

More Than Evil

by

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BEFORE

He ran through the woods as if the devil was chasing him. He didn't know if the things from the night were still following but he was running as fast as he could and looking back would only slow him down.

Not far ahead he spotted a flicker of light. He dropped into a steep ravine and scrambled up the other side. The ravine was at the edge of the forest, near his village. As he crawled out of it he peered between the few remaining trees.

What he saw was too horrible to believe. Most of the thatched roofed huts were on fire and the leaping flames bathed everything in a blood red glow. People were fleeing for their lives and long, scarecrow shadows pursued them as they went.

The terrible creatures he had seen in the woods were already here. They had overrun the village and were attacking anything that moved. Three of them pulled a frail, old man from beneath a cart and began ripping the limbs from his body. A young woman bolted from one of the dwellings. She tripped over the carcass of a small child that was lying in the road. The girl fell and as she hit the ground the carcass began crawling hungrily toward her. She got up and tried to run but another of the creatures lunged at her. The broken blade of a lance protruded from the beast's head but it seemed oblivious to the deadly wound and tore open the woman's throat with a flick of its misshapen hand. Blood shot into the air like a geyser and the thing buried its face in the horrible spray. It reveled in the gore, wallowing in it as it drank. It gulped greedily, careless of the amount of the crimson spew that was spilled – as if the eating was secondary to the joy of the slaughter.

The disgusting sight caused the man in the forest to retch, and the burning eye of the wounded creature turned in his direction. It discarded the woman like a forgotten toy and charged at him. Terrified, the man tried to flee but his legs became entangled and he fell back into the gully. The instant he hit the bottom he jumped to his feet and bolted for the darkened woods. Behind him a pair of fiery eyes appeared at the top of the ravine. After a moment another pair joined them, and another. Then the creatures rushed down into the forest like a ravenous storm.

It had begun.

Revenge is a wonderful thing. When you are in pain it is your comfort. When you are alone it is your companion. When you are hopeless it is your reason to live.

Andy stood beside a low, angular machine called a roof bolter. The large, boxy device looked like a flattened car with a pair of massive jacks rising out of the top. Andy took a yard long steel bolt from a pile beside him. There were two arms extending from the front of the apparatus and he mounted the bolt into one of them. The mechanism spun the bolt like a drill bit and the metal appendage raised, forcing the rod into the hole he had just bored in the coal mine's roof. The bolt caught and snugged tightly in place. This anchored the thin layers of rock overhead and reduced the chance of a cave-in.

He wondered absently what it would be like to use this device on his best friend. In his mind's eye he pictured the event – the long, spinning bit grinding into Harlan's belly, slowly chewing away the skin. With the skin gone it would begin tearing through the muscle underneath until it ripped a hole in his stomach. Then a geyser of blood and gore would spew from the wound. And as the bit burrowed deeper, his intestines would erupt from his body in a gristly knot, and wrap around the drill like spaghetti around the tines of a fork

Andy smiled and felt a little better. He took another of the steel rods and eagerly lodged it into the machine's waiting arm. He replayed the fantasy again.

Yes, revenge was a wonderful thing.

Harlan sat up in bed carefully. He looked at Linda sleeping beside him. Her hair was a river of chestnut flowing down her back. It was the sort of hair a man could lose himself in. He ought to know. He had been trying hard enough.

She purred in her sleep and shifted slightly. Their love tonight had been full and complete – both exhilarating and relaxing. In a different time, in a different place, it would have been just the thing to make him sleep like the dead. But in this time and this place it was not.

Harlan took a cigarette from the pack beside his gun. An ornate Zippo was lying there as well. He flicked the lighter into life and the eagle's head emblazoned on its side glinted in the flame. It was the symbol of the 101st Airborne Division and the only memento he had kept from a faraway war.

He took a long draw on the cigarette. The acrid taste filled his lungs like a welcomed poison. He put the lighter back beside the gun and let the smoke slowly trail from his nostrils. He looked down at Linda again and a haunting voice spoke from somewhere inside him. Was it worth it, the voice asked?

He closed his eyes and shook the thought away. He didn't want to think of it that way. Life wasn't some account ledger you tried to balance. Things happened and you made choices – sometimes you made the right ones, sometimes the wrong ones, sometimes you simply didn't know. He hadn't intended for it to work out like this. But it had, and now he was going to have to live with the consequences.

He sighed and wished that it was possible to keep his best friend and the woman he loved. But you can't take a man's wife and expect to keep his friendship too. He watched as the smoke drifted up from the tip of his cigarette to opaque the air, and longed for sleep.

“They took this long, thin brush about as big around as a pencil and rammed it down the end of your pecker,” Henry explained dutifully to the other men in the dinner hole. The dinner hole was a section of the coal mine that was set aside for meals. The earthen room contained an old aluminum picnic table with attached benches. At the ends were a few more chairs and men filled every seat. Work lights were positioned at each end of the room. Their bright LED glare pushed back the heavy, underground darkness. It was far from a comfortable setting but it served its purpose well enough.

Jake Turner was sitting across the table from Henry, and he put the Vienna sausage he had been eating back in the can. He tried to swallow the bite that was already in his mouth but it didn't want to go down.

“Then,” Henry continued. “They twisted the brush and ran it in and out a few times.”

Danny was the youngest miner on the shift and he moaned as he pictured the procedure. The eighteen-year-old's reaction brought a wicked smile to Henry's deeply lined face and he pushed ahead with the story. “After that they pulled the brush out real slow. The bristles were those stiff kind and each one felt like a piece of wire being dragged along the inside.”

Ned, a jovial black man who usually had a smile on his face, shuddered.

“But the last part was the worst,” Henry said, relishing their reactions. “They would lay your thing down on a table and take this rubber hammer...”

Jake's immense stomach roiled as he realized what was coming.

“Then they'd pound it with the hammer to get out all the puss that was freed up by the brush.”

Edgar Perry, who normally didn't let Henry get to him, grimaced at the thought of puss shooting out the end of his member.

“God, Henry don't tell no more,” Jake said, holding his legs together and trying to force the image from his mind.

“That's really all there was to it,” Henry replied innocently. “Of course after the procedure, they had to wash the thing out and all they had in them days was alcohol.”

“That's enough,” Jake pleaded, shaking his balding head. “I'll never be able to finish my lunch as it is.”

Henry glanced slyly at his friend's dinner bucket. “Well if you're feelin' poorly I might take them Vi-eenie sausages off your hands.”

Jake pushed the food away and Henry snatched it up. “You wouldn't happen to have any mayo would ya?” he added with a grin.

Ned tried not to laugh. Danny looked over at Henry, who was greedily devouring Jake's lunch. “Is that really what they used to do when you got the clap?”

“My uncle said that’s what happened to a Navy buddy of his,” Henry replied as he sucked down one of the sausages. “I can’t swear it’s gospel, but he definitely made me believe it was.”

“You sure he wasn’t just trying to keep you out of the whorehouses?” Edgar asked as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Let’s change the subject,” Jake groaned. “My nuts are achin’ from talking about it.”

“That ain’t nothing,” Henry smiled. “Did I ever tell you boys about that disease over in Africa that makes your balls swell up like watermelons?”

Somebody threw a can at Henry but he dodged it easily, as if he’d been expecting it.

Andy sat at the back corner of the table, staring at the ground between his feet. He was vaguely aware that the rest of the men were laughing but he ignored it. There was a time when he would have been the ringleader of such an exchange but none of that interested him much anymore. There were other things on his mind now - dark things.

The men all knew about his divorce. The separation had started months ago and in a small town nothing could stay quiet for that long. The last of the papers had come through three weeks back, making everything final – at least as far as the law was concerned. But of course the law said, “Till death do us part,” and he and Linda were both still walking around, weren’t they.

He ground his teeth. It made him furious to think about it. Harlan had been his best friend since the second grade. They had done everything together – school, football, even volunteered for the Army. They had been closer than brothers. But Harlan was over there right now screwing the only woman he had ever loved.

A sharp pain pierced his hand. He looked down. He had been clenching his fist so tightly that his nails had punctured the skin. The cuts were ragged and ugly. He watched the blood welling up in his palm.

It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it was nothing compared to the other pain - the pain that was eating him up inside.

It was galling to realize how stupid he had been. He had let trust blind him, even when the evidence had been staring him in the face. He hadn’t even suspected when Harlan had been going over to Linda’s nearly every night after the separation. He hadn’t suspected because every time Harlan had gone to see her he had made sure to hurry back to his best buddy Andy and tell him what she’d said. He wanted Andy to think he had taken on the role of peacemaker. But the only piece he had been trying to make was Linda.

Andy berated himself for not having realized it earlier. But his need for a friend had been so desperate that he’d been blind to the knife poised behind his back.

Was anything worse than the two people you trusted most betraying you? He looked at the blood that was now growing tacky as it spread across his palm. Not likely, he thought and angrily jammed his nails back into the cut, tearing it deeper. The bleeding erupted and he squeezed his fist tightly, squeezed until he could see the red liquid being forced out between his straining fingers.

The pain was good. The pain brought clarity to his thoughts. Suddenly he desperately wanted a smoke. He dug into his breast pocket and rummaged for the crumpled pack of Marlboro’s he’d put there. He pulled out his Zippo. There was a raised eagle crest on the lighter. It was a memento from his unit in the Army. Harlan had one exactly like it. It was just

another reminder of the friendship he had thought they shared – and of the betrayal that had replaced it. He bitterly thumbed the wheel and it sparked.

“Holy shit,” an angry voice yelled from somewhere nearby.

Andy looked up distractedly. Jake was glaring at him in disbelief. The rest of the men were staring at Andy too. Their looks ranged from alarm to downright fear. It took a moment for this to register and then he remembered where he was. He was in the mine and a spark in these gas-filled environs was like flipping matches at a powder keg. He looked down at the lighter but instead of closing it; he held it up to the tip of the Marlboro and struck it again. There was an audible gasp from somewhere at the table.

Jake turned purple. “You got some kinda friggin’ death wish,” he yelled.

Andy smiled and took a long drag from the cigarette. He held it for a moment and let the smoke trail from his nostrils like a sleeping dragon. As the ghostly cloud swirled around his head he pointed to a methane detector sitting on the table in front of him.

“Jake, if there was any gas in here that thing would be singin’ like Michael Jackson.” His smile had turned into a smirk and he took another long pull from the cigarette.

“If you wanna play Russian roulette, asshole,” Jake said angrily. “Do it where you can’t take me with you.”

Andy slammed his injured fist on the table, leaving a bloody smear. “If you don’t like the cigarette old man, why don’t you come over here and put it out?”

Jake jumped up and Andy rose to meet him. Henry and Edgar quickly rushed between them.

“Get off me,” Andy spat as he pushed Edgar away. Edgar staggered backwards and struck his hip painfully on the corner of the table. The shove caused Andy’s Marlboro to dislodge and drop to the ground. All the men stared at the fallen cigarette.

“You moron,” Andy growled. “That was my last one.”

Henry stepped past Edgar. “So I guess now there’s nothing left to fight about.”

Andy looked at him. Henry could read the anger and hurt in the younger man’s eyes. Andy opened his mouth to reply but he was cut off by the booming voice of the foreman.

“Time’s up guys,” Cloyd Farmer yelled from a few yards down the shaft. “We need another fifty buggies by the end of the night.”

The men turned toward the foreman. After an uncomfortable moment, Henry raised his hand. “Be right there,” he called.

The foreman returned the wave and continued on his way. Luckily he was too far away to smell the cigarette smoke. When he was gone silence hung in the air. The tension was awkward and the men dealt with it by pretending it wasn’t there. They began quietly putting away their trash. When this was done they hurried back to work.

Edgar was at the rear of the exiting miners and glanced over his shoulder. Andy was still standing beside the table scowling at the departing men. Edgar sighed and followed the others out.

As Andy watched them go, rage welled up inside him. It seemed that his list of enemies was growing. He clenched his fist and a new bolt of pain caused him to look at his injured palm. Blood had pooled there and it was beginning to thicken and congeal. He turned the palm downward and let the red liquid drip slowly onto the ground. Then he stalked angrily out of the dinner hole.

Behind him the blood formed a tiny pool in the dust. The small, red puddle lay there for a moment and then the hungry earth drank it like some ravenous beast.

And in the darkest pit of hell something began to snicker.

Henry stood beside a forty foot dragon. The beast's wide body filled nearly half the tunnel and its swollen belly hung only inches above the ground. From its rear, a long tail extended out above the mine floor. Down the middle of this tail stretched a segmented belt like the layered plates along a dinosaur's back. But by far this dragon's most frightening feature was its head. It looked like a huge metal drum ringed with row upon row of vicious, hooked fangs. The drum was spinning at an incredible speed and the ferocious teeth were little more than a blur. The head reared and growled as it attacked the wall. Its steel fangs clawed hungrily at the black rock, ripping it into powder and chunks the size of a man's hand.

Henry was positioned along the side of this beast holding a small control box. An umbilical cord stretched from the controller to the heart of the monstrous machine. He deftly operated the device and the behemoth responded to his every whim.

The machine was called a continuous miner and Henry manipulated it with the skill of a surgeon. Then another sound added its roar to that of the huge, mechanical miner. A low shuttle car pulled in behind it. This new machine was the equivalent of an underground truck, with a wide, shallow bed dominating most of its body and a cramped operator's compartment mounted on one side.

Ned was sitting in the driver's seat and steered the "buggy" up to the tail of the continuous miner. Its wheels had hardly stopped rolling when the conveyor in the miner's tail jumped to life, filling the car in a matter of seconds. Ned then slammed the vehicle into reverse and its electric engine whined as it backed away and headed down the shaft. Ned had been gone less than a minute when another buggy swung around the corner and pulled in behind the continuous miner's tail. Jake was wedged into the driver's compartment of this vehicle. He brought the shuttle car to a sudden stop, and before he even had time to finish scratching his crotch, the buggy was filled and ready to go.

In another part of the mine, Andy and Edgar were working at the roof bolting machine. After the continuous miner had cut out a long rectangular section of coal it was their job to move into the area and install anchors to keep the ceiling from caving in.

As they worked Andy stared venomously at Edgar. Edgar pretended not to notice. He knew it was better to just ignore him and wait till he cooled off. Andy mounted the drill steel into one of the roof bolter's arms and began burrowing a hole in the rock overhead. As the bit

cut through the stone it whined like a cat in a grinder. Andy gritted his teeth and kept up the pressure. He remembered his fantasy about using the machine on Harlan and a brief smile played at his lips. After a moment the smile grew into a laugh. Edgar looked up at this unexpected sound and what he saw in Andy's eyes chilled him. Andy caught Edgar staring and the worried expression on his co-worker's face made him laugh that much harder.

Suddenly a tremendous shudder rumbled through the mine floor. The whole shaft shook with it and ominous streamers of dust began pouring from the roof. Andy stopped laughing and he and Edgar looked around in alarm. Then a gigantic scream pierced the air. It was like the earth crying out as monstrous hands ripped it apart. The ground shuddered again and a deafening crash silenced the roar of the continuous miner in the shaft next to theirs. Edgar and Andy immediately dropped their work and ran toward the upheaval as fast as they could.

As they rounded the corner where Henry had been working they saw a thick cloud of coal dust billowing up to obscure everything. The obsidian fog made it impossible to see, and Edgar yelled into the swirling blackness.

"Henry! Henry! You all right?"

Danny, Ned and Jake came running up behind them. They stopped and as they strained to see into the pillar of dust, fear slipped its suffocating hand around their hearts.

"Is Henry in there?" Jake asked worriedly. Edgar answered by calling back into the blackness.

"Henr-"

"Shut up before you bring the rest of the mountain down on me," Henry shot back from somewhere in the thickening gloom.

When they heard his voice, an audible sigh passed through the men gathered in the shaft. Edgar yelled back at Henry in annoyance, "Why didn't you answer me the first time, you shithead?"

"I had half a pound of coal dust in my mouth," he grumbled. "Now, how about cutting the yak and getting me out of here? I'm stuck."

Edgar looked back at his co-workers and they nodded. The miners began wading into the slowly settling dust. They felt their way through the swirling soot for a few feet and saw the feeble glow of Henry's helmet light.

Henry was lying near the mine wall. There were large chunks of rock from the roof and walls littering the ground around him. One tombstone sized slab was lying across his thighs. When he saw it, Edgar's first thought was that Henry's legs had been crushed. But when he got down beside the older man he saw that Henry was smiling.

Edgar figured that he must be in shock and then Henry winked at him and pointed to something beside his knee. Edgar looked down and saw that the heavy slab was resting on the continuous miner's controller. The steel device wasn't much bigger than a shoebox but it had been large enough to absorb most of the impact and keep the stone from breaking his legs.

Henry grinned, "Pretty damn luck wouldn't ya say?"

"Pretty damn," Edgar had to agree.

The rest of the men began to gather around their fallen comrade. They looked over the situation and Jake whistled as he examined the twisted control box.

"You sure you ain't hurt?" he asked skeptically.

"Well at the moment there's a rock jammed halfway up my ass. But if you guys'd quit gawking and get this thing off me I think we could fix that."

Ned looked around at the others. "Sounds like he's OK to me."

The men smiled in return and crowded around the stone. They all grabbed hold and began to lift. With everyone pulling, they managed to get it high enough for Edgar to drag Henry clear. Then the men let the slab fall and, on its second try, it smashed the control box like it was made of cardboard.

Edgar looked from the flattened box to Henry. "I know you always wanted your pecker to be longer than your legs but this ain't the way to do it."

Henry shook his head and gave Edgar the one finger salute. A nervous chuckle tittered through the group but it quickly began to fade. When it had died away, a heavy silence was left in its wake. The men all knew how close the call had been and the sobering thought left them with little to say. But Henry never could stand it to be quiet for very long.

"So you gonna help me up?" he asked. "Or just stand there playing with yourselves?"

Jake shook his head and tried not to smile. "I think we oughta put the rock back on him."

Ned moved around to Henry's side and took hold of one arm. Jake feigned reluctance as he caught Henry under the other. They lifted him to his feet. Henry stood there for a moment and tested his legs careful. They seemed to be all right and he tried walking back and forth a few steps. He looked up at his friends and shrugged. He did a little Irish jig and took a bow. The dirty, bone-weary miners laughed in spite of their fatigue.

An awkward pause followed as the men wondered what to do next. Edgar looked around.

"Where's Andy?"

The miners exchanged uncertain glances. Then Danny pointed through the thinning curtain of dust to a beam of light moving near the continuous miner.

"Hey Andy, that you?" Edgar called.

In response, the light disappeared. The men looked at each other curiously.

"Andy?" Ned tried louder.

There was still no answer and Ned turned to the others. "You think he fell or something?"

"I sure hope so," Jake commented sourly. "The guy's been actin' like a nut case ever since his old lady dumped him."

"That may be true," Henry replied with a shrug. "But after this." He pointed to the slab of rock that had almost killed him. "I ain't gonna wish gettin' hurt on nobody."

Jake lowered his eyes shamefully and finally nodded in agreement.

"Come on," Henry said and led them through the darkness.

The men carefully made their way toward the place where the light had disappeared. As they went they walked past the hulk of the once menacing continuous miner. The huge machine had been crushed under a slab of rock that was half again its width and so high that they could not see the top.

"Shit the bed," Edgar said wondrously as he surveyed the damage.

"Henry, if you'd been any closer to that thing," Jake observed. "We'd be scrapin' you up with a shovel."

"A very small shovel," Ned added.

"Must be all that time I spend on my knees," Henry replied modestly.

"Yeah and maybe now you'll do some prayin'."

Somewhere behind them, Danny laughed. Then the men rounded the front of the continuous miner and stopped dead in their tracks. There was a large fissure in the wall where the miner had been cutting. It was as high as the shaft and nearly four feet across. Sections of

the walls often sheered away during a roof fall, but this was something else. The breach was much too deep and chunks of coal fanned out from the depression in a wide pattern, almost as if they had been forced from the other side.

The men cautiously moved in for a better look. They gathered around the fissure and peered back into it. From here they could see that the hole only went back a few feet and stopped. But it didn't end. Instead, it did something entirely unexpected. It opened up into a gigantic chamber.

The men stared through the opening in astonishment. Compared to the cramped quarters of the mine shaft the cavern seemed immense. Its rough, irregular walls were nearly a hundred feet apart and they were curved, giving the chamber a cylindrical shape. Edgar knelt down and craned his neck so he could look upward. The vaulting ceiling rose high into the air and ended in a dome of wicked fangs. As he peered up at the huge stalactites, Edgar realized that he could see them even though they were far beyond the reach of his mine light. Apparently there was some sort of subtle, natural illumination coming from within the cavern. It was like nothing he had ever seen.

The miners were awestricken and they surveyed the interior of the chamber like wondrous children. Then, when they had seen everything their imperfect vantage point would allow, they slowly turned their attention to Andy who was already standing several yards inside. There was a circular ledge that ran along the wall all the way around the interior of the cavern. This shelf extended about thirty feet toward the center of the chamber and stopped. Where the ledge ended the ground appeared to drop away. Andy was standing near the brink of the shelf staring down over it. From their vantage point they could not tell what he was looking at.

"Andy," Ned called a little nervously. "What do you see?"

Andy continued gazing over the edge. "Why don't you pussies find out for yourself?"

The men in the opening glanced at each other uncertainly. Their bravery had been questioned but it took them a moment to decide whether their machismo was greater than their fear.

Impatient with their indecision Edgar pushed past the others and headed into the cavern. After he had gone several steps without incident the rest of the miners began to follow. They continued gawking at their surroundings as they went. The cavern was fascinating. Up close the walls were a dark, glossy stone but it was not coal. The coal seam had ended out where the fissure began. This was some other kind of rock and it glistened wetly, like onyx. As they scanned the interior they continued moving forward. Finally the miners came to the place where Andy was standing and the shelf of rock ended. They fidgeted nervously and then peered out over its edge. There was a collective gasp.

Beneath their feet was a huge, rounded shaft stretching for as far as they could see into the heart of the earth. It was like the blackened socket of some gigantic skull looking back at them. The men stared in disbelief at the seemingly bottomless pit. They were all too stunned to speak. The plunge was dizzying and Jake took a step backward. There was a small, raised lip at the end of the ledge and Danny cautiously knelt down beside it. Ned joined him.

"Wow," Danny whispered.

Jake scratched his head as he peered over the young man's shoulder. "I been minin' thirty year," he muttered. "And I never seen nothin' like this."

"Wondered how deep it is?" Ned asked.

There was a loose chunk of rock beside Edgar's toe and he kicked it into the pit. A long, expectant silence hung in the air as the miners waited for the sound of it hitting bottom. That sound never came.

The men looked at each other uneasily.

Danny pointed to the light affixed to his hard hat and said, "Why don't we drop a lamp down so we can see how far it goes?"

Jake frowned at him impatiently, "You wanna throw your light away kid you go ahead."

Danny felt foolish and lowered his eyes. Suddenly there was a snicking sound from somewhere close by and they all turned toward it. Andy was standing a few feet away from the rest of the men. He held his lit cigarette lighter out over the abyss and without hesitation let it fall.

Ned gasped. Jake's eyes bulged and he lunged at Andy, grabbing him by the shirt.

"Are you NUTS!" He yelled at the man.

The other miners quickly moved to pull them apart. Jake was livid and struggled to get loose. Andy said nothing and stared at Jake expressionlessly.

Then Danny, who was still kneeling beside the chasm, called urgently to his companions. "Hey guys, look at this."

The men stopped their jostling and turned back to the pit. They were just in time to see the lighter's tiny flame shrink to infinity and disappear. The miners gazed at each other wordlessly. The distraction had given Jake time to cool down a bit but he pointed an angry finger at Andy.

"You may not care about your own life but you got no right taking chances with ours," he fumed.

Andy continued to stare at Jake blankly. "There ain't no gas down there," he said without inflection. "Methane comes from coal and that sure ain't part of no coal mine."

Jake opened his mouth to reply but Edgar's voice cut him off.

"Hey," he said, glancing around uncertainly. "I think I hear something?"

The other men looked at him quizzically and became quiet, straining to hear. Danny crouched near the end of the ledge and said, "I think it's coming from down there."

The men moved cautiously toward the shelf's brink and listened. After a few moments a sound became audible. It was faint, so faint in fact that it was difficult to define.

Ned put his hand out over the abyss. "There's warm air too."

"Yeah, some sort of updraft," Henry added.

A pebble dislodged from the cavern wall behind them and tumbled to the ledge. The sound of it was magnified by their straining to hear and it startled them. A little embarrassed laugh trembled through the group. Then another, larger stone dropped from the far wall and rolled out across the shelf. Their laughter quickly stopped and the men glanced around nervously.

Ned pointed into the pit and yelled, "Look!"

The miners all stared down into the chasm. As they watched a tiny red glow became visible. The light was faint and distant, and it seemed to be oscillating slightly – from darker to lighter.

There was something else about the light too – it was getting bigger.

A rock the size of a bowling ball dislodged from the ceiling and dropped to the ledge. It bounced once and rolled into the abyss. The men looked around worriedly. Then they turned back to the pit. The tiny, red glow was growing at a fantastic rate. Suddenly the ground started

trembling beneath their feet. The miners' eyes widen in fear. Jake grabbed Henry's arm. The vibrations intensified and coalesced with the sound that they had heard coming from the chasm. Several more rocks were torn from the walls and tumbled to the ledge. A stalactite the size of a man sheared away from the ceiling and plummeted into the vast darkness below. The shaking of the earth quickly grew until it was difficult to stand. Jake turned and tried running from the cavern but the upheaval had become too great and he fell. Rocks and debris were streaming from the walls and ceiling in an erratic torrent. Then, without warning, the violent convulsions doubled and all of the men were thrown to the ground.

Danny landed at the edge of the abyss and grabbed the raised lip to keep from falling in. He looked down into the pit beneath him. The red glow had grown into a gigantic ball of flame that was rocketing toward him at an unbelievable rate. He screamed but his voice was lost in the now deafening roar within the chamber. Jake was crawling for the entrance when a boulder the size of an anvil slammed into his back.

In the pit, the fireball had almost reached the ledge. It filled the entire shaft and crawled up the sides like something alive. Then the flaming mass began to turn, like a slowly spinning sphere, and the underside rotated upward revealing a huge, demonic face etched in the flames. The entity's infernal mouth slowly opened in an evil, deafening laugh that shook the entire mountain. And then the fireball exploded from the abyss and engulfed them all.

A shrill scream echoed through the darkness. An eternity passed. Then the scream came again, louder and sharper this time. Harlan struggled up from the swirling blackness of sleep and groped for the bedside lamp. As the light came on, the phone screamed again and he yanked it from its cradle. He took a deep breath and tried to clear his head. He raised the receiver to his ear.

“Yeah?”

Pearl had been the night dispatcher for the Puritan County Sheriff’s Department for nearly eighteen years. She was a ripsaw of a woman with a gruff exterior and a soft heart. She had been trained to keep her demeanor professional even though she knew the personal ramifications of her message.

“Sheriff there’s been an explosion at Puritan Mine Number Eight,” she said quickly. “I don’t have any details and I don’t know how bad.”

Harlan’s sleep filled mind reeled. He looked at his watch. The second shift wouldn’t end for another half hour. And he knew exactly what that meant.

“No report on who was involved?” he asked knowing that she would have told him if there had been.

“No sir.”

Harlan raked a hand through his hair. “OK Pearl, I’m on my way,” he said, trying to keep his voice from sounding frantic.

“Sheriff,” she started, and paused awkwardly. “I hope he’s OK.”

“Me too,” he replied softly and hung up the phone.

Beside him, Linda was just beginning to sit up. She rubbed at the sleep in her eyes. Harlan was the sheriff and calls in the middle of the night were far from unusual. But she could tell from his voice that this was something grave.

“What is it?” she asked struggling to clear away the mental cobwebs.

“There’s been an accident at Puritan Number Eight,” he replied trying to make his voice sound calm.

She glanced at the bedside clock and her eyes grew wide with alarm. “Oh god, it’s still Andy’s shift.”

“Get dressed as quick as you can,” he said, and turned to do the same.

Harlan's cruiser skidded to an abrupt halt in front of Puritan Coal Company's number eight mine. The area outside the mine opening was nothing more than a huge notch carved out of the mountain's sloping side. Normally this would have been a mostly empty space with a few work trailers, temporary buildings and pieces of equipment scattered around it. Now, however, it was abuzz with activity. There were three ambulances, two mine rescue vehicles and another two dozen private cars. At least fifty people had already crowded into the small area outside the shaft. Some of them were with the rescue team or the paramedics but most were concerned miners and family members. Within an hour this number would double and possibly double again as the townsfolk gathered to show their support – and to await the outcome.

Harlan slammed the cruiser door and met Linda as she came around the front of the car. They began making their way through the eerily quiet gathering of people. Up ahead they could see the mine portal. It was like a large, rectangular hole cut into a flat wall of excavated earth. Thick, black smoke was billowing out of it, rushing up to blend with the deeper darkness of the night.

Not far from the opening a knot of men huddled around a hastily constructed command post. Most of them were dressed in fluorescent yellow uniforms and had devices strapped to their backs that looked like some kind of hybrid Aqua Lung. Four of these men were covered with a heavy coating of soot. Their breathing masks had been removed and the white ovals of their faces were in stark contrast to the blackness that covered the rest of them.

Harlan led Linda toward this group. One of the men, who wasn't dressed in the mine rescue gear, stepped forward as he saw them approach. They both recognized him immediately. It was Cloyd Farmer, the foreman from Andy's shift. Cloyd's face was dirty and etched with fatigue. He extended his hand in a weary greeting.

"How's it look?" Harlan asked, getting quickly to the point.

The older man regarded them both for a long moment before answering. "Not good," he said finally. "I was inside almost the entire shift. Then I came up after dinner to work on my reports. I hadn't been outside ten minutes when..."

His expression clouded as he recalled the event. "It was like an earthquake," he continued. "The whole mountain shook. It knocked me clean outta my chair."

Harlan motioned toward the soot-covered rescuers. "Were they able to get back to the men?"

The foreman looked from Harlan to Linda and back again, as if trying to gauge what he should tell them. “They couldn’t even get close,” he muttered at last. “It’s like hell’s furnace down there and the smoke’s so thick that even with a light you can’t see your hand in front of you.”

Harlan glanced over at Linda. Her face was pale and drawn but she never took her eyes off the foreman. Before Harlan could ask another question she spoke up, her voice trembling slightly. “Cloyd, what about Andy?”

Cloyd stared at his shoes, as if hoping they might provide an answer. When he didn’t reply she pressed him. “Cloyd, we’ve been friends ten years, and you and Harlan longer than that,” she said bracing herself. “You know we’d want the truth – straight out.”

Cloyd looked up at her as if his eyes dreaded what his lips were about to say. “He was working his shift when I came out,” the foreman reluctantly replied. He stopped for a moment and seemed to be searching for words. Finally he returned his gaze to hers and continued, “This is the worst mine explosion I’ve ever seen.” He nodded toward the rescuers behind him. “These boys said the same thing. And even if the blast didn’t kill them, there’s no way their air could have lasted this long.”

Cloyd’s entire body seemed to sag. “I’m sorry,” he finished regretfully.

Linda stood there trying her best to look brave and in control. After a moment her lower lip began to quiver. A tear spilled from her eye and rolled slowly down her face. She sniffed once and her voice caught. Harlan put his arm around her shoulders and her tears began to flow freely.

Suddenly they heard the sound of squealing tires behind them and Harlan’s head jerked instinctively toward it. Through the crowd, he saw a red pickup skid to a halt and its doors fly open. Then a young man came pushing his way through the onlookers. It was Linda and Andy’s son, Tom. Right behind him an attractive young girl struggled to catch up.

She looks more like her mother every day, Harlan thought as his daughter Jessie hurried toward him.

Linda moved away from Harlan’s side and took two steps toward her running son. He stopped in front of her. His eyes were wide and glassy with fear. They darted erratically, like a frightened doe. And when he spoke, his voice was more the high squeak of a scared little boy than that of a seventeen-year-old young man.

“Where’s dad?” he blurted.

His mother did not reply. She embraced him, but Tom’s body was rigid and unyielding. He looked at her, his eyes pleading for the right answer.

She did not have it.

Tears streamed down Linda’s face. “I’m sorry, honey,” she said simply.

The fear in his eyes grew into panic. “What do you mean you’re sorry?” he yelled. “Where is he?”

“It’s too late Tom,” she said holding him tighter.

Tom stared at her for a moment and then the panic on his face turned to terror.

“No!” he screamed and tried to push past Linda and run toward the mine. She clung to him and several of the men standing nearby edged between Tom and the smoking portal.

“Tommy, there’s nothing you can do for him now,” she said tearfully as she held her son. Tears also began streaming down Tom’s face and his body sagged as the weight of the situation settled upon him.

Jessie was standing behind Tom. She wanted to help comfort him and raised her hand to place it on his shoulder. Before she could touch him, though, Tom suddenly stiffened. Then he twisted free of his mother's embrace and pushed away from her. He looked at Linda with a sneer of revulsion.

"Keep your hands off me," he said, stumbling backwards. "I don't want you ever touching me again."

Linda was taken aback by this sudden change. "Tom, wh-what are you doing?"

"Just stay away from me," he said bitterly.

Linda could only stare at him in confusion. "Tom honey, why are you acting like this?"

"Why?" he replied incredulously. "I'll tell you why. Because while my dad was in there dying you were out screwing his best friend." Hate twisted across Tom's features. "*That's* why!"

Tom was on the verge of tears again. "He loved you. And you threw him out of the house for this backstabbing piece of shit." Tom shot an accusing glance in Harlan's direction, before looking back at Linda.

"I hope you rot in hell," he spat vehemently and started pushing back through the crowd toward his truck. Linda was unable to move and stood there in stunned silence.

Jessie looked from Tom to Harlan. She wanted to both stay for her father and go comfort the person she hoped to marry one day.

"Daddy..." she started to say and stopped unsure of how to continue.

Harlan understood her dilemma. "You'd better go to him, honey. I think he's gonna need you."

She smiled her thanks and ran after Tom. Harlan turned to Linda. She looked up at him, and now it was her eyes that were pleading. Harlan enfolded her in his arms and she began sobbing helplessly into his chest.

Sister Elizabeth was working much later than usual. She had been away most of the day visiting her ailing brother in Lewisburg. It was quite late when she finally returned to town but she'd come directly to the church. There was a Mass in the morning and, in their tiny parish, it was her responsibility to see that the building was cleaned and made ready.

The work hadn't really taken that long and she stopped for a moment to give the place a final look. The sanctuary was small and not overly ornate. The room was just a simple rectangle with two sections of pews divided by a wide, middle aisle. The walls were painted a clean, virginal white and were trimmed with dark oak at the corners, roof and around the doors. The only things at all unusual about the church were the beautiful, stained glass windows set into its two side walls. On each of these was depicted a scene from the New Testament: The Raising of Lazarus, The Last Supper, The Crucifixion, The Casting Out of Legion and more. Sister Elizabeth smiled. The stained glass was a source of pride for the whole congregation. There were few Catholic churches in this part of Appalachia and none of them could boast windows that were as intricate and beautifully wrought as these.

