

Prologue

Sunday, July 12, 1972, 5:35 a.m.

THERE WERE THREE OF THEM in the aging Volkswagen Beetle: Scott Bowman in the driver's seat, Brian Horner in a drunken stupor beside him, and Jake Laking lounging in the back. Scott's window was rolled all the way down, and from time to time he leaned his face into the cool rush of air. He was having some real difficulty concentrating on the road, which was slick from an earlier drizzle. In the east, a flat arc of crimson widened like a sleepy eye.

"Come on, Jake," Scott said. "I'm beat, I'm half-drunk and I sure as hell shouldn't be driving. So where *are* we?"

An inebriated cackle drifted up from the back seat. Jake snapped on the interior light and unfolded a map of the southeastern New England states. After a considering pause, he said, "I haven't got a clue." Jake was in charge of navigation—or he was supposed to be. They'd turned north off I-90 just outside of Boston in the hopes of finding a camp ground or a cheap motel, but that had been well over an hour ago. He said, "Lost, I guess," and cackled again.

"That's great," Scott said. "That's just great."

"Hey, man, Lighten up," Jake said, the good humor gone from his tone. "Who gives a shit where we are? We're boogying, right?" He reached into the hip pocket of his wash-faded Levi's and produced a flattened plastic Baggie. "Besides, I've got a bit of a treat in store." He wagged the thing in the air next to Scott's ear.

"Is that what I think it is?" Scott said, his gaze returning to the narrow road in time to correct for a tight, unmarked turn.

“I purchased this little number in that bar back in Boston,” Jake said. “A few toots of this particular herb, you won’t give a damn where you are.”

“Are you insane?” Scott said. “That tears it, man. I thought you gave that shit up in high school. Do you have any idea how screwed we’d be if we got caught with that stuff in the car? We’re in the States now, dickhead. This isn’t Canada. We’d lose our spots in med school and that would be the least of it.”

Scott shook his head, partly in disgust, but mostly in an effort to clear his vision. He’d had more to drink than he was accustomed to and now his alertness was dwindling dangerously. The interstate had been okay, the kind of wide, unbending strip you could navigate pretty much on autopilot. But wherever they were now, he needed every ounce of concentration he could muster. The road was unlit and winding, really treacherous in places.

“Jesus,” Jake said, “lighten up, man. No one’s going to catch us. Wasn’t this the point of the trip in the first place? To *celebrate* getting into med school?”

Scott ignored him and an awkward silence settled in the car. Only Brian, his hulking linebacker’s body shifting in the shotgun seat, was oblivious of its weight.

They rolled on. To Scott, the winding rural road seemed endless. There had been no signs of habitation in almost an hour, and the only road sign he’d seen had been so badly buckshot it was illegible. At this point all he wanted was stop someplace quiet and sleep it off.

In the back seat Jake lit up. Scott could hear him inhaling, then stifling a cough. After a moment the joint’s glowing tip stitched across the rearview mirror. Then it was under Scott’s nose.

Scott pushed it away. “I’m driving,” he said, and the joint was withdrawn.

The weed made Scott nervous. He'd worked too hard and too long to risk losing it all over something as juvenile as a bag of grass. Banking into another curve, he marveled at the paradox that was Jake Laking. Moody, more brilliant than anyone Scott had ever known, Jake could regress without warning into a total redneck dipshit.

Startling Scott, Jake broke into a chorus of their old high school victory song.

"Yellow and blue, yellow and blue, What we want we always do..."

The road took a hard jag to the left now, and the headlights flickered off a badly canted road sign. "Old Burwash Road," Scott said. "See if you can find it on the map."

The happy minstrel ignored him. Brian grunted awake from his stupor.

"Rick-a-rack-a, rick-a-rack-a, Ziss-boom-bah..."

Furious now, Scott glared into the rearview. He was about to chew Jake out when Brian said, "Heads up," and seized the wheel, cranking it hard right.

Scott looked out in time to see a kitten dart onto the blacktop from the tall grass bordering the roadway. Tail straight up, eyes flicking back an eerie red reflex in the glare of the headlights, its tawny body froze in the middle of the lane, as if waiting for the killing impact.

Pushing Brian's hand away, Scott continued that rightward veer, edging the starboard wheels into the loose dirt of the shoulder and just missing the terror-stricken animal. The dirt caught and held, tugging at the car like a giant hand.

