

# CICADA SPRING



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*A NOVEL*

*Cicada Spring*

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*For you*  
*It's always for you*



*As adults, we find solace in the knowledge that monsters do not exist. This is true because it's what we choose to believe. That is the privilege of the practiced mind. But the terrifying reality is that monsters are real. They do exist. They are us. And that is more horrifying than anything I ever imagined as a child.*





# CHAPTER 1

THE GIRL STOPPED AT the creek and looked down at the blood. Some of it was from the cut on her lip, but most of it—the darker blood—came from between her legs. She tried to wipe it away with her hands, only smearing it into broad red streaks across her fair skin. Bending at the water's edge, she regarded her rippled reflection: bruised flesh and wild hair. A tear welled in her eye and broke free. It traced her nostril, caught for a moment, then fell from the tip of her nose into the water. She looked away, her heart dropping from the sight of her face.

The sky through the canopy of trees was an overcast, ashen plate, the color of a moth's wings. A premature New England summer on the heels of an early heat wave had turned the evening into a solid thing. Humid, earthy scents hung heavy in the air, and in the woods where she found herself now, the ones that separated downtown Heartsridge and Durham Street, the crickets began to sing their lonely songs of approaching night.

It was May 7, 1979, a Saturday, and Kara Price was fifteen years old.

She glanced up and down the trail cautiously, looking left, in the direction of town, and then right, toward home. When she was certain she was alone, Kara removed her sandals, her shirt, and her underwear. She folded them neatly on a flat rock beside the creek, save for the underwear, which she crumpled and threw into a bush. She left her bra and skirt on, rolling the skirt up at the bottom to spare it from the water. Her hands trembled as she picked up her purse. They felt like clumsy, impersonal appendages that belonged to someone else. She fumbled with the zipper for a moment, eventually sliding it open, and removed a small packet of tissues which she placed on top of her stack of clothes.

The water was unsympathetic—it stole her breath. She waded into it, determined, watching for anyone coming up the path. Cupping her hands, she leaned forward and christened her face. Her lip caught fire in a flash of needling pain and she winced, turning her head as the sting fell off into a low whimper. She ran her tongue over the spot, finding an awkward, cumbersome lump. Then she tasted the sick metallic saltiness of blood. Clenching her jaw, she brought another splash of water to her face, washing away the tinge. She hated that taste; it was something like old pennies.

Next she splashed water on her legs, her arms, and her stomach, and began running her hands over her body in slow circular motions. She just wanted him off of her. She wanted to be clean. He had done terrible things to her in the backseat of his car, and she was certain she could still smell him. It was as if he were still on top of her, breathing and sweating. She just wanted to forget him, to put what had happened behind her.

Five minutes passed, and by the time her skin was free of blood she was nearly numb from the cold. When she was finished, Kara stepped out of the creek and blotted herself dry with

the tissues. She put her sandals and shirt back on. The shirt was a pink top, and on the straps were small specks of blood. She would throw it away when she got home, but for now, she needed to slide back into that sordid skin.

Kara could not allow anyone to find out what had happened. She was ashamed and embarrassed about the whole thing. *Maybe I deserved it*, she thought. And for the first time in a long while, Kara found herself longing for her mother's touch, wanting to feel that safety a child can only find in a parent's embrace. But she couldn't tell her mother. This could very well have been her own fault. How could she look her in the eyes? Her mother had expressed her disapproval for the outfit she was wearing that morning, telling her it was not professional for a first day of work. Kara had scoffed and told her she was being too old-fashioned. "Get with the times, Mom!" she'd said. Maybe her mother had been right all along, though. And maybe Kara had brought this on herself.

Even if she did tell someone, who would believe her? This notion, this feeling of helplessness, gripped her stomach and filled her with a dreadful hollowness. She was alone, and somewhere inside, in the badlands of her consciousness, she knew that her life had just significantly changed, that her course had shifted, and now she was heading toward some dark horizon where storm clouds were stacking, promising to bring hard times. Kara sat down at the edge of the water, brought her knees to her chest and started to cry into her arms. Time elapsed in an incoherent daze.

*Why did he do this to me? Did I do something wrong?*

The questions rolled through her mind, repeating like some sort of awful scrolling text, the words bright and red against a black abyss. But no answers came. There was only a strange, far-off guilt to greet her, a feeling that she had done something terrible

and that no one could know. It was a secret she must keep. So that was what she would do.

Once she'd cried herself out, Kara stood and headed down the trail in the direction of home. The hard orange glow of the streetlights along Durham Street silhouetted the new-budded branches of the trees ahead, turning them a seasick green. When she reached the road, she turned left. Her house was only a quarter mile ahead on the corner of Durham and Columbus. Walking briskly in the cover of twilight, Kara stuck to the shadows below the low corridor of branches overhanging the sidewalk. But she ached and burned between her legs, and this eventually slowed her. She reached down and touched where it hurt. Pulling her hand away, she looked at it. Clean. The bleeding had stopped; all that remained was the pain. It was like some kind of sick, unwanted legacy he'd passed on to her.