After surveying the room she turned to the communion table behind her. A large, artfully decorated chalice sat near its center and on each side it was flanked by a long, sturdy candlestick. She looked over the arrangement for a moment and then ran her finger along the edges of each implement. No dust showed on her pale fingertip. She surveyed the items again and picked up the heavy chalice in her right hand. She examined the tablecloth beneath. It appeared to be clean. She took her dust cloth and swabbed around the underside of the goblet's base. When she examined the cloth, a faint ghost of dust furred one corner. She smiled contentedly and replaced the chalice.

With this done she stepped back from the table and let her eyes wander over the sanctuary's front, looking for any missed details. Finding none she turned her gaze upward.

Above the communion table, and set back several feet, was a lifelike and nearly life-sized statue of Jesus on the Cross. His pale, white skin glistened in the amber lights and in spite of the many wounds the Savior had received, he looked down upon her with an expression of complete and uncompromised love. The smile on her own face mirrored those same emotions. She crossed herself and turned back to finish her work.

A few extra hymnals were piled on the front pew and she picked them up on her way to the back of the church. As she walked slowly down the aisle she sighed. It was very late and

fatigue was beginning to weigh upon her like an oxen's yoke. She stopped to switch the hymnals to her other arm and continued on.

Behind her the chalice began to vibrate in its place on the communion table. This movement was quickly taken up by the candlesticks and they began to shimmy and rattle as well. Startled by this sudden noise Sister Elizabeth wheeled around and the stack of hymnals tumbled from her arms.

On the communion table the chalice and candles sat unmoved. Her eyes quickly surveyed the front of the room for the source of the noise. When none became apparent her gaze returned to the table. All was still. She waited a moment, listening intently for any sound. There was none to be heard. She frowned and shrugged. Maybe it had just been the vibration of a coal truck driving past the church on a late night run. She knelt and began picking up the fallen hymnals. Or maybe, she thought to herself, it was simply the overactive imagination of a tired old woman.

She quickly finished gathering up the song books and started toward the storage area at the rear of the church. No sooner had her back turned than the chalice began to vibrate again. The whole table shimmied this time and its legs clattered loudly against the wooden floor.

Sister Elizabeth spun around instantly and glared at the front of the room. Everything sat neatly and quietly in place. Her face clouded with anger as her eyes scoured every inch of the sanctuary's front. Seeing nothing she called out.

"I don't think God will look favorably on anyone playing tricks on an old woman."

Her words echoed through the emptiness of the sanctuary. She started toward the front of the room and saw movement from the corner of her eye. She turned, half expecting to see some mischievous child running for cover. But her eyes came to rest on a doorway to the right of the pulpit. It was where Father Lake entered at the beginning of each service. Above the door was an ornate wooden cross. The cross slowly began to turn until it was inverted. Then it stopped.

Fear ran down Sister Elizabeth's spine like a cold finger of ice. Then the communion table began to vibrate again. Its legs clattered loudly against the floorboards and the objects set upon it danced across its surface like poorly handled marionettes. Suddenly the rest of the building joined in the tumult. The pews started to rattle across the room. Candlesticks placed throughout the sanctuary began to tremble and several tumbled to the floor. The windows shook brittly and plaster rained down from above. The lighting fixtures mounted along each wall began to fracture and explode in a shower of jagged glass.

Sister Elizabeth's eyes darted around the room in fright. Her gaze passed over one of the beautiful, stained glass windows. The colors in the gorgeous depiction of Christ's crucifixion began to melt and run together. She looked at another one. The Sermon on the Mount was an ugly swirl of earth tones oozing down the glass. She turned to The Casting Out of Legion. Instead of the melting demons being banished into the herd of swine, they now appeared to be rushing toward the Christ. The look on his face was one of sheer terror.

Then a new horror manifested itself. Blood started oozing from beneath the oaken baseboards that ran along the bottom of the walls. But it didn't seep out across the floor, the spreading gore began to run up the church walls in defiance of gravity. The scarlet ichor looked like an army of liquid ants crawling up the stark, white plaster toward heaven.

Over the rear entryway a statue of the Virgin began to pop and crack. Blood began to leak from the fissures that spread across her delicate porcelain features. But the gooey viscera also defied the pull of gravity and streamed toward the ceiling in long, scarlet tendrils.

Sister Elizabeth staggered backwards. Her mind was unable to accept any more of the fear that was overloading her senses. She whirled toward the front of the sanctuary and screamed out at the supernatural manifestations around her.

“Get thee behind me Satan!”

In response, the statue of the Savior hanging above the communion table opened its eyes. The once compassionate face contorted into an evil leer and looked down at her contemptuously.

“Satan was a pussy compared to me bitch,” it sneered, and then a gigantic fireball rocketed up through the church floor. The force of the blast was so great that the entire building exploded in a volcanic geyser of burning debris. And as the church disintegrated, the huge fireball roared up into the night sky like a fist thrust defiantly at the heavens.

This morning Jenny had awakened in a puddle of blood. When it happened it'd been dark outside – the sun still an hour from graying the sky. It was that eerie time when silence ruled the world – when the songs of the night had died and the songs of the day were yet to come. She rubbed sleepily at her eyes and noticed a cold dampness among the covers. She was twelve and it had been a long time since she'd wet the bed. But it wasn't a sensation one easily forgot. She turned on the light and pulled back the blanket. Her thin cotton panties and a large section of the sheet were covered in blood. She then replaced the silence of the night with the screams of her terror.

It had taken her painfully shy grandmother nearly an hour to calm her down and even longer than that to explain what had happened. Jenny still wasn't sure she believed it. Some dark part of her mind insisted that she was going to die and that her grandmother's explanation was just some story concocted to spare her from dwelling on the terrible death that awaited.

She felt betrayed, betrayed by her grandmother for hiding this dark secret and betrayed by her body – which was still bleeding slowly into a cotton pad between her legs.

Jenny's grandmother had said she should be happy. That this meant she was no longer a little girl. That she was now a woman. Of course no one had asked her whether she wanted to be a woman. Sure it would be nice to be a grown-up and come and go as you pleased. But if anyone had told her that bleeding to death was the price you paid she might have reconsidered.

Jenny frowned morosely out the living room window. Her first day as a woman had come and gone in a roller coaster ride of stress and anxiety. Now night had fallen again and she was finally, and thankfully, alone.

She sighed as the events of the day continued spinning through her mind. Her grandmother had told her that people, boys in particular, would never treat her the same again. Jenny wasn't exactly thrilled with that idea either. The only thing she had ever been was a little girl. She wasn't sure how to be an adult. Grandma had even said she could get pregnant now. And that was certainly a scary thought.

In a rickety pen across the yard she could see the two hogs that were part of her grandpa's small stable of livestock. They were pacing steadily back and forth. That was unusual for this time of night. One of the lessons she had learned in her years on their tiny mountainside farm was that animals sometimes sensed when things were wrong. Storms, fires, Grandma even said that the night Jenny's mom had died in childbirth that their old mule had been so skittish it'd broken a leg trying to jump over the corral gate.

Jenny began a smiley face in the condensation at the bottom corner of the window. She figured the animals were anxious now because of whatever had happened at the mine where her great uncle Edgar worked. When the phone call had come, her grandmother had turned very pale and handed the phone to Grandpa. After that they had tried to reach Sister Elizabeth, who babysat for her sometimes, but no one was home. When several other calls brought no results they let her stay alone until they were able to get one of her cousins to come over, or returned themselves. Jenny had promised that she would be fine and her overprotective grandmother had been so distracted and fretful about what had happened to her brother Edgar that she had agreed with little protest. Then both of her grandparents had hurried off into the night in the old pickup with the livestock rack on the back.

Being alone was good. It gave her time to think about the changes that had happened in her life today. Outside, the pigs' movements became a little more agitated and their snuffling grunts drifted to her across the night air. The low, mournful call of one of their cows joined them.

Jenny looked up into the night sky to see if there were any storm clouds. The huge full moon was beginning to peek over the tops of the mountains to her right and it illuminated the sky enough to show a few big, fleecy shapes drifting by, but none of them seemed threatening. Then she heard Raider, their mixed-breed hound, pad across the front porch. His nails clicked like skeleton's teeth against the floor boards. She couldn't see him from here but she knew his ears would be up and his tail would be sticking out ramrod straight. He wasn't one of those yippy little dogs that barked at every sound. He was a farm dog and didn't bark unless he meant it. From a few feet below her window, she heard the low motor of his growl. A knot of fear formed in her stomach.

She cupped her hands and peered through the window. There was no movement except the pigs fidgeting in their pen. They circled repeatedly like sharks in a tank. Raider started barking loud and mean. She strained to look beneath the window, where the sound was coming from, but the angle was so acute that she could see nothing. Suddenly the dog's angry bark was squeezed into a series of high, terrified yelps. The yelps became so frantic with pain that they merged into a single, shrill shriek before being cut off entirely.

Jenny's mind kept yelling at her to get away from the window but she continued straining to see what had happened to her dog. She pressed her face hard against the glass and two glowing, red eyes jumped into view an inch away from her. She flailed and fell off the chair. She looked up from the floor. The two orbs seemed to hover on the other side of the window. Their red glow rippled like twin fires. They smoldered hungrily down at her and lunged forward. The glass exploded in a shower of glinting daggers and Jenny scrambled backwards across the floor. A blackened shape fell upon her and for the second time that day her screams echoed through the darkened rooms of the tiny farmhouse.

And then the thing that had been drawn by the aroma of her freshly lost innocence began to feed.

“It’s my nickel,” Harlan said aggravatedly.

“Is not,” Andy shot back.

“Is too,” seemed to be the obvious reply.

Instead of continuing the exchange Andy just stood there looking smug. Harlan realized that this was getting him nowhere and decided to try another approach.

“If it’s yours then where did you get it?”

“I found it behind your desk.”

“Then it’s mine,” Harlan insisted.

“No way, finders keepers,” Andy responded adamantly.

Harlan was becoming frustrated. It was obvious that reason wasn’t going to solve this dilemma so he figured a more direct strategy was needed. He made a grab for the nickel in Andy’s hand. When Andy realized what Harlan was doing he pulled away. He was in time to save the nickel but not quick enough to avoid a nasty scratch from the other boy’s fingernail.

“Ow,” Andy yelled. “Scratch me like a girl why don’t ya.”

“I’m gonna do worse than that if you don’t give me back my nickel.”

“Oh, yeah,” was Andy’s inventive retort.

“Yeah,” Harlan parried skillfully.

Their razor sharp exchange seemed to bog down at this point and, as usual, when Andy couldn’t solve a problem with his mental acumen he resorted to his physical acumen instead. He pushed Harlan against the schoolhouse door. Harlan bounced back quickly and responded with a shove of his own.

A few feet away, a small knot of girls jumped rope along the wide stretch of sidewalk that paralleled the school. They stopped to watch the scuffle. Martha Evers was the tallest of the girls and she moved from her place in line to get a better vantage point. Squeaky, little Doris Pugh dropped her end of the rope and tilted her head back so she could peer through her thick glasses.

The boys were now wrestling in earnest. Andy had Harlan in a headlock but Harlan’s arm was wedged under the other boy’s chin and he pushed Andy’s head painfully backward. Suddenly Harlan stopped pushing and swung his weight around. This caused Andy to overbalance and the two boys tumbled into the schoolyard.

The girls that had been jumping rope moved back to avoid becoming entangled in the brawl. The boys rolled around fitfully in the dirt. Neither seemed able to gain an advantage and

the only thing they really accomplished was to stir up a good sized cloud of dust. Martha Evers watched this futile exchange for a moment and then ran past the boys toward the schoolhouse. When she got to the door she looked back around at them.

“I’m gonna go tell Mrs. Wilson that you two are fighting,” she said, raising her pinched little nose haughtily into the air.

The two combatants immediately stopped their struggle and stared up at Martha with twin expressions of terror. She turned to enter the school and the boys scrambled after her.

“Wait Martha,” Andy called as he ran. “Please, don’t tell.”

“Yeah, we were just funnin’,” Harlan explained desperately.

Martha was beginning to pull the door open when the boys got to her.

“Come on Martha, please don’t,” Andy pleaded. “We’ll get whooped for sure.”

Martha turned toward the boys. From hair bow to bobby socks she was as prim as the cover of the Sears and Roebuck. “You should have thought of that before you started fighting,” she said. “Besides, rules are rules. I have to tell.”

The two boys looked at each other in panic and then Andy’s eyes widened with an idea.

“I’ll give you a nickel if you don’t,” he offered.

Harlan scowled at him. “Wait a minute, that’s my nickel.”

Martha moved toward the door. “I’m going to the teacher,” she said with a flip of her hair.

The boys immediately stopped arguing and rushed between Martha and the entrance. Harlan took the coin from Andy and held it out to her.

“Here you can have the nickel,” he offered earnestly.

“Yeah,” Andy implored. “Just don’t say nothin’ to Mrs. Wilson.”

Martha seemed to think about this for a moment and then snatched the nickel from Harlan’s hand. “OK,” she said, as if it was a great sacrifice for her to take their money. “But next time it’ll cost you a dime.”

Martha skipped down the sidewalk to join her playmates. As Harlan and Andy watched her go they shook their heads in dismay. When she was finally gone they turned to each other. A look of relief washed over their faces and left a smile in its wake. Harlan pulled a leaf out of Andy’s disheveled hair and then mussed the untidy mop further. Andy responded by putting an arm around Harlan’s neck and the two boys walked across the playground as bosom buddies again.

“Women,” Harlan said, still shaking his head in amazement.

“Yeah,” Andy added with genuine distaste. “Who needs ‘em.”

“Harlan?” Linda asked from the passenger seat of the cruiser. “You OK?”

Harlan reluctantly returned from the memory. “Sorry,” he apologized. “I was thinking about...” he trailed off not really wanting to continue.

“Andy,” she finished for him.

He nodded.

She looked down at her hands. Her calm exterior belied the torrent of emotions that swirled within her.

“You know, you don’t have anything to feel guilty about.”

“Oh, I don’t?” Harlan replied, sarcasm edging his voice.

“No you don’t,” she insisted. “What happened between us didn’t make me leave Andy. It just – hastened it,” she finished, not liking the sound of the phrase the moment it left her mouth.

“But he was my best friend,” Harlan whispered. “And I never got a chance to explain. To make it right.”

Silence filled the car. Then Linda turned to Harlan.

“I’m sorry I was the one that came between you,” she said, unable to meet his eyes.

Harlan looked at her. Even with that tear-streaked face and the sleepless tangle of her hair, she was beautiful. He put his large, rough hand over hers and squeezed.

“There’s a lot of things I wish I’d done differently. But the one thing I don’t regret is being with you.”

A smile spread across Linda’s face and she raised his hand to her lips. She kissed it. Harlan caressed the soft skin of her cheek and saw the turnoff for her house loom in his headlights. He slowed the car and steered it into the driveway. He stopped the cruiser and shifted into park. Linda slid across the seat and put her arms around him. He held her and they took comfort from each other’s embrace.

The cruiser’s radio blared into life and Pearl’s voice startled them, “This is central to Sheriff Ellis. Over.”

Harlan groaned wearily and took the radio handset from its cradle. “Go ahead Pearl,” he said trying not to let the tiredness show in his voice.

“We got a report about a fire at St. Paul’s,” she replied. “It sounded pretty bad. Elliot said he’d take care of it but I thought you’d want to know.”

Harlan rubbed his eyes. Fatigue etched his face as he mulled over the information. Finally he said, “OK Pearl, I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Ten-four,” she finished as he hung up the mike.

He looked at Linda apologetically. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m gonna have to check this out.”

Linda ran a soothing hand through his short, thick hair. “It’s been an awful night for you,” she said. “Can’t you let Elliot handle it?”

Harlan signed. “You know how Elliot is. And besides, Pearl wouldn’t call if it wasn’t serious.”

Linda nodded her understanding and kissed him firmly on the lips. Then she slid across to the passenger side and exited the car. She closed the door and looked at him through the open window. Harlan smiled at her.

“I’ll stop back by as soon as I can,” he promised.

“OK,” Linda said, returning his smile, and stepped away from the car.

Harlan shifted the cruiser into drive and sped off into the night. Linda waved at his receding tail lights and turned to go into her house.

As Harlan drove off through the darkness he tiredly massaged his neck. It had been a terrible night and it wasn’t over yet.

Deputy Elliot Purdy stood surveying the burnt out husk of the church. He tugged thoughtfully at one of the sparse patches of beard that grew from his face. The dark, scraggly hair was intended to cover the scars of his lifelong battle with acne, but there wasn't nearly enough of it for that, and the end result was somehow worse than the acne scars alone.

Elliot was the sort of person that no one ever seemed to take seriously. Even as a boy he had been at the bottom of the pecking order. He was the type of kid who had always been on the receiving end of the practical jokes, the pranks and derision of his classmates. Throughout his entire life he had never gotten any respect, and that was why he had chosen a career in law enforcement. When you were a police officer, people treated you with respect whether they liked it or not – because no one wanted to get on the bad side of a cop.

Elliot heard the sound of a car sliding to a halt in the church parking lot. He turned to see Harlan quickly exit his cruiser and walk toward him. As Harlan crossed the small stretch of pavement, he surveyed the area around the church. Elliot's cruiser was already parked there along with an ambulance and a fire truck. St. Paul's itself was little more than a smoking ruin. The corner nearest the road and part of the wall behind the pulpit were all that remained of the structure, and even these looked ready to collapse at any moment. A lone support beam, that had been part of the wall directly across from him, pointed up at the sky like a charred fang. Both the wall and the roof it had once held up were gone.

Harlan waded through the debris that was scattered across the parking lot and stopped beside Elliot. From here he could see inside the sanctuary. The floor of the building was gone and a huge, blackened crater had replaced it. This crater stretched from one end of the church to the other and only a few of the shattered floorboards were left.

Harlan looked at the structure in dismay and turned to his deputy. "What happened?" he asked.

Elliot spat a long stream of tobacco into the dirt beside the parking lot. "Well Sheriff, from the intensity of the fire and that there crater, I'd say something blew it all to hell."

Harlan sighed and reminded himself that he was lucky to get a deputy, any deputy, with the amount of money he was able to pay.

"Any idea what caused it?" he asked patiently.

Elliot pointed with his chin at the firemen who were snuffing out a few pockets of the still smoldering blaze. A droplet of tobacco spit glistened in the deputy's scraggly whiskers. "Well, these boys are just volunteers. And Father Lake over there hasn't been much help." Elliot

motioned toward the ambulance. A thin man with disheveled hair was sitting on the back bumper. He was wearing slacks with a pajama top tucked carelessly into them. He stared ahead blankly, like a shock victim.

“But whatever it was, this place went up like a whore’s skirt.”

Elliot glanced at Harlan, obviously pleased with his metaphor. “My guess is that it was a gas leak. There’s a meter out back, and frankly,” he shrugged, “I don’t know what else it coulda been.”

Puritan County was in the asshole of America. At least that’s what the rest of the country thought. It was surrounded by three of the fifty poorest counties in the U.S. and it was number nine. The rest of the state, and nation for that matter, had given up on it and did its best to pretend Puritan didn’t exist. That meant folks here were pretty much on their own. The county fire marshal, who would normally look into this, had been on medical leave for six months and word was he was angling for comp. He had fallen at a fire scene and claimed that the two bulging disks and torn rotator cuff made it impossible for him to do his work. The whole thing would drag out for a year or two and then it would take that much longer to replace him. The result was that any investigation that happened would be on Harlan’s department. It was an imperfect world but it was the world he lived in.

Harlan massaged his forehead. He turned to Elliot and placed a hand on the deputy’s shoulder. “Elliot that’s OK for a preliminary but it’s important for us to find proof of the exact cause.” He smiled at his deputy conspiratorially. “We don’t want some insurance company screwing Father Lake over, now do we?”

Understanding dawned on Elliot’s face. “Don’t worry, Sheriff,” he replied with a wink. “You can count on me.”

That’s exactly what Harlan was worried about, but saying so wouldn’t help matters any. At least he appeared to have gotten through to the deputy and that was about the best he could hope for.

There was a loud crash. Harlan wheeled around, startled by the unexpected sound. Near the front of the building he spotted a cloud of black soot billowing up into the night sky. From this angle Harlan couldn’t see the firemen very clearly but he quickly surmised what had happened. They were pulling down pieces of the collapsed structure in an attempt to ferret out lingering traces of the fire. Harlan relaxed the instinctive tension that had coiled in his muscles and then one of the firemen began yelling, “Sheriff, come quick.”

Harlan and Elliot responded immediately and hurried into the jumbled mess of the church. They skirted the large crater at the center of the building and made their way toward the corner that still stood nearest the road. Harlan could see glimpses of the firemen through the skewed wreckage but couldn’t make out much else. He and Elliot finally circumvented the gaping hole in the sanctuary floor and entered the area of activity. The firemen were standing in a small knot staring up at a smoldering slab of the church wall. Harlan’s eyes followed theirs and widened in shock.

Sister Elizabeth was little more than a blackened cinder fused to the interior of the church wall. The upper half of her body and one arm were all that remained and those were a horror of burnt, papery flesh and charred bone. Her hand was raised above her head in a hideous claw and her skeletal mouth was thrown open in a soundless scream of agony.

“I never seen so much blood. God, it was everywhere,” Helen said as she wrung her hands.

“Stop talkin’ about it, Helen – please,” Ed muttered and pressed the accelerator harder. He turned his eyes back to the road and squeezed the steering wheel so tightly that the white bone of his knuckles strained against the skin.

Helen continued wringing her hands, as if she was trying to rub some invisible stain from them. “God, Ed what are we gonna do? Our poor Jenny.”

Helen moaned and Ed felt his stomach churn. Every time she made that moaning sound it reminded him of the blood – the blood of his granddaughter coating the walls of their small farmhouse, dripping from the living room ceiling in great black droplets and even running in a little stream across the cantered floor toward the kitchen. It would have been the most horrible thing he had ever seen even if it hadn’t been his little angel.

Ed turned the wheel as they started down the slope of Puritan Mountain. The tires squealed loudly. He knew he was going too fast but he couldn’t help himself. He had no desire to slow down. The tires screeched again and with great reluctance he lifted his foot from the gas and touched the brake. The aging pickup lost a little speed as it entered the next curve and the complaining of the wheels was not as loud. They were still going very fast, however, and the wooden livestock rack on the back leaned so far to the side that it seemed in danger of tipping. Ed looked into his side mirror and unwillingly pressed the brake a little harder. When he did Helen moaned. And when she moaned he saw the blood again.

Even the phone, that had been ripped from the wall, had been bathed in it. And let’s not forget about the TV – the ancient TV with the deep puddle of gore on its top and the long, thick fingers of blood reaching down across its electric-blue face. The heat from the picture tube had quickly congealed the blood into heavy, black tendrils that flashed transparent red whenever the screen buzzed into intermittent life. It looked as if some huge devil’s hand was gripping the set from above, trying to burst it, like the heart of a frail little girl who had just entered puberty.

The tires screamed again and it snapped Ed back into the present. Instinctively he hit the brake and his body was jolted forward. In the back something thumped heavily against the cab. It was probably one of the feed barrels rolling loose or the livestock rack shifting in its tracks. Ed looked into his side mirror. The black tarp that he kept tied across the rack flapped like a cape, and the slatted sides of the rickety, frame structure swayed in concert with each turn. It

sure was lucky he didn't have Nell or Betsy with him. The two old cows would have stopped giving milk for a year after a ride like this.

As he turned through the next curve he glanced at the mirror again. The rack began to lean precariously outward with the force of the turn. He knew if it tipped, it was heavy enough to take the entire truck over with it. But he couldn't slow down. He had to hurry – for Jenny.

He looked over at Helen. She was dead white and staring straight ahead like a zombie. The only part of her that was moving at all was her hands and they kept darting over one another like a pair of mad, fighting fish. Ed looked closer and could see that the skin was turning red and raw from the incessant rubbing. She did not seem to notice.

"Helen," he said, and it came out as a little more than a squeak. "Helen honey, can you hear me?"

She did not respond and her hands continued to rub over one another at their same feverish pace. He started to call her name again, louder, but thought better of it. There was really nothing he could do for her now and besides, he was afraid she might moan again and make him think about the blood. He shuddered. It didn't seem possible that a human body could contain that much blood. It just didn't seem possible. And this thought brought another question – a question he had been trying to avoid ever since he had stepped into that gore-drenched living room.

Where was her body?

He had looked everywhere for it – in the house, in the yard, even in the barn, but he hadn't been able to find anything – anything except the blood and a shredded piece of the nightgown she had been wearing.

The stock rack bumped against the truck again. He was sure that's what it was this time because the sound had been right behind his head where the corner of the rack was closest to the cab. It didn't matter though. He pressed the gas pedal further to the floor. The tires screeched louder than ever but this time he did not let up. He had to get someplace as fast as he could and call a hospital, and the sheriff. A tear spilled from his eye and zigged its way down his deeply lined face. And yes, a preacher too.

He took one of his hands off the wheel and tried to rub the tear away. The truck swerved a bit and the wooden rack whammed against the cab so hard that it nearly dented the metal. He glanced at his rearview mirror and then looked over at Helen. She didn't seem to have noticed. He wasn't surprised. In her present condition, he doubted she would have noticed if her hair caught fire.

He turned back and looked at the road. Another tear trickled down his face and unbidden, that nagging thought returned to him, where was his granddaughter's body?

And then he found out.

The truck suddenly came into a very steep curve, a curve that at this speed it would never make. Ed panicked for a moment. But, before he could react, the rack on the back of the truck gave one last mighty whump against the cab and Jenny flopped down over the front windshield – or at least something that was grotesque and flayed open and wearing Jenny's clothes.

Helen screamed and Ed's mouth fell open in a strangled shriek that was somehow even worse. Instinctively he slammed both feet onto the pickup's aging brakes and braced his arms against the steering wheel. The truck skidded and the rear end began to swerve out into the oncoming lane. Ed felt the weight of the truck beginning to shift and tilt sideways. He yanked the wheel in the opposite direction of the skid. The pickup slued and swung the other way. Across the windshield the body of his granddaughter lolled bonelessly like some ghastly doll.

Ed fought the steering wheel first one way and then the next. He tried not to look at what was on the window but its face kept sliding over in front of him. He wanted to close his eyes but could not. He pulled at the wheel again, and again the truck swerved. The tires howled like something crazed and primitive. He pressed the brakes harder and he could smell them burn. This was a bad sign. The brakes weren't in the best of shape to begin with and this kind of stress might just finish them off. And if they went so did Ed and Helen.

The truck came into another curve and he tried to steer through it. The tires shrieked at him again. Having no other choice he jammed down on the brake with all his strength. His body was almost horizontal now, with only his shoulders touching the seat behind him.

The truck began to skid wildly. He eased up on the brake some and fought the wheel in the direction opposite the slide. Ahead of him, another curve loomed in his headlights and he stood on the brakes again, this time rocking up and down on them like a child on a pogo stick. With his arms braced straight out in front of him he swung the wheel into the curve. The tires screamed at him with a voice like the nails of god against a blackboard. He rocked the brakes desperately and pulled at the steering wheel until the cords of his neck stood out like high tension wires. The two inside wheels of the truck began to leave the road, lifting further and further from the pavement. The livestock rack on the back started to tip, leaning inexorably toward the point of no return. Suddenly the black tarp tied to the stock rack ripped free and flapped off into the night like a wounded bat. Ed held his breath for what well could have been the rest of his life and prayed to whatever gods would listen.

And apparently one of them did.

Up ahead his headlights swept around the bend of the curve and miraculously he saw the road straighten out. In the darkness and panic, Ed had lost track of where he was. As he looked at the seemingly endless strip of pavement stretching in front of him, Ed realized that he'd finally reached the bottom of the mountain. He had made it. Gradually the two airborne tires began easing back down toward the road. When they touched the asphalt, the truck bucked once and then grudgingly surrendered to his will. Ed sighed and for the first time in a long while he breathed.

He continued applying all the pressure he could muster to the crippled brakes and that, plus the leveling of the road, began to slow the truck to a manageable speed. The wave of relief that washed over Ed was like a long-awaited rain. At the end of the straight stretch, there was a wide bed of gravel beside the road. He steered the truck into it and, with the help of the loose carpet of stones, he was able to bring the pickup to rest. When the truck came to a full and complete stop he dropped his head into his hands and wept like a baby.

After several minutes Ed managed to get himself under control enough to lift his eyes from his still trembling hands. By some ghastly miracle he saw that the body of his granddaughter had not been shaken free by all the swerving and sliding of the truck. She was still plastered there across the windshields like a giant, gutted fish. Ed could not stand to look at her and turned away.

Beside him he heard something groan and remembered Helen. He looked down in the direction of the noise and saw that she was crammed into the small floorboard space on the passenger side. She had apparently been thrown there by their wild ride and was wedged so tightly that she couldn't move. The end result of this though, was that she seemed to have come through the ordeal with hardly a scratch, a few bruises maybe, but hardly a scratch. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled wanly up at him. He held out his hand to help her up and, with much difficulty, the two of them managed to free her from the confines of her cramped resting

place. As soon as she was out, Ed pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. He stroked her hair and when they both had finally stopped trembling he turned her face toward his.

“I want you to promise me something,” he said, not letting her eyes waver from his.

She blinked as if trying to clear away some of the lingering confusion and then uncertainly managed to ask, “What?”

He took a deep breath and steeled himself for what he had to do. “I’ve gotta get out of the truck and take care of something, and I want you to promise me that you’ll close your eyes and not look out the window.”

She stiffened in his arms, remembering the sight of her granddaughter’s body flopping down over the windshield. Instinctively Helen turned and looked in the direction he had warned her not to.

Ed wasn’t fast enough to stop her and could only grimace as he waited for her reaction to the ghastly sight he’d been trying to spare her. But instead of the violent screaming he had expected, she simply asked a question.

“Where is she?”

Ed immediately turned toward the window himself. To his amazement there was nothing there. He blinked several times and rubbed his eyes but the apparition did not reappear. For a moment he wondered if the whole thing had just been some sort of crazy hallucination.

And that was when the clawed hands came bursting through the window behind him.

Tom was staring out into the darkness through the window of his truck, trying not to think about the loss of his father. Jessie sat quietly beside him. The somber teenagers were parked along a stretch of remote county road. The spot they had chosen wasn't very wide and the passenger side of the truck was at the edge of the undergrowth that trailed off into the nearby woods.

Jessie looked over at Tom. There were so many things she wanted to say to him but none of the words that came to mind seemed right. One of the lessons her own mother's death had taught her was that nothing anyone could say would ever take away the pain. But she also knew Tom was the type that needed to talk about what had happened or he would let the hurt and anger eat him up inside.

Jessie gently touched Tom's shoulder. He blinked back from the distant place he had been and turned toward her.

"Tom, I'm sorry about your dad," she said knowing how clumsy and inadequate it sounded.

There was a long pause and then Tom lowered his eyes. "Yeah, me too," he replied softly.

Jessie's fingers found his hair and stroked it. "I know how much you loved him," she said wishing there was some way to ease his sorrow.

Tom nodded sadly and looked back out the window. His eyes began to take on that far away cast again. Jessie didn't want to let the conversation end so quickly, and awkwardly added, "I know you love your mother too."

This comment certainly got Tom's attention. He turned on Jessie quickly. The venom she had seen at the mine reappeared and the anger in his voice was barely held in check.

"Look Jessie, I'm not ever going back there again," he snapped. "It'd be like condoning everything she's done."

"Tom you don't know all the things that happened between your parents," she countered rationally. "Why don't you give your mom a chance to tell her side of it?"

"Yeah, why don't I give her a chance to run my dad down now that he can't defend himself," he sneered. "That's real smart."

His tone was hurtful and she responded in kind. "You keep assuming that everything was your mother's fault."

Tom's eyes widened furiously, "Well, I guess that's because my mom was the one screwing your old man."

The accusation hit Jessie like a slap in the face and she recoiled from it. Jessie turned away and waited for the sting to pass so she wouldn't elevate the argument by replying in anger.

Through the dense undergrowth of the nearby woods a monstrous, black shape moved. It pushed its way easily through the grasping thicket of nettles and branches that lined the forest floor. Its pace was slow and methodical, the confident stride of a hunter. It emerged from the edge of the forest and saw the truck. Its posture instantly became slier, more stealthy. It had been tracking its prey for miles and now it was close, very close, to the kill.

Jessie turned back to Tom. Her voice was level and carefully controlled. "My father told me that nothing happened between him and your mother until after the divorce was final."

"And you believe that?" Tom said incredulously.

Jessie looked away from his scathing stare. There was a long pause and when she finally did reply there was something less than conviction in her voice.

"Yes," she said.

Tom shook his head in disgust and looked away.

The creature from the woods hurried toward the truck. It stayed low to the ground and circled wide so that it could approach without being seen. It made almost no noise as it pushed through the thinning undergrowth that continued almost to the rear of the pickup.

Jessie was smarting from the hurtfulness of Tom's remarks, and her own uncertainty, and it showed in the sharpness of her retort.

"So what are you planning to do now? Sleep in this truck for the rest of your life."

"If I have to," Tom replied defiantly.

Jessie's eyes narrowed with anger of her own. "Well, I'm not," she snapped and opened the door. She stepped out into the long grass that started below the vehicle's running board.

When Jessie's foot landed in the thatch of wiry vegetation the thing that had been slithering through the undergrowth stopped. It was less than ten feet away now and it could taste the aroma of her on the air. It urgently started forward again, this time making a beeline for her leg.

In the truck Jessie moved to get out but Tom reached for her. "Wait," he asked.

Jessie turned to look back at him. A single tear trickled from her eye and rolled down her smooth, soft cheek. The sight of it sent a pang of self-loathing through Tom.

"Come back in here," he urged, his voice now imploring and apologetic. "Please."

In the undergrowth less than a foot from Jessie's leg the weeds parted and a blackened, claw emerged. The deformed hand lunged for Jessie's leg just as she pulled it back into the truck. The door slammed and the razored nails slashed empty air.

Inside the pickup, Jessie turned from closing the door and looked at Tom. Shame leadened his eyes and made it difficult for him to meet her gaze.

"I'm sorry," he offered honestly. "There's a lot of things I don't know right now. But the one thing I do know is that you're the only good thing left in my life. And if I lose you I don't know what I'll do."

Jessie looked at him. His face held none of the anger from before – just sincerity and hurt. Tears rimmed his eyes.

“I love you,” he said, trying desperately to smile. All her own anger melted away and Jessie embraced him. They held each other that way for several moments and finally Tom sat back.

“You know what you said about me having to live in my truck might be true,” he said and wiped at the salty tracks of the tears drying on his face. “I can’t bear the thought of going back to that house where mom is. And it ain’t like your place is an option.”

Jessie smiled sadly and nodded in understanding. Suddenly her eyes lit up with inspiration.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said. “Let’s go to your dad’s hunting cabin. It’ll be empty this time of year and we could stay there as long as we wanted.”

A grin dawned across Tom’s face. “That’s perfect,” he replied, and then stopped. “Did you say, we?”

“If you think you’re gonna get rid of me buster,” she said perkily. “You’ve got another thing coming.”

He smiled and kissed her. He turned back to the steering wheel and twisted the key into the ignition.

In the open passenger window beside Jessie two smoldering red eyes raised into view. They towered above her and burned with a hunger too unearthly to name. The blackened claw that had missed her leg rose into the air and lashed out with the speed of a cobra. Oblivious to this Tom shifted the truck into gear and floored it. The pickup peeled out and the vicious claw missed its mark, closing on empty air for a second time.

As the vehicle rocketed away a mad howl of frustration pierced the night air. But the sound was lost in the scream of tires and the throaty whine of the accelerating engine.

