

THE STARVED

By Rick Ochre

“Whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake” (Corinthians 10:27)

— inscribed above the door of the Laboratory of Physiological Hygiene, University of

Minnesota, 1944-45

CHAPTER ONE

August 1945

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

They walked—Carl and the others, the ones whose names floated away from him like butterweed silk on these long, hot summer afternoons, nearly seven months since Dr. Keys had drawn them here with his promises and his twisted science. Keys had played them like the chumps they were, and now they walked through the long days, walking until they were exhausted, walking until some of the men moaned, insensible of their own voices, and others cried like little girls. Little kindergarten girls, like Mary Davenport with her shining blond pigtailed that curled at the bottom, a curl Carl wanted to poke his finger through all those years ago, when he and Mary chased each other around the swing set and she wore a dress, a flowered thing with red buttons down the back like glistening cherries. Cherries, cherries, oh, *God*.

Carl stumbled at the thought. *Cherry pie cherry soda cherries in a white bowl leaking juice cherries popping in his mouth*. If he had a cherry now he'd eat it all, stone and stem and the branch from which it fell, he wouldn't care if the stem stuck in his throat and the stone broke a tooth. Hell, he'd eat his own tooth.

Stumbling had caused him to veer off the curb and into the road that wended away from campus to the northwest, through tidy neighborhoods of bungalows and two-flats, past clotheslines and cats sunning themselves on porches and ladies in their backyard gardens, pulling

weeds between the rows of radishes and larkspur and pole beans. Carl had been watching those beans, all right, had seen the buds burst into white bonnet-shaped blossoms and waited until the petals fell from the vines, birthing tiny little pods that grew tender and succulent, swaying in the June sun only weeks ago. Back then he'd been stronger, back then he'd thought he could survive, but even then he must have known because he'd thought *I could get those beans*, he'd thought *A fellow could slip into the yard for a second, be back before anyone saw*. He'd imagined his hand stripping the pods from the vine, fast and wily, pushing them down into his pocket. It could be done.

Ha. Ha. He'd been a fool then, no more foolish than the rest of them perhaps, but a fool all the same. How could he have known it would be like this: skin thinning to leather, bones hurting where they poked from the inside. Ass sore from sitting with no padding. Ribs...he couldn't look at another man's ribs, jutting from their sunken chests, without imagining glistening, meaty crown rib roasts. Carl was sorry for it, but that was just how it was. And he would wager he wasn't the only one.

But it was Dr. Keys who had turned them into this. He stared at them over his wire-framed spectacles, barely blinking, like a lizard—Carl and the others made bets on it, how often did he blink, once every ten seconds? Twenty? An entire minute?—while they girded themselves and shivered despite the summer warmth and tried not to beg or bargain or cry. Keys and his staff watched them clamber onto the scale, onto the treadmill, into their cots at night. They prodded the men with their calipers and measuring tapes and stethoscopes, and in return, the men gave up their expectorate and semen and urine and feces and blood, clippings of their hair, scrapings from their nails. They allowed Keys to peer into their eyes and throats and ears, to watch them at their toilet, at the table, at rest, in their agony and in their despair. Wearing their

white coats, carrying their clipboards, Keys and his staff took the measurements, the issue from their bodies, with an enthusiasm that bordered on greed, and it was, in fact, their zeal in collecting the data that threaded through Carl's first nightmare, when he dreamed of Dr. Keys—much larger than life, with pincer-like claws instead of hands—grasping, grasping, grasping at him as he crouched cowering in a corner, with nowhere to run.

But oh, how the nightmares had worsened since then.

A shiver wracked his body despite the still heat. Carl shuffled along the road, staring at the curb he walked beside. Up ahead half a dozen paces was Hank in his sagging trousers, doing no better; Hank's ankles, between the hem of his pants and his unlaced shoes, were swollen and purple. Perhaps today was the day that Hank would fall in the road and then Carl would have to walk around him, or over him, a hard choice. Straight ahead was easiest. But first he had to get back up onto the curb, and he stared at it for a good long while before he took a deep breath and prepared to lift his foot and wondered if the exertion would kill him. And then he wondered if death might be a mercy.

CHAPTER TWO

May 1957

Rural Litchfield County, Connecticut

No, no, oh dear sweet Mary Mother of God, please no no no oh God

She could smell herself, even above all the other choking fetid smells, and she was befouled and she finally understood she was foul at her core, a truth she had fought against for many years. Now it had come to this, a jury of one, a harsh judge and a punishment that would be harsher still. The nature of her punishment would soon be revealed, and it would be the destruction she deserved. She could hear her breath, it was coming out in such tiny little huffs, in-out-in-out-in-out.

What if he's here? Now?

The sound that flopped out of her mouth was part scream and part rusty scrape. She gasped for air, bit down on her fleshy lips, lurched into a circle and promptly tripped on her own shoe and fell, striking her knee on the hard floor, pain waking her sluggish body.

Moments ago, when she woke, she'd stood up too quickly and thrown up and fallen down and crawled to her feet again, more carefully the second time. Well, the sequence was more like this—a sharp headache woke her, then she was aware of the cold—freezing! So cold, even in the month of May!—and then the stench and then the texture of the coarse blanket she was lying on,

and then, only after registering all of those sensations did the terror return like an anvil dropped through the ice skimmed over an early November pond. She'd scabbled with her hands, unable to see anything in the dark, felt the blanket's woolen edge, a lumpy hard mat, the floor—hard, cold packed dirt. Looked up—there were a few small gaps at the juncture of walls and roof, and through these openings dusty beams of light insinuated themselves, enough to reveal the nature of the room, a shed of some kind or a primitive cabin. A stone hearth. A listing table. The empty frame of a cot against the wall. Mounds of filth in the corners.

She remembered then—the man, his glove, the car—and the memory made her bolt to her feet as fast as a startled old dog, but something was wrong with her. It wasn't just the headache, he'd done something to her, the tea—he called it tea, but that was no tea—it roiled and rolled in her stomach and the sodden acrid mass that remained from her last meal—an egg salad sandwich in the teacher's lounge, sitting by herself and pretending to grade papers—rose in her gut and expelled itself forcefully. Too late, she thought to direct the stringy looping bile away from the blanket, onto the floor, and the vile mess landed on the blanket.

That was when the thought occurred to her that he might be here, somewhere in the room, waiting, watching.