There was a small playground in front of the Clarke Middle School a few hundred yards before her house. Kara stopped, taking a seat on one of the half-buried tires cresting out of the ground. Only the year before, she'd attended this school and played on these tires with her friends, hopping from one to the next, but it felt like such an impossibly distant place now. She would've given anything to be back in that earlier version of her life—young, innocent, carefree, no knowledge about the sad truth of the world—but the harder she reached for it in her mind, the farther it receded, slipping through her fingers as she tried to grasp it.

*Toughen up, Kara*, an internal voice said. This was something her field hockey coach used to yell at her from the sidelines. She recognized the words, but this wasn't her coach's voice—it was her own. *Toughen up, Kara*.

So she toughened up as well as she could, stiffening her posture, throwing back her shoulders, choking back tears. In this

moment, her mind forged a distorted lens, and through it Kara viewed the rape as something that sometimes people just had to endure. Plain old bad luck. Something that needed to be gotten over and moved past. The facts of life, kiddo. She would never tell anyone that she'd been raped. This was her decision. This was her choice.

Then Kara remembered her face. How would she explain it? People would ask questions. If she had learned anything growing up in a small town, it was that curiosity was a powerful drug, and it demanded answers. She needed a story, something believable, something she could retell over and over again when people asked, cracking a counterfeit smile to sell the lie, maybe laughing a little at her own expense.

Kara recalled the path she'd taken through the woods. At the start of it there was a two-foot drop where the asphalt of the parking lot in back of the Saver Mart met the beginning of the trail. It was a place people could easily fall if they weren't careful, just a silly mistake. If she rubbed a little dirt on her palms and knees, she could really sell the story. It was decided. The cliché of the assaulted woman explaining away her bruises by saying she'd fallen was something that Kara did not yet understand. In her mind, the lie had no holes, no cracks in its veneer to be pried open by doubtful eyes. It was time to go home now, time to get gone and get on.

She stood and left the park.

The front lights were already on when Kara got to her house. She stopped at the granite walkway step and rehearsed her story one more time. While she ran through it in her head (Mom: *Kara, sweetie, what happened to your face?* Kara: *Oh Mom, I'm such a klutz...*) her eyes fell on the features of her house. It was a picture she'd seen a million times before, but now what she saw looked different and somehow sinister.

The windows were dark and stared back at her like large, sunken, accusing eyes. The red front door resembled a jackal's mouth ripped open wide, howling with laughter. To the far left, the large bay window revealed the kitchen. Kara saw her mother pouring a glass of wine at the counter. Her father wasn't there, and then he was. He walked in behind Kara's mother, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her neck. Her mother smiled, turning her head to meet his cheek. They rocked from side to side for a moment in a lovers' slow dance. Then her father backed away, picked a magazine up off the kitchen table, and disappeared into the house. The smile remained on her mother's face long after her husband had left the room. It was all framed so serenely in the yellow glow of that window, like a silent home movie from a time before Kara had been born. Young love not yet pressed with the task of raising a daughter. Watching her mother and her father brought a thickness to the back of Kara's throat, an achy feeling, the feeling of holding back the tears that so desperately wanted out. But Kara remained strong. She would not cry. *Toughen up, Kara.*

Looking left, Kara gazed mindlessly down the sidewalk, searching for something she could hardly define. Perhaps a last bit of calm before everything crystallized. Four houses away, Mrs. Twomey stood in her front yard, watering her prized tulips—brilliant reds and yellows that cut the haze of the settling evening. The woman's silver hair cinched tight in a bun resembled a shimmering coin in the distance. Underscored by a blue gardening apron and white cotton gloves, she almost looked cartoonish, drawn into the scene by some unseen hand of God—the Almighty Animator. Then Kara's eyes moved from Mrs. Twomey, looking hard down the center of Durham Street. The streetlights on either side had the illusion of bending inward as she focused

on the distant vantage point. She stared with a purpose, trying to see beyond the limits of her vision, trying to find some new place beyond reality—salvation—until the road fell away into a gray and orange haze and her awareness harmonized with the moment. But what she found was not deliverance. She found a place where past, present, and future—the primary colors of being—all overlapped like sheets of transparent film, existing all at once in a deep, dark, dreadful fourth color.