The thing glowered at its receding prey with those terrible, burning eyes and howled again. It did not like being denied and it could not stand being teased. It bolted after the truck, pursuing it with an eerie, unnatural speed. It had missed twice. It would not miss again.

The gray light of dawn slowly crawled across the sky and the first amber fingers of morning reached out from behind the mountains to push away the night. Harlan rubbed his eyes tiredly and returned his hand to the wheel. The headlights of his cruiser illuminated the still darkened road ahead of him. It had been a very long night and the only thing he wanted to do now was go home. He didn't want to spend any more time thinking about the fire, or the mine, or Andy. The inside of his brain was furred with a heavy coat of fatigue and useful thought was impossible at this point.

But of course, your mind has a mind of its own and fragments of the day whirled through his head like taunting ghosts. The burned agony of Sister Elizabeth; the hatred on Tom's face at the mine; Linda's hopeless expression in return; and all those things interspersed with memories of Andy – Andy trying to sleigh ride in a leg cast, Andy consoling him after a fumble in the county championship, Andy dancing drunkenly by himself at a bar after the worst week of boot camp, and Andy's lifeless eyes staring up into the smoke-filled blackness of a caved-in mine.

He shook these images away and returned his focus to the road ahead. He saw that the Kink was coming up. The Kink was a treacherous little curve that started out slow and gentle but halfway through had a hairpin angle in it. To make matters worse the turn was banked wrong and if you took it too fast your momentum would throw you into the on-coming traffic. He had separated many a teenager from twisted metal on that curve.

He slowed the cruiser and negotiated the turn carefully. Ahead the road began to straighten out. Off to his right, he could see the sprawling outline of Puritan Mountain. The mammoth hill rose toward the gradually brightening sky. It looked like the back of some gigantic dinosaur that had fallen asleep among the forest of smaller hills around it.

Harlan's eyes lingered for a moment and then returned to the road in front of him. Up beside the pavement, about halfway down the straight stretch, he could see something. It was still too dark to make out any details but it looked like an older model truck. He slowed the cruiser as he approached the stranded vehicle. The rounded fenders, liberal coat of primer and livestock rack were unmistakable. It was Ed Tuttle's pickup. Ed had a small farm on the other side of the mountain. Apparently the old heap had broken down on him. Not surprising considering its age and advanced state of disrepair.

Harlan slowed the cruiser to a halt and clicked on the search beam that was mounted near his outer mirror. The morning was still gloomy and he aimed the light at the truck. Dew had opaqued the windows and he couldn't see inside. He continued running the light over the pickup

and several inches behind the cab something glittered like a scattering of diamonds. It was glass – broken glass.

Harlan sighed and took a flashlight from the glove box. Someone had probably vandalized the abandoned vehicle. He got out of his cruiser and closed the door behind him. He left the search beam on and, as he walked into it, his shadow crawled silently over the old truck.

He stopped beside the vehicle and shined his flashlight around. There were a few pieces of broken window glass in the truck's bed. He looked at the ground. A couple of tiny glimmers indicated some there as well. He turned his light toward the driver's side window. The heavy dew made it impossible to see the interior. He listened for a moment. The only sound was the slow ticking of the engine as it cooled. Harlan reached out and grasped the door handle. It was cold and wet from the dew. He pulled its old-fashioned grip. The door creaked open on rusted hinges and reluctantly swung back. Harlan aimed the light inside. His eyes bulged.

The truck was filled with blood.

The thickening, red gore coated every inch of the cab's interior. It congealed in scabrous pools on the seat, ran in dark rivulets along the walls and dripped in long, ropy tendrils from the ceiling.

The sharp, coppery smell of decay hit Harlan just as his mind accepted the vile magnitude of the sight. He turned and ran for the road. Puke squirted from his mouth and he capped a hand over it. When he finally reached the pavement he removed his hand and vomit shot out onto the asphalt in a steaming splatter.

It was the perfect end to a perfect night.

By the time Harlan's cruiser entered the town of Puritan the sun was up and the morning fog had burned off. The sky was clear and blue and bright. On any other day it would have been beautiful.

After his initial investigation of the scene around Ed Tuttle's truck, Harlan had tried to raise Elliot on the radio but the deputy hadn't been in his car. Pearl's shift was over and she wouldn't be in the office. This meant he'd had to string yellow "Crime Scene" tape around the area where Ed's truck was and hope no one disturbed it while he drove into town.

As he entered Puritan's only street, he saw that the meager business district was already beginning to wake. There were a couple of cars parked in front of the Uptown Restaurant and a few others scattered here and there. Most of the shops would be opening before long and traffic would pick up a bit. But even at its zenith the activity in Puritan would be far from hectic.

Harlan passed quickly down Main Street. Most of the buildings in Puritan dated back to the coal boom of the thirties and forties but had gone through endless layers of siding and paint in vain attempts at modernization. Several of the storefronts were vacant but there were still a number of businesses that held on. A small branch of the Farmers and Merchants bank stood at one end of town and Stevens Hardware held sway at the other. In the middle were the Uptown, the vacant storefronts, a barber shop and a large three-story building that housed the Mercantile. The Mercantile was a clothing establishment noted for still carrying a number of fashions that had been on its racks since the seventies.

Just beyond the barber shop, off to itself, was the courthouse. It was the largest structure in town and it contained most of the county's government offices – including those of the sheriff. Harlan quickly pulled his car to a halt near the side entrance and jumped out. He hustled into the building noting that Elliot's cruiser was presently sitting in the "SHERIFF ONLY" parking spot beside the door.

Harlan's office was the first on the right and he hurried to it. He entered and strode past the tiny waiting area immediately inside. There was a counter that separated this part of the room from the rest of the office. Harlan moved around the counter to a large open space where his staff worked.

Elliot's desk was the one closest to the front and at the moment he was sitting at it with his feet propped up, snoring like a bandsaw. As Harlan walked by, he knocked Elliot's feet down and the slightly built deputy came awake with a start.

“Get up Elliot,” Harlan said as he made his way toward one of the other desks. “I need you.”

Elliot struggled to collect his wits. “Sorry Sheriff,” he stammered. “It... It was a long night with the fire and all.”

Harlan held his hand up to cut off Elliot’s excuses. “Never mind that,” he said hurriedly. “I want you to locate Sidney Porter and a wrecker and get over to the foot of Puritan Mountain. I found Ed Tuttle’s truck abandoned there. It was full of blood but there were no bodies.”

“Holy shit!” Elliot exclaimed.

“My sentiments exactly,” Harlan replied and picked up the phone. As he began to dial he glanced over and saw that Elliot hadn’t moved.

“Today Elliot!” he barked and the deputy jumped up like he had been shot out of a cannon.

“Yes sir,” he blurted and spun around. He was in such a rush that he nearly tripped over his chair and sent it careening into the wall. He looked back at Harlan sheepishly and then hustled toward the door.

When he was gone Harlan shook his head and finished pushing the buttons on the phone. After a couple of rings, a receptionist answered.

“Yes,” Harlan said. “I’d like to speak with Trooper John Campbell, please.”

John Campbell was the sort of man that would make a good friend or a bad enemy. He was a big, square-jawed fellow – intimidating even by state trooper standards. He was six feet four inches and two hundred and forty pounds of discipline and integrity. But to those few people who were fortunate enough to know him well he was a soft-hearted man who couldn’t turn away a stray cat or a friend in need.

On the second ring, John put down the arrest report he was reviewing and picked up the phone.

“Campbell,” he answered in his best trooper’s baritone.

“Hi, John. This is Harlan,” the voice on the other end replied.

A smile immediately bloomed on the big trooper’s face. “Well if it isn’t the law in the hinterlands,” he said genuinely pleased. “How are you Harlan?”

There was a pause and then a weary sigh. “To be honest I’ve been better.”

The trooper’s attitude quickly became more businesslike. “Yeah, I heard about the mine explosion on the way in this morning.”

Harlan raked a hand through his hair. “You don’t know the half of it. We also had a church blow up, and what’s starting to look like a multiple homicide. All within hours of each other.”

“Geez,” John replied in amazement. “Sounds like New York City down there.”

“Tell me about it,” Harlan agreed. He was silent for a moment and when he continued a note of distress began creeping into his voice. “There’s nothing at all to indicate any connection between the events but I can’t shake the feeling that I’m missing something.”

John mulled his friend’s words over. “Never underestimate instincts. Sometimes it’s your subconscious putting things together before your conscious does.”

“Well, I sure wish my conscious would get its rear in gear.”

“What’s your schedule like this afternoon?” the trooper asked.

Harlan paused. He hadn’t had time to think that far ahead. “Ah, just dealing with whatever comes up in these cases.”

“I’m in court till eleven,” the trooper said looking at his desk calendar. “But I’ve got some time this afternoon. If you’d like I could come down. Sometimes an extra pair of eyes can do a world of good.”

“Hey John, that’d be a real help. It’s a little hard for me to be objective right now.”

“Been there and done that,” his friend admitted and glanced at his watch. “Look, I’m gonna be late if I don’t get out of here right now. I’ll see you around two, OK.”

“Thanks,” Harlan said gratefully. “I owe you.”

“No problem,” the trooper replied and hung up the phone.

On his end, Harlan returned the receiver to its cradle and sighed tiredly. He rubbed his eyes for a moment and finally got up.

He exited his office and headed out into the brightening day – unaware that, for Puritan, a new kind of darkness was already beginning to fall.

Linda's dreams were far from peaceful. She lay tangled in the sheets and the white linen encircled her like the coils of a boa constrictor. She tossed fitfully and mumbled under her breath as demons chased her through the endless corridors of sleep. She had visions of Andy trapped in the mine, his body smashed into a bloody smear by tons of rock. His mangled face was the only thing visible and it was bloated with the blood that had been forced into it by the tremendous weight on his body. Andy's head was twice its normal size and the distended flesh was beginning to split and fracture. The congealing blood inside discolored his face and the swelling made the features nearly unrecognizable. She was so close to him that she could see clear liquid being forced through his pores by the pressure of the blood. And then Andy's eyes popped open, and his mouth contorted into a terrible smile. When the grinning lips parted, she could see the black blood that filled his mouth.

She screamed.

But the scream was locked within her nightmare and in the bedroom, the only sounds were an incoherent moan and her body tossing fitfully among the sheets. After a moment another noise joined those that she was making. It was the creaking of a floorboard. This external stimulus seemed to invade her sleep and she moaned again in response to it. Another board creaked, this one closer – almost at the foot of the bed. The struggle within the dream continued and her body shuddered in response. When the third floorboard creaked it was only inches away and her eyes moved frantically under their lids as the horrible nightmare reached its climax. Suddenly Linda bolted upright in bed. She was about to scream when she saw the burnt, torn face of her ex-husband Andy leering down at her. Now she did scream – long and loud. But this dream would not end.

Andy stepped back. His face was not bloated the way it had been in the dream but the cracks and discoloration were visible, as if the swelling had once been there and faded. Much of his skin was blackened and charred, like a marshmallow left too long on the fire. Slimy, vile ooze leaked from the gashes and rips in his flesh. He had a mangled cigarette in one hand and with the other, he patted his pockets as if searching for something.

“Got a light?” he asked casually. “I seem to have lost mine.”

The offhand manner he displayed was in sharp contrast to his terrible appearance. Linda's fear had gone beyond her ability to cope with it and she just blubbered deliriously as she crawled back across the bed away from him. In response, the smirking grin on Andy's face vanished and his tone became mean-spirited and threatening.

“What’s wrong Linda?” he sneered. “You don’t look so glad to see me.”

Linda shrank further away from him. Andy threw his crumpled cigarette at the floor in disgust.

“I guess I must have surprised you,” he said sarcastically. “You were probably expecting your backstabbing, little boyfriend instead.”

Linda still did not answer. She had retreated as far as she could and her back was wedged into the corner formed by the headboard and wall. In response to her silence, Andy began pacing agitatedly back and forth beside the bed. The room’s heavy drapes were closed and a few stray beams of subdued, early morning sun leaked out around them. Finally Andy turned and glared at her.

“You know you make me sick,” he spat. “You two were planning on coming back here to do the nasty while I was dying in that caved-in hell hole.”

Linda’s eyes were fixed on Andy’s pacing form but she still gave no reply. Andy looked up at the ceiling as if he might find an answer there.

“That’s just great,” he said angrily. “I give you twenty years of my life and a wonderful son and you can’t even wait till my body’s cold before you’re off humping my best friend.”

Andy stopped pacing and stared at her incredulously. “Was I that bad?” he asked and loomed toward Linda, his mutilated face only inches from hers. “Was I that much of a monster?”

Linda cringed away, her eyes wide with fear. Andy leaned back to his place beside the bed and smiled triumphantly.

“Well, I’m definitely a monster now,” he crowed. “And boy are you gonna be sorry.”

Andy turned his back to Linda and walked toward one of the heavily draped windows. He stood there for a moment and glanced back over his shoulder at his ex-wife.

“You know Linda, that mine explosion was the most horrifying thing you can imagine,” he said, and closed his eyes as if recalling the event. “But I didn’t spend those last moments wishing I wouldn’t die. I spent them thinking that I would have sold my soul to the devil if I could’ve lived long enough to make you and Harlan pay for what you did to me.”

“And guess what?” he said wheeling around gleefully. “I got my wish.”

Andy waited for a response but Linda was too frightened and confused to speak. When she didn’t reply he continued his raving.

“Hate is a very powerful thing, Linda,” he said. “Hate is far more powerful than love. Love can end.” He glared at her accusingly. “You taught me that. But hate just keeps on until you or the thing you hate is gone. And sometimes it keeps going even after that.”

Andy began patting his pockets and looking around the room. “I’d sell my soul for a cigarette,” he mumbled absently. Then he realized what he’d said and threw his head back in laughter. “If I was still one to sell,” he finished and kept on laughing. After a moment the laughter began to fade and he looked back over at Linda, who though still afraid, appeared a bit more in control.

“You see Linda, I found something down in that mine last night.” He stopped and seemed to reconsider this statement. “Or maybe something found me. I’m not exactly sure.” Andy smiled evilly. “But one thing I do know. It’s more terrifying than anything you can imagine. And it believes in paybacks, Linda. And paybacks are hell.”

Suddenly Andy’s rantings were cut short by the sound of a car pulling up outside. He moved back to the window and peeked between the drapes. In the driveway, he saw Harlan

getting out of a police cruiser and tiredly walking toward the house. A smile bloomed on his terrible face and he glanced back at Linda.

“Here comes lover boy,” he giggled.

Linda’s eyes darted toward the window. A new fear filled them. Andy noted her concern and pretended to be sympathetic.

“Aw, don’t worry,” he pouted. “This would be much too easy. I wanna savor my revenge. I want to make it last as long as possible.” An idea seemed to occur to Andy and he winked at Linda mischievously. “And besides, what makes you think I’m even here?”

His eyes locked powerfully with hers and she immediately felt herself grow sleepy. “Maybe that nightmare you were having earlier never really ended,” he urged.

With this, the room around Linda began to fade and, as it did, Andy bent over to pick up the tattered fragment of the cigarette he had discarded earlier. He smiled as he looked at it and slowly faded along with everything else.

Linda struggled for a moment, trying to resist the sudden tide of fatigue that had come upon her. But this proved impossible and with the unmistakable scent of a flaring match tickling her nose she was quickly pulled back down into the irresistible embrace of sleep.

Harlan wearily climbed the steps to Linda’s house. He dragged his feet up each of the risers as if there were cinder blocks attached to them. He opened the door with his key and entered. The house seemed unusually dark. It was fairly early though and, after the long night, Linda might still be asleep. He walked across the living room and down the narrow hallway toward her bedroom. He put his hand on the doorknob and turned it quietly. He noticed an odd, burning smell and looked down. Thick smoke was billowing out around his feet. Panic gripped his heart and he shoved the door. It did not open. He pushed again, harder, but it still wouldn’t budge. A thousand terrible possibilities raced behind his eyes and he lowered his shoulder and charged forward.

When he hit the door it burst open with a whine of swollen wood and he stumbled inside. The room was clouded with heavy, gray smoke. He frantically searched through the haze and found Linda lying unconscious on the bed. A lit cigarette smoldered among the sheets. Harlan quickly snuffed out the flickering embers. He picked Linda up and hurried into the hall.

Linda began coughing as Harlan carried her to the living room and laid her on the sofa. She struggled toward consciousness and then her eyes flew open. She began thrashing in his arms and trying to get free. But when she saw that Harlan was the one holding her, the squirming suddenly stopped. She quickly scanned the living room and glanced down at her nightclothes. Finally, realization dawned on her face.

“My God, it *was* a dream” she muttered and looked over her surroundings again, as if to confirm that she really was awake this time. To reassure herself further, she gripped the cloth of Harlan’s shirt between her fingers and touched his face. A feeling of relief washed over her. Yes, this *was* real. And if she was awake now that meant her vision of Andy had indeed been nothing more than a terribly vivid nightmare.

“Are you all right?” Harlan asked, peering worriedly into her eyes.

Linda looked at him for a moment and then her tense body sagged like a punctured balloon. She buried her face in Harlan’s chest and clutched at him weakly. “I had the most awful dream,” she said, pulling him closer. “Andy was alive... Or maybe not,” she corrected. “But he was in my room, accusing me, saying these terrible things.”

It pained Harlan to see her like this. He enfolded her in his arms and kissed her. “Sweetheart, you’ve been through a terrible ordeal. And when you’re upset like this it’s only natural to have bad dreams. But it was just a nightmare and it’s over now.”

Harlan tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. “OK?”

Linda nodded and Harlan smiled. “Good” he said. Now why don’t you take a couple of deep breaths? It’ll help you relax and you’ll feel better.”

Linda did as Harlan suggested and it did, in fact, make her feel better. The tenseness in her body slowly began to fade and a feeling of cool relief washed through her. She returned her gaze to Harlan’s and the steady, reassuring smile on his face told her that somehow, some way, everything was going to be all right. She hugged him fiercely and drew strength from his embrace. Then she took one last, long breath and sat back. Harlan dug out a handkerchief and dabbed at her tear streaked face.

Linda sighed and let him continue his tender ministrations. There really was something about this man. He could make her feel better whenever he wanted. Like a father washing away the tears of his little girl. He was something special and she loved him the way you could only love a good, honest, gentle man. She smiled and started to share these thoughts with him, but before she could a violent coughing spell began racking her body.

“Open some windows,” she wheezed, still not quite over the effects of the smoke.

Harlan jumped up and quickly did as she asked. He raised the windows in the living room and kitchen – and even in the bedroom so it could air out too. When he was satisfied that he’d done all he could, Harlan returned to the sofa. Linda was sitting up. He eased down beside her and began gently stroking her hair.

“You gonna be all right?” he asked.

She nodded slowly. He kissed her puffy eyes and took her hands gently in his. Linda sighed and snuggled closer. Yes, this certainly was a special man. She peered up at him and he smiled warmly in return. But suddenly his smile seemed to waver as if some other, less pleasant, thoughts were invading the wonderful moment they were sharing. Harlan looked down at her worriedly.

The panic caused by the fire in the bedroom had made him momentarily forget about the events of last night but now those memories came rushing back, and his mind returned to the subject that had been troubling him for hours.

“Have you heard anything from the kids?” he asked.

This sobered Linda’s mood as well. The crying jag had tightened her throat and she cleared it softly. “Last night Jessie was able to sneak a call to me while Tom was in a restroom at some gas station. She said they were gonna hide out at the cabin for a few days.”

Harlan pondered this news for a moment and shrugged. “Isn’t it funny how much difference a night can make? Two days ago, our kids shackled up in a hunting cabin wouldn’t have been very good news. But under the circumstances, I guess it’s about the best we could hope for.”

Linda turned away from Harlan. When he saw this he tried to look into her eyes but she resisted. Harlan’s strong fingers caressed her face and gently pulled it back toward his. Fresh tears glistened on her cheek.

“What’s wrong?” he asked awkwardly. “What did I say?”

“It’s not you,” she said through the tears. “I’m the problem. You’re a good man. But ever since you got involved with me you’ve had nothing but trouble.”

Harlan shook his head and gazed at her lovingly. "I'm the first to admit we didn't make all the right decisions," he confessed. "But that's in the past now. And the only thing anyone can do about the past is learn from it and move on."

Linda rubbed her reddened eyes with the heel of her hand. "That damned Andy," she said angrily. "He probably just got himself killed so Tom would hate me even more."

She buried her face in Harlan's chest and he held her tightly. After a moment of drawing strength from him again, she tried to collect herself. To help in this endeavor she changed the subject.

"What happened out at the church last night?" she asked pushing the last of her tears away.

Thoughts of the church turned Harlan's expression grave. "Nothing left," he said. "Sister Elizabeth was killed too."

"Oh, Harlan that's terrible."

Harlan nodded his agreement. "And after that, I found Ed Tuttle's truck abandoned and full of blood." He shook his head wearily. "Add that to the mine blast and it was a pretty bizarre night."

Linda put her arms around Harlan. Now it was her turn to do the consoling.

"You must be exhausted," she said and brushed a strand of hair away from his eyes. "Why don't you lie down on the couch for a while and take a nap?"

"I can't," he replied. "I only stopped by to check on you. The coroner is going over Ed's truck right now and I've gotta get there before he's finished."

Linda could tell when Harlan's mind was made up so she kissed him and stood. "Well, at least let me make you some coffee before you go," she offered, and turned without waiting for an answer. "Just relax and I'll have it ready in no time."

Linda moved across the living room to the adjoining kitchen. As she went Harlan dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one. He took a long drag and let the smoke out in a sigh.

In the kitchen Linda rinsed the coffee pot and filled it with water. She opened the cabinet and took down a Tupperware canister. On the back of the shelf behind the container there was a beat up, old Aladdin thermos. Linda took it down and carried it into the living room for Harlan to see.

"How about some for the road?" she asked and then stopped. Her eyes came to rest on the sofa and a smile spread across her face. Harlan was sitting there fast asleep, still upright, with a smoldering cigarette wedged between his fingers. Linda sat the thermos down and walked over to him. She removed the cigarette from his hand and put it out. She took a macramé comforter that was draped over the back of the sofa and covered Harlan's slumped figure. She kissed his cheek and went back into the kitchen to turn off the coffee.

Harlan's tongue slowly traced the curve of Linda's breast. He stopped to kiss her once and continued on. His hand came up and caressed the softness there. It felt warm and smooth and firm all at the same time. Linda's breathing began to quicken. He pushed the thin cloth of her nightgown back to reveal what was underneath. She sighed and her breath caught as the satin slipped across her nipple. She rubbed her hands through Harlan's hair and pulled him downward, urging him on. Harlan's other hand stroked her stomach gently and proceeded on to caress her thigh. When his hand had gone as far as it could he began to drag his fingertips up her leg, gravitating toward the middle. His tongue began to retrace its journey back around her breast. He felt her shiver beneath him. As his hands worked their magic he continued kissing her, slowly moving up to her neck. She trembled and he lowered his weight down on top of her. He nuzzled the flesh under her chin and finally began to kiss her lips. They were wet and inviting. He pressed forward kissing her more deeply and then opened his eyes to see Andy's leering, burnt face staring back at him. Andy bit down on Harlan's tongue and he screamed.

A large hand shook Harlan's shoulder. Harlan jerked and sat up immediately. There was a wild look in his eyes as he glanced around. He realized that he was still on Linda's couch and saw his friend John Campbell standing over him. The big state trooper smiled.

"Time to get up, sleeping beauty."

Harlan stood, still struggling to get fully awake. "S-Sorry John," he fumbled apologetically. "I must've..." He looked down at his disheveled appearance. "I must've nodded off. I didn't think you were coming till two."

The trooper laughed. "Yeah, sorry I'm running so late, but I got held up in court."

Harlan looked at his watch and cringed. "Jesus," he swore. "I apologize John. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

While Harlan was trying to pull himself together Linda entered the room and leaned against the kitchen doorframe.

Harlan was tucking madly at his shirttail. "Lin..." he called out loudly and then saw her. "Honey why did you let me sleep?" he asked with frustration edging his voice.

Linda didn't reply. They had been over this ground before. Harlan's biggest fault was that he would rather drive himself to exhaustion than delegate authority and chance anything going wrong. She had let him sleep because he needed it. Nobody would benefit if he worked himself to death.

Harlan combed a hand through his hair and cleared his throat. Behind him, John grinned ruefully. Harlan led the trooper through the living room and looked back at Linda.

“I’ll call you later,” he said.

Linda gave him a wink. He shook his head but there was a smile playing at his lips as he hurried out the door with his friend.

Harlan and John exited the state trooper's cruiser and walked across the loose gravel to the spot where Harlan had found Ed Tuttle's truck. The truck had been removed but the yellow, crime scene tape Harlan had stretched around the area was still there. The two officers slipped under the plastic ribbon and Harlan stopped. He held his hands out to indicate the section of the ground where the truck had stood.

"This was where I found it," he said as John came up beside him.

"The large gravels kept the perpetrator from leaving any footprints," Harlan continued, pointing at the egg-sized stones beneath their feet.

John turned and peered back at the road leading up the mountain. There were thick, black skid marks that continued almost as far as he could see. The trooper knelt down and examined the deep furrows that the truck tires had made in the bed of loose rocks.

"Looks like he was going pretty fast," John commented.

"Ed drove like winter molasses," Harlan replied.

John stood and walked to where the stones ended and the roadside vegetation began. Some of the weeds had been trodden down. He edged further into the brush. There was the faint outline of an overgrown path that zigged its way down the hill. A waist-high sumac stood just where the trail began to steepen. John moved toward it. There was a red smear on one of its leaves.

"Hey, Harlan," the trooper called. "Look at this."

Harlan joined his friend and examined the stain. It was blood. They stared at each other and then their eyes returned to the path. The mountain they were on was not conical. Instead, it was shaped like an enormous horseshoe with two long slopes descending from a central spine. Harlan and John were standing on one of those slopes and the other was directly across from them, divided by a steep ravine. The path at their feet dropped down into this ravine and quickly disappeared in the undergrowth. Their eyes followed its sketchy outline and tilted up to see it ascend the opposite slope. The narrow trail angled toward an ugly notch cut into the mountain's side. A thick, black tendril of smoke rose from this scar and drifted into the flawless blue sky.

It was the portal to Puritan Mine Number Eight.

Sidney Porter wasn't your typical mortician. You were more likely to see him in a Hawaiian shirt than a black undertaker's suit. He was a free-spirited man who, at fifty, had more life than most teenagers. He loved to dance and spent every night he could down at the Moose Lodge "cuttin' the rug" and "shakin' his thang". Most people overlooked what, for someone in his profession, were considered eccentricities because he did excellent work and conducted his services with infinite respect and decorum.

He was very careful to make sure that when you entered Porter's Funeral Home (the kids in town called it Porterhouse – after the steak) you were greeted with the appropriate air of dignity, even though he might be in the embalming suite at the back of the huge, rambling house jamming to Bob Marley or some early Stones. At the moment James Brown was yelling out at him through the small speakers hidden discretely around the room ("Ahhhhhhwww, good god!")

Sidney wasn't paying much attention to the music right now though. He was too involved with his work on the charred remains of Sister Elizabeth. There was very little flesh left on her ravaged body. What had once been skin now resembled spongy charcoal. Even the internal organs were shriveled up like hard, leathery raisins. But the biggest challenge he faced was her one remaining arm. The clawed appendage was raised above her head, as if still warding off the blast that had consumed her. Sidney pulled mightily on the arm, trying to get it back down to her side. But it wouldn't budge. Tendons were as tough as bailing wire under the best of circumstances but when they were burnt and fused this way it was like wrestling with a crowbar. "Hep me, hep me," James Brown's voice called from the speakers. Sidney readjusted his grip so he could get his weight into it. After a moment the arm started moving slightly and there was a loud creaking sound, like a two-by-four splintering.

"Come on sister, loosen up," he said between gritted teeth.

As if in response to his request the nun's arm began to give enough to allow it to be slowly pulled down to her side. With this difficult task completed, Sidney stopped to wipe away the sweat that had popped out on his brow. "I feeeeelll good," the godfather of soul commented boisterously. Sidney smiled and started to turn away. As he did though, the nun's arm began to slowly rise, reflexively returning to its original position. Sidney pounced on the arm and began wrestling it back down. At that moment the door to the embalming room opened and two men

walked in. One was Sheriff Ellis and the other was a big state trooper. Sidney looked up from his awkward position.

“Good morning gentlemen,” he said without missing a beat. “You’re just in time to watch me arm wrestle a nun.”

The two men didn’t seem to get the joke. Sidney released the nun’s arm with his right hand and cut off the music with a switch near the embalming table. He turned to face his guests but continued to hold the corpse’s arm down with his left hand. There was an awkward silence after this and Harlan decided to fill it with an introduction.

“Trooper John Campbell,” he said motioning to his friend. “This is Sidney Porter our local mortician and acting coroner.”

“Acting for the last twenty years,” Sidney replied and started to extend his hand. Then, remembering where it had been, thought better of the idea and returned it to his side. A subtle look of relief passed over the trooper’s face.

“Sidney can’t officially hold the office of coroner because he’s not an M.D.,” Harlan explained. “But there’s none in the county that’ll do it. Besides, Sidney is so good at the job we don’t need anybody else.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Sidney replied with a sly smile. He looked at the trooper. “Harlan thinks he has to butter me up occasionally so I won’t quit on him.”

John smiled as well. “Yeah, he used that silver tongue to get me down here too.”

Harlan held up his hands to put an end to the direction this exchange was taking. “Hey, how did I get to be the bad guy all the sudden?”

“If the foo shits,” Sidney responded, bringing a laugh from both of the men.

After the chuckle had passed Harlan figured it was time to bring up the reason for their visit. “So Sid,” he asked. “Have you got anything from the Tuttles’ truck?”

Sidney shifted gears fluidly. “Not much,” he said, becoming more businesslike. “I sent the blood samples over to Memorial for a quick prelim. There were three types in the vehicle and they matched each of the Tuttles’ records. But all the blood at the house was from the little girl. Beyond that we’ll have to wait for the report from the state medical examiner’s office.”

Harlan stared at the floor as he pondered this information. Finally he looked up. “Well, one possibility is that they came home, found the girl and were driving her to the hospital.”

“Seems reasonable,” Sidney nodded. “But obviously something happened before they got there.”

“Maybe whoever murdered Jenny hid in the pickup and killed Ed and Helen too.”

“Wait a minute,” John interrupted. “What makes you so sure they’re dead?”

Harlan shook his head. “You didn’t see how much blood was in the truck,” he replied. “There’s no way they could be alive.”

“I have to agree,” Sidney interjected. “The spray patterns in the vehicle and at the house indicate the opening of some major arteries. They couldn’t have survived this long.”

John grimaced at the ghastliness of the crime. “Well, you’re right about one thing,” he said to Harlan. “Not your typical night in the boondocks.” He then turned to Sidney and pulled a small plastic bag out of his breast pocket.

“We recovered this from some foliage near the wreck,” he said holding up the bag. “It should be run it against the other samples.”

Sidney examined the blood splattered leaf through the plastic. “Was this all you found?”

“Yes,” Harlan replied. “We looked the place over pretty good but no bodies and no more blood. I’ve got Elliot and some volunteers out there combing the area so something still might turn up.”

Sidney nodded. There was a long silence as each of them mulled the information over. When no more questions were asked Harlan spoke up.

“It’s getting late,” he commented in John’s direction. “I guess we better get going.”

John nodded his agreement and then Harlan turned to the mortician. “Thanks for your help Sidney,” he said appreciatively. “I’ll give you a call in the morning.”

“Nice meeting you,” John added as the two policemen turned to take their leave.

“Same here,” Sidney replied.

The two men exited the room. When they were gone Sidney sighed and put his hands on his hips. He scanned the room as if trying to remember what he needed to do next. Suddenly Sister Elizabeth’s blackened arm began rising above her head again. When Sidney saw this he pounced on it and began pulling it back to her side.

“Keep it down, sister,” he said between clenched teeth.

Harlan and John exited the funeral home. “You wanna take a run out to the church?” Harlan asked as they descended the steps.

John stopped in front of the cruiser and looked at his watch. “Harlan, you’re gonna hate me,” he said regretfully.

“Not a chance,” his friend replied. “What’s wrong?”

The trooper sighed. “I know it’s my fault we got such a late start but I’ve got to be back in Charleston by eight.”

Harlan did a few quick mental calculations. “The church is pretty far from town,” he said. “We’ll never be able to make it there and back and still get you on the road in time.”

“I’m sorry. When I promised to come down today I had no idea the court case would take so long.”

Harlan put a hand up to stop his friend’s apology. “Hold it right there. You’re busier than about anybody I know but you still came all the way down here to help out an old friend. Sounds like I should apologize for imposing on you.”

The trooper smiled and his eyes brightened with an idea. “Hey, maybe I could just check the church on my way out of town. If I come up with anything I’ll call you and we can compare notes.”

Harlan considered the suggestion for a moment. “Actually that might work out better for me too. There’s something else I need to do and if we split up I can get both of them taken care of.”

John nodded and Harlan extended his hand, “I really appreciate you coming down.”

“My pleasure,” his friend replied as they shook. Then his expression seemed to change and he looked at Harlan much more somberly. “I wasn’t quite sure how to bring this up, but Pearl told me what happened to Andy. I wanted you to know how sorry I am.”

Harlan felt uncomfortable and struggled to maintain his professionalism. “Thanks,” he said, but there were no words to express the complicated tangle of emotions he felt.

John put a comforting hand on Harlan’s shoulder and then got into the cruiser. He pulled the door shut and started the engine.

“Catch you later,” he called above the noise.

Harlan nodded and raised his hand in farewell. John shifted the car into gear and pulled out. Harlan waited there for a moment, and as he watched the vehicle disappear from sight he had the strangest sense of foreboding. He felt it as clearly as a pang of hunger or that vague ache he sometimes got in his knee when a bad storm was on the way. Something was coming and, if recent events were any indicator, it wasn't going to be good.

Father Lake carried the head of Jesus through the ruins of the church. He stopped in front of the mounting pile of rubble and tossed it there. The heavy piece of sculpture struck the mound of debris and rolled almost to its base before stopping. From there on the ground its soot-blackened face stared up at him. The dirty smears that covered it seemed to contort its once placid features into an expression of hateful accusation. Father Lake turned his back on that expression and looked at the devastation that had once been his church.

In the entire building there was nothing left of use – not a pew, not a candlestick, not even a hymnal. The Catholic faith had never enjoyed a particularly strong hold in Appalachia and the work required to build this church into a self-sustaining ministry had taken him a lifetime. Now it was gone – all of it – and he just didn't think he had the strength to start over.

He began to gather up the broken pieces of his baptismal cistern. The shards of porcelain glinted dully in the fading sun. The little minister in his head told him that this was exactly the sort of tribulation that Job had endured. But the weary, sad man in his heart didn't want to hear it. Logically he thought that there might come a day somewhere in the far away future when he would be able to view this as some sort of object lesson and analyze the spiritual significance of it. But for now the pain was too close, the wound too raw to be examined.

He wondered if this attitude made him a bad priest. Did being subject to the common human emotion of despair make him less of a man of God? Being aware of your frailty was supposed to be a virtue. It was the high minded that were due for a fall.

