then waddles into the living room with her tail tucked way down low. She doesn’t look back.

“Honey? EI?”

I go into the bedroom. There’s still nothing to be seen of her but the milkweed fluff of her hair and the shape of her body under the quilt. The quilt is slightly rumpled, so I know she’s been up—if only to have some coffee—and then gone back to bed again. It was last Friday when I came home and she wasn’t breathing and since then she’s been sleeping a lot.

I go around to her side and see her hand hanging down. There’s not much left of it but bones and hanging strips of flesh. I gaze at this and think there’s two ways of seeing it. Look at it one way, and I’ll probably have to have my dog—Ellen’s dog, really, Lady always loved Ellen best—euthanized. Look at it another way and you could say Lady got worried and was trying to wake her up. Come on, Ellie, I want to go to the park. Come on, Ellie, let’s play with my toys.

I tuck the reduced hand under the sheets. That way it won’t get cold. Then I wave away some flies. I can’t remember ever seeing flies in our apartment before. They probably smelled that dead rat Carlo was talking about.

“You know Billy Ederle?” I say. “I gave him a slant on that damn Po-10s account, and I think he’s going to run with it.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“You can’t be dead,” I say. “That’s unacceptable.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“Do you want coffee?” I glance at my watch. “Something to eat? We’ve got chicken soup. Just the kind that comes in the pouches, but it’s not bad when it’s hot. What do you say, EI?”

She says nothing.

“All right,” I say. “That’s all right. Remember when we went to the Bahamas, hon? When we went snorkeling and you had to quit because you were crying? And when I asked why, you said, ‘Because it’s all so beautiful.’”

Now *I’m* the one who’s crying.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get up and walk around a little? I’ll open the windows and let in some fresh air.”

Nothing from Ellen.

I sigh. I stroke that fluff of hair. “All right,” I say, “why don’t you just sleep for a little while longer? I’ll sit here beside you.”