The child's head appeared first, popping through the curtain of grass like the head of the world's tiniest vaudeville performer. Her body followed—and then she was standing there, not a dozen

feet away, rigid with fear as the kitten had been only a heartbeat before. She wore a frilly white dress and polished white shoes and she couldn't have been much older than ten. Her hair was like spun silver and it riffled prettily in the breeze. Her eyes, round and terrified, locked on Scott's in an unwavering death grip that burned with the same red fire as the kitten's eyes had when it froze in the middle of the road. Pale in the glare of the headlights, she seemed somehow transparent, spectral, unreal.

But the sound she made when the Beetle scooped her up, a sound like hailstones pelting tin, was more than real.

It was mortal.

It took only seconds, yet during that catastrophic interval Scott Bowman learned what an arbitrary concept Time really was. Somehow an eternity in the cruelest reaches of hell got crammed into those few seconds, and it never ended.

It just went on and on and on.

The car's low chrome bumper took her just above the knees, folding her onto the steeply sloping hood like a well-hit bowling pin. Her head struck the hood with a metallic *thunk*, a dull death-sound that would waken Scott from numberless future nightmares.

Then she was rolling upward, slender legs pitched to the right, tiny arms pinwheeling in futile circles. Now her face was in front of Scott's, bare inches away, her eyes glazed but still fixed on his even though she was almost certainly already dead.

She's looking at me, oh, dear God, she's looking right at me...

Then her face struck the windshield with a sharp, wet splintering sound and glass was rocketing inward, glittering shards that stung like hornets. There followed an instant when it seemed she would hang there forever, her lifeless eyes peering in at him

accusingly. Then she was gone, over the side and down into the pale, receding night.

The car fishtailed twice, then heeled back onto the blacktop before juddering to a halt across the faded center line. There was a jagged, fist-sized hole in the windshield. Next to it, running off thinly to the left, was a small, almost inconsequential smear of blood. Cool air found its way through that hole and struck Scott's shock-whitened face.

It smelled of slaughter.

He closed his eyes and tried to wind back the clock—a few seconds was all he would need. He'd return to the instant the kitten had appeared and run the witless creature over, drive on without sparing it a rearward glance. Frantic phrases like prayers streaked through his mind, staccato verses directed at any god, pagan or otherwise, who might hear his pleas.

o god let her live please I'll do anything but please let her live i beg of you...

Scott's body trembled convulsively, its every fiber riddled with horror. His fingers went to his chin and found blood, his own blood, running in a rivulet from a pea-sized wound caused by a bullet of flying glass.

a dream let it be a dream...

Slowly he opened his eyes. He didn't look at his friends. He looked instead at the windshield in the desperate hope that it would be intact, that the spider web fracture with the fist-sized hole at its center would be gone, that the runny smear of blood would have vanished.

But the hole was there...and the blood.

Reality skewed.

The harsh *clunk* of a car door.

Low, shocky, overlapping voices.

Then Scott was drifting out of the car, following the hunched figures of his friends, gliding toward that small, crumpled shape in the road. He fell to his knees beside her even as the others shrank away. He was no doctor, not yet, but he knew she was dead just as surely as he knew that a part of him had died along with her. He placed a hand behind her neck and her head lolled toward him. Her eyes were still open, still gazing blankly into his.

“Don’t touch her,” Brian said into the flat morning air. “You could damage her spinal cord.”

“She’s dead, you asshole,” Jake said.

At the sound of Jake’s voice, Scott looked up—and his heart lurched into his throat. Jake’s eyes, usually a soft, pallid green, seemed to emit their own amber light now as they swept the roadway in both directions, then shifted to the bordering woods. He stood with his shoulders braced and his head cocked and for an instant Scott imagined a coiled, predatory cat, scenting danger and preparing to disembowel it.

And in that instant Scott knew his friend’s thoughts, clearly and absolutely. Because they were his own thoughts, too.

Brian Horner, his huge frame weaving against the indigo sky, stared dumbly at the child and started to blubber.

Scott turned again to the child and realized she was an albino. It explained the ghostly pallor, the snow-white hair...and those eyes, devoid of pigment, reflecting red in the glare of the headlights.

Her blood was red, too. It was on his hands, tacky and warm, and a pool of it was spreading around her ruined head like some terrible satanic halo.

The world tilted, the darkness that had been so rapidly receding returning, spilling into Scott’s vision like fountain ink. There was a voice now, harsh and reproachful—Jake’s voice—and clawed fingers digging into his shoulder...but now the voice seemed far

away and hollow, as if reaching him from the bottom of a dark, dry well.

Now he was falling into that well...down...down...spiraling down.

At the bottom was the child's white face.

And its eyes were on fire.