He lifted the broken scraps of the cistern and began carrying them toward the pile of debris. Every injured beast needs time to lick its wounds, he told himself. And given time he would be able to view this more objectively. Someday he might even be able to use this pain to help him minister to others. But for now, he had to simply keep putting one foot in front of the other. He had to apply himself to the work he could do with his hands and hope that his spirit healed itself in the meantime.

He dropped the pieces of the cistern on the rubbish pile and then heard the sound of a car pulling up. He raised his eyes and looked toward the road. A state police cruiser was turning into the parking lot of the demolished church. A tall man got out of the car and began walking toward him. Father Lake wiped away the sweat that was running down his forehead. The big trooper stopped in front of him.

“Hi there,” the tall man said putting his hand out. “I'm Trooper Campbell. Sheriff Ellis asked me to stop by and have a look around.”

Father Lake removed his work glove and shook the trooper's hand. "I'm Father Lake," he replied. "This is..." he stopped and corrected himself. "*Was* my church."

John looked away from the weary priest and surveyed the devastated building. "Gee," he said. "Must've been some explosion."

The priest glared at him, his brow knit in puzzlement. "What do you mean – explosion?" he asked pointedly.

"Ah... well look at this crater," he said motioning toward the deep depression that gaped in front of them. "And how far the debris has been thrown. That was the same conclusion that Sheriff Ellis had too."

Father Lake seemed flustered. "Well, no one said anything about it to me," he replied, trying to suppress his anger. "I thought it was just a fire."

The priest looked down at the ground in anguish. "Who would want to blow up my church?"

John quickly tried to calm the priest's fears. "It was nothing like that," he explained. "The deputy said that it was caused by a gas leak."

"Gas leak?" the priest balked. "There wasn't any gas in this church."

"But the deputy's report said there was a meter out back."

"There's an old meter out there," the priest replied agitatedly. "But we switched to electric years ago."

John looked down at him dumbly. He had run out of arguments.

Darkness falls quickly in the mountains of Appalachia. The sun slips over the back of one of the big sprawling hills and then the hungry night scurries in to take its place.

John looked up at the sky. There was a faint glow still silhouetting the few scrubby clouds that hung there, like a lingering memory of the daylight past. But the road in front of him was pooled in deep shadows. His car lights carved out a small chunk of visibility as he hurried back toward town.

After his talk with Father Lake he had done some checking at the scene. It turned out that not only did the church no longer use gas but the flow had been cut off where the building's old line branched off the main. That was out near the road and it meant that there couldn't have been any gas in the lines running under the building. And even if there was, it would never have been enough to create a blast like the one that had disintegrated the church.

Up ahead the road turned sharply but John didn't slow down. The wheels of the cruiser squealed in protest as the car rounded the curve. When the cruiser was through the turn he pressed the accelerator to the floor. He still didn't know if there was any connection between last night's string of unusual events, but like Harlan, he was beginning to get a strange feeling that there was more going on than met the eye.

He picked up his radio and tried calling Harlan's office again. Interference blared from the speaker. It was the same strange static he had experienced out at the church. It wasn't as strong as it had been, but it was still bad enough to make real communication useless. He tried anyway.

"Pearl, this is John Campbell," he called. "Over."

"Com . . . ba ver." The radio crackled.

John started to restate his message again and cursed under his breath. He hung up the mic aggravatedly. He didn't know what was causing this but he figured he was wasting his time until he got over Puritan Mountain. Once he was at the top of the giant hill, where there wasn't any obstruction between him and town, the weakening interference wouldn't be as much of a problem. He might also be able to get a signal on his cell phone. At the moment it was as useless as the radio.

Another turn loomed in his lights. He didn't slow for this one either. He would have thought, if he had known it was the one the locals referred to as the Kink.

The cruiser entered the curve doing sixty. The turn wasn't very steep at first and John swung the vehicle through it smoothly. Without warning the road angled abruptly to the right. When John saw this, fear shocked him into immediate action. He pulled the steering wheel hard. The tires screamed at him. His foot shot at the brake. The car was heading straight for the dark woods on the left-hand side of the road. The cruiser's lights raked across the trees, illuminating the fate that awaited him. He continued pulling at the wheel, hoping the vehicle would respond in time. Suddenly the rear of the cruiser swung outward and the car skidded around the turn. A cold wave of relief washed over him as he realized that he had made it. A nervous, thankful smile dawned across his face but it was instantly replaced with a look of abject terror.

There was a wrecked car lying in the road less than fifteen feet in front of him. A cry of panic jumped out of his throat and his foot jammed onto the brake. He wrenched the steering wheel fiercely and the car began to skid. He fought the wheel in the opposite direction and the rear end fishtailed wildly. As the overturned car loomed in his headlights the decision became clear. Hit the car or the woods. He jerked the steering wheel mightily to the left and the cruiser missed the wrecked vehicle by scant inches. Then the car shot into the woods like a rocket.

There was an earthen berm that divided the road from the woods. It was over a foot high and the cruiser hit it with a loud *whump*. The front end of the car was catapulted several feet into the air. Even with his seat belt on, John's head struck the car's roof. Then there was a sickening drop as the front end plummeted back toward the ground. At that moment the back wheels struck the high berm and the rear of the car bucked into the air like a rodeo horse. John was thrown toward the steering wheel but the seat belt caught before he struck it. The force, however, whipped his body like a rag doll and threw it back against the seat. The rear of the car landed with a thunderous crash and John's teeth bit deeply into his tongue.

The leap over the berm had slowed the car somewhat but it was still moving fast. Tree limbs slapped the windshield, clawing greedily at the cruiser as it went by. The heavy undergrowth and the soft ground began to slow the car – but not enough.

A huge hickory loomed in his path. Its long, craggy branches opened wide to welcome him. The hickory's trunk looked bone white in the glare of his one remaining headlight. The cruiser hit the tree with a terrible thud. The grill shattered instantly and the entire front end collapsed in a spray of broken glass and metal. The bumper caved in, enfolding the tree in a steel embrace and the hood popped open like a screaming mouth.

Inside, John was thrown forward. His seat belt wasn't quite as effective this time and his forehead slammed into the steering wheel with a sickening crunch. The momentum of the car continued forward for a moment and finally stopped. Then the car recoiled violently and jolted backwards. There was a terrible metallic groan, like the sound of the vehicle giving up the ghost, and then it was over.

Smoke and steam rose from the demolished cruiser and thick, black oil gushed from its ruptured guts. A broken web of windshield dropped into the floor. John lay slumped over the steering wheel. A thin line of blood ran down his face, branched across his nose and branched again near the bottom of his jaw. He groaned and more blood bubbled from his punctured tongue. The foamy gore dribbled down his chin and dripped onto his shirt. His eyes fluttered and fluttered again. Consciousness slowly returned but the world was foggy and desperately in need of focus. He leaned back in the seat.

John looked down at himself searching carefully for signs of injury. He tested his arms and legs. Nothing seemed to be broken. He pawed at his seat belt. It had saved his life. He popped open the buckle and tried to get out of the car. He pulled at the handle set into the

cruiser's armrest but it clicked back forth ineffectually. He pushed at the collapsed door. There was a shrill cry of metal. It opened about a foot and refused to go further. He didn't have the strength to wrestle with it so he crawled out of the small opening. His limbs felt as if they were made of lead. He pulled and dragged himself painfully through the tight space and when he was finally out of the car he fell to the ground.

His back and chest felt like someone had been beating them with a rubber hose. He lay there for a moment, trying to get his breath, and then unsteadily attempted to stand. He held onto the car for balance and looked at the damage.

The front end of the cruiser was wrapped around the tree like the arms of a dying lover and everything from the passenger compartment forward was a twisted mess. He shook his head, thankful that he was alive. He turned and moved back along the car using it to steady himself. He glanced toward the road.

Amazingly the cruiser had only traveled about fifty feet into the woods. While it was happening, the trip had seemed to last for hours. Through the undergrowth he could see lights shining from the highway up into the tops of the nearby trees. This seemed odd, until he remembered the other car. His dazed mind still wasn't completely clear but all the years of training and police instincts kicked in. There was probably someone hurt in that car. He began making his way back toward the road as best as he could.

John moved slowly through the woods using the trees he passed to help steady himself. After a few feet, he began to feel strong enough to walk on his own and only used the occasional sapling for balance. His vision was also beginning to clear and hopefully he didn't have a concussion. He was going to be mighty sore tomorrow but, other than that, he thought he would be all right. Suddenly he saw movement to his left. Something white and diaphanous flitted by in his peripheral vision. He turned quickly toward it but nothing was there.

Fear prickled the hairs at the back of his neck. He shook it off. Apparently his vision wasn't as clear as he had thought. He took several deep breaths to get more oxygen into his system and started walking again. He had only taken a few steps when another ghostly shape darted past on his right. He wheeled around trying to catch sight of it, but again it was gone. His head swam from the sudden movement and he had to steady himself against a tired, old maple. He closed his eyes and rubbed them. The world swirled in front of him. After a moment it cleared and he tried to walk again.

He was a few feet from the edge of the forest now. He took a couple of more steps and stopped. He peered through the last of the trees. The wrecked car was sitting on its top in the middle of the highway. The driver's side of the vehicle was facing him and its lights pointed uselessly up into the night. Part of the roof had collapsed and the car was cantered sharply in his direction.

John pulled himself up straight and, when he felt able, began walking out of the woods. His legs felt stronger now. It was really his head he was worried about. As he approached the car he surveyed the site. There was no sign of any other vehicle. It looked like the car had just hit the curve too fast and lost control. There was some broken glass scattered across the pavement but no blood that he could see. He stopped beside the overturned sedan and knelt down. There seemed to be no one inside. He examined the area curiously. The flattened window was only a few inches high but he could see that the door on the other side had been pushed open. He couldn't tell for sure but logic said that the driver would have crawled out over there.

He stood and started to walk around the car. As he eased past the back he began to hear an odd noise. He couldn't identify it at first but it was a wet sound, almost like a lung puncture made. Then he stepped out from behind the wreck and looked down. A young child was sitting on the pavement near the vehicle with the body of a man held in her lap. Her mouth was buried in his smashed face and she was sucking ravenously at the soft, wet stuff inside. John stopped dead and his foot crunched in the car's broken glass. At this noise, little Jenny Tuttle turned and gazed up at the towering state trooper. His eyes bulged when he saw her face.

The frail child's skin was deathly pale and her eyes were like burning coals. The flesh around her throat and chest had been savaged. Deep gashes had been ripped from beneath her left ear down along her neck all the way to the navel. Her jugular vein, and a large section of the muscle that had surrounded it, now drooped almost to her shoulder. The remains of other ruptured blood vessels could be seen hanging among the tattered ribbons of her throat. Near her upper chest, the white shard of a rib jutted into the air like an accusing finger. And in the ragged cavity that had once been her stomach, there were no internal organs left at all. The only hint that there had ever been any was a foot long section of intestine that snaked up from her pelvic cavity and dangled down the front of her shredded nightgown.

She giggled merrily up at the tall man standing by the car and her lips parted to reveal a mouth filled with dozens and dozens of small, needle-thin teeth. These tiny, razor-sharp fangs bristled everywhere within her mouth but they were clustered most thickly around the incisor area, where they disappeared up into her gums in layer after layer of jumbled wickedness.

At the sight of this, Trooper John Campbell wet himself. When the ghoulish little girl saw it she giggled again. There was something unbearably chilling about that gleeful, childlike sound coming from the creature eating out of the dead man's face. The little girl's grin widened hungrily and she started to rise.

John watched helplessly as she began strolling toward him. His body seemed to be frozen. He struggled to move but he was paralyzed, like deer caught in the headlights of an onrushing car. The little girl advanced and John's mind screamed for his body to respond. Nothing happened and the fear that was threatening to consume him went off the scale. The big trooper's body began to jitter and shake as panic raced along his muscles like electricity. This vibration became so violent that it allowed him to move his right arm. He concentrated and forced it toward his pistol. When the trembling fingers touched the cold, blue steel it was like a dam bursting. The spell seemed to break and his quivering hand fumbled for the gun. He pulled the weapon out and pointed it shakily at the advancing girl. She was less than a yard away when he was finally able to squeeze the trigger.

The deafening gun blast shattered the stillness of the night. The bullet pierced the girl's chest and exploded out her back in a rain of bloody tissue. This new wound had no effect on her though, and she continued to advance at the same leisurely pace. John was stunned, but then wondered what had made him think a bullet would kill something that was as ravaged as she was. He didn't know what else to do so he raised the gun shakily toward her head.

Jenny smiled calmly and lunged at him. His gun went off, shearing away a chunk of her right cheek and most of her ear. She hit him full in the chest and sank her fangs into the soft tissue beneath his chin. Her dagger-like teeth clamped down on his Adam's apple and ripped open a hole as big as his fist. She didn't stop there though. She continued to rip and tear until his entire neck was a mangled, spurting ruin. He tried to scream but without a throat it was only a gurgling spray of blood. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground. She continued to tear

and rend at him like some frenzied beast. His body hitched once in a final spasm of death but she was too consumed by her bloodlust to even notice.

The steep, dirt road Elliot's cruiser was climbing began to level off and he drove out onto the blasted surface of the moon – or at least that was what it looked like to him. The land along this part of the mountain was the remnant of an abandoned strip mine. A thick layer of the earth here had been ripped away so that the coal near the surface could be easily removed. But the company doing the work went bankrupt years ago and no one had ever reclaimed the land. The case was still in the courts and would probably remain there long after Elliot had gone on to that big police station in the sky.

As the cruiser's high beams crawled across the devastated landscape they threw the ravaged terrain into stark relief. Huge, gouged out pits were everywhere and most of them were filled with thick, congealing water. Large piles of dirt and rock protruded erratically up from the earth like miniature mountain ranges. Jagged boulders jutted from the ground like broken bones rupturing skin. Here and there scrubby vegetation poked out of the scarred land and clawed at the sky with ugly, skeletal branches. A ghostly fog intertwined among all these grim features and enshrouded the landscape, making it seem eerie and surreal.

Elliot slowly guided the car along a set of worn ruts that wound their way through this still and unearthly place. The locals called it the Overlook because the outer edge looked out over the sheer, north face of Puritan Mountain and the deep valley below. It made for a very beautiful view, especially when there was a full moon – like tonight. This was the place where the kids from town came to park and sometimes on a good weekend Elliot had roused a couple of dozen cars. He loved watching the bare butts flash in the windows and the kids scrambling to pull on discarded items of clothing. What he loved most of all though, was their guilty, trapped expression when he shined his flashlight into their faces. They would stammer and stutter and come up with some of the wildest excuses for being there you ever heard.

A fond smile crept across Elliot's lips as he replayed the memories in his mind. He drove a little further and then stopped the cruiser beside one of the huge craggy mounds that dotted the landscape. He turned on a spotlight that was mounted to the door near the outside mirror. The light flared to life and Elliot pointed it toward the irregular pile of earth. The fog diffused the beam and reduced its effectiveness. The only thing it managed to illuminate was a pair of old tire tracks that had been there for weeks.

A little disappointed, Elliot backed the cruiser out and continued to drive along the road. As he went he swept the searchlight back and forth across the area on his side of the car.

Rick Burns felt confident that tonight would be the night. He had been dating Heather Mills for a couple of months now and things had progressed about as far as they could without going all the way. When she had accepted his invitation to watch the big, fat, full moon from up at the Overlook he'd known that the time had finally come.

Her head was resting on his shoulder and he had his arm around her. He had gradually inched his hand out over her breast and he was now cupping the wonderfully warm flesh there in his palm. He caressed it slowly, spreading his first two fingers around the nipple so he could massage it rhythmically with each stroke. Beside him Heather began to moan. She looked up at him and the want in her eyes was so strong that it sent a shiver of electricity through his body. He leaned down to kiss her and with his free hand started unbuttoning her blouse. Her breath began to quicken and he hurried to match its pace.

Elliot slowly guided the cruiser along and continued panning the searchlight back and forth across the blasted terrain. The fog was getting awfully thick and his light was nearly useless. He frowned. The only way he would be able to see anything now was if he ran over it.

Rick Burns' aging Toyota was parked way around on the back side of an outcropping of rock that all the locals called Old Lincoln. It was said that the huge boulder had gotten this moniker because its sharp, jutting ledges resembled the profile of the long-dead president. Rick believed that the real reason for its name was because there was enough space behind it to park one of those big old Continentals – with room left over to get out and take a piss. It was the primmest parking spot on the whole Overlook and he was tickled to death to get it. Hardly any other cars were out tonight, probably because of the mine explosion the previous evening. He hated that the disaster had happened as much as the next person, but he'd been working up to this night for two months, and he wasn't about to let something he couldn't help ruin it for him.

Heather had been wearing one of those bras that opened in the front and he'd gotten it out of the way quickly. His lips now encircled her right nipple and he was sucking on it so hard he was afraid it would come off in his mouth. But Heather was giving him no indication that he was doing anything wrong. On the contrary, his date was moaning so loud she was starting to get hoarse. She probably wasn't paying all that much attention to her nipple anyway because he had managed to slip his hand down inside her pants and was anxiously stroking the soft wetness there.

A bright light swept over the Toyota and bounced off the chin of old man Lincoln, who was watching from above. The beam continued on quickly but Heather's eyes flew open and she glared around in alarm.

"What was that?" she asked worriedly.

His lips released her nipple long enough to whisper, "Nothing." And then they moved to her mouth. She was tense for a moment but he quickened the movements of his hand and she immediately forgot everything else.

Elliot clicked off the spotlight in annoyance. The fog was making it useless. He sighed. It probably didn't matter anyway. After all the things that had happened last night, people wouldn't be venturing out much for a while. He didn't blame them. The cab of the Tuttle's

truck had looked like the inside of a slaughterhouse. Harlan had told him to keep the details to himself. He said that if people knew how bad it was it would cause a panic. Elliot had agreed, but there was no way to keep all of it quiet. He had to tell the search party what they were looking for, and just the fact that the Tuttles were missing and badly hurt was enough to start the rumor mill in motion. That kind of thing might be commonplace in big cities but around here it was still pretty shocking. And the fact that it had happened to someone you went to church with or saw down at the market on Saturdays made it a whole lot worse.

Elliot grimaced. The business with the Tuttles was bad news and whoever had done it was one sick pup. It took a lot of effort to get that much blood out of a person, and he had the feeling that whoever had done it enjoyed their work.

Elliot guided the cruiser toward an outcropping of rock that jutted from the side of the mountain and extended out over the valley below. The flat, stone projection was big enough for one car to park on and Elliot did exactly that. He turned off the engine and gazed out through the cruiser's front windshield.

The view here was spectacular. In the sky the moon was like a huge beacon, highlighting everything below it. The soft moonlight gave the darkness a bluish cast and made it less foreboding somehow. Elliot peered into the valley below. It was shrouded in fog. The heavy, white mist looked like a thick, cottony river flowing between the mountains. The rays of the moon fell upon this terrific earthly cloud and made it glow with a light that seemed almost to come from within.

Elliot smiled. This was Miller time, or more accurately Old Grand-Dad time, he thought as he dug a hip flask from his back pocket. He unscrewed the cap and tipped the bottle up. The straight whiskey rolled down his throat like liquid fire and the second it hit his stomach he could feel it spread through his body like the warm caress of a lover.

"Ahhhh," he commented satisfactorily and resealed the cap.

He reached down and turned the volume back up on the radio. Earlier there had been an unusual amount of static and he had gotten tired of listening to it. Up this high reception would probably be better and, besides, it didn't pay to be off the air too long. He thumbed the switch on the side of the hand mic and called in. There was still some crackle and buzz but not enough to overpower his signal.

"Central this is car two," he said officially and ruined it by adding, "You got your ears on, Pearl?"

The noise from the speaker got louder for a moment and then Pearl's voice cut in. "My ears have been on all night," she said flatly. "Which is more than I can say for you."

"I got sick of listening to the static," he replied ignoring the perpetual nag in her voice. It seemed to be the only tone she ever used with him and he'd eventually decided that the best way to deal with it was to ignore it. He had two years in and she had almost two decades so he figured he'd just have to put up with it.

"Yeah," she replied a little more conversationally. "It's startin' to give me a headache."

The reply that went through Elliot's mind was, if I had a head like that and it didn't ache I'd be worried, but he kept it to himself.

"This is the clearest signal I've had all night," she said. "Where are you?"

"Up at the Overlook," he responded offhandedly.

"What are you doin' there?" she asked with that nagging pitch returning to her voice. "I thought Sheriff Ellis told you to quit trolling for gropers."

This caught Elliot by surprise. He didn't know Harlan had mentioned his admonition to stay away from the Overlook to anybody else. But he should have expected it. Not only did all police communications pass through the old fart but so did most of the town's gossip.

"Well, I..." he said, trying to buy some time and then got an idea. "It's dangerous for those kids to be out tonight." He recovered quickly. "So I thought I'd make a pass and send home anyone that was up here.

There was a long pause, and then a reply that was ripe with sarcasm. "And of course you wouldn't just be out there trying to catch teenyboppers with their drawers around their 9s."

The worst part about working with Pearl was the infuriating talent she shared with his mother for saying exactly the right thing to make him squirm. It was like they could both look straight through him to his most shameful secret and parade it around for everyone to see. And, as with his mother, he could never manage anything better than a guilty sounding response.

"Get your mind out of the gutter Pearl," he said, floundering unconvincingly. "I'm just doing my job."

"Whatever you say, Elliot," she replied knowingly.

There was a long silence after this exchange. Elliot didn't want to speak because he knew anything he said would be held against him. Pearl, on the other hand, was using the time for some second thoughts. She realized she was a little too rough on Elliot sometimes, but she couldn't seem to help herself. He was such a transparent, simple minded little shit that it was often all she could do to keep her jibes in check. To her he represented one of the great paradoxes of small town law enforcement – very often the only people who would take the job were the ones you would least want to have it.

Still, all in all, he really wasn't a bad person – especially when you considered his upbringing – a drunk for a mother and a worthless, abusive father. He definitely could have turned out a lot worse. A pang of guilt gnawed inside her. He might not be her ideal of a law enforcement official but he deserved to be treated with a little common decency. And besides, even if you didn't particularly like someone that did not mean you wanted any harm to come to them.

"Listen Elliot," she said thinking of the murderer still lurking around. "Why don't you start checking in a little more often till we solve this thing with the Tuttles."

Elliot was surprised by the sudden about-face. There actually seemed to be concern in her voice, and the unexpected change caught him off guard.

"Uh, well. Sure, I..." he stammered. "If it'll make you feel better I will."

"It would," she replied honestly.

Elliot sat there for nearly a minute with the silent mic held in his hand. Pearl's sudden concern was confusing to say the least. Maybe the old bitch was human somewhere under that aloofness and superiority after all. He shrugged and returned the mic to its cradle.

Who can figure a woman, he thought and reached for his hip flask again. He took another satisfying jolt and settled back against the seat. With all the uproar he had barely slept in a day and a half. But the odds of having another night like yesterday were too high to calculate. He closed his eyes and relished the warm tingle of the alcohol. Yes, there was no chance of another night like last night. No chance in hell.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Heather called out as she clawed eagerly at Rick's back.

"Oh Go, oh God, oh God," Rick replied from on top of her.

The young couple had somehow managed to overcome the cramped constraints of the Toyota's front seat and were nearing a very heated and vocal climax. Rick felt his own orgasm welling up inside him, building to an irresistible zenith. He shuddered as the wonderful sensation roared toward release. Then he opened his eyes and saw Ed Tuttle's demolished, bloody face leering at him from the other side of the passenger window. Ed's skin was ashen, his eyes red and his mouth was bristling with clusters of wicked, needle-like fangs. There were four huge claw marks that ran diagonally across his face. One of these had torn his nose away and the mangled piece of meat flopped against his cheek on a ragged strand of gristle. There was also a huge, grotesque hole in the left side of his chest where something had ripped out his heart.

Rick pushed off of Heather and scurried back across to the driver's side of the car. His mind could not accept what his eyes were seeing, and he sat there in stunned terror. Heather wondered what was going on and sat up with her back to the passenger window. She saw the fear in her date's eyes and misinterpreted it.

"Look, I told you I was on the pill," she said in confusion.

Rick didn't reply. Instead, he pointed to the window behind her, where Ed Tuttle's ghoulish features were pressed against the passenger side glass. Before she could turn around though, the late Mrs. Tuttle sprang up in the window behind Rick. There wasn't enough of Mrs. Tuttle's face left to tell exactly who she was, but that really didn't matter. Heather started screaming. Rick looked behind him and finally he began to scream as well.

The ear-splitting shrieks frightened Elliot awake. He jerked forward in the seat and glared at his surroundings in panic. He raised his gun and pointed it wildly in every direction. He looked down at his hand and saw that he was brandishing the hip flask. Its cap was aimed uselessly at the darkness outside the cruiser. He immediately dropped the bottle and scrambled to unholster his sidearm. He pulled at it several times before remembering the safety strap. He yanked the snap loose and drew the gun.

He held the weapon in front of him and stared out at the night. His eyes were wide and alert with fear, and where he had been laying against the seat his hair was sticking up comically into the air. He reached out and turned on the car's searchlight again. He began to nervously pan it over the area where he thought the screams might have come from. Another scream pierced the night and he yanked the light toward it. The heavy fog made the beam nearly useless and he could see very little. He hurriedly fumbled open the glove compartment and pulled out a flashlight. The screams were silent now but their echo seemed to hang in the air.

Elliot shuddered and peered out into the darkness beyond the searchlight. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. The thought occurred to him that he should just roll up his window and drive away. But he discarded the idea. Fear was a natural part of these situations and you had to make yourself get past it. He had a job to do and he wasn't going to back down. It was obvious that someone out there was being hurt. He slowly opened the cruiser's door and stepped out into the night.

Elliot held his pistol at the ready and began moving carefully toward the origin of the now silent screams. He walked along the beam of the searchlight. Its rays were like a tether for him. Their illumination provided a measure of comfort as he wandered into the unknown.

When he moved further into the fog, though, the beacon became more of a hindrance than a help. It refracted in the vaporous cloud and caused the mist around him to glow like an orb. He could barely see beyond the reach of his arm. He inched slowly along through this eerie, luminous shroud. His ears were standing out like radar dishes and his eyes were so wide

that they looked like they might fall out of his head at any moment. He fumbled through the blinding haze and his nerves jangled with apprehension. His flashlight reflected off something to his right. He swung it back and the metallic glint twinkled again. He held his gun at the ready and inched forward. As he got closer the beam picked up a flash of red. He took a few more cautious steps and realized it was a car.

He circled slowly keeping the light trained on the vehicle. There was a hulking shadow above him that he instantly recognized as Lincoln Rock. He moved closer and could tell that the automobile was one of those small, foreign jobs – a Toyota or a Honda or something. He stopped a few yards from the car and looked around. He could see nothing but rocks and scrubby brush. He advanced and came up on the driver's side. He shined his light at the window and saw that it had been shattered. He cautiously stepped closer and scanned the vehicle's interior. There was no one inside and nothing unusual, except the fragments of glass scattered across the seat. Then he heard an odd, guttural sound and looked up.

The window on the passenger side was smashed as well but, because of the fog, he could see no further. He pulled the hammer back on his pistol and crouched behind the car. He started easing along the side of the vehicle keeping his head low and his flashlight trained in the direction of the noise. When he got to the end of the bumper he tensed and sprang around the car with his gun thrust out in front of him.

There was nothing there.

He let out the breath he had been holding in a long sigh of relief and stood. He walked along the passenger side of the vehicle, searching this area, but could see nothing. He stopped for a moment, wondering what to do next and then heard the strange noise again. He spun around.

The sound seemed to be coming from a scrubby stand of undergrowth just over a low mound. There was about a three-foot drop and

the land leveled off slightly before finally plunging toward the valley below. He began moving toward this area and the choked knot of vegetation at its center. As he closed in, the faint noise became clearer. At first it was like the low growl of a motor but it quickly clarified into something much more feral. He eased down over the waist-high embankment and advanced to the branches of the stunted trees. He held his gun ready and peered into the undergrowth.

There was a small clearing within the nest of deformed brush and in the middle of it he saw something that looked like Ed Tuttle after he'd been through a meat grinder. There was blood covering the entire front of the man's body and huge gashes had been torn across his face. Worse than that, though, he was crouched over two slaughtered corpses, greedily gorging himself and a fistful on entrails that he had pulled from the ripped open torso of one of them. He buried his face in the bloody organs and slurped ravenously. Between gulps, deep guttural growls of delight purred from within him. It was like watching a starving animal devour its prey.

Something stirred in the shadows nearby. Elliot turned to see a female figure that was in even worse shape than Ed. There was no flesh at all left on her face and one of her eyes was dangling from its socket on a long strand of nerve. Her rib cage had been ripped open and one of her deflated lungs hung out of her body like a ragged balloon. The bones in her left arm were also shattered and they poked through the flesh of her upper forearm at odd angles. The rest of the limb flopped uselessly at her side. She began to slowly advance toward Ed, who was now burrowing his face into the chest cavity of his female victim and gulping loudly at what was inside.

Mrs. Tuttle crept closer making a cautious beeline for the forgotten male corpse. She advanced slowly, angling around so that the thing that used to be Ed Tuttle would not see her. She closed in carefully. A long tube of intestine hung from the boy's body and a limp bag that could have been his spleen lay beside it. She extended her clawed hand slowly and then snatched at the organs.

Hearing this Ed wheeled around suddenly and swiped at her with his long, sharp fingernails. His wife yelped and shrank away, her prize left behind. She hissed at him, displaying her terrible, razor-sharp fangs. Ed responded with a low rumbling growl that vibrated menacingly from deep within his chest. Mrs. Tuttle's hiss turned into a defiant sneer and she sprang forward, lunging at her once loving husband with tooth and claw bared.

The two creatures came together like frenzied, wild beasts. They slashed and ripped at each other savagely and thrashed in the dirt. As they struggled, Ed dug his nails into his wife's dangling arm and twisted it like someone tearing the leg off a Thanksgiving turkey. She screamed furiously and clawed out one of his eyes.

Elliot was overwhelmed by the bizarreness of what he was seeing and took an involuntary step backwards. When he did this his foot dislodged a small stone that tumbled loudly into the clearing.

The stone came to rest only inches from the ghoulish creatures. They immediately stopped their fighting and looked up. The moment their eyes met Elliot's, his already pounding heart leapt in his chest. The terrified deputy panicked and bolted back up the hill toward the police cruiser. When the Tuttles saw Elliot start running, they quickly put aside their differences and bounded after him like wolves chasing a deer.

Elliot fled frantically up the hill, clawing at the loose ground with his hands and feet. By the time he had scaled the embankment, the Tuttles were already exiting the undergrowth and closing in. When he got to level land, Elliot could finally turn on the speed and shot past the parked Toyota like a rocket. Instinctively he ran toward the spotlight and the glowing shaft of fog that it illuminated. When he entered the white glare he was blinded momentarily and tripped. He hit the ground with a heavy thud and the nearly forgotten pistol flew from his hand. He immediately jumped back to his feet and made a grab for it. He missed and looked behind him. The Tuttles had already lunged past the Toyota and were pursuing him into the light. Elliot turned and ran. The creatures were too close for him to retrieve the gun and he had other weapons in the car.

Elliot galloped toward the cruiser. The sound of a bestial howl rose into the air from much too close for comfort and he glanced over his shoulder. The inhumanly fast creatures were gaining relentlessly.

While he was looking back, his foot struck the root of a gnarled tree. He stumbled and felt himself begin to pitch forward again. He knew if he fell this time that he would never get up. He pinwheeled his arms crazily and strained to maintain his balance. His body was leaning forward, tipping irresistibly toward oblivion. He fought desperately to right himself, like a plane trying to pull out of a dive.

The creatures saw what was happening and sensed that the kill was near. Ahead of Elliot the car was less than fifteen feet away. The sight of it gave him hope and he struggled valiantly to drag his body upright. The effort slowed him down but it worked. After a couple more awkward steps he was able to regain his equilibrium and then began running at full speed again. He did not chance looking back a second time but he could tell by the creature's guttural snarls that they were almost upon him.

Elliot covered the last ten feet to the cruiser in three long strides. The window on the driver's side was already down and he dove for it like an Olympic swimmer. As his feet left the ground he could hear Pearl's voice calling to him from the radio's speaker.

"Elliot, are you there?" she asked testily. "I thought you were gonna check in more often."

Elliot went through the window head first and as his body hit the seat he scrambled to get his legs inside. He wasn't quite fast enough, however, and he felt jagged nails rip into the back of his calf. He screamed in agony and tried to pull himself the rest of the way into the car. But the thing that had his leg was far stronger than he was and it began to drag him inexorably back through the window. He kicked and thrashed violently but the two creatures were unaffected. They were slashing and tearing at him with what felt like a hundred, angry claws.

Slowly the slaving ghouls hauled Elliot out of the car. He fumbled desperately for something to grab and one of his hands found the steering wheel. His fingers locked around it and held on for dear life. Then Mrs. Tuttle leaned over his shoulder and plunged her wicked fangs into his face. Her jaws clamped down like a vice and the razor-sharp teeth were driven deep into his lips and cheek. She gave a savage, rending jerk and tore away most of the flesh from the left side of his head. Blinding pain exploded through his brain and he felt his hand slip from the steering wheel.

Then the two creatures began to feed, and as they ripped into the soft flesh of his body Pearl's voice whined from the radio.

"If you're sleeping again, Elliot," she bawled. "Harlan's gonna kill you."

If Elliot had still been alive he might very well have laughed.

As time and hope passed the number of people outside Puritan Mine Number Eight had dwindled. In a mine explosion if the men were not recovered within the first twenty-four hours the odds of survival dropped dramatically. There were still a few diehards huddled outside the mine opening. Those with husbands or sons wouldn't leave until they saw the blasted, broken bodies carried out and driven off to Porter's Funeral Home – where closed casket services would be the rule of the day. There was still an ambulance waiting to perform this chore, but only one. When the bodies came out they would call for others but the two paramedics who sat drinking coffee in the cab of their vehicle knew there was no chance they would be rushing anyone to the emergency room tonight.

Cloyd Farmer sat next to the makeshift command post that the rescue unit had set up a few yards outside the mine. He hadn't been off the mountain since the accident occurred.

People from town brought food up to feed those standing vigil and his wife had carried him some clean clothes from home. There were also showers and a cot at the mine but using either would have kept him away from the command post for too long. He was dead on his feet but he still would not leave his men.

Kent Givens, the leader of the rescue effort, was sitting beside Cloyd. He held the receiver of a portable mine phone in his hand and rang down to the crew that was working underground.

Blaine Thompson stood near the wall of a shaft that led to the area the miners had been in when the explosion occurred. It had been a very difficult task getting to this point. There were a number of areas where the ceiling had collapsed. They were able to climb over some of these roof falls but several were so bad that they'd had to retrace their steps and use other shafts to go around them. It had been a long, arduous journey but they were getting close.

Now, however, their progress had been stalled. The tunnel they were in was blocked by a set of massive stones that were almost vertical. This was unusual. The thick layers of rock that made up the ceiling of the mine normally cracked near the walls and fell into the shaft in big slabs or just broke into chunks. This time the roof had fractured down the center and the thick sheets of stone were standing in a large "V" shape in the middle of the tunnel. Other, smaller rocks had fallen in as well and one of them was wedged in the mouth of the "V", effectively blocking their way.

The rescue crew was presently in the process of trying to get this smaller rock out because it appeared that they would be able to get through if it was removed.