In her mind she saw herself, an eight-year-old girl, wearing a purple snowsuit, being towed up Durham Street in a wooden toboggan. Her father had the yellow rope wrapped around his hand and taut over his shoulder, his feet sliding on packed snow as he leaned his weight forward, trying to find purchase and pull her along. He stopped, turning back to smile at her. The scene shifted to August of that same year. She sat on the hatch of the family station wagon, swinging her legs, waiting for her parents to take her to Crane's Beach for the first time. They drove in the heat, eventually breaking to cool, salty air. Marsh all around, sand dunes and blue skies. That day she spent nearly two hours in the surf and earned her first sunburn. Her mother had to stop for burn cream on the way home. Kara remembered this. She remembered the smell of her toasted skin and then, later, the smell and cool feel of the Lidocaine. It was seven years behind her, half a lifetime ago, but she remembered. Here the images were clear, but yet they were also tainted, viewed through the filter of that fourth, dark color where everything existed all at once.

Kara brought her hand to her face and touched her lip. It stung fiercely, the sweat on her fingers bringing the pain to a point again, dousing her recollections of childhood. She clenched her jaw, inhaling long, thin breaths through her teeth. *Toughen up, Kara.*

She walked up the brick walkway to the front door. Through it, Kara could hear her mother talking. “I think she said she was out at six so she should be home soon. You could probably light the coals now.” There was a beat of silence. Then: “And did you get the mail today? We still haven’t received our invite to your cousin’s wedding.” The voice soothed her. It was the sound of home, the sound of family and comfort and rescue. Somehow it touched her heart. Squeezed it. And then broke it.

*Home*, Kara thought distantly. Her lips parted, and she whispered a word to herself as if she didn’t believe it: “Mom.” At that, the world around her blurred gray and white and every color at once and then fell into a dizzying darkness. Her knees became rubber. The strength, the toughness, the walls, the barriers, the story about how she’d tripped and went face first into the ground all fell with it. And when it did, Kara’s mother opened the door and saw her daughter standing there. Toughen up. But how?

“Oh my God!” her mother yelled, and Kara Price, the fifteen-year-old who was afraid that everyone would find out, afraid that she had done something wrong, fell into her mother’s arms and wept.

She was eight again. And it was spring.



HARRY BENNETT PULLED HIS Eldorado into the junkyard, the car dipping and diving through a landscape of dried-up puddles and washed-out potholes. He accelerated and peeled through the entrance gate, past a faded sign that read HEARTSRIDGE TRANSFER STATION in big orange letters. In the distance, at the far end of the rolling mounds of garbage, a black pickup truck sat parked. Harry sped toward it. When he was close, he brought his



car to a skidding stop. The tires of his Cadillac belched out plumes of pale dust as they crunched over the baked gravel. Harry turned off the ignition and stepped out, waving vaguely at the truck as he opened the back door of his Cadillac.

Eddie Corbett hopped out of his pickup, wearing khaki slacks and a denim shirt. He was a short, balding man in his mid-fifties, with glasses sitting atop a small upturned nose. There was something very pathetic about him, the way he stood: hands in his pockets, shoulders slouched. Desperate.

“Why the hell did you want to meet me all the way out here on a Saturday?” Eddie asked, folding his arms. “I could’ve met you at your office.”

Harry was leaning into the backseat of his car. When he straightened and turned around, he was holding two one-gallon jugs of water in each hand. “Evenin’ to you too, Eddie,” he said. “Had an errand to run out here, thought I’d kill two birds.”

“What errand does the mayor of Heartsridge have at the dump?” Eddie moved toward Harry.

“Need to ask you a favor,” Harry said. He turned and placed the two jugs on top of his car. Then he bent back down, grabbed another two, and put them beside the others. “We’re friends, right? I was hoping you’ll be able to help me out. Who knows, maybe help each other.”

They weren’t friends. If it weren’t for the fact that their wives were cousins, they might never have known each other at all. Save for the occasional run-in around town, the only time the two men ever spoke was at holidays and birthday parties. Even then the conversation was stilted and forced.

Eddie wrinkled his brow, running a hand through what remained of his thinning hair. “A favor? What could I possibly have that you want?”

Harry removed his gray sports coat, folded it over his arm and put it in the backseat of his car. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, stopping midway up his forearms when the muscle grew too thick. "It's the thirtieth anniversary of the Heartsridge Spring Festival, starting this coming Thursday, so we're expecting it to be a big one." Harry removed his tie, tucking it into his breast pocket. "Do me a favor, Eddie, and grab me that bucket over there." Harry pointed behind Eddie to an old rusty bucket sitting next to a toppled-over ice chest.

"What the hell you need that for—"

"Christ! Just get it!" Harry snapped, his face darkening. "I've had a shit day, and I got things to do."

Eddie flinched and jumped back, his glasses sliding to the end of his nose.