A big, broad-shouldered man with a glass eye was holding a steel pry bar. He placed the point of the lever between the smaller stone and one of the vertical ones. He pushed mightily but the obstruction would not budge. Then a voice blared from the portable mine phone that was sitting beside Blaine.

“Inside, inside. Come back. Over,” Kent’s voice called from the device.

Blaine answered the phone but continued watching the progress of his men. “We’re gettin’ close but we’ve run into an obstacle,” he said watching his men struggle with the stone.

Suddenly the ground beneath Blaine shuddered and the entire mine started quaking violently. Blaine dropped the mine phone and threw himself against the tunnel wall. Dirt rained down from the roof and chunks of rock pelted the ground around him. The men who had been working to move the boulder scattered as pebbles and fist-sized stones bombarded them from above. Then the vertical slabs they had been working on shifted and the stone wedged between them rolled out into the shaft with a thud.

Outside the mine, the above ground team felt the tremor as well and Kent yelled frantically into the mine phone, “Inside! Inside! Are you all right?”

Down in the mine, the shaking of the ground began to subside, and eventually stopped altogether. The men in the shaft waited for several seconds, holding their breath, making sure that the danger had passed. Finally, Blaine stepped shakily away from the wall and looked back at his companions.

“Are you guys OK?” he asked.

The men dusted themselves off and glanced around at each other. They nodded, confirming that they were unhurt. Kent’s voice was still calling worriedly from the mine phone.

“Is everybody all right?” the strident voice asked again.

Blaine shook the dust from his hair and picked up the phone. “Calm down, Kent,” he said into the handset. “We’re fine.”

Behind him the man with the glass eye moved to the vertical slabs and peered into the now empty space between them. He stepped up onto the rock that had fallen from the gap and shined his light through the hole.

Kent’s voice burped from the mine phone again. “Are there any injuries?” he asked.

“No,” Blaine replied. “But I think I soiled myself.”

“Ten-four,” Kent’s laughing voice replied and then he became serious again. “Can you keep going?”

Blaine turned back to the men. “How’s it look?” he asked.

The man with the glass eye continued shining his light into the opening. One of his co-workers was holding a methane detector up to the hole. The man with the light turned back and nodded his head.

“I think we can get through,” he said and then a burnt, leering face appeared in the beam of his flashlight. It was Edgar Perry and he snarled revealing a mouth filled with savage, piranha-like teeth.

Someone yelled and the man with the light turned just in time to see the nightmare thing lunge at him. He opened his mouth to scream but one of Edgar’s powerful claws clamped around his throat before the sound could escape. Edgar continued to squeeze and the man’s neck started spewing blood like a ruptured pipe.

This all happened so fast that the other men barely had time to react. Finally one of them snapped out of his shock and grabbed the long, pry bar they had been using. He brandished it like a club but, before he could strike, another shape rushed out of the hole. This one was bigger, especially across the middle, and it hit him like a train. The man with the pry bar was driven to the ground and when the weight of the thing smashed down on top of him his spine snapped like a twig. He yelped in agony and Jake Thompson's newly acquired fangs gutted him like a fish.

The other men panicked and started to scatter. But it was useless. The rest of the miners-turned-ghouls exploded from the opening like a ravenous storm. The slaughter was incredible and in the close quarters of the mine no one could escape.

Blaine was farthest from the opening and when he saw the horrific carnage he dropped the mine phone and started running up the shaft. His reaction was fast but the frenzied ghouls were much faster. One of the creatures quickly caught up with him. The thing was a now grotesque caricature of a young miner named Danny. It pounced on Blaine's back and pulled him to the ground. The creature grabbed Blaine's face and tore it off like a mask. Blaine screamed insanely but the thing continued to tear. And the louder Blaine screamed the more gleeful the creature's attack seemed to be.

Up on the surface, Cloyd and Kent stared at the mine phone in disbelief. The rescue team's death shrieks blared from its small speaker in wave after wave of unimaginable agony. The ghostly cries chilled Kent's soul as he called frantically into the phone.

"Inside, inside," he yelled. "What's wrong?"

The only reply was the horrifying sound of the dying men. Then one particularly blood-curdling wail erupted from the speaker, its excruciating pitch climbing higher and higher, and at its climax the phone went dead.

After a long moment Kent lowered the receiver and just stared at it dumbly. All the people waiting outside the mine had been drawn by the terrible screams and they were now gathered around the rescuers. They stood there staring down at Kent's ashen, shocked face.

Cloyd looked from Kent to the people and back again. He grabbed the phone from Kent's hand and began trying desperately to get it operational. He worked at it feverishly for several minutes until finally it became obvious that he would not succeed. His shoulders sagged and he reluctantly put the receiver back onto its cradle. After a moment he gazed up into the faces of the people standing behind him. Their eyes mirrored the same hopeless devastation that he felt.

"Hey, I think I hear something!" a voice called from somewhere nearby.

Everyone began looking around to see who had spoken. There was a teenage boy standing in front of the mine shaft. His head was cocked toward the opening as if he was listening. Then he looked back at the others and waved them over.

"I heard a noise," he repeated.

The people standing outside the mine moved anxiously to the entrance and listened expectantly. Cloyd and Kent stepped a few feet inside the mine. At first they heard nothing, but then Kent perked up.

"Wait," he called. "I do hear something."

The bystanders crowded closer to the entrance. The shaft began curving slightly a dozen paces in. That, added to the total darkness, made it impossible to see very far. Suddenly a man near the front pointed excitedly.

"Look!" he yelled.

Every eye turned in the direction he indicated and they saw a blur of movement coalesce into the figure of a man rushing toward them. The man was running as if he was being chased by

the devil himself. He closed the distance between them quickly and when he was ten feet away he bared his teeth and howled like an animal. Several more of the creatures charged out of the darkness behind him.

The sight took a moment to register and then a girl in the back screamed. Her cry jolted the others into action and they started to run.

A few, however, recognized their loved ones and were too stunned to move. One disoriented woman opened her arms to her onrushing husband.

“Oh, Henry,” she called to him happily.

Henry leapt into his wife’s waiting arms and sank his gaping teeth into her neck. She shrieked in agony and he bit down, tearing most of her throat away.

One of the paramedics ran toward the ambulance and tried to get inside but Ned caught up with him and rammed his clawed hand through the man’s back. Blood gushed from the medic’s mouth and Ned pulled a handful of entrails out and eagerly began to feed.

A few feet away, Edgar had Cloyd pinned to the ground but the foreman’s arm was wedged under the ghoulish miner’s chin, keeping the deadly fangs at bay. The Edgar creature finally became impatient with this struggle and grabbed Cloyd’s wrist. He ripped the restraining arm from the foreman’s body, like a child dismembering an unwanted doll. Cloyd screamed and Edgar shoved the severed stub into his open mouth. Then he started tearing away the man’s other limbs as well.

Suddenly Danny ran past chasing a woman into the darkness. Behind him he was dragging the ragged torso of an old man. A rope of intestines uncoiled along behind the man’s body and several of his internal organs sloshed out and were left behind.

Near the mine entrance, Jake was sitting on the ground with his face buried in Kent Givens’ brain cavity. In his hand he held the severed leg of another victim. He slurped greedily at the soft stuff inside Kent’s head and then looked up at the carnage around him. A primitive smile played at his lips and a disgusting belch erupted from somewhere deep within him.

He hiccupped once and eagerly returned to his meal.

Tom and Jessie sat peacefully watching the fire glow in the fireplace. The interior of the hunting cabin was rough but comfortable. It was all one big open space with different parts set aside for different functions. The sleeping area consisted of six bunk beds that stood out from one wall. The kitchen was a sink and two propane burners located in a corner on the opposite side. Everything else basically amounted to a big living area and the bathroom was a path that led from the back door to a cantered, wooden outhouse.

The furnishings of the cabin were rustic as well. There were a couple of sagging, old, mismatched couches arranged in an “L” shape near the middle of the room. Across from them sat an ancient Laz-e-boy recliner that seemed held together solely by the liberal application of duct tape. The shiny, silver chair looked more like a prop from a David Lynch film than something you would actually sit in. The final piece of furniture gracing the cabin was a coffee table made out of two-by-fours. At present it was covered with an impressive mound of old magazines that ranged from the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue to Field and Stream.

Tom and Jessie had decided to forego the other, less inviting, seating in the room and were now huddled in front of the large stone fireplace that dominated the rear wall of the cabin. It wasn't really cold enough for a fire tonight but there was no electricity and it was the only source of light. They didn't mind though. There was something cozy and romantic about snuggling beside a crackling fire.

Jessie was sitting in front of Tom, leaning back against his chest. Her face was tilted upward so she could look at him while he talked. In the truck they'd felt like fugitives running from some unseen pursuer and Tom had spoken very little. But now, cuddling by the fire, everything seemed safer and he was starting to relax. There were a lot of memories in this place; good memories of times spent with his father; memories from the pantheon of his childhood that recent days could not taint. They were the kind of memories that gave you solace when the present wasn't so good.

“Tell me about the first time you came here?” Jessie asked smiling up at him.

Tom held her tightly and stared into the fire. The glow of the flames danced in his eyes as his mind traveled back through time.

“I was ten,” he said wistfully. “I remember my dad wanted to bring me deer hunting but my mom said I was too young. She was afraid I'd shoot myself – or somebody else – or both. I

had friends who'd been going since they were eight but she said just because their mothers were stupid didn't mean she had to be." Tom rolled his eyes as he remembered his exasperation. "I pleaded with her. I even promised her I wouldn't carry a gun. I told her that if she'd let me go, the only thing I'd do was stay with dad and watch."

"What happened?" Jessie asked encouraging him to continue. This was the most talking he had done since they'd left the mine.

"I never found out all the details," he shrugged. "But the night before the trip dad and mom had a big argument. The next morning he woke me up and told me to get my stuff ready."

Jessie grinned ruefully. "So was it really worth all the begging and pleading?"

"Yeah," he replied without hesitation. "It was a five-day trip and we sat out in a foot of snow for the first four and never even saw a doe. My hands got so cold I couldn't even unzip my pants to take a leak."

He looked down at Jessie. "I didn't have a gun, 'cause of the promise I'd made mom, so even if we saw a deer I wasn't gonna get a shot. But I never complained once. I was so happy to go that I would've sat out in that snow naked if I'd had to."

"Then, on the last day of the trip about two hours after dawn, I glanced out across this wide ravine and saw a branch move. But it wasn't a branch. It was a whitetail that looked like something you'd see in a book. It was an ax handle wide across the rump and it had the most incredible set of antlers you can imagine. The biggest one my dad had gotten was a ten point but this one was at least a fourteen." The grin on Tom's face spread almost to his ears.

"It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I turned to my dad but he was already looking at me and he had this big old smile on his face. He clicked off the safety on his rifle and laid it in my hands. I couldn't believe it. My dad would have given his eye teeth for a deer like that but he wanted me to have it. I shook my head 'No' but he winked and handed me the gun. Between the cold and my nerves I could barely aim it. I fired – and missed by a mile."

"But he wanted you to have the shot," Jessie beamed.

Tom nodded. "My dad could have nailed that deer in his sleep, but to him letting me get to try was more important." Tom's eyes glistened as tears welled in them. He looked down at Jessie and smiled sadly. She put her arms around him and they sat there holding each other in the firelight.

In the woods outside, a dark, lumbering shape hurried through the undergrowth toward the cabin. As it burst from the stand of trees near Tom's truck its foot landed on a dried branch. When the branch broke it popped like an old bone and the sound carried loudly across the still, night air.

Jessie stiffened in Tom's arms. "Did you hear something?" she asked, suddenly alert.

Tom stopped and listened for a moment. "Probably just some fiendish monster roaming the woods," he replied offhandedly.

Jessie looked at him incredulously and punched him in the arm. "That's not funny," she pouted.

Tom grabbed his arm and laughed in pain. "Ow," he said, rubbing at the sore spot. "Can't you take a joke?"

Jessie gave him one of those scathing looks that only women seemed able to perfect. He held up his hands in surrender and then explained. "The wind coming off the mountain gets pretty wicked sometimes. It used to scare me to death when I was a kid."

The look on Jessie's face melted into a placating smile. She began to rub the place where she had hit Tom's arm.

The shape that had emerged from the woods moved hurriedly to the cabin and stopped. There were voices within, and the flicker of firelight glinted in the windows. It began creeping toward the porch and started up the steps.

Inside, Tom and Jessie were again watching the fire when a board creaked loudly from the other side of the front door. Jessie sat up.

“That doesn’t sound like the wind to me,” she said worriedly.

Tom’s playful expression faded and he turned toward the noise. “Me either.”

Tom stood. There was a long, steel poker sitting beside the fireplace. He picked it up and began to walk quietly across the room. Jessie followed close behind him. They stopped and listened for a moment. Another board creaked. This one was a foot beyond the door. Tom raised the poker above his head like a club and, with his other hand, grasped the knob. He yanked the door open. A dark, slumped shape tumbled into the room and Tom swung the poker viciously.

“Stop!” Jessie screamed at him in mid-swing. Tom reacted reflexively and strained to change the path of his blow. The poker arced through the air and slammed into the wall, missing its target by inches.

Tom looked at Jessie in disbelief. “Why did you do that?” he yelled and brandished the poker, ready to strike again.

“It’s dad,” Jessie replied, kneeling down beside the man on the floor. As she did this, he rolled over onto his back. Harlan was dressed in his dark patrol jacket and black slacks. He looked up guiltily at the two of them. When Tom saw who it was he lowered the poker. His hands were trembling visibly and he turned away. He walked stiffly toward the fireplace as Jessie helped her father up.

“You OK?” she asked but before he could reply they were startled by a loud, clanging sound behind them. They spun around in time to see the poker bounce off the fireplace and clatter to the floor. Tom stood there glaring at the two of them. His hands were clenched into fists and his face was as red as blood.

“I can’t believe you told him we were up here,” he fumed.

Jessie floundered for a reply. “Tom I...” she began and trailed off.

Harlan tried to come to her defense. “Jessie only called to let us know you were OK,” he said plaintively. “She didn’t think I was gonna come up here.”

“Shit!” Tom yelled in exasperation and kicked out at the makeshift coffee table. It fell onto its side, spilling magazines across the floor.

Jessie looked ashamed. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to...”

Tom turned on her angrily, his voice trembling near tears. “I was just starting to get my mind off it – just starting to feel good again. And now he’s here bringing it all back.”

Harlan knew he was the cause of this boy’s pain and that knowledge sent a wave of guilt through him. He wasn’t sure what else to do so he tried to explain why he was here.

“Look Tom,” he said. “I’m sorry. I would never have come up here if it wasn’t important. There’s been some strange goings-on in town and I was worried about you two.”

“You!” Tom sneered. “Worried about somebody besides yourself. That’s a real switch.”

Harlan winced at the hurtfulness of the words. This remark cut deepest of all, but he had to put it aside so he could finish his explanation.

“After the mine last night,” he continued. “Sister Elizabeth was killed. Then some maniac slaughtered Ed Tuttle’s whole family.”

Jessie looked at her father fearfully. “Dad, that’s terrible.”

Harlan nodded. "And the Tuttle's killer is still out there."

Jessie turned from her father to Tom who was standing by the fireplace staring expressionlessly into the flames.

"Tom, we can't stay up here with a murderer running loose," she said, worry straining her voice.

Tom didn't answer and kept staring into the fire.

"We're miles from anywhere," she continued. "And there's no cell service or anything."

Tom still did not reply. He looked away from the fire, but not quite in her direction. There was a long silence and then Harlan offered a compromise.

"Look Tom," he said. "You and Jessie can follow me back in the truck. The two of you can stay at my house and I'll sleep at the jail. You won't even have to see me or your mother if you don't want to."

"Sure," Tom smirked. "I bet you'll sleep at the jail."

Anger rose up through Harlan like mercury in a thermometer. He held his tongue though, and waited for it to pass. When he finally spoke there was just enough edge in his voice to let Tom know he'd gone too far.

"If I tell you I'll sleep at the jail," Harlan said flatly. "That's where I'll be."

Tom didn't look at Harlan. Instead he kicked at one of the rough stones set into the fireplace. Harlan regretted letting his anger show. Tom was still a boy he had been through an awful lot lately. Harlan took a step toward him and spoke again.

"You're angry and hurt and you have every right to feel that way," Harlan said, trying to be conciliatory. "But do you really want to put Jessie in danger by having her out here in the middle of nowhere with some crazy running around?"

Tom continued kicking at the hearthstone but he seemed to be mulling over Harlan's words. After a moment Jessie left her father's side and went to Tom. She stood there for a moment and then put her arms around him.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go to my house. We'll make it as good as it was here."

Tom looked into her eyes but he still did not respond. She smiled at him disarmingly. "If you want, we can come back up here after they catch this guy," she offered. "And no one will bother us." She turned to her father. "Right dad?"

Harlan did not reply so she repeated herself more pointedly. "Right dad?"

"No one will bother you," he answered.

Tom leaned his forehead against Jessie's and his body sagged. She hugged him reassuringly.

Jessie turned to her father. "We'll catch up," she said.

Harlan started to protest but thought better of it. He simply turned and walked out the door. When he was gone Jessie took Tom's hand and squeezed it. He managed a weak smile in return. They heard Harlan's cruiser start and pull out. It was not long before they followed.

Linda stood by the sink washing dishes. She peered out at the darkness through the small kitchen window. Harlan had phoned earlier and told her he was going to the cabin to get the kids. She was glad. They weren't safe up there. She shuddered. Maybe no one was safe. With a nut case running around killing people you just didn't know what to expect.

She rinsed the plate that had held her solitary dinner and put it in the drain rack. She was happy that the kids were coming back but she dreaded facing her son. Tom had idolized his father and there was no way he would understand what had happened between her and Harlan – or why. In the back of her mind she had known she would eventually have to face the music with Tom, but had avoided thinking about it. She had hoped that somehow he wouldn't find out until a little time had passed. But that had been a pipe dream. You couldn't keep anything secret in a town this small – especially something as juicy as, sheriff sleeping with best friend's wife.

She sighed and scrubbed at the old, iron skillet her mother had given her. There was no way to put it off any longer. She would have to tell him the truth and deal with the consequences. Either way, it looked like she was going to lose him. He was old enough to go out on his own now and he had that same pigheaded, unforgiving streak in him that his father had. She might as well accept it and hope that someday, when he found out life wasn't so simple, they could become friends again. Unfortunately that was the best scenario she could think of. Anything better would take a miracle and miracles had never happened for her.

She sighed again and placed the pan in the drain rack. Suddenly an eerie shriek echoed through the darkness outside her window. She froze and fear crawled up the back of her neck. The noise had been distant and faint – but chilling. Her mind began quickly churning through the possible origins of such a sound. There were still a few mountain lions in these hills and their howl was often mistaken for the tormented scream of a woman. That was undoubtedly what it had been, she told herself.

She waited, listening. But the shriek did not come again.

Finally, she returned to her dishes. She was tentative at first, and continued to glance back out the window every couple of minutes. But when the sound still did not return she began to relax and finish her chore.

Then another shriek pierced the night. And this time it did not seem so far away. Linda looked back out of the window uneasily. The sound still could have been a mountain lion but, alone and at night, that knowledge did not keep her from being afraid. Linda withdrew her hand

from the dishwasher. It now contained a twelve-inch butcher knife that she clutched reassuringly to her breast. She continued to look out into the darkness beyond her window. The Tuttle's murderer was still out there somewhere and you couldn't be too careful.

Linda began walking around the house, testing doors and windows. She knew that they were all locked but double-checking them made her feel better. When this was done she returned to the kitchen to finish the dishes. Linda placed the knife by the sink, within easy reach. She took a glass and began to wash it, all the while continuing to stare out the window. Harlan would be back soon, she told herself, so there was nothing to worry about. She rinsed the glass but her eyes never left the darkness.

Father Lake paced impatiently outside a door with a discreet “No Admittance” sign on it. He was dressed formally and his starched collar chafed at his neck. In his hands he held a simple, foot-long, wooden cross and a bible. Finally, he stopped pacing and leaned close to the entrance of Sidney Porter’s workroom to listen. He couldn’t hear anything. He sighed agitatedly and knocked on the door. He waited a moment longer but there was no answer so he grasped the knob and let himself in.

He looked around the room but couldn’t see Sidney. After a moment he noticed a sound coming from the back. It was humming. He shook his head in frustration.

“It’s time, Sidney,” he called in a loud whisper. “People are beginning to arrive.”

Sidney walked into view briskly patting aftershave onto his face. He shoed Father Lake back.

“I’ll be right there,” he said unfazed.

Father Lake rolled his eyes and moved back out into the hallway. He stood there outside the door and tried to be patient.

In the workroom, Sidney finished with his aftershave and slipped into a jacket. The material of his suit looked nearly black but there was a reddish hue to it. Mr. Carroll, over at the Mercantile, had said the color was called black cherry. Sidney felt compelled to be formal out of respect for the mourners but he so hated to wear the boring, drab undertaker’s clothes that were standard fare for most in his profession. With his jacket in a place he moved over to a simple, powder blue coffin. Inside was the ghastly, charred body of Sister Elizabeth. He had worked for almost an hour this afternoon before he’d gotten her arm to stay down at her side. But there was really little else he could do for her.

“Sorry Sister, but I don’t think you’re presentable enough for the general public,” he said and started to close the coffin lid.

Suddenly the dead nun’s eyes popped open and her remaining arm lashed out and grabbed Sidney but the throat. Sidney was too startled to scream and then the powerful fingers were squeezing so tightly that he couldn’t have even if he’d wanted to. He thrashed madly and his foot struck a nearby implement stand. The narrow table fell to the floor with a loud crash.

Father Lake was still pacing out in the hall when he heard the sudden noise. The thunderous bang made him jump and he turned back to the door in annoyance. He opened it again and stuck his head inside.

Sidney what are you doing?” he asked exasperatedly. The mortician was around the corner, out of his line of sight, but he could hear some sort of commotion coming from back there. Father Lake stepped into the room and rounded the corner. A few feet away he could see Sidney thrashing wildly over the coffin he had picked out for Sister Elizabeth. Father Lake couldn't tell what was going on but it was odd behavior even for Sid. He moved closer and the funeral director managed to turn slightly toward him. This enabled the priest to see the blackened claw wrapped around the man's throat. Sidney's terrified eyes connected with his for a moment and then there was a loud pop as the undertaker's neck snapped. With him taken care of, Sister Elizabeth's ravaged body raised up out of the coffin and snarled fiendishly at the priest. Inside her blackened mouth he could see dozens of small, spiky fangs.

Father Lake was horrified and began backing away from this unbelievable sight. As he did so, the nun's blasted body started pulling itself out of the coffin. He gasped in terror and tried to run. But as he turned he slammed into a figure standing behind him. He looked up and saw Andy's devastated face staring down at him. Father Lake screeched and stumbled backward in revulsion.

“What's wrong Father?” Andy said nonchalantly. “You of all people should appreciate the miracle of resurrection.”

Father Lake's jaws worked but no sound came out. He staggered away from this frightening specter, clutching his bible and cross protectively to his chest. He backed into the overturned mortician's table and could go no further. He looked around urgently for an avenue of escape but there was none. Then he glanced down and remembered the cross he was clutching. Hope burned in his heart and he thrust the wooden crucifix at Andy.

“Stay back you spawn of hell!” he commanded.

Andy threw his hands up in front of his face and hissed in terror. When Father Lake saw this reaction it emboldened him and he stepped forward brandishing the cross like a weapon. Andy started to back away but then stopped abruptly. He lowered his hands and smiled.

“Just kidding,” he smirked and launched himself at the priest.

Father Lake's look of superiority dropped like the blade of a guillotine and his screams filled the night.

Bob Mills stared out his living room window, impatiently waiting for his daughter to return from her date. Behind him his wife Janet sat in her rose-colored Raoul chair doing a crossword puzzle. Bob turned away from the window and started ranting again.

“Damn it,” he barked. “She should have been home hours ago.”

There was no reply and he began to pace agitatedly in front of the large, Victoria sofa that dominated the tastefully decorated living room.

“That girl must learn,” he fumed. “That when I give her a curfew I mean it.”

There was still no reply and he stopped pacing long enough to glare at his wife. “Am I the only one worried here?” he asked angrily.

Janet looked up from her magazine for the first time. “Relax,” she said calmly. “We taught her to take care of herself. She’ll be home soon.”

Her husband peered out the window again. “I can’t relax,” he grumbled. “I had that Burns kid in the eighth grade.” He turned to his wife. “And he was a little monster.”

Just then “the little monster” burst through the window Bob Mills was standing in front of and landed on his back. Bob yelled and Rick Burns drove the stiletto fangs he had acquired at the Overlook into the man’s shoulder. On the other side of the room, Janet jumped out of her chair and screamed. The scream was cut short, though, when her daughter Heather exploded through the window behind her. Heather hit her mother along with a volley of broken glass and they both tumbled to the floor. As they struggled, Janet turned over just in time to see her daughter’s bristling incisors plunge into her eyes. Janet shrieked insanely but Heather did not let up. She continued to tear and rend while her mother drowned in her own spurting blood. On the floor across the room, Rick Burns was playing with his food. Instead of going for the kill immediately, he was gleefully pounding Bob Mills’ head into the floor. Every time he smashed Bob’s face against the glistening, well-polished wood there was a wet crack. After that he would peer into the man’s dazed eyes until he made a sound of protest. Then he’d slam his head against the floor again. Eventually the bloody pulp that had once been Bobs face could no longer make a noise of protest, or any other noise for that matter. At this point Rick tired of the game, so he twisted off the man’s head with a swift jerk and began drinking from the gushing stump of Bob Mills’ neck.

Linda dried the last dish and put it into the cupboard. She pulled the stopper from the sink and let the water drain. She looked at her watch. It was getting late. Harlan should have been back by now. She told herself there was no reason to worry. If anyone could take care of themselves it was Harlan.

But what if he'd had trouble with the kids, she wondered. Just because he went after them didn't mean they would want to come back. Tom could be very stubborn, especially when he was hurting.

The last of the foamy dishwater swirled down the drain and Linda ran a little cold water to rinse the remaining suds away. Her chore was done. She dried her hands and looked up at the kitchen window. The darkness outside was like a solid sheet that had been stretched across the glass. The full moon, that had been out a few hours ago, was nowhere to be seen. Clouds were moving in, thick and dark.

She sighed. At least the eerie sounds that had frightened her earlier had stopped. She put the dishtowel down beside the sink and her hand came to rest on the butcher knife she had left there. An ironic grin played at her lips. It was silly for a grown woman to be frightened of noises in the dark – but that howl, or whatever it was, had been too creepy.

She placed the knife in the utensil drawer and started to turn away. Suddenly a blood-curdling shriek shattered the stillness of the night. It was the same sound she had heard before but this time it came from right in her yard. Linda spun around and stared frantically out the window. But the only thing she could see was darkness. She shivered as terror wrapped its icy fingers around her heart and then another set of icy fingers wrapped around her shoulder.

Linda yelped and whirled around. Andy was standing behind her. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes grew large and panicked. Andy looked exactly as he had in her dream – all burnt and charred. And she realized that the vision in her bedroom hadn't been a dream at all. She held a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

Andy smiled merrily. "Well, at least you're glad to see me."

Linda's jaw worked up and down several times in an attempt to make words come out, and eventually she managed some limited success.

"You...the dream...uh...you're," she stammered.

Andy smiled gleefully and nodded his head.

Linda kept struggling to put coherent thoughts together. Finally she was able to ask, “Are...Are you...real?”

Andy held his arms out expansively. “In the flesh,” he said happily and then looked down at his ravaged body. “What’s left of it anyway?”

Linda’s mind reeled. This just wasn’t possible. There was no way Andy could be alive in his present condition. Charred strips of flesh hung from his face like burnt leaves, sections of his body were beginning to swell and split, and there was a ragged, gaping hole that exposed several of his internal organs.

There was no rational way to cope with what was happening. Linda’s eyes darted around. She felt trapped and afraid. Her instincts told her to run or lash out or something. She caught sight of the utensil drawer next to the sink. It was slightly ajar and she could see the handle of the butcher knife inside. Without another thought, she jerked the knife out and rammed the twelve-inch blade right between Andy’s eyes.

The element of surprise worked in her favor and Andy had no time to react. When the blade sank into his face his head rocked back sharply and he took a staggering step backward. Finally he stopped and steadied himself. He looked at Linda, calmly grasped the knife and pulled it from his face.

Andy smiled. “After all I’ve been through,” he smirked. “A little cutlery isn’t going to stop me.”

Linda panicked. Nothing human could survive what she had done to Andy. She felt her mind gibbering near the abyss and there was only one way to stave off the maddening shriek she felt rising in her throat. Run.

Linda shot past the thing that looked like her ex-husband and ran desperately toward the living room. In her blind terror she careened painfully off the corner of the couch. This slowed her for an instant but she quickly recovered and lunged for the front door. She grabbed the handle and yanked at it. It did not open. Her mind screamed. This was like one of those dreams where you would never be allowed to escape. Then some far away, rational part of her remembered that she had locked the door earlier that evening. She stopped struggling and looked at the deadbolt. It was still thrown. Relief washed over her. She yanked the bolt back and pulled the door open.

Standing there in front of her was the big state trooper that had come to visit Harlan. Something was wrong with him, though. He had been hurt. Blood covered the front of his uniform and there was a terrible wound in his throat. She started to run into his arms, grateful for a savior, even an injured one. Then he smiled at her hungrily and his lips peeled back to reveal the most vicious set of fangs she had ever seen.

She screamed and slammed the door. She looked around wildly for another avenue of escape and ran to the window on her right. She threw open the curtains and saw something that had once been Jenny Tuttle staring back at her. The little girl snarled toothily. Linda recoiled from the sight and sprinted for a window at the rear of the room. Ed Tuttle’s mutilated face was pressed against the glass. She wheeled away from the vile creature and searched frantically for another exit. That was when Andy stepped nonchalantly into the room, cutting off her last option.

Linda froze in her tracks. There was no escape. Andy smiled and walked slowly toward her. Instinctively she began to retreat.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Andy said, leering at her.

Linda's terrified mind struggled to make sense of the otherworldly situation. "Andy, w-what happened to you?" she stammered.

"You might say I've had a religious experience," he replied and held his hands up like someone giving a church testimonial. "I have seen the light."

Linda didn't find any humor in this and continued backing away. She kept talking, hoping that stalling would give her time to think of a way to escape.

"Wh-why are you here?" she asked. "What is it you want?"

Andy smiled patiently as he continued to advance. "The same thing I've always wanted," he said sincerely. "You."

Linda was revolted by the thought. "But you're... You look..."

"Dead," he finished for her. "I assure you Linda, I'm not dead. As a matter of fact, I'm more alive than I've ever been."

Andy held his hand out to her. "Come, let me show you."

Linda recoiled instinctively and quickened her retreat. Then she took one final step backward and bumped into the wall. The breath caught in her throat as she realized there was nowhere else to go. Andy slowly circled toward her.

"Harlan's gonna be here any minute," she said, grasping at the only straw she could think of. "So you'd better leave while you can."

Andy threw his head back and laughed. The sound was insane and chilling.

"You don't have to worry about Harlan," he replied and winked slyly. "I've already sent someone to take care of him."

Alarm replaced Linda's fear. "What have you done to Harlan?" she demanded, forgetting about herself.

"This!" Andy said and lunged at her.

Harlan's cruiser rolled along a dark, winding section of two lanes known as State Route 52. It was a rather prosaic name for a span of road that amounted to little more than a paved cow path. In most places it was barely wide enough for two cars to pass without scraping each other, and it was so crooked it would make a rattle snake dizzy. Route 52 followed the outline of the Appalachian Mountains and was a slave to the whims of their irregular geography. There were places where the curves were so sharp that they came back around on themselves, creating an almost 360-degree loop, before turning abruptly again and heading off in another direction. It was a stretch of highway that would have challenged the drivers of Le Mans but Harlan guided the cruiser effortlessly. When you grew up riding the back of a sidewinder you got used to it.

Behind Harlan, his two young charges followed in the pickup. Jessie sat close to Tom and leaned her head against his shoulder. It was getting late and she was tired. Tom still didn't seem happy about coming back but he appeared to have accepted that there wasn't much choice.

Jessie was actually glad they were returning. The cabin had been fun, a nice escape, but you couldn't run for your whole life. Tom needed to get back home and begin dealing with the reality of the situation. His dad was dead and there was nothing he could do about that. He didn't like what was going on between his mother and her father – and she wasn't sure how she felt about that either – but whether they liked it or not it was a fact they would have to confront. Running just postponed the inevitable. She sighed and looked up at Tom. She loved him and knew they would never really be able to get on with their lives until he came to grips with the things that were facing him now.

Suddenly the cab of the truck became very bright. Tom looked up into the rearview mirror and it cast a harsh rectangle of light across his face. He shielded his eyes against it. Jessie turned and looked behind them. A set of headlights were coming up fast. Beside her, Tom adjusted the mirror so the glare wouldn't be so bright and turned his attention back to the road. The headlights continued closing in at a rapid pace until finally the car was only a few feet from their bumper. The impatient vehicle stayed there for a few seconds, hovering dangerously close to the rear of the truck. Then it clicked on its high beams and the cab of the pickup exploded with light. Tom squinted and gripped the steering wheel tightly. The heavy contrast between the brightness in the truck and the darkness of the road made it difficult for him to see.

“Jerk,” Tom grumbled under his breath and the car whipped out into the other lane and started coming around him. Tom could hear its engine roar as it kicked into passing gear. He took his foot off the accelerator. Just because the guy was an idiot didn’t mean Tom had to make things worse by turning this into a race. It was better to slow down so the other car could get around as quickly as possible. This stretch of road was much too dangerous to fool with and getting cute could put them both over the hill.

As the vehicle came around them, Tom looked down into his side mirror. That was when he saw the blue light-bar on top. It was a cruiser of some kind. The moment he realized this he tapped the brake to make it even easier for the car to pass. The truck slowed quickly and the cruiser shot around them like they were sitting still. As it went by, he and Jessie both strained for a better look. The pickup was so much higher than the cruiser that they couldn’t see inside, but its markings were certainly familiar enough.

“That looks like Elliot’s car,” Jessie said, echoing Tom’s thoughts. Then the cruiser was a blur of tail lights rocketing past them.

Harlan looked up into his rearview mirror and saw headlights shoot around Tom’s truck. The vehicle was moving fast and stayed in the left lane as it came up toward him. The stretch of road they were on was anything but straight and the car’s driver was either crazy, stupid or drunk – possibly all three. Harlan figured that when it got near enough to tell he was a cop it would drop back or maybe even cut and run.

Whoever was in that car was dangerous and he hated the thought of letting them go, but he had the kids in tow and technically he was out of his jurisdiction. Either way, he didn’t like his options. Then something strange happened. When the car was close enough to see his police markings it didn’t slow. In fact, it began to speed up. An alarm went off in his head and he tensed reflexively. Something wasn’t kosher here.

Harlan looked into his door mirror as the other car edged up alongside him. He slowed the cruiser and prepared to hit the brake if he saw a gun. He knew that someone willing to challenge a police officer on the road was capable of anything. Finally the other car pulled even with him and he saw that it was Elliot’s cruiser. Harlan’s eyes rose from the vehicle’s Puritan County Police emblem and peered into the darkened cab. The cruiser’s interior light came on and Harlan saw that Elliot was driving. He felt relieved but the relief was immediately replaced by a surge of anger and he reached for his radio mic.

“Elliot, what the hell are you trying to do? Kill us both,” he growled into the mic.

The deputy slowly turned to face him and nodded enthusiastically. When he did this Harlan saw that the entire left side of Elliot’s face had been ripped away and only a few ragged shreds of meat still hung from the bones of his skull. Harlan recoiled in shock and his cruiser swerved in response. He instinctively returned his attention to the road and struggled to right the vehicle. He looked back over at the other car and saw the torn remains of Elliot’s face grinning at him, exposing a set of teeth like none he had ever seen.

A voice spoke to him from his right. Harlan jerked around and saw a ghostly, ethereal form in the seat beside him.

“Gruesome, ain’t it,” said the thing that looked like a charred version of his best friend.

“Andy,” Harlan whispered in disbelief and then there was the sound of rending metal as Elliot rammed him with the other car. The force of the vehicles colliding whipped Harlan’s neck painfully and sent his cruiser swerving. He wrenched the wheel around and began fighting the skid. The cruiser slued wildly in response and he pulled the wheel in the other direction to compensate.

“Gee, this is better than Space Mountain,” Andy’s spectral apparition said, eagerly enjoying the ride.

In the driver’s seat, Harlan struggled to control the cruiser but Elliot’s car crashed into him again. The cruiser bucked violently and the passenger wheels dropped off the pavement. There was almost no berm on that side of the road and a rickety strand of guardrail was the only thing between Harlan and a dizzying plunge into nothingness. He peered over the edge. The steep, sheer mountainside dropped away beneath him in an almost vertical dive into the darkness below. And though he could not see them, he knew that jagged rocks were waiting for him – like hungry, bone-grinding teeth.

Fear squeezed at Harlan’s heart and he immediately returned his attention to the road. He struggled desperately to pull the car back onto the highway but, before he could, Elliot crashed into him again. This time the driver’s side door buckled and Harlan’s cruiser was slammed savagely against the guardrail. Sparks flew as Elliot continued to force him into the steel barrier. Harlan pulled at the wheel but the leverage of Elliot’s car made freeing the cruiser impossible. There was nothing he could do. He looked up and saw that the guardrail stopped abruptly a few yards in front of him. He knew that when it ended the cruiser would be forced over the edge and explode like a missile on the rocks below.

The apparition of Andy sitting beside him began to fade. “Gotta run,” the thing said as it gleefully watched the end of the railing rush toward them. “I just couldn’t bear letting you bite the big one without knowing who was really responsible.”

Andy winked at him and disappeared. “See ya in hell,” his voice echoed back from the darkness. And then he was gone.

Harlan looked ahead at the guardrail. The end was only a few feet away. He turned to the car that was pinning him. The creature inside was gritting its ghastly teeth as it bore down on the steering wheel. In a few seconds he was going to die. He had to do something even if it was wrong. There was really only one other option that remained. He slammed both feet on his brakes.

A look of surprise dawned on the Elliot creature’s face and metal screamed as the deputy’s car scraped along past the other cruiser. The end of the guardrail was nearly upon him and Harlan pulled mightily at the steering wheel trying to get his tires back onto the road. If there had been two more yards of railing this tactic would have worked but Harlan realized that there simply wasn’t going to be enough time. He closed his eyes and asked God to have mercy on his soul.

There was a loud crash and Harlan’s eyes shot open. In his peripheral vision he saw a blur of chrome smash into the rear of Elliot’s vehicle. It was the grill of Tom’s truck. The force of this blow pushed Elliot’s car far enough past to give Harlan the leverage he needed. He yanked at the steering wheel and, as his front tires passed the apex of the railing, he pulled them up onto the pavement. Tom’s truck retreated quickly to keep from hitting him. Harlan’s cruiser bucked once as its back fender clipped the guardrail and returned to the road.

In the other car, the Elliot creature looked over its shoulder and snarled. Elliot’s rear bumper was now even with Harlan’s front one and he put on his brakes so he could drop back for another try. Harlan wasn’t about to let this happen though and whipped his front end over into Elliot. Now it was the deputy’s turn to swerve. His car fishtailed erratically and he struggled to keep it in the road. Harlan prepared to ram him again, before he regained control, but the thing anticipated this action and let the momentum of its swerve carry it into Harlan first.

Harlan cursed under his breath as the other car slammed into him again. The cruiser jerked wildly and his front tire dropped off the road a second time. He struggled to keep the rest of the car from following it but his efforts caused his rear end to swing around into the left lane. He tried to fight against the slide but the wheel that was over the edge of the pavement wouldn't allow it.

The Elliot creature saw what had happened and knew that fate had given it another chance. Elliot immediately swerved to hit Harlan but the rear end of the sheriff's sliding cruiser came around too quickly and slammed into the deputy's car first. The unexpected contact caused Elliot's vehicle to veer wildly and start into a spin. But it had the opposite effect on Harlan. When the two cars collided the force of the blow reversed the cruiser's skid and the front wheel popped back up onto the pavement. The cruiser straightened out and resubmitted to Harlan's will.

In the other car, the Elliot thing was starting to lose control of its vehicle and Harlan quickly dropped back. When he was out of harm's way Harlan waited for the right moment and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The cruiser shot forward and rammed fiercely into the side of the other car. He caught the deputy's vehicle perfectly and the force of the collision ended any chance that it would straighten back out. Elliot's car spun around swapping ends and then one of its rear tires dropped off the road just as Harlan's had. The spinning car's momentum was too great for any recovery and it was instantly pulled over the side of the mountain. The car careened down the steep precipice, tumbling end over end, and burst into flames as it crashed against the rocks at the bottom. It exploded and the fireball rose up into the night sky like an angry, hateful exclamation point.

Harlan slowed the cruiser and guided it to a stop on the side of the highway. Tom's truck eased in behind him and came to rest there also. Harlan climbed out of the cruiser and moved to the edge of the road. He peered over the hillside at the deputy's burning car. It was not long before Tom and Jessie joined him. The three of them stood there stunned as they watched the fire claw at the darkness. Harlan looked over at Tom and found that the boy was already staring at him. Their gaze locked, and for the first time tonight Harlan could see something in Tom's eyes besides hatred. He saw fear. Harlan wanted to reassure him, but he could think of nothing reassuring to say. Finally, at a loss, he turned and looked back into the terrible inferno below.

Harlan hurried through the night in his damaged cruiser. The events of the past twenty-four hours spun through his head like some ghastly carnival ride. When he had found Ed Tuttle's truck he'd known that it was the beginning of something terrible but nothing in his wildest dreams could have prepared him for what had happened since. He still didn't know how it was all connected but he clearly wasn't dealing with something normal. There was no way that Elliot could have been alive – and driving for God's sake – in the condition he was in. And of course there were those teeth. Harlan shuddered at the thought of it and then he remembered the vision of Andy. As much as he wanted to convince himself that it was a hallucination or paranoia he somehow knew it had been real.

His mind was trained to investigate, to analyze, but every time he tried to analyze the evidence from recent events it defied logic. The Arthur Conan Doyle quote about removing the impossible and whatever remained, no matter how improbable, must be true; was fine if you were Sherlock Holmes – but in small-town law enforcement things were a little different. If it looked like a pig, squealed like a pig and smelled like a pig it was usually a pig. And pigs, roughnecks and small town hoods were things he could relate to. But trying to apply logic to the walking dead took some time to get a handle on.

Harlan looked at the road ahead of him. They were just outside of town. He glanced up into his rearview mirror. Tom and Jessie were close behind him. The two of them had been much shaken after the incident with Elliot. They had glimpsed the deputy's face during the melee and Harlan had grudgingly filled in what few details he could. However, they hadn't mentioned seeing Andy's apparition and he had not volunteered anything about it. There was enough for them to worry about already and he especially didn't want to tell Tom. The boy had plenty on his mind without wondering if his father had come back from the dead. And besides, Harlan had the uneasy feeling that if Andy really was alive, they'd be seeing him again soon anyway.

Up ahead the highway turned sharply and then straightened out. As he rounded the curve, Harlan saw Sidney Porter's funeral parlor come into view. Harlan felt a strange relief. Since driving away from Elliot's burning cruiser his mind had been filled with dread and seeing a part of home, even if it was the mortuary, was comforting somehow.

As he approached the building though, he noticed something odd. There was a car parked out front, but it didn't look right for some reason. When he got a little closer he realized

what was wrong. The vehicle's grill was rammed up under the mortuary's porch almost to the windshield. Harlan could also see that many of the funeral home's windows were broken out and the diaphanous curtains fluttered from them like ragged ghosts.

Harlan slowly pulled his cruiser to a stop in front of the building. From here he could see that the door was shattered and hung askew on its hinges. He got out of his damaged car to the shriek of warped metal. Headlights bounced along behind him as Tom's truck pulled off the road. Harlan walked back to the pickup and the boy rolled his window down.

"What is it, Dad?" Jessie asked from the middle of the seat.

"I don't know," Harlan said gravely. "But you two stay in the truck while I look inside." Harlan turned and headed toward the funeral home.

"Be careful," Jessie called after him.

Harlan waved his acknowledgment and continued moving toward the porch. As he climbed the steps, he unsnapped the safety strap on his gun. He moved to the door and peered inside. The interior of the funeral home looked like a tornado had swept through it. The small lectern where guests signed in was lying across the floor just inside the entryway. In the foyer, chairs were scattered across the room. Most were broken or twisted. A large picture of the Last Supper had been knocked from the wall and lay within a corona of broken glass. Several planters were smashed against the thick, maroon carpet and soil spilled from their guts in large, black pools. In the midst of all this carnage was a single, red high-heeled shoe.

Harlan stared down at the shoe for a moment and then continued to search the building. As he moved toward Sidney's workroom, he saw the smear of a bloody handprint on one wall. His eye was drawn to the gory stain like a magnet. He gripped the butt of his pistol and continued moving carefully toward the rear of the mortuary. He had only gone a few more steps when he saw the door to Sidney's workroom standing ajar. Harlan moved to the door and slowly pushed it open.

The inside of the room looked even worse than the rest of the building. Implements and equipment were lying everywhere. It was like a giant mixer had spun everything around and then dumped it into the floor. Harlan's eyes wandered slowly over the unbelievable mess and came to rest on Sister Elizabeth's powder blue coffin. The body of Father Lake was draped face down across the casket. The simple wooden cross he had used to ward off Andy had been rammed through his trousers and was now sticking out of his ass.

"Holy shit!" Harlan blurted.

He took an involuntarily step backward, appalled by the desecration. Killing a man was one thing, he thought disgustedly. But this sort of depravity took someone who was very sick – or very evil – his mind added. Harlan stared at the revolting sight and steeled himself. He would have to make sure that Father Lake was dead. He started forward but before he had even taken a step something from the wreckage lunged at his leg. Harlan looked down and what he saw froze his blood. The blackened remains of Sister Elizabeth were at his feet and the nun's single, burnt claw was clamped around his ankle. The grinning, skeletal creature snarled up at him and then plunged its bristling fangs into his shin.

Harlan howled in pain and stumbled backwards. His free foot caught the edge of an overturned table and he fell. Harlan hit the floor with a bone-jarring thud but he never took his eyes off the trapped leg. The nun's jaws were still clamped around it like a vice. Harlan fumbled desperately with his gun. Adrenaline jangled electrically along his nerves. He fired too quickly and the shot missed.

In response, the thing dug its fangs deeper into his flesh. Harlan grimaced at the heightened pain but tried to block it out so he could aim. He steadied the gun and fired again. This shot hit its target and blew a gaping hole in the ghoulish nun's head. The blackened skull was sheared away revealing the shriveled, pink brain inside. The thing unclamped its fangs and shrieked in agony.

The creature looked at Harlan and snarled. There was murder in its eyes. Then its gaze dropped from Harlan's face to his crotch and the ghoul's snarl turned into a wicked leer. It launched forward, aimed like a missile at his most vulnerable spot. Harlan fired again and this time the bullet struck the creature's lower jaw – blasting it into a useless, bloody pulp.

Harlan didn't wait around for its reaction. Instead he kept on firing. His next shot shattered the creature's remaining arm and the hand clutching his ankle reflexively let go. He quickly emptied his last three shots into the thing, obliterating its head in a violent spray of charred tissue. With its head gone the rest of the creature slumped to the floor in a bloody jumble and Harlan quickly scrambled away from it. He would have kept going but the table he had tripped over stopped his progress and he sat there waiting to see if any life was left in the creature. It didn't move and he kicked at it with his foot. The pile of broken pieces tumbled into a heap and lay still.

Harlan closed his eyes, relieved that the horrible encounter was over. He sighed and tried to stand. He glimpsed movement in his peripheral vision and turned just as something vaulted through the air at him. It was Sidney Porter and the undead mortician knocked Harlan back to the floor and pinned him there. Harlan struggled wildly but the creature's strength and leverage were more than he could overcome. It realized this as well and grinned down at him evilly. When it did, the thing's blue lips pulled back to display a wicked menagerie of teeth. It leaned forward hungrily and a long trail of saliva dripped from its bared fangs and splattered onto Harlan's face. The creature's head was twisted sharply to the left and the shattered bone of its neck jutted through the skin. It slowly turned its misshapen body for a better angle at the soft tissue of Harlan's throat. The thing pulled back and prepared to lunge but there was a loud, ratcheting sound from above it.

The creature looked up. Tom was standing over it with a pump shotgun braced against his shoulder. When the thing saw this it immediately reared at him and the boy pulled the trigger. The point-blank blast slammed into the ghoul's face and the impact knocked the creature halfway across the room. As the thing sailed through the air a spray of blood fanned out from its mutilated head and then the beast crashed to the floor with a limp thud.

Gun smoke and silence hung in the air. Finally Tom looked down at Harlan.

"Sorry it took so long," he said solemnly. "I couldn't find the shells for your riot gun." Harlan's shoulders slumped in a sigh of relief and Jessie moved to help him up. When Harlan got to his feet, they turned and looked at the bloody creature.

"Daddy, what was that?" Jessie asked with a grimace.

"It used to be Sidney Porter," Harlan said eyeing the thing distastefully. "But I don't know what it is now."

Harlan squeezed Jessie's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance and bent over to pick up his pistol. He ejected the empty magazine and the three of them turned to leave. Suddenly there was a strange chattering sound from behind them and Harlan spun toward it.

On the floor, the broken remains of the nun's body began to shudder spastically. It was amazing that there could be any life left in that shattered heap of bones. Then the creature that used to be Sidney Porter leapt to its feet and charged at them like a berserk rhino. Tom somehow

managed to get the shotgun up and blasted the creature full in the face a second time. The impact rocked it backward several steps but did not knock it down. Harlan struggled to reload his gun. The thing's head was a mangled, bloody mess but that did not stop it from attacking. Tom jacked another shell into the pump's chamber and fired. Harlan jammed his last clip into the pistol and aimed at the creature as well. The two of them began blasting away with all they had.

The bullets flew into the thing like a swarm of angry bees, and as they hit it, they blew away huge chunks of flesh. One of Harlan's slugs shattered the lower jaw and a shotgun blast turned its chest into an erratic jumble of jutting bones and tissue. Several more shots slammed into the creature's head and torso opening gaping wounds all over it. The ghoul continued to advance on them though, and Tom lowered his aim and blasted one of its kneecaps. When the twelve gauge shell hit the joint it exploded like a melon and the beast's leg collapsed beneath it. The thing fell to the floor and the two gunmen kept pumping shells into its prone body. Tom blasted away at one of its clawing arms but Harlan concentrated on the monstrous head. The two men continued firing relentlessly; unloading every single bullet they had into it, until finally both of their weapons began to click on empty chambers.

The creature was little more than a disgusting heap riddled with huge, bloody craters, but still it tried to drag itself toward them. They stood staring at the thing in awe as Harlan searched himself for more ammo but could find none.

Jessie took advantage of the lull and grabbed her father's arm. "Dad, just leave it," she pleaded, tugging at him. "Let's get out of here."

Harlan looked around impatiently. "No," he barked. "We gotta finish killing this thing." Just then there was movement across the room and they saw Father Lake's body begin to stiffly dismount the powder blue coffin.

"Of course I could be wrong," Harlan said and began pushing the teenagers toward the door. The three of them bounded from the mortuary like tumbleweeds in front of a tornado.

Father Lake dropped to the floor and wheeled around angrily. He reached behind him and pulled the wooden crucifix from his anus. He disdainfully threw the cross aside and charged after the others.

Harlan and the kids raced down the funeral home's steps and scrambled into the police cruiser. Father Lake exited the building right behind them and vaulted over the stairs like a wild beast.

Harlan slid under the car's steering wheel and fired the engine. Tom jumped in the seat beside him and Jessie dove into the back. They pulled their doors shut as the undead priest lunged at the car. Harlan slammed the shifter into drive and peeled out. As the car shot forward they saw the priest's snarling face bounce off the side of the cruiser and slide back along the window. The car rocketed off down the road in a cloud of exhaust and smoking rubber.

For a long moment everyone sat in shocked silence, grappling with what had happened. Harlan stared blankly ahead at the road. He looked empty and deflated. Beside him, Tom took in a deep draught of air, as if it was the first breath he had allowed himself in several minutes. Jessie put a trembling hand to her mouth. The backs of her knuckles were pressed against her lips as if she was trying to stifle something. She leaned her head against the passenger side window. The cool surface felt good on her face and the glass began to fog. She turned and stared out the opaque window at the passing night. Then the priest's monstrous face sprang into view right in front of her.

Jessie screamed. Tom and Harlan looked around just as she scrambled across the seat, away from the leering creature. The thing clung tenaciously to the outside of the car. One of its legs was thrown over the back and hugged the rear quarter panel. The other pushed against the inner rim of the wheel well for leverage. Its right hand clutched the door handle and the fingers of the left were wedged into the groove that ran along the bottom of the window. It would have been a precarious hold for a normal human but because of the creature's strength it clung there like a magnet.

The priest peered in at them and grinned evilly. It was like some demonic cat sizing up the pickings in a goldfish bowl. The creature's vile breath steamed the window even further and it stuck out its grotesque tongue and licked away a stripe of the fog. After a moment a single, glittering eye appeared in the tiny slice of clear glass. The thing seemed to be enjoying itself immensely. Then it released its grip on the window groove and reared back as far as its awkward hold would allow. Its gnarled fist struck the window. The sound of the blow echoed through the car like a thunderclap. Jessie screamed in terror and Harlan grabbed Tom's shoulder.

"Load the shotgun!" he yelled.

Tom jumped as if coming out of a trance. "But I used all the shells at the mortuary," he replied frantically.

Harlan tried to push away the panic so he could think. "Look in the glove compartment," he said hopefully.

In the back, the creature slammed its fist into the window again. This time the glass popped like a gunshot and a long crack zigged across its surface. Jessie screamed. Tom yanked open the glove box and began rummaging inside. This seemed to take an eternity. Finally he saw a flash of red beneath some of the papers there and grabbed for it.

His fingers closed around a single shotgun shell and he pulled it out. The rifle was lying against the seat and he snatched it up. He took the shell and tried to jam it into the pump's chamber. Then the creature struck the window a third time and the glass exploded inward. Jessie shrieked madly and grabbed at Harlan. Her frightened death-grip caused him to jerk the wheel and the car swerved wildly. The unexpected motion knocked Tom into the dashboard and he dropped the shell.

Across the seat from Jessie, the creature struggled to pull itself through the broken window. Tom dove into the floorboard and began scrambling to find the lost shell. Jessie screamed again as the demented Father Lake tried to grab for her.

Harlan looked in the back seat. The creature's shoulder and head were already in the car. He knew there was no time to wait for the shotgun so he decided to try another tactic. He jerked savagely on the steering wheel. The car swerved sharply across the dark, deserted highway. This sudden motion caught the thing off balance. The priest was hurled backwards but its inhuman reflexes and flailing arms somehow managed to stop it from being thrown out the window. It held on tenaciously and, as soon as the car snapped out of the slide, the thing started pulling itself into the cruiser even more urgently than before. Seeing this Harlan began the swerving tactic again, this time veering the car back and forth continuously.

The incessant motion stopped the creature's progress and caused it to focus all its energy into just holding on. Down in the floorboard, Tom continued his struggle to find the shell but the wild, sluing motion of the car made it impossible. Every time he got close to grabbing it he was flung violently to one side and missed. At the wheel, Harlan concentrated intently on trying to

shake the thing loose. The creature though, was becoming frustrated and started scrambling wildly to get inside the car. Harlan realized that they were about to lose the battle.

“Get the damned shell,” he yelled at Tom again.

Tom was bent over and had his arms extended under the front seat. This awkward, upside down position and the erratic motion of the car were making his head swim. He shook himself to try and clear his vision. Then he saw the shell roll to within reach. He lunged for it but the car turned again and the shell shot out from under the front seat and into the back floorboard.

“I can’t get it,” Tom yelled exasperatedly. “It’s in the back.”

Harlan glanced up into his rearview mirror. The creature had gotten both shoulders through the window and now had enough leverage to pull itself into the car. Jessie’s screams became more hysterical than ever and she began kicking frantically at the thing’s clawing hands. Harlan did not know what to do. He desperately looked around the car for a weapon, or an idea, or something. But there was none to be found. A hopeless dread enfolded him. There was nothing else he could do while he was driving. He would have to stop the car. He looked back out at the road – and immediately everything changed.

Just ahead the highway disappeared into the side of a mountain. It was the old Dingess Tunnel. In his panic, he’d completely forgotten about it. Eighty years ago it had been a main railroad artery but the spur had been abandoned and when the road was built it had been routed through the tunnel to save money. The shaft was nearly a mile in length and straight as an arrow. Harlan glanced up into the rearview mirror as the opening’s greater darkness engulfed them. The sudden change caused the creature to look up as well, and their eyes connected momentarily in the mirror.

Harlan sneered at the thing menacingly. “Take this asshole,” he yelled and whipped the steering wheel violently to the right.

The police cruiser swerved and the entire passenger side slammed into the tunnel’s inner wall. There was a roar of grinding metal as the car hit the ancient stonework and a geyser of sparks shot into the air. The creature let out a blood-curdling scream and the fiery hail showered it as the car was ground into the rock. Harlan held the cruiser like this for several seconds and then jerked it away from the wall. When he did, the creature fell backward and its body began sliding limply out of the window. But at the last second its hand lashed out and somehow managed to catch itself on the door. Harlan looked around at the beaten ghoul just as the beast let out a war cry and lunged forward. Harlan reacted immediately. He swung the wheel again and the car slammed into the wall a second time. The impact was tremendous and blood erupted from the creature’s mouth in a sickening spew. It gurgled an insane wail and thrashed madly from side to side. Its shrieks were matched by the shriek of the car grinding into the tunnel’s granite face, and this time Harlan did not let up.

The creature continued its frantic thrashing, and sparks poured into the car like electric rain. Harlan kept up the pressure though, gripping the wheel with both hands and forcing the vehicle harder and harder into the wall. Eventually the creature’s torturous howls started to weaken and even wane. Dark blood streamed from its mouth and around the rims of its eyes. The thing’s struggling began to slow, until its movements became little more than feeble pawing. Harlan glanced over his shoulder and smiled victoriously at the ghoulish priest. Then he turned and looked at the road ahead of him, and his smile abruptly disappeared. The cruiser exited the tunnel.

The shredded remains of the creature still clung to the car door. Its body from the middle of its back down was nothing but a few limp rags of flesh fused to the scarred metal of the automobile's exterior. The rest of it had been burned away by the terrible friction. When the car left the tunnel and its agony ended, the creature's eyes sluggishly rolled up to see why. When it realized what had happened, those eyes turned toward Harlan and the thing emitted the most hauntingly, evil chuckle he had ever heard. Immediately the priest started pulling himself back into the car. When Harlan saw this, he looked from the rearview mirror to the road ahead and it was his turn to smile.

"Guess again," he snarled between clenched teeth and jerked the steering wheel one final time. The car responded instantly and the creature was thrown backward. The ghoul turned, and as it saw what was about to happen it froze.

There was a large oak at the edge of the road and the rear end of the cruiser swung out and clipped the tree at exactly the point where the thing was clinging to the door. The terrible impact hit the creature like a bomb and its body exploded in a volcanic spay of blood and gore. Harlan wrenched the cruiser back onto the road and jammed the gas to the floor. They hurtled off into the night away from the horrible experience and the ghastly remains of the creature. There was stunned silence in the car. Jessie was trembling violently, but struggled to pull herself together. Harlan's eyes were dark and hollow as he stared ahead at the road. Beside him, Tom was still wedged in the floorboard and struggled to pull himself free. When he did, he sat up suddenly with the elusive shotgun shell clutched in this hand.

"I got it. I got it," he yelled triumphantly.

In unison Harlan and Jessie turned to Tom and even the ghoulish priest could not have survived the look they gave him.

Harlan's cruiser wound along the last stretch of road leading into town. The three occupants were exhausted. They had been through an unbelievable ordeal in the last few hours and it had taken its toll. Their eyes were glassy and listless. It was a relief that they were nearly home, but the events of the night somehow made it difficult to be hopeful. The world was no longer the safe, sane place they had left at the hunting cabin. Their lives had been changed irrevocably, and things would never be the same.

The cruiser rounded the last curve and Harlan slowly pulled to a stop. The three of them stared out through the windshield in disbelief.

Their town was a war zone. Fires raged out of control in most of the buildings. The courthouse looked like a missile had hit it. Flames leapt forty feet into the air from its gutted remains. The barber shop was nearly half gone and the front window of the Uptown Restaurant resembled a broken mouth with its fiery tongue licking out at the darkness. Flames could also be seen shimmering behind the windows of the apartments upstairs. The most spectacular blaze though was in the Mercantile. It was a three-story skeleton, engulfed in bright, leaping fire. As they watched, the rickety, frame structure crumbled a few burning timbers at a time. It looked like the whole thing would give way at any moment and collapse into a gigantic bonfire.

There was other devastation as well. Wrecked and overturned vehicles were scattered everywhere. Several were piled in a jumble on the left-hand side of the street, like the losers in some crazed demolition derby. Still more cars lay strewn across town in mangled, burning heaps and the rear end of an old Buick was sticking out of the front window of the Farmers and Merchants Bank. A big, tandem coal truck had plowed into the row of utility poles that lined the right side of the road and flattened three of them. The electric wires that had been attached to the poles now jittered across the ground like writhing serpents, shooting sparks into the night.

But far more terrible than all this carnage were the packs of ghouls that ran rampant through the devastated town. In front of the barber shop, one creature had pulled a burning man from his car and was dragging him along by the face. From the alley beside the bank, a woman ran out into the street and was overtaken by a pack of slavering children. They quickly dragged her to the ground and began tearing her to pieces. On the porch of a small house set back from the road, a ghoul sat gnawing on an arm. The hair on the left side of its head was on fire but the beast didn't seem to notice as it tore into the ghastly meal. Suddenly a teenage girl jumped

through the window of one of the apartments over the Uptown Restaurant. She clawed at the air as she plunged the twenty feet to the ground and hit the pavement with a bone-snapping thud. A second later a ghoul appeared silhouetted in the flaming window she'd exited and leapt out after her. It landed on top of the girl's crawling body and eagerly began to feed.

The creatures were everywhere – running through the streets, scurrying between the buildings – killing and killing and killing.

In the cruiser, Jessie stared out at the destruction in disbelief. “Wh-What are we gonna do?” she stammered.

Harlan turned to his daughter. Her face was a mask of worry and exhaustion. He looked over at Tom. The boy jacked the remaining shell into the shotgun's chamber.

“I don't think one shell will do much against that,” he commented gravely.

Harlan's gaze returned to the windshield and the horrible mayhem that had engulfed their town.

“Could we get to a phone and call somebody?” Jessie asked.

Harlan pointed toward the crackling electric wires. “All the lines are down,” he replied. “And my cell phone hasn't worked all day.”

He turned on the CB. Static blared from the speaker. “And the radio's still out,” he added needlessly.

Harlan looked over at his daughter. “Whatever we do,” he said. “It looks like we do it on our own.”

Just then a charred ghoul lunged at the cruiser, thrusting its blackened face against the windshield on Harlan's side. Its distorted features grinned in at them hungrily.

“The first thing we gotta do is get outta here!” Tom yelled.

Harlan slammed the car into reverse and it bolted backwards. After retreating about fifty feet he stopped and turned to Tom abruptly.

“No,” he snapped. “The first thing we gotta do is find your mother.”

Harlan threw the car into drive and floored the accelerator. The cruiser shot forward like a rocket and quickly gained speed. The ghoul that had lunged at the car stood in the middle of the road howling at them wildly. Harlan punched the accelerator again and the cruiser's supercharger kicked in. The car leapt forward like a lion and bore down on the creature. The beast stood its ground and howled again. Harlan gritted his teeth and the cruiser mowed the thing down like a winter thistle. They heard its body thump as it bounced repeatedly off the undercarriage of the vehicle. Then the sound ended and the car roared down the street.

Jessie looked out the back window and saw the ghoul's mangled body roll quickly to a stop. No sooner had it come to rest than it jumped to its feet again and started charging after them. Jessie now saw the creature's face clearly and turned to her father.

“Dad. That thing,” she said in amazement. “It was Edgar Perry.”

Harlan understood her meaning. Edgar was one of the miners that had been trapped in the mine. He looked over at Tom. The boy's eyes were fixed hypnotically on the road ahead. Either he had not heard or had not understood the implications of what she'd said.

“I know, sweetheart,” Harlan replied and returned his attention to the road.

Harlan steered the police cruiser through the obstacle course that had once been their town. He knew that he dared not slow down so he swung the car wildly around wrecked vehicles and felled trees, and over bodies and blazing debris. Suddenly a man ran out of the burning restaurant and directly into their path. His body was engulfed in flames and there was no way Harlan could avoid him. The cruiser hit the man with a loud whump and his body somersaulted onto the hood, struck the windshield and flipped over the roof. Jessie turned to

watch as the flaming man bounced off the trunk and crashed into the street. Her attention though, quickly left the man and became focused on a much more terrible sight. Every ghoul they'd passed had stopped what it was doing and was now chasing the cruiser.

"Daddy," she yelled. "They're coming after us."

Harlan glanced up into the rearview mirror and saw an army of ghouls pursuing them. His jaw dropped and Tom screamed from the seat beside him.

"Look out!"

Harlan instantly turned from the mirror. The road ahead had been made very narrow by of a pile-up of cars on the left and the flaming Mercantile building on the right. Harlan's eyes bulged as he watched the burning store collapse directly into their path. At the speed they were going there was no way to avoid it.

The glowing, skeletal structure keeled over into the road like a falling tree. Because of its girth, it seemed to move in slow motion. Harlan had time to think that in a way it looked like a giant, flaming cage that was trying to entrap them. But the trap had been sprung too soon and the building crashed into the street moments before they arrived. The cruiser, however, kept hurtling forward and it hit the burning heap like a missile. The car was instantly engulfed by the blaze and it disappeared from sight.

Everyone screamed as the jaws of the inferno clamped down around them. They were completely covered in flames. It was as bright as day in the cruiser and the heat immediately began sucking out the air they needed to breathe. The building had been on fire for quite some time before it collapsed and its timbers were fragile and weak. The cruiser smashed through the burning framework like a fist through paper. Charred beams disintegrated as the grill struck them and the car plowed ahead. Suddenly the walls of hell parted and the cruiser burst from the flames on the other side of the building.

There was a huge shower of sparks and fiery debris but then miraculously the car was past it and the windshield became clear. The careening automobile, however, continued barreling ahead and its passenger wheel slammed into the high curb on the right edge of the street. When this happened the vehicle leapt into the air and began to sail like a bird. It rolled as it flew and then the force of gravity overtook it and yanked it back down to earth. The car landed on the driver's side with a thunderous jolt and skidded roughly along the pavement. It continued on for another ten yards before it finally slammed into the front of a deserted tavern.

The ruined cruiser sat there rocking precariously for a moment and then became still. In the car no one moved. The three of them had been thrown around like rag dolls and now they lay in a limp heap against the driver's side. A moment passed, and another. Harlan stirred slightly and his eyes fluttered open. There was a long gash across his forehead. He put his arm out and pawed at the air. Tom was lying on top of him, still unconscious. He hurriedly shook the boy's shoulder.

"Tom," he winced. "You OK?"

The boy moaned and held his hand to his head. He was disoriented and flinched spastically. Blood trickled from his nose.

"I... I think so," he stammered.

In the back seat Jessie stirred and yelped in pain.

"My ribs," she groaned.

Harlan looked back to check on her and through the cracked rear window he saw a terrible sight. The building they had driven through was now just a pile of flaming debris lying

in the road. Suddenly a score of the creatures burst from the inferno and continued bounding hungrily toward them.

“Good God!” Harlan exclaimed.

Seeing the terror on his face, Jessie and Tom quickly turned. As the creatures exited the building their bodies were a mass of flames. But the fire didn’t even slow them down and they continued their relentless pursuit. Tom began struggling with the passenger door. The trip through the tunnel had fused it closed, and it wouldn’t budge. Harlan looked around frantically and saw the shotgun. He grabbed it and fired into the windshield. The glass exploded outward.

“Let’s go,” he yelled and turned to help Jessie over the seat.

Tom scrambled out of the car first and hurriedly assisted the other two. When they were all finally outside, they looked around desperately for a place to run. Harlan saw that the hardware store was straight across the street.

“Over there,” he said and pulled Jessie. She winced at the pain in her ribs and tried to follow. Harlan had to help her and the three of them dashed toward the squat, brick building next door.

The windows of the hardware store had bars over them and there was a large sign across the front that said, “Stevens Hardware and Pawn.” It was an odd pairing but that sometimes happened in towns with dying economies. There wasn’t enough business for either alone but together they could hang on.

As Harlan and the kids got to the building they looked back at their pursuers. The still burning ghouls were closing in quickly. With no time to waste Harlan turned his attention to the door. There was a large padlock on the outside. The huge Yale was as big as his fist. Harlan still had the shotgun. He raised it over his head and brought the butt down hard on the lock. Nothing happened. He tried again but still no luck. Then he heard Jessie scream and turned.

One of the lead ghouls was already upon them. Harlan instinctively swung the gun like a club and knocked the thing down. He quickly renewed his attack on the door. This time though, when the rifle hit the heavy Yale, the wooden stock shattered in his hands. He cursed and flipped the shotgun around. He started viciously slamming the tip of the barrel into the lock. The big Yale still did not give but slowly the nails holding the hasp began to pull out of the door frame.

“Daddy, it’s up again,” Jessie yelled from behind him.

Harlan gave the door one more whack with the gun and turned. The creature had gotten to its feet again and lunged for them. Harlan flipped the rifle around. When the butt had shattered, part of it had broken off leaving a long, wicked fang of wood behind. Harlan raised the weapon to shoulder level and rammed it forward. The deadly spear plunged into the creature’s face. It howled fiercely and clutched at its ruined eyes. This was not their only worry though. The other creatures were now steps behind the first one and closing quickly. Seeing this Harlan turned and ran headlong at the shop door. He lowered his shoulder like a fullback and slammed into the wooden barrier with all his might. The nails in the hasp wrenched free with a shriek of bending metal and the door burst open.

Harlan tumbled into the room and fell to the floor. Tom and Jessie hurriedly followed him inside and Tom slammed the door shut behind them. Immediately the creatures began throwing themselves against the other side and it was all he could do to hold it.

“Help!” Tom called frantically.

Harlan groggily got to his feet and came to Tom’s aid. The two of them pushed at the door, struggling to keep the creatures from getting inside. But it was obvious they would not be

able to withstand this assault for long. Harlan looked back over his shoulder. Jessie was now beside him adding her weight to the effort.

“Find something to brace the door,” he said above the racket.

Jessie nodded and started looking around the room. Harlan noticed a display of large boxes not far away and grabbed his daughter.

“I see something we can use,” he said loudly. “But we need a hammer and some big nails.”

Jessie obeyed and ran back into the room. Harlan and Tom continued wrestling with the door. More of the creatures were arriving and the job was fast becoming unmanageable. Jessie quickly returned with the requested supplies. Harlan nodded to the boxes beside him. There was a picture of a picnic table on each.

“Bring those boards,” he said urgently.

Jessie hurried to the task but then the glass in the building’s front window exploded. They all turned to see several of the creature’s arms clawing between the steel bars that old man Stevens had put up during a rash of burglaries a few years back. The bars rattled with the force of the creatures’ efforts, but for the moment they held.

“Get the boards!” Harlan yelled.

Jessie responded immediately and ripped one of the boxes open. She handed Harlan a plank and the hammer. Harlan quickly nailed the wooden slat across the door and repeated this procedure several more times. When this was done he took the last board and braced one end against the barricade and nailed the other to the floor. It would be good enough to hold for a while.

Harlan looked at the window. The bars were rattling violently as the creatures struggled to get in. They didn’t seem to be bending but like the padlock, it would be the moorings that would give way first. Harlan looked at the places where the grillwork was attached to the brick and saw that it was loosening already. They didn’t have long.

He turned and looked at the two kids. They returned his stare and Tom asked, “Now what?”

Harlan surveyed to the store quickly and pointed to a display near the center of the room.

“See that stack of paint cans,” he said. “I want you to pile anything that will burn around it – mineral spirits, alcohol, kerosene, anything.”

They both just stood there looking at him.

“Now,” he shouted.

This spurred them into action and they hurried to work. Harlan quickly made his way toward the back of the store.

At the rear of the large room there was a long counter with a cash register sitting on it. Beside the counter was a glass display case. Inside the case was the reason Harlan had decided to come here. Arranged neatly on the shelves were half dozen handguns and two rifles. Harlan moved behind the counter and took three of the pistols. He then lifted out the two rifles. One of them was a double barrel shotgun and the other was a knockoff of a WWII era .30 caliber with a short clip. He laid the weapons beside the cash register and turned to the ammo shelf on the wall behind. He quickly began taking down boxes of shells.

At the front of the store the creatures continued their desperate struggle to get inside. The iron bars covering the windows were already beginning to rattle loosely in their foundation and even with its fortification the door was starting to bulge inward. In the middle of the sales floor, Tom and Jessie ran frantically back and forth piling cans onto the paint display.

Harlan finished loading the last gun and stuffed the remaining shells into a shopping bag. He carried his cachet into a small room behind the counter. At the rear of this room was an exit. Harlan listened at it for a moment but heard nothing. He pulled the deadbolt back quietly and peered out. He couldn't see any of the creatures so he opened the door wider and scanned the area. There was an empty lot behind the building and a side street off to the right. Parked at the end of this street was an old, rusty, Ford pickup. Harlan smiled and closed the door. He locked it again and went back out into the hardware store.

Jessie and Tom were still working busily. At the front of the building, the window barrier had almost been worked free and one of the smaller ghouls was even trying to squeeze its body through the six-inch gap between the bars. Then one of the creature's arms smashed a fist-sized hole through the front door. Harlan knew that time was short and picked up a hatchet from a box beside the counter.

He walked across the sales floor to the paint display. He sank the blade of the hatchet into one of the tins of mineral spirits. When he pulled the ax out, the clear liquid splashed over the containers around it. Harlan quickly repeated this procedure several more times. He picked up one of the leaking cans and carried it toward the back of the room.

At the front of the store another huge hole was knocked in the door. An arm came through the opening and began pulling at the boards that were nailed there. Then a section of the window bars was finally torn free and crashed loudly to the sales floor. Now there was nothing to keep the creatures back and they began scrambling into the building.

"Come on!" Harlan called to the two teenagers.

Tom and Jessie hurriedly followed him and, just as they slipped behind the counter, the front door burst open. With two points of entry the creatures began spilling into the store like a flood. Harlan led his two companions into the back room and locked its flimsy door in their wake. With this done he guided his charges to the rear exit. He listened for a moment and opened this door. The coast was clear and he pointed to the pickup across the way.

"See that truck?" he said. "Jessie and I are gonna make a run for it." He turned to Tom. "And I want you to wait here till one of those things comes through that other door." Harlan sat down the leaking can of paint thinner.

"Then," he continued, indicating the liquid. "You light this and run like the devil."

Tom looked at him nervously. "Why do I have to stay behind?"

"Can you hotwire that truck?" Harlan asked nodding toward the vehicle across the street.

Tom shook his head. Harlan handed him the shotgun. "That means you have to buy us the time we need."

Tom took the gun.

"Do you have a light?" Harlan asked. The boy shook his head again. Harlan fished out his ornate Zippo and handed it to Tom. "And you better get out of here in one piece, 'cause I want that lighter back," Harlan admonished him.

Tom looked up to see if he was serious but Harlan smiled. Tom took the lighter. Then Harlan turned and peered out the back door. In the distance they saw a single, terrified woman running off into the darkness away from town and then everything was quiet. Harlan helped Jessie to the door. She was still favoring her injured ribs.

"You ready?" he asked looking down at her ashen face.

She nodded and Harlan turned back to Tom. "Remember," he cautioned. "Wait till they smash through the door."

Tom swallowed thickly and muttered, "OK."

Harlan squeezed the boy's shoulder and eased into the exit. He took one last look around and headed out the door. He and Jessie made their way quickly across the empty lot toward the truck. Out in the store something crashed and Tom jumped. He brought the shotgun up and waited nervously but the door to the sales floor did not open.

Harlan and Jessie arrived at the pickup and looked around. There were no ghouls close by but occasionally they could see one in the distance, running down Main Street. Harlan tried the door of the truck. It was locked so he used the butt of his rifle to smash the driver's window. He handed Jessie one of the pistols.

"Keep an eye out," he said and opened the door. He got down under the steering wheel and began pulling out wires.

Back in the store, Tom fidgeted nervously as he waited for the creatures to find him. He held the cigarette lighter tightly in his hand and opened it.

Out in the front of the store the ghouls were running madly over the sales floor looking for their prey. There were dozens of them combing the inside of the building. One was fumbling around near the back counter. It knocked the cash register over and the old machine fell through the display case, shattering the glass into a thousand pieces.

This sound was just beyond the door and when Tom heard it he jumped and almost dropped the lighter. Then something rattled the flimsy entrance to the back room and the glass pane that dominated its upper half shook violently. The window was frosted and Tom couldn't see through it very well. Suddenly the shape on the other side stopped moving and an arm came crashing through the opaque glass. Tom panicked and fumbled with the lighter. He got himself under control and thumbed the Zippo's wheel. It sparked once but nothing happened. Tom glared at the unlit lighter in alarm.

Out at the truck, Harlan worked feverishly to get the vehicle started. Jessie was supposed to be keeping watch but her attention was focused on the rear exit of the hardware store. She strained to see inside but could not. She was worried about Tom being in there with all those things. She craned her neck and was far too busy looking for Tom to notice the movement behind her.

In the rear of the pickup something began slowly rising. The tarp it had been hiding under slid off to reveal one of the creatures. It had once been a frail old woman but now it was a lean, whipcord beast. The thing slipped to the edge of the truck bed and prepared to spring but at that moment Harlan got the engine to start. The sound caused Jessie to turn just as the beast lunged at her.

Tom stood trembling in the store's back room. He struck the lighter again but nothing happened. He looked up as the creature that had broken out the window tore the rest of the door off its hinges. Tom was getting ready to thumb the wheel again but he heard Jessie scream and then gunfire from outside. He glanced reflexively toward the sounds and that was when the creature attacked. As it came for him, the thing growled and this made Tom look back. His thumb struck the wheel one last time. It ignited but the flame burned his hand and he dropped the lighter.

When the flickering device landed on the floor the paint thinner went up in a blinding burst. The unexpected flash startled the creature and it stopped momentarily. Seeing this Tom turned to run but remembered the Zippo. He swiveled back around and reached into the flames. He grabbed the lighter but the effort was costly. The creature had recovered and now leapt at him again. He tried to bring the shotgun up but fell backwards. When he hit the floor, his finger jerked back on the twin triggers and the double barrel went off. The blast from the gun struck

the creature full in the chest and knocked it back out of the room. The victory was brief though, because another of the monstrosities immediately appeared in the doorway and started to charge. Tom didn't wait around this time. He scrambled frantically through the back exit of the building.

In the front of the hardware store, the burning trail of paint thinner Tom had ignited finally reached the flammable canisters. The huge room was full of the ghouls when the pile ignited.

Tom had barely gotten clear of the building when it exploded in a gigantic ball of flame. The creature standing in the doorway behind him took the full force of the concussion. The wall of fire hit it like an enormous fist and instantly incinerated most of the flesh on its body. Then the hail of shrapnel from the exploding paint cans ripped into it like a thousand jagged bullets. The creature was knocked to the floor and the blast propelled the sales counter through the rear wall and onto its back. It lay there writhing savagely beneath the weight and flames but did not die.

The explosion hurled Tom into the air and he landed with a heavy thud that knocked the wind out of him. He struggled to breathe as the flames and debris from the building sailed over his head. Burning wood and metal rained down around him and bounced off the concrete surface of the vacant lot. He covered his head and waited for the first wave to pass. When the falling debris slackened to a trickle he glanced back over his shoulder.

The hardware store was an inferno. Its upper half was now completely gone and the remainder of the building burned like a gigantic torch. Tom quickly looked away from the store to where Jessie and Harlan had been trying to get the pickup started. What he saw chilled him.

One of the creatures had Harlan pinned against the truck. Harlan's rifle was lying on the ground beside him and he was wrestling the creature hand to hand. They were far enough away that very little of the hardware store debris had reached them but the concussion had knocked Jessie down. She staggered to her feet and tried to aim the pistol at the two struggling figures. She weaved unsteadily as she attempted to find an opening to shoot the creature. It was obvious though that Harlan and the ghoul were too closely intertwined to allow that. Then Harlan spun the thing around and the two of them stumbled away from the truck.

Tom realized that this was his chance and grabbed the empty shotgun. He started running toward the pickup as fast as he could. It was nearly a thirty yard sprint and by the time he was closing in he had built up a considerable head of steam. When he was ten feet away from Harlan and the creature he lowered his shoulder and slammed into the two of them as hard as he could.

At the moment of impact the ghoul's back was turned to him and it took the brunt of the blow. The force of his charge drove the thing to the ground and knocked Harlan back against the truck. Tom lay there sprawled on the ground, momentarily stunned. The creature recovered first and immediately jumped to its feet. The thing was closer to Tom than Harlan so it turned toward him. The boy was just beginning to recover and rolled over onto his back. His eyes widened with terror as he saw the ghoul spring. Then he caught a glimpse of Jessie trying to draw a bead on the creature.

"Shoot!" Tom screamed at her and instantly the pistol went off. The first bullet hit the thing in the back and sheered away a large chunk of its shoulder. The creature flinched as if bitten by an insect and continued toward Tom. Jessie fired again and this shot blasted a hole in the ghoul's neck. This seemed to bother it more and the thing looked around as if wondering whether to go after the girl instead.

It never got to make the decision though, because Harlan had retrieved his rifle and began pumping .30 caliber bullets into its head in rapid succession. The creature spun and began

clawing madly at the air like a bear attacking a swarm of bees. As each .30 caliber shell hit it, the terrible beast was rocked back violently and a large chunk of its head disintegrated in a spray of blood and brains. Harlan's concentration never left the sight of his gun and he yelled to Tom and Jessie over the rifle's bark.

"Get in the truck," he shouted and continued firing.

The teenagers didn't have to be told twice. They bolted for the idling pickup and jumped inside. Harlan continued his onslaught against the creature but even with the devastation he was causing, the thing still staggered forward.

There was movement to Harlan's right and he glanced toward it. His heart leapt in panic. Apparently the other creatures had heard the gunfire and now there was an army of them rushing toward him from Main Street. He saw another flash of motion and turned to see several of the ghouls staggering from the ruins of the burning hardware store. Many of them were on fire and missing limbs but this did not stop them.

Harlan turned back to the creature nearest him. Its face was gone above the nostrils and the blasted pulp of the thing's brain oozed from the shattered cavity of its skull. But still, the creature advanced. The worst part though, was that the remains of its ragged lips were stretched into a leering, arrogant grin. Harlan had had all of this he could take and he turned his rifle around and swung it like a bat. It arced upward through the air like a heavyweight's roundhouse and slammed violently into the creature's chin. Harlan had focused every ounce of his strength and anger into the blow and when the gun butt struck the creature its head exploded in a vomitus geyser of bone and gore.

Harlan winced and shielded his eyes against the gristly spray. He looked back at the creature and saw that the only thing left above its shoulders was a jutting finger of neck bone and the quivering snake of its spinal cord. There was a long, expectant pause and then the ghoulish beast staggered backwards and fell to the ground. But even after all this, there was still life left in it and the thing continued to writhe and thrash on the pavement.

Harlan shook his head in disbelief and disgust and then looked back up at the throng of approaching creatures. Two of them were less than ten yards away so there was no more time to waste. Harlan turned and jumped into the truck. He slammed the door and threw the idling vehicle into first. He popped the clutch and the laboring, old Ford shot forward with a jolt. Jessie and Tom's heads rocked back and the truck took off.

As the pickup gained speed Harlan shifted again. He was heading the wrong way. The alley they were in dead-ended twenty yards ahead and he swerved the truck back into the vacant lot behind the hardware store. It lost a little speed in the turn but he kept the pressure on and the engine roared loudly as it struggled to comply. He floored the gas and wound second gear as far as it would go. The truck complained bitterly but he did not shift again. He was almost upon the ghouls now and he could not afford the momentary loss of speed.

Suddenly one of the creatures wobbled out in front of him. Its body was scorched to a cinder and riddled with shrapnel from the exploding paint cans. There were also dozens of broken bones protruding from its crisped and papery skin – the result of the thing being crushed beneath the hardware store's back counter during the explosion. Instead of avoiding the truck the creature lunged forward as if to attack it. The grill of the pickup hit the thing full force and the creature's cindery limbs flew into the air like the broken pieces of a toy. Jessie winced as the thing's burnt head bounced along the truck's hood and smashed against the windshield in a grotesque spray of blood red and charcoal black.

Harlan grimly watched the creature's demise and pushed the accelerator harder than ever. Other creatures began looming into the old pickup's onrushing headlights and the charging vehicle leapt forward hungrily. The truck hit the pack of ghouls like a bowling ball and the writhing creatures scattered like pins. The truck bounced and jerked as its wheels rolled over their squirming bodies. Finally the last snarling face disappeared beneath its speeding bumper and they were past the terrible horde.

Harlan shifted the pickup into third and swung it out of the alley onto Main Street. The Ford gathered speed as it bolted past the front of the inferno that was once Stevens Hardware. A few more buildings blurred past on either side and then they were out of the devastated town. Harlan looked up into his rearview mirror and saw a few of the ghouls chasing after the truck but the shambling creatures quickly faded from sight.

The old, pickup slowly pulled to a stop in front of Linda's house. The occupants of the truck peered out cautiously. The whole place was still and quiet – and dark. Because of the downed lines, the power was off everywhere on this side of town and it appeared to be off here as well. Harlan scanned the house's impassive face but the darkened windows gave no clues. The garage door was closed and he couldn't tell whether Linda's car was inside. They hadn't seen any more of the creatures since leaving town and it was possible that none of them had gotten this far yet. There was still a chance that she was all right, and no matter how illogical it might be to believe it, he refused to give up hope.

Harlan looked at his two companions. They stared back at him wearily. "Come on," he urged, picking up his rifle. "But stay close and keep your guns ready. Just because things look quiet doesn't mean they are."

"Wait," Tom asked.

Harlan turned to the boy, who was now extending a hand toward him.

"You said to make sure you got this back."

Tom opened the hand. It contained the ornate Zippo. He placed it in Harlan's palm. The gesture seemed almost conciliatory but the boy's face remained noncommittal. Harlan gave him a smile of thanks and put the lighter into his pocket. Tom nodded in reply.

Even a grudging civility was a vast improvement over the boy's earlier scorn. However, there was no time to dwell on any of that now. They had to find Linda and get out of here as fast as possible. Everything else would have to wait.

Harlan turned and steeled himself for the task that lay ahead. He slowly opened the door and stepped onto the lawn. Jessie and Tom slid across the seat and followed him. Their first few steps were slow and cautious. If something in the nearby woods was waiting for them to exit the truck before it sprang they wanted to be able to retreat quickly. When they had gotten about ten feet without incident Harlan picked up the pace and they hustled to the porch. The three of them waited outside the house for a moment, listening, but did not hear a sound. Then Harlan carefully opened the door.

The inside of the house was dark and, at first, Harlan could see nothing. His eyes began to adjust and shapes started to form. But the shapes were all wrong and he quickly realized why. Though the house's exterior had looked unscathed, the interior was a wreck. The living room furniture was all pushed out of place and overturned. There was a broken lamp lying near the

door and the glass-topped coffee table was a jagged mess beyond it. The couch and chairs were also lying askew. Tom and Jessie entered the room and moved to Harlan's side. They looked over the carnage worriedly. Then Harlan turned to them. His face was pale. Of all the things he had been through, this one seemed to affect him the most. His normally strong features were etched with terrible concern.

"Let's keep our hope up," he said, his voice cracking. "She might not have even been here when this happened." He looked at their faces. They nodded, trying not to think of the alternative. Harlan motioned for them to follow.

"We better look around," he said and swallowed thickly. "Just in case."

Tom and Jessie stayed close behind Harlan as he headed into the darkness. There were a hundred places the creatures could hide in the erratic shadows of the house. They moved carefully through the disarray of the living room but found nothing. Harlan glanced into the kitchen. It was a large open area and he could see that no one was there. He turned toward the deeper pool of shadows that led to the rest of the house.

The door to the hallway was like a black, grinning mouth waiting to devour them. Harlan looked back at his two young charges, but stopped before he could say anything.

The weak light from the open front door fell upon the far wall and now that he was standing on this side of the room it illuminated something he had not seen before. There was writing on that wall. The words were drawn in large, erratic letters and even in the poor light he could see that they were written in blood.

MINE MINE MINE

Harlan's breath caught in his chest and knotted there painfully. The double meaning was not lost on him. Andy had taken Linda and he was telling him where.

Harlan immediately turned to his companions. There was no question about his decision. As long as there was hope, he would go after her.

"She's not here," he said and began hustling them out of the house. Tom and Jessie were confused.

"What is it? What does it mean?" Jessie asked her father as he hurried them along.

Harlan started to reply but stopped abruptly. A look of alarm dawned across his face as he stared out the front door. The two teenagers immediately realized something was wrong and turned to follow his gaze.

Standing on the lawn between the porch and their truck were four of the creatures. Three of them were the members of the once missing Tuttle family and the fourth was Harlan's trooper friend John Campbell. As they watched, the creatures began to advance.

There was little time to act. Harlan quickly slammed the front door and locked it. He turned to Tom and Jessie.

"Come on," he yelled and pushed the two kids toward the rear of the house.

In the yard the creatures quickly fanned out and crawled up onto the porch. The trooper ghoul stopped in front of the door. He slapped it once with his misshapen paw and it rattled on its hinges. Then he stepped back and charged savagely. The other creatures had positioned themselves in front of the windows and when the trooper attacked the door they leapt forward also.

As one, the ghouls crashed into the living room in a rain of broken glass and shattered wood. They had no sooner hit the floor than they began frantically searching for their prey.

Suddenly there was a thunderous noise from outside and the creatures turned to see the garage door explode into the driveway. The rear end of Linda's blue Chevy rocketed forward, hurling the broken remains of the door across the lawn. Harlan expertly swung the car around and roared off down the driveway just as the ghouls ran out of the house, howling impotently in his wake. The enraged beasts bolted after the car but it was much too fast for them to catch.

Harlan fishtailed onto the highway and floored the accelerator. He glanced back over his shoulder and shot the creatures the bird as he sped off into the night.

Linda's car came to an abrupt halt at Puritan Mine Number Eight. The area outside the mine opening was deserted except for several abandoned vehicles. Harlan's eyes were drawn to the ambulance that was parked a few yards away. Both its doors were standing open and there was a large bloody smear across its glistening white and yellow side. Harlan grabbed his rifle and got out of the car. He was no longer being cautious or timid. He motioned for Tom and Jessie to follow him and they did.

Harlan ran up the steps of a work trailer that sat near the edge of the clearing. Just inside the door was a small, cluttered office. Harlan walked through the office to a larger room that extended down the remaining length of the structure. The two longest walls of this narrow room were lined with a number of hooks. On each hook was a pair of coveralls, a miner's belt and a hard hat. Harlan moved to one of the hooks and took down a belt. He fastened the wide strap around his waist and pulled it snug.

Harlan grabbed a hard hat and moved to the short wall at the far end of the room. A large part of this wall was dominated by rows of battery powered lights that were connected to a bank of chargers. Harlan found one of the gauges that showed a full charge and unhooked the lamp from it. The light and battery pack were about the size and shape of a pack of cigarettes and weighed almost nothing. He clipped the lamp to the front of his hard hat. With this done he turned around. Tom and Jessie were standing behind him. He walked over to them. The expression on his face was solemn and determined.

"There's a good chance I won't come back from down there," Harlan said, looking at them levelly. "And I want you both to know something."

Jessie shook her head. "Dad, you're not gonna go in that mine alone," she said emphatically. "We're going with you."

Harlan put his hands on her shoulders. "Be quiet and listen," he said calmly and turned to Tom.

"Son, I'm not sure I could ever explain to you what happened between your father and mother and me. I'm not really sure about all of it myself. Sometimes over the course of people's lives they change and grow apart. That doesn't make either of them bad. It just makes it hard for them to stay together. Your mom and dad were having problems and I tried to help. Somewhere along the line everything got mixed up and things change between Linda and me."

Harlan took a deep breath and continued. “Your mother told me that she would have still divorced your dad even if she and I hadn’t become involved. There’s no way I can ever know that for certain, but I have to trust that she was telling me the truth.” He sighed. “That still doesn’t make what I did to your dad right. He was my best friend and I…” Harlan faltered. “And I guess I betrayed him. I’m sorry about that and it’s been eating me up inside every day since it happened. The problem is that I can’t change any of those things now. I simply have to go on from here and try to live with myself. For better or worse that’s all I can do.”

Harlan took a long look into Tom’s eyes. “You’re the one innocent party in all this, Tom and you’ve probably suffered the most. I am honestly and truly sorry for that. I won’t ask for your forgiveness because I don’t think I deserve it. But I wanted you to know the truth. And I wanted you to know that I love both your father and your mother very much.”

Harlan took another long breath and then lowered his eyes. Having said his piece, he turned away from Tom to Jessie.

“Baby, I hope you’ll forgive your old man,” he said repentantly. “After your mother died I didn’t think I’d ever be able to feel anything for another woman again. And when I did, it came in such a rush that I just wasn’t smart enough to use my head. I was lonely and hurting and I should have waited.” He trailed off. “But I didn’t. I fell in love and I acted like an impatient schoolboy instead of a grown man.” He bowed his head. “I’m sorry I let you down.”

Tears glittered in Jessie’s eyes and she threw her arms around her father’s neck. “I love you daddy,” she blubbered. “No matter what.”

Tears gleamed in Harlan’s eyes as well. “I love you too, sweetheart,” he said and squeezed his daughter tightly. They held their embrace for a moment and then he kissed her cheek and stepped back. He looked down at her and smiled through his tears.

“Now you two go get in that car,” he said as firmly as he could. “And don’t stop driving till you find someplace safe.”

Harlan picked up his rifle and started for the door. Jessie ran and got to it before he did. She stood there looking up at her father defiantly and rubbed the tears away from her eyes.

“If you think I’m letting you go down there without me you’re crazy,” she said squaring her shoulders. “I’ve already lost my mother and there’s no way I’m gonna lose my dad.”

Harlan opened his mouth but before he could protest Tom joined Jessie in the doorway. “I’m going too,” the boy said leaving no room for question in his voice. “My mother, and maybe even my father, are down in that hole. And I won’t leave till I find them.”

Jessie turned from Tom to her father. “And if you don’t take us with you,” Jessie added matter-of-factly. “We’ll wait till you’re gone and follow you in.”

Harlan looked back and forth between the determined, young faces. It was obvious that they had made up their minds. And Jessie was right. Once he was underground there was no way he could keep them from following him, and if they did they could become lost in the maze of tunnels – or worse they might stumble upon some of the creatures. Harlan sighed and shook his head.

“Don’t you two understand how dangerous this is?” he tried feebly.

“We’ve held our own pretty well so far,” Jessie argued.

Harlan nodded. He had to admit they had saved his life more than once tonight. His shoulders slumped in resignation.

“All right then,” he said softly. “Go get your gear on.”

A smile bloomed on Jessie's face and she hugged her father. She and Tom quickly moved to the equipment lined wall and began suiting up. Harlan watched them for a moment and shrugged, unwillingly accepting the situation.

"When you're finished wait here," he told the hurrying teenagers. "There's some other stuff we'll need."

Jessie looked back from buckling her belt and shook her head. Tom did the same and Harlan quickly left the room.

Harlan exited the trailer and moved across the work area to a small building that sat off to itself. The solitary structure had the words: "DANGER", "POWDER", and "KEEP OUT" printed on its side in big, red letters. The warnings were left over from a time when the building had contained older types of explosives like dynamite. These days' mines used something called ANFO that would not explode unless detonated. This made handling easier and much safer. Dynamite had a nasty habit of going off if you dropped it, but you could run over this new stuff with a truck and it wouldn't detonate. Even so, the door of the building was secured with a huge padlock. Harlan picked up a sledgehammer from the toolbox beside a dilapidated piece of mining equipment and proceeded to attack the heavy, steel latch. It took several blows but finally the lock sprang open and fell to the ground with a thud.

Harlan moved quickly to the back of the small room and opened one of the sturdy rectangular boxes stacked there. Inside were a number of bags filled with a white, granular material. Harlan found a burlap sack behind one of the crates and put one of the bags in it. When this was done he rushed out of the building to find the detonators.

Back in the trailer Jessie and Tom had finished putting on their gear and were testing the lights. Everything seemed to be working satisfactorily. They turned to each other and sighed. The last few hours had been a roller coaster ride of terror and both of them looked as if they had aged several years. Jessie stepped forward and embraced Tom. They held each other for a moment and then heard Harlan enter the trailer.

Harlan walked into the room carrying a small burlap sack. It now contained both the explosive and the detonators. He gravely surveyed his two companions.

"Ready?" he asked.

Jessie and Tom nodded and followed him out into the small office at the front of the trailer. Harlan sat the burlap sack down and began going through one of the desks there. Eventually he found what he was looking for. It was a small, square device with a digital display dominating its front. Harlan looked it over briefly and clipped it to his mine belt.

"Methane detector," he explained. "There's a good chance there'll be some gas down there."

Harlan turned and walked to the far wall of the office. There was a large sheet of paper pinned there. It was two feet wide and nearly four feet high. The paper looked like a long, rectangular grid that had been carefully laid out with some type of machine.

At one time it had been a neatly crafted schematic but it didn't look very neat anymore. Someone had taken a magic marker and outlined many of the squares in the grid with heavy, black lines. The result looked almost like a child's rendition of a long, irregularly shaped waffle. Harlan studied the paper closely for a moment.

"What is that?" Jessie asked from behind him.

"A map of the mine," Harlan explained as he continued to examine it. "The coal is removed in sort of a grid pattern. The little squares are large blocks that haven't been mined yet and spaces between them are the tunnels left when the coal is taken out."

“Whatever you say,” Jessie replied ironically.

Harlan smiled. “It is a little hard to make out at first,” he said. “But that’s really the point. A mine isn’t just one big shaft. There’s a maze of numerous interconnecting tunnels. It’s easy to get lost under the best of circumstances but the chances are far greater after a cave-in.”

Harlan unpinned the map from the wall and began folding it. Tom and Jessie watched him quietly. “That’s why it’s important for you to stick with me like glue,” Harlan stressed. “If we get separated down there you might never find your way out.”

Worry clouded the teenagers’ faces. “You still sure you want to do this?” Harlan asked. “I could move a whole lot faster without you.”

“I’m going,” Jessie said without hesitation. Harlan looked over at Tom. The boy nodded his head emphatically. Harlan sighed and stuffed the folded mine map into his shirt.

“Come on then,” he said, picking up his rifle and the burlap sack.

Harlan hurried out of the trailer with Tom and Jessie following close behind. They crossed the work area to the mine opening and rushed headlong into the waiting jaws of death.

Harlan, Jessie and Tom walked down the cavernous throat of the mine. The lamps attached to their hard hats were the only illumination and the beams bounced and jerked along in front of them as they went. The erratic movement of the light was like a strobe effect and it added to the eerie atmosphere of the mine. The shadows jumped and moved around them in a constant, unearthly dance. To make matters worse there was no peripheral vision. The only thing that was visible was a small area directly in front of them and the world to their right and left was as black as Satan's heart. It was like tunnel vision or trying to walk with heavy, dark blinders.

Jessie scanned her surroundings as she went. The shaft was angular and, except for an occasional irregularity, nearly a perfect rectangle. The flattened walls were about twenty feet apart and the roof was just over five feet high. For the most part the ceiling was smooth but in places there were bulging rocks or high depressions that looked like a large chunk had fallen out. Because of the height of the shaft, Jessie had to walk in a stoop and every so often she would raise up too much and crack her hard hat painfully against the stone surface above her head. The floor beneath her was a layer of hard packed gray earth over solid rock. It seemed to bulge upward in the middle like a long, wide grave and occasionally there were shadowy holes lying in wait to twist an ankle. The walls on either side were made of coal but instead of being black and shiny they – like the rest of the shaft – were covered with an eerie, bone-white film. This gave the entire place a ghostly, surreal feeling.

“What's that stuff on the walls?” Jessie asked her father.

“Coal dust coats everything down here,” Harlan explained. “And if too much of it gets stirred up in the air it can explode, so they have to spray the shaft with limestone to dampen it down.”

Jessie shook her head. There were more ways to die down here than she cared to think about. The movement caused her mine light to flutter disconcertingly so she stopped it and continued on. Tom was behind her and she saw the beam from his light swing toward the right. Her eyes involuntarily followed it. The wall beside her ended abruptly. She looked ahead and saw that a few feet further on it began again. She aimed her light into the gulf between and realized that it was another shaft leading off at a right angle to the one they were in. She then turned and looked quickly to her left. The interconnecting shaft went off in that direction as well.

As they continued, clocking along the rough hardpan floor, she spotted another side shaft coming up. They passed this one and several feet further on they passed a third. Her father had been correct. She felt like a rat in a maze. But this maze was eerily dark and filled with traps. There were deadly gasses, collapsing roofs – and the creatures too – she reminded herself. Jessie quickened her pace and moved up closer to her father. She was practically on his heels when he stopped unexpectedly and she plowed into his back.

Harlan looked behind him and the light strapped to his headgear blinded her. She squinted into it feeling silly.

“Sorry,” she said and saw his smile in her own light.

“I need to check my bearings,” Harlan told them and took the mine map from his shirt. He examined it carefully and then peered up at the ceiling. He searched for a moment until he saw a glint. He moved toward the glint and rubbed it with his hand. The reflective object proved to be a small, brass tag with a number set into it. He glanced down and compared it to the map. He nodded and looked back at his companions.

“We’re doing fine,” he said reassuringly, “We’ll go up a few more breaks – that’s these side tunnels – and take a right.”

Tom and Jessie nodded and their lights bobbed across Harlan’s face. He turned and began leading them again. They passed three more of the side tunnels and Harlan veered off into one of them. They had only been walking down this shaft for a few minutes when Jessie heard a sound. She wheeled left and saw two red, glowing eyes staring back at her. She screamed. The close quarters of the mine magnified the sound and it startled her companions.

“It’s one of the creatures,” Jessie yelled and fumbled for the pistol that was shoved into her pants pocket.

Harlan swung around and brought his gun up. The beam of his light illuminated a jumble of large, mine timbers piled near one wall. The long, square logs were almost as thick as a man’s thigh and Harlan’s light panned over them hurriedly as he looked for their attacker. Suddenly a mine rat scurried out of the stack of wood, searching for a deeper darkness. From nose to tail it was a foot in length but it was a far smaller threat than what they had been expecting.

Harlan sighed in relief and Jessie looked up at her father sheepishly. He smiled and hugged her shoulders. Then he turned and resumed with the business at hand.

They continued moving down the tunnel. After a few more minutes their lights picked up an obstruction in the shaft ahead. As they got closer they saw that it was a cinder block wall that had been built across the passage. In the center of this wall was a door about three feet square.

Jessie glanced over at her father. He didn’t seem surprised by this. As a matter of fact, upon seeing it, he picked up the pace. Harlan moved quickly to the door and squatted down beside it. He took the methane detector from his belt. He pulled the door open slightly and reached the device through. He waited for several seconds and brought his hand back. He checked the detector’s gauge. He seemed satisfied and reattached it to his mine belt. He looked at Tom and Jessie.

“No gas so far,” he said. “But we’ll have to be more careful from here on out. Methane has no smell or taste so if you start feeling faint drop to the floor. It accumulates around the ceiling so the air below is usually better.”

Tom and Jessie nodded their heads. The worry on their faces was obvious but they gave no sign of wanting to turn back. Harlan opened the door the rest of the way and crawled through. His companion followed.

On the other side, they began walking again. After only a few steps there was a loud crash behind them. All three spun around quickly. The only thing visible was the cinder block wall. Then they saw the heavy door swing shut and heard the banging sound again – this time not as loud. The door bounced once more and settled closed.

They all let out the breath they had been holding. Stress was running high and these false scares weren't making things any easier. Harlan offered his young charges a grin to break the tension and they tried unsuccessfully to return the gesture. Then the three of them turned and continued their journey.

As they moved down this tunnel they began to see signs of the mine fire. The sides and roof were scorched black and a layer of soot coated them. They walked another hundred yards and came to a place where a huge slab of the wall had collapsed into the shaft. There was still enough room to go around the rubble and they did.

Fifty feet further on they came to a place where the ceiling had caved in. The huge chunks of rock were piled in an erratic jumble for as high as they could see. They could go no further. Harlan did not seem perturbed. He simply turned around and retraced his steps until he came to one of the interconnecting tunnels. He looked up at the ceiling. There was a white, chalk arrow drawn on the rock overhead. It pointed to the right.

"The rescue team came this way too," he explained. "That's where they marked their path."

Harlan continued walking in the direction indicated by the arrow. Their pace now slowed as he watched the roof for more of the markings. It wasn't long before he found another one, this time pointing to the left. He followed it. He knew that the route taken by the rescue team wasn't the only way through the mine but it was certainly the surest.

They followed this shaft for quite some time until they finally came to a place where the roof seemed to have broken down the middle and two high, vertical slabs stood blocking the way. The slabs were spread outward slightly at the top and resembled a huge, narrow "V".

Harlan walked up to the rocks and surveyed the area around them. There was no white arrow on the ceiling but he saw a portable mine phone lying nearby and some pry bars and other tools scattered across the floor.

"It looks like the rescue team was here," Harlan said turning back to Tom and Jessie.

"Is this as far as they got?" Tom asked eyeing the vertical slabs.

Harlan squatted down and examined a large, dark stain on the floor. He touched it and his finger came away a slimy red. When he realized what it was, he quickly wiped it on his pants.

"I'd say this was it for them," Harlan replied.

Tom and Jessie looked down at him, realizing what he meant. Tom raised his shotgun and Jessie pulled the pistol from the pocket of her jeans. They clicked off the safeties simultaneously.

Harlan stood and moved to the vertical slabs that blocked the tunnel. There was a large rock sitting in front of them and he stepped up onto it. He shined his light into the dark heart of the "V". The opening seemed to go back quite a way.

"I think we can get through," Harlan said and looked down at the dark, russet stains on the outer edges of the rock. He didn't want to think about how those stains had gotten there so he forced them out of his mind and hauled himself up into the vertical fissure. He crawled slowly back along the crevice. The going was treacherous because there was nothing to stand

on. He had to push his toe down between the uneven slabs until it could go no further. If he wasn't careful he could very easily break an ankle or get his foot caught between the stones.

"I'm gonna try this out first," he called back to the kids. "If it's OK, I'll holler for you."

Harlan slung the rifle he was carrying up over his shoulder and hooked the burlap bag with the explosives to his mine belt. With both hands free he could negotiate the difficult space much more safely. He eased along slowly another ten feet and came to a large rock that had fallen into the opening. The huge stone was almost completely blocking the passage. Harlan shined his light under the boulder and saw that there was about two feet of clearance beneath it. He eased down onto his side and began worming his way through the tight gap. This was a very vulnerable position and he knew if the rock were to fall it would squash him like a bug.

Then he heard a rumble from somewhere deep within the heart of the mine and sand cascaded into his face. He gasped and thought he felt the massive stone shift. He quickened his pace and scurried past it as fast as he could. The crevice opened up again and he crawled down from the "V" shaped slabs and out into the mine shaft beyond the obstruction.

When he was finally clear of the danger, he stopped to catch his breath. He waited until his racing heart had slowed and then began to wipe the sand from his eyes. With this done he stepped back to the wall of stones and listened. The sound was gone and the rock seemed stable enough. He sighed, figuring that its movement had been a product of his panic and jangled nerves.

It didn't pay to assume too much, though, and he took the butt of his rifle and tapped the boulder lightly. Nothing happened so he hit it again, harder – to make sure. Without warning the rock shifted and plunged into the crevice. The roof above it groaned mightily and more rocks began collapsing around it. Harlan lunged backward and scrambled away from the danger. The ceiling continued to shift and more rubble fell into the opening.

On the other side of the rocks, Tom and Jessie heard the rumble from within the opening and Jessie instinctively started forward.

"Daddy!" she screamed and the vertical slabs shifted. Dust exploded out of the hole like smoke from a gun barrel. Tom grabbed Jessie and pulled her backwards. A chunk of rock the size of a Volkswagen dropped into the shaft where they had been standing only moments before.

Jessie yelped and Tom felt his stomach roll sickly. Then the earth groaned and a crack began zigging along the ceiling in their direction.

"Daddy!" Jessie screamed again and Tom began dragging her up the shaft away from the source of the cave-in. They ran as fast as they could through the obstacle course of the mine. Behind them the fissure widened like a yawning mouth and huge chunks of rock rained from above. They continued to run and a gigantic slab of the roof sheered free and collapsed into the tunnel. When the rock hit there was a loud whump and a shock wave of displaced air slammed into Tom and Jessie. It was like the blast from an explosion and it sent them flying through the air. They sailed nearly ten feet before landing heavily and painfully against the mine floor.

The two of them lay there on the ground hurting and helpless to flee any further. If the cave-in continued they would surely be killed. But there was nothing either of them could do to stop it so they tensely awaited their fate.

Finally, as abruptly as it began, the roof fall ended and everything became deathly still. Jessie looked up, too tired and sore to really show the relief she felt. She turned back. The entire mine was a jumble of debris that stretched from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. It was obvious that no one would be digging through that.

When Harlan heard the big cave-in begin he had run in the other direction. He knew by the sound that it was going to be a bad one. He had gotten almost a hundred feet when a tremendous convulsion shook the floor. Suddenly the pile of rubble he had climbed through bulged mightily and exploded into the shaft. As it blew outward more fell from the ceiling to take its place. The force of the concussion slammed into Harlan and knocked him behind a large boulder that he had been trying to scramble over. The result was that most of the shock wave had passed above him. The worst he'd gotten was a bruised shoulder and a mouth full of dirt.

When the tumult had finally ceased, Harlan sat up and looked behind him. Where the tunnel had been there was now an impassible wall of stone.

Harlan stumbled down the shaft. There was no way of knowing whether the kids had survived that last cave-in. If so, hopefully they would be able to find their way out. If not, then that just added to the score he had to settle. Either way, there was nothing he could do for them now – nothing except maybe exact revenge.

Harlan had gone quite a distance from the spot where the vertical stones had been. He'd had to take several detours to avoid other obstructions and now he was unsure of exactly where he was. The mine map had been lost somewhere during his previous ordeal, and he had to navigate by counting how many turns he made. The grid pattern of the mine meant there were a number of ways to get from point A to point B but the trick was not to lose track of your direction during the detours. He sighed tiredly and continued plodding along. If he had somehow managed to keep his bearings he figured he should be getting close to where the miners had been when the original explosion occurred.

Up ahead he saw that the shaft ended abruptly and another tunnel bisected it. The passage to the left was blocked by debris but it appeared you could get through on the right. He made his way to the intersection and continued in the only direction he could. When he made the turn he saw that there was rubble in the side tunnel as well – rubble and something else. There was a dirty yellow glint beneath several large slabs of rock.

Harlan moved closer. The yellow glint was a shuttle car that had been covered by falling rock. He knelt down and looked at the crushed vehicle. Its heavy, steel sides had been crumpled like aluminum foil and the machine was nearly unrecognizable.

The shuttle car meant that he was getting close. In this mine it would not have traveled far from the continuous miner and the main part of the mining activity. Harlan surveyed the situation carefully. There seemed to be enough room to climb over the obstruction and he did just that.

On the other side, Harlan stood and looked at the shaft ahead of him. It was far from clear but, except for a couple of places, it looked like he would be able to walk for a while. He began making his way around the chunks of rock and coal that littered the floor. He had only gone about a hundred feet when he heard something.

Harlan stopped and listened. All was quiet. Then he heard it again. The sound was low and so faint that he could not make out what it was. He looked up and down the shaft. The crazy acoustics of the mine made it difficult to tell which direction it was coming from. He took a couple of tentative steps forward. He was standing at one of the tunnel intersections. He strained to see

in each direction. He stopped and listened again. The sound was more distinct now, like a low rustling. He still wasn't sure what it was but he also wasn't sure he wanted to find out. Lately all the news had been bad news.

Harlan moved quickly up the passage, hoping the sound had been coming from one of the side tunnels and that, by getting past them, he could avoid whatever it was. He kept looking over his shoulder. He could not see anything and the noise of his hurrying drowned out the sound. He peered back down the shaft but his light could pick out nothing in the heavy gloom. Finally he stopped. He listened again. It seemed now that the sound was not fainter but louder and coming from – behind him.

Harlan turned. His light swept the walls. He could see nothing but darkness and then there was movement ahead. The rifle was slung over his shoulder and he pulled it down. He held the weapon at the ready. The movement was low like something keeping close to the floor as it rushed toward him. He saw a flash of red and another close to it. Suddenly the ground in front of him was alive with hundreds of glowing eyes.

Harlan stumbled backwards. He pulled the rifle's trigger. It went off and a pair of the eyes winked out. But another pair quickly took their place. Harlan turned to run. A terrific pain lanced through his calf. He glanced down and saw a foot-long mine rat fastened to the back of his leg. Its vicious front teeth tore deeply into the skin and blood squirted into its grinning mouth. Another rat hit him and another and another. He looked back just in time to see a flood of black, writhing bodies engulfed him.

The force of their numbers was terrific. They chewed and ripped and clawed until he was a bloody mess. One leapt onto the back of his neck and clung there by its teeth. Another scurried up his arm and bit through his ear. Harlan began to slow. The sheer weight of them was dragging him down. Two more of the ugly creatures crawled up through his hair. As they eagerly wriggled their way forward they pushed the hard hat over into his eyes. He stumbled blindly. Now his entire back looked like a carpet of the squirming beasts and still more joined the fray.

Then one of the rats jumped from his shoulder and plunged its fangs into the soft tissue of his cheek. Harlan yelped in agony as the rodent's churning legs scrambled for purchase. He slung his head sideways but the creature did not let go. Instead, it hung there by his tearing flesh. The hard hat was now pushed completely over his eyes, making it impossible for him to see. He blindly grabbed at the rat and squeezed. Its back was so wide that he could barely get his hand around it so he dug his fingernails into its eyes. The tiny orbs popped like blisters and the rat squeaked in pain. Harlan pulled the bleeding creature from his face and slung it to the ground just as his foot tripped over a slab of rock.

Harlan pitched forward. He struggled desperately to keep his balance but the weight of the rats crawling over him was too great and he was pulled to the ground. He hit the mine floor face first and was immediately buried in a sea of rodents. They washed over him in a tidal wave of vile, rabid flesh. Harlan tried to get up again but their weight was too great and all he managed to do was fall over onto his back.

When he did this the creatures began to attack his face. A rat chewed into his lower lip and several more went for his eyes. He opened his mouth to yell and it was immediately filled with a hairy, slithering body. He still held the rifle in his right hand and reflexively pulled the trigger. The weapon discharged and one of the vermin exploded in a spray of blood. In reaction another of the creatures bit into the hand holding the gun. Its teeth ground all the way to the bone and Harlan's fingers twitched open. The rifle fell away. He groped for it madly but it was

useless. Then one of his tightly closed eyelids was ripped from his face with a horrible tearing sound and he could see hundreds of squirming, beady eyes staring back at him. He screamed. And the last thing he saw was their churning, ravenous teeth gnawing into his pupil.

Harlan drifted through the void. He floated along in the total darkness, surrounded by an endless sea of night. So this is death he thought and then suddenly came awake.

Harlan sat bolt upright and began clawing at the rats covering his body. It was several panicked seconds before he realized that there weren't any. He looked around wildly and his light caught a glimpse of a single rodent scurrying down the tunnel away from him. He examined his hand. There was no evidence of a bite to be found. He quickly searched his body and clothes. He felt for the wounds on his face. None were there. He stood up immediately and scoured the ground around him. He realized that all his weapons were gone and so were the explosives. Then the air around him began to tremble with an eerie, sinister laugh. The terrible cackle rumbled through the mine with the force of an avalanche. It was maniacal and insane and somehow reminiscent of the man who had once been his best friend.

Outside the mine the darkness was absolute. Heavy clouds had moved in. They now covered the sky like a thick caul that the rays of the moon could not penetrate. It was a black night and it was about to become even blacker.

Suddenly there was a terrible commotion along the road that led up to the entrance of Puritan Mine Number Eight. It was faint at first and then it erupted into a sea of writhing bodies far worse than those Harlan had encountered underground.

It was the creatures. There were hundreds of them now. Many were burnt and broken from the hardware store explosion but still they hurried toward the mine. None that could move were absent. Their master was calling and they could not disobey.

The laughter had stopped but Harlan continued looking around, as if trying to locate the source of the ominous sound. It had come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was even possible that it was only in his mind. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it and tried to get his bearings. He was exhausted and all the strange goings-on were beginning to take their toll. But he couldn't let that slow him down. Linda was still down here somewhere and he had to find her before it was too late. He took a deep breath and began walking in what he hoped was the right direction.

Harlan had only gone about a hundred yards when he finally found the continuous miner. It still lay under the terrific pile of rubble that had crushed it. The huge machine and everything around it were scorched black. There were even places where the coal in the walls had obviously been burning, but it was burning no longer.

Harlan scanned the area. There was no sign that anyone was here. He moved toward the miner. The machine was charred and all its hoses and non-metal fittings had been scorched away. He touched it. It was cold and lifeless. He examined his fingers. They were covered with soot. He walked to the front of the machine and glanced at the wall where the menacing ripper head had once chewed into the coal.

He stopped.

The wall was gone, and where it should have been there was a huge, irregular hole whose edges had been singed and melted smooth. It was like a portal that went back several feet and then appeared to open up again into something even larger.

Curiosity and fear warred within him. He had no idea what this could be but it was very strange, and unnatural – which made it exactly what he was searching for. He had come too far to turn back, so that really only left him with one option. He steeled himself and started forward again.

He stepped through the opening and looked up. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but this certainly wasn't it. He was standing in a huge, cylindrical chamber. The ceiling was a hundred feet high and the walls were almost that far apart. He surveyed the gigantic expanse in amazement and then peered into the bottomless pit at its center. The whole thing was mammoth and awe-inspiring – and eerie.

“Well, it's about time,” a mocking voice boomed. The sound startled him and he quickly turned toward it.

Andy was standing on the opposite side of the pit staring back at Harlan. He looked exactly like the apparition in the cruiser. His clothes were blackened and torn, and so was his flesh. He began to advance.

Harlan watched him walk along the ledge – inexorably closing the distance between them. As Andy approached, a leering grin spread across his face.

“Aren't you going to say hello to your best friend?” the mutilated figure asked, feigning hurt.

“Jesus Andy,” Harlan muttered. “What’s happened to you?”

Andy threw his head back in deep, guttural laughter. It was the same sound Harlan had heard earlier in the tunnel, but not as deafening.

“I assure you,” Andy replied, as he got himself under control. “That Jesus had nothing to do with it.”

Andy's laughter had caused him to stop momentarily but now he continued advancing. Harlan's eyes darted worriedly as he assessed the situation. Andy was getting closer by the second. He had to find a way to stall for time.

“So are you gonna tell me what's going on – what happened to all those people outside – what happened to you?”

Andy tapped at his mangled chin, as if deciding how best to continue. Then he plunged ahead. “Our entire lives we’ve been taught that the nature of things is the product of a battle between god and the devil – two polar opposite forces of good and evil. But monotheistic religions like Christianity are actually pretty new. All the old religions believed that reality resulted from the interplay of many different beings – an entire pantheon of powerful forces. They called them gods because that’s what they called anything they didn’t understand. And though they were wrong about a lot of the particulars, they were much closer to the truth than we are.

Andy spread his arms wide. “I know because one of those beings is now inside me.”

Harlan’s brow furrowed. “That sounds pretty incredible.”

“And everything you’ve seen tonight isn’t enough to convince you that the world’s not what you thought it was?”

Harlan had to give him that. “But if this being is so powerful, why is it wasting it’s time with you?”

Andy let the implied insult pass, as if such trivialities no longer bothered him. “Blind luck or fate. It’s hard to say. But I like to think it was destiny. I needed it and it needed me.”

“What could you possibly have that it needed?”

Andy stopped walking and pointed into the enormous pit. “See that. That’s not a hole in the earth. It’s a hole in everything.”

Harlan looked confused. Andy tried to explain. “The entity we released is from a place completely different than ours. It is a being of pure energy – and its form is not compatible with our world.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you come in,” Harlan said

“Because it is so different, it needs help to remain here,” Andy replied.

“Help?” Harlan asked.

“A host. It needs a physical body to move about in this plane of existence.”

“And somehow you were the lucky guy?”

Andy put a hand to his chest in a gesture of grateful appreciation. “The dice finally rolled my way.”

“But if all that’s true then what’s going on with the people in town?”

“The rules governing an entity like this are much different than those you and I are subject to. After it entered my body I could...” Andy searched for the right word. “Infect others,” he continued. “With a tiny spark of its essence and they were then able to do the same.”

“But the creatures in town act more like crazed animal,” Harlan said.

Andy shrugged. “I was alive when it joined with me. And my consciousness – my self – is still intact. The others are just dead bodies that it has re-animated. They have no mind or soul of their own, so more of the being’s nature comes through.”

Harlan struggled to comprehend this. In the last 24 hours everything he believed about the world had changed and he was still reeling from the sheer enormity of it all.

Andy gloated as he watched Harlan's bewilderment. It gave him great satisfaction to see his usually self-assured friend looking confused and overwhelmed. If Harlan was having trouble dealing with what he had heard so far, then why not give him even more to think about.

“Harlan do you think it's possible that, in the entire history of man, this is the very first time something like this has happened?”

Harlan's eyes widened. Andy's smile did the same. He was enjoying himself immensely.

“Yes, it's true. A very similar being was released during the Dark Ages in a remote corner of Eastern Europe. However, the only records that remain of this event are a few warped and fragmented stories that have trickled down to us through the filter of myth.”

He looked in Harlan's eyes for some glimmer of understanding but saw none. “Must I explain everything,” he said in exasperation. “Think about all the tales that come to us from that time – the legends of vampires, werewolves, the undead. Every one of those mythical creatures rose from the dead, fed upon the living, passed their condition on, and was nearly impossible to kill – just like the things outside. How is it possible that so many tales, with so many common elements, could originate from exactly the same time and place unless there were some real events behind them?”

Andy paused and let out a sigh of regret. “Of course, as with all legends, the facts have become distorted and confused over the centuries, but can't you see how each of those myths could have evolved from the creatures you saw tonight.”

Harlan was stunned. It was almost more than his beleaguered mind could take. How could he fight something like this? How? And suddenly a thought occurred to him – a thought that brought with it a dawning ray of hope.

“But if one of these things was released before,” Harlan blurted. “Then it must have been stopped somehow too. And that means this one can be stopped.”

There was complete silence in the cavern, and as Andy stood there Harlan could see the anger growing behind his eyes. “You ignorant fool,” he yelled. “There is nothing that can stop us. Do you hear me? Nothing!”

Veins were pulsing beneath the burnt skin of Andy's temples. He looked down at Harlan and snarled hatefully. “The life you remember is over now, Harlan. Today is the beginning of a new life – a new Dark Age.”

Andy's body started trembling. At first Harlan thought it was because of his rage but it quickly became apparent that it was something more. Andy's mouth opened slowly and Harlan watched his teeth lengthen into razor-sharp points. More fangs emerged from the gums and

clustered around his incisors in layer upon layer of jagged wickedness. This was not the only change though. Andy's face was warping and contorting, as if the bones beneath his skin had somehow begun to grow. His chin jutted forward and the forehead and cheekbones rose sharply. At the same time coarse, wiry hair sprouted across his jawline and thick bony knots erupted along the angles of his face and bulged from the scalp above each temple. Then Andy's dark eyes blazed into fiery, red pinpoints and both hands curled into menacing claws. The result was demonic and wolfen at the same time. It was easy to see how this too had spawned legends of its own.

“This is the creature’s true face – its true nature,” Andy’s badly distorted voice boomed. “I thought you should see it before you die.”

Andy lunged. Harlan stumbled backwards and slammed into the cavern wall. The terrifying creature loomed over him. There was nowhere left to run. If he didn't do something quickly it would all be over. His mind reeled as it struggled to think of a way out, and then he got an idea. Linda was one of the few things the old Andy had loved. Maybe he could use her to get through to him.

“So are you planning to do the same thing to Linda that you did to those poor people out there?” he shouted accusingly.

This question stopped Andy in his tracks, and he lowered his head shamefully. “No,” he replied and then looked back up with a wicked smile. “I already have.”

Andy pointed behind Harlan and he turned to see Linda standing in front of the entrance to the chamber. She was deathly pale and her mouth was filled with row upon row of razor-sharp teeth. She smiled at Harlan, proudly displaying her glistening fangs.

Harlan was devastated. He had hoped against hope that he would somehow be able to save her. It was the only thing that had kept him going. It was the only reason he had ventured into this hellish place. He turned back to Andy. His sickening smirk was more than Harlan could stand.

“You son of a bitch!” he screamed and sprang forward, intent on tearing the mocking grin from the misshapen face. Andy did not seem worried though, and as Harlan leapt his arm flicked out like a cobra and snatched his former friend by the throat. Harlan flailed wildly but Andy was inhumanly strong and he lifted him off the ground with ease. Harlan struggled with all his might but the other man's grip was like a vise and he just held him there. Andy smiled and slowly turned toward the abyss. He extended his arm and held his captive out over it. Harlan thrashed even more violently but it was to no avail. Linda moved to Andy’s side for a better vantage point and gloated as she watched Harlan squirm.

“I'm going to send you to hell, Harlan,” Andy said and glanced down into the pit. “By the express route.”

“Guess again, asshole,” Jessie's voice barked from behind him.

Linda turned and Andy looked over his shoulder. Tom and Jessie were standing in front of the opening to the chamber. Both of them were waiting with their guns aimed and ready. The mine map was sticking out of Jessie's front pocket. Suddenly Andy's eyes locked with those of his son and he dropped Harlan without even being aware of it. Harlan fell into the abyss. His chest struck the raised lip that ran around the ledge and he scrambled to catch himself. There was a small rock jutting from the rim and he was able to grab it. He held on for dear life.

“Son,” Andy whispered, and as the once caring father stared at the person he loved most in the world, his demonic features immediately reverted back to the injured but human appearance of before.

Beside Tom, Jessie started to help her father but he yelled at her. “Don't!” he said emphatically.

She stopped and seemed momentarily unsure of what to do. Then she stepped back to Tom's side and raised her gun level with Andy's face.

“Don't come any closer,” she said, aiming the weapon. “I'm not sure I can kill you, but if you're anything like the others I can definitely turn you into hamburger.”

Tom's eyes darted from Jessie to his father and back again. “W-Wait. Stop,” he said uncertainly. “That's dad.”

“No it's not,” Jessie said without taking her eyes off Andy. “He's just another one of those creatures. Or maybe worse.”

Tom turned to his father for an explanation. “Dad, what's happened to you? What's going on?”

Andy took an imploring step forward. His expression was honest and vulnerable. “Look son, I know this all seems strange, but you have to understand. I was dying and the only way I could survive, the only way I could come back to be with you, was to make some sacrifices.”

Andy gestured to his chest. “But this is still me. I'm still your dad inside.”

Tom stared at his father – torn between wanting to believe and not being able to. “What about the people in town, all that death and destruction?”

“That's not my fault – not really. I had no idea that was going to happen.”

Andy took another step forward and Jessie cocked her gun. Tom glared at her. “Jessie, no. You heard what he said. He's not responsible for this.”

“Oh, really?” she smirked. “If he's so innocent, why was he about to kill my dad? And look at what he's done to your mother.” Jessie pointed her gun at Linda and the woman instinctively snarled, displaying her wicked fangs.

“He knew what he was doing,” Jessie spat. “And he didn't care who else got hurt in the process.”

Tom's eyes turned to his mother and, as he stared at the terrible thing she had become, his mind finally had to accept what his heart already knew. Tom's shoulders sagged and he returned his gaze to Andy. The boys trembling hands raised the shotgun and pointed it at his father.

Andy's brow furrowed and the burning, demonic glow returned to his eyes. Then the humanity that had been there seconds before quickly melted away as the terrible thing sharing his soul reasserted itself.

“You little ingrate,” he sneered. “You're just a backstabbing piece of shit like the rest of them.”

Andy lunged forward and Tom reflexively pulled the trigger. The gun blast hit Andy squarely in the chest and the force of it rocked him backwards

Down in the pit Harlan had pulled himself up to the ledge and threw one leg over it. He heaved mightily as he struggled to get the rest of the way out.

Andy staggered for a moment and then recovered from the impact of the shell. He roared angrily at his son.

“I'm going to make you pay for that, boy!”

Andy charged. Jessie and Tom braced themselves and took aim. In the pit, Harlan had managed to pull himself over the edge. Andy let out a war cry as the two weapons fired. At that same instant Harlan whipped one of his legs around and caught Andy behind the knees. Andy's legs buckled as the two shells detonated in his face. The combination of being off balance and the force of the blasts knocked him back toward the pit. He struggled desperately to keep from

falling but Harlan reached up and grabbed hold of his tattered clothes. Harlan pulled with all his might. Andy's feet slipped out from under him and he plunged into the abyss.

Andy screamed in rage as he fell. They all stood there agape, watching as his flailing body disappeared down the shaft's ebony throat.

Linda was staring into the pit as well and she shrieked crazily as she heard Andy's scream wink out. She turned viciously on the others and leapt at Harlan. He stumbled and she fell upon him like the ravenous beast she had become. Her fangs parted and slashed at his throat, but just as they grazed the flesh she cringed in agony. Her body doubled over with pain and her eyes rolled up into her head. She spasmed violently one last time and let out a strangled sigh as she collapsed.

They all stood there staring at her for what seemed like an eternity, but she did not move again. Finally Harlan gently rolled her over. Her wounds were still visible but the fangs and other manifestations were gone.

"Is she dead?" Jessie asked.

Harlan nodded sadly. "She was dead when it entered her. I guess it must have needed Andy to hold the whole thing together. Without him the connection was broken and everything else stopped."

"Then all the others..." Jessie started hopefully, but was cut short by a strange noise.

They all looked around worriedly and the sound became a violent quaking beneath their feet. The earth bucked and screamed like a mother in childbirth. The vibration was so sudden and fierce that they could barely stand. A crack appeared in the floor and ran up the side of the cavern. It spread and widened as it raced along the roof. Huge rocks were wrenched from the walls and ceiling and began plummeting to the ground. It was like the end of the world and the chamber convulsed angrily all around them.

Down in the pit something else began to happen. A swirling, red, ball of fire appeared deep within its bowels. It seemed distant at first but it was rushing toward them at an unbelievable rate.

Harlan had seen enough. He grabbed his teenage companions and pushes them toward the chamber entrance. The shuddering ground made it difficult going but they somehow managed to get to the opening and pulled themselves through.

In the abyss behind them the fireball roared toward the surface like a rocket. It grew larger and larger. And as it did its speed increased. It was only seconds from exiting the pit when an opening appeared in its churning surface. The hole expanded and became a terrible, shrieking mouth. Then a deafening scream of fury exploded from it that shook the entire mountain.

Harlan and his charges exited the chamber and stumbled out into the mine. They ran past the continuous miner and down the shaft to their right. They turned a corner and saw the entire army of ghouls littering the mine floor. It was as if they all had fallen in mid-step. There were so many that the passage was blocked. Harlan looked around frantically and spotted one of the side tunnels.

"This way," he yelled and started toward it. The shaft had one of the cinderblock walls built across it a few yards up. The trio ran for the wall and Harlan pulled open the door set into its center. The kids scrambled through and Harlan followed. He slammed the door behind him and the three of them bolted down the shaft.

At that moment, back in the chamber, the terrible, demonic fire erupted from the abyss. It blasted out of the cavern and streaked down the mine shaft like a meteor. It seemed to know exactly where it was going and roared after Harlan and the kids like a guided missile.

Harlan and the two teenagers ran down the mine shaft on the other side of the wall. The shaking of the ground made their progress difficult but their terror kept them going. They had no idea what direction they were heading in but it did not matter.

Jessie and Tom were in the lead, and ahead of them they saw a roof fall had blocked the main passage. They veered down one of the side tunnels to the left. Harlan had almost made it to the intersection when the supernatural force slammed into the brick wall behind him. The entire shaft convulsed from the impact and the barrier ruptured outward.

The blast sent chunks of cinderblock and the heavy door sailing up through the shaft. Harlan was a hundred feet away when a piece of the wall hit him like a sledgehammer and drove him to the ground. As he landed, the twisted door flew past his head and crashed into the floor further up. He was winded and bruised but if the door had hit him it would have ended his life. There was a sharp pain in his stomach and he reached down to see if he was hurt. He felt something hard and square against his abdomen. He pulled it out. It was the methane detector. He sighed in relief and then noticed the reading. The shaft was red-hot with gas.

At that moment Jessie's voice drifted back to him from somewhere far ahead. "Daddy are you all right?"

"Keep going!" he yelled. "I'm right behind you!"

Tom and Jessie reluctantly obeyed and began running again.

Back near the shattered wall Harlan pulled himself to his feet. He winced at a bolt of agony in his ankle. He looked down and saw that the joint was beginning to swell.

"Damn it," he cursed under his breath. He had somehow twisted it during the fall. He gritted his teeth and began hobbling up the shaft using the mine wall for support.

Suddenly the ground beneath his feet stopped shaking. It was as if someone had flicked off a switch. Startled, Harlan looked behind him.

What he saw was too horrible to believe. Standing in the tunnel not ten feet away was what remained of Andy's blasted and shattered body. Huge chunks of him weren't there anymore, but wherever a piece was missing an unearthly, red glow had taken its place. The seething aura crackled and swirled like molten fire. The upper quarter of his head was gone – blown away by the gun blasts that had knocked him into the pit. The surreal illumination hovered there and two brighter pinpoints blazed within the ragged, cavernous sockets of his eyes. As Harlan looked at the thing he wondered why its fiery essence did not ignite the mine gas and then he realized that it must not be fire in any normal sense but some mystical, otherworldly equivalent that could be controlled at will.

The thing's mouth opened and an eerie, inhuman voice came out. It was the same voice that had spoken through Andy earlier. "There is nowhere to run," it said without inflection. Then from far ahead in the tunnel Jessie's distant call echoed back to Harlan.

"Dad!"

"Run, Jessie!" Run! "Harlan screamed.

When Jessie and Tom heard Harlan's frantic words, Tom grabbed Jessie and began dragging her up the shaft after him. She moved reluctantly at first but finally let herself be pulled along.

Harlan stood facing the demon and, as the spectral creature stared at him, he realized that there was no trace of Andy left in the thing. The entity was simply using the tattered fragments of his body to allow it to continue in this plane of existence.

“Your host is looking pretty shabby,” Harlan said as brashly as he could. “I’m surprised you’re able to hold enough of him together to stay in our world.”

“I will manage long enough,” it replied.

“Long enough for what?” Harlan asked.

“Long enough to take you instead,” it said, with the subtlest hint of irony.

This statement took Harlan’s bravado down a notch. He glanced around worriedly, like a trapped animal. The creature seemed to enjoy this reaction.

Suddenly Harlan felt very light-headed. The methane was beginning to get to him. He had to act quickly. If he blacked out there would be no way to keep this thing from taking him. He glanced at the shaft and prayed Jessie and Tom were safe. He turned back to the creature. It began to advance.

Harlan’s head swam and his vision was beginning to blur. He knew he could not outrun the thing and there were only moments of consciousness left. He put a hand into his pocket. The creature reached out for him.

“I will take great pleasure in destroying you,” the thing said in its strange, hellish voice.

Harlan knew he was dead either way and his only choice now was whether or not take this horror with him. It was no choice at all.

“Same here,” he replied and pulled the ornate Zippo from his pocket. There was a millisecond in which Harlan was able to enjoy the look of surprise on the creature’s face and then he thumbed the wheel.

The lighter sparked and the methane ignited. The explosion was gigantic and the force of the blast virtually disintegrated both Harlan and what was left of Andy’s body.

Harlan had guessed right. Without a host the entity’s precarious foothold in this world was gone and the unearthly creature could not stay.

The demons swirling essence screamed in agony. It had come too far to be thwarted now, and the tiny taste of freedom it had enjoyed here made returning to the abyss an even crueler punishment than before.

And so it refused.

There was one last hope. There were still two more of the humans within reach. If it could catch them in time it would be free. If not, then it would be stranded between the two planes of existence and without a host from this world its life would cease. The attempt was worth the risk. It could not stand the thought of spending another instant of eternity trapped in that endless limbo.

The demon’s mystical energy form shot through the mine toward Tom and Jessie. Since it no longer had a physical body to keep intact, it could release all the burning heat and energy within it. The fiery ball seethed and roared as it hurtled forward. However, the further the entity traveled from the abyss, the weaker and more tenuous it became. But even with all that, the thing was still a terrible force and its anger and desperation made it infinitely worse.

The combination of the demon rocketing through the mine and the terrific concussion of the methane explosion were ripping the place to pieces. In every shaft, the walls and ceilings collapsed in a tremendous avalanche of rock and earth. Ton after ton of the convulsing mountain plummeted back into the mine, sealing the tunnels with an immovable landslide of debris.

There were dozens of ways to get to the mine entrance and somehow in their blind terror Jessie and Tom had managed to find one. They rounded a corner and stumbled headlong into an exit shaft. Far ahead they could see a tiny pinprick of light and bolted madly toward it. As they ran, the terrible shaking of the ground slowed their progress. Slabs of rock continued to rain down from the roof all around them and huge sections of the walls buckled and collapsed into their path. But still they scrambled frantically toward the entrance.

Then, when they were less than fifty feet away and hope was glimmering in their hearts, something happened. The shaking of the mine became even greater and Jessie glanced over her shoulder to see the unearthly fireballs thundering toward them. Its glow was no longer red or even orange. It had now burned down to its white-hot essence – a raging missile of anger and hatred. It gained on them at an incredible rate and Jessie screamed for Tom to hurry.

Their fear went off the scale and propelled them forward with a strength they did not know they had. Their feet pounded toward the opening as the mine collapsed around them and the demon closed the distance. They ran so hard that it seemed like their pistoning legs were being driven down into the dirt. They did not dare look back but they could feel the fiery intensity of the thing's approach.

When they were ten feet from the opening, the entity started closing in on Jessie and she felt her hair singe. At five feet the burning fingers of rage reached out and the back of her shirt burst into flames. And if that wasn't enough she watched in abject terror as the entrance to the mine started to collapse in front of them. The walls appeared to bulge outward and the roof dropped toward the floor like a guillotine. Jessie's mouth burst open in a shriek of refusal to accept this fate and she and Tom lunged into the shrinking slit of light.

They hit the ground outside the mine just as a gigantic slab of roof struck the earth behind them. There was less than a centimeter to spare and, as the opening clamped shut, Jessie thought she saw a long finger of white fire snuffed out by it. Then the concussion of the falling rock catapulted them through the air. And when they hit the ground they rolled and tumbled like bowling pins. Behind them the cave-in continued and tons of the mountainside plummeted down over the mine opening, sealing it in an impenetrable avalanche of rock and earth.

Epilogue

The sky was blue and cloudless. It was the sort of day you lived for – the sort of day that made you glad to be alive. Jessie's gaze slowly drifted from the window of the car to Tom, who was in the driver seat beside her. He was tired and disheveled, and his clothes were still soiled from the dirt and mud of the mine. She reached over and took his hand. He looked away from the road and she offered him a smile. He returned the expression and squeezed her fingers lovingly. The miles continued to click by under their wheels.

Jessie turned to the window again. The wide flat plains of the Midwest stretched around them from horizon to horizon. They were far from the mountains now – far from home.

But a new home was still ahead – somewhere.

Jessie pushed a strand of hair away from her face. Their families were gone, their town was gone, and their old life was gone as well.

She sighed. They had no other choice but to leave. There was simply nothing left for them in Puritan. And if they had stayed behind, there would have been questions – questions that no sane person would have believed the answers to.

And there would also have been the reminders of what they had lost. Even worse, though, would have been the knowledge that somewhere beneath the ground they walked on, something might still be waiting – waiting for another chance to escape.

She knew she could not stay and live with that knowledge and, of course, there was no guarantee that she would be able to live with it somewhere else. But she would try. She would try because her father had given his life to save hers. And she refused to let that sacrifice be in vain.

“I love you, daddy,” she whispered to the sky, and hope that he could hear.