Harry was in his fifties, the same as Eddie, but he was in far better shape. Standing almost six feet, two hundred pounds and built of solid blue-collar muscle, intimidation came naturally to him. He grew up working at the Bentley Warren gravel pit over in West Elm, running the rock crusher for almost twenty years before starting his own trucking business and then parlaying that into politics. His mix of street smarts and common-man work ethic had made him a shoo-in when he finally decided to run for mayor of Heartsridge. He was a man of the people, for the people. He reminded folks that hard work paid off. In a way, he represented hope. And for that, he was loved.

"Okay, don't blow a gasket," Eddie said, pushing his glasses back up. He walked over and grabbed the bucket.

Harry brought his hand up to his head, clamping his middle finger and thumb over his temples. The veins throbbed beneath the surface, his head flaring behind the eyes. "This fucking heat," he muttered.

“What’d you say?” Eddie placed the bucket in front of Harry. “You okay? You look a little worse for wear.”

Harry looked up, his eyes sunken and dark. “Yes. I’m fine.” He dropped his hand away from his head and turned back to his car, grabbing two of the jugs off the roof. He pulled their caps off with his teeth and proceeded to dump the water into the bucket. “Now, where were we?”

Eddie eyed the bucket. “You were talking about the festival,” he said, distracted.

“Right, yes, Spring Festival. It’s going to be big this year, real big. It should bring us a good haul in tourist dollars, too.” Harry grabbed the other two containers of water and emptied them in with the rest. He tossed the jugs aside.

“Okay, but how can I help with that?” Eddie pulled a pack of Salems from his pocket, lit one and inhaled deep, blowing jets of smoke through his nose.

“We need your lot,” Harry said, walking up to Eddie and standing only a few feet away. Harry dwarfed him.

He was referring to the parking lot attached to the strip mall Eddie owned in West Elm, the next town over. The property sat directly at the intersection of Route 6 and Route 1A, which made it a straight two-mile shot from West Elm to Heartsridge. Eddie had bought the place ten years back using his retirement savings—his wife Jeannie had just about lost her head when he told her what he’d done—but in the end it had proven to be a sound investment, so transgressions were forgiven. With all the properties rented, it generated a sizable monthly income, enough for Jeannie and Eddie to retire early.

“My lot?”

“Yes, we need your parking lot for extra parking. Tourists are easily spooked, and if they show up in Heartsridge and there isn’t

anywhere to park, they'll just leave and say better luck next time. Especially the ones who are just passing through, and they're a good portion of it. But if we have your lot we can run a free shuttle between West Elm and Heartsridge. I figure if we advertise off the highway it'll work out just fine. Gives us the extra space, and we can put a little coin in your pocket for your troubles. It'll only be for the weekend, of course. We shouldn't need it Thursday. Usually it's only locals on opening night." He slapped Eddie hard on the shoulder, a thick politician's smile set across his face.

"Aw, Jesus, I can't do that." Eddie threw his cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his boot. "I have rental agreements with my tenants. I can't just tell them their customers can't park there for three days. They could sue me."

"Oh come on, show a little spine." Harry turned away, shaking his head and setting his hands on his hips. "Can't let your tenants run your life. You'll get three thousand dollars, a grand a day to do nothing. Hell, half the businesses in that mall have booths at our fair this year. It'll be just as good for them. Besides, we're family, Eddie. That's the kind of thing you do for family. Am I right?"

"I'm sorry. I can't do that, family or not. This is my livelihood. If my tenants leave or sue me, I won't be able to pay the bills. I'll be screwed. I got two mortgages to think about."

Harry gazed off into the distance to where the sun dipped below the horizon, splashing its fading firelight skyward onto what remained of the disappearing world. He brought a hand back to his temples. His jaw muscles bulged and rippled as he clenched his teeth. He was starting to hate Eddie Corbett. He'd always thought the man was a coward, but he was offering money now, *real* money, and Eddie was turning it down. This disappointed Harry but didn't necessarily surprise him. If it had been a surprise, Harry

wouldn't have made sure he had a Plan B. He always had a second course of action ready. His ability to see all the angles was, perhaps, second only to his ability to exploit them. It was what made him such a successful politician. He'd offered Eddie the easy way; now it was time for the unpleasant.

Eddie continued. "If I could help you, I would—"

"Bullshit!" Harry spun around, pointing a rigid finger at Eddie. Strands of his dark hair broke loose from their slick hold, falling in sweaty bands across his forehead and around his eyes. "You're a chicken-shit, Eddie. You always have been and always will be," he said in a low, hard voice.

Eddie bent backwards as Harry pushed his finger into his face, almost so far back that he looked as though he might stumble and fall on the seat of his pants. "Harry, please... I..." he trailed off.

And then as quickly as Harry Bennett had changed into the wild-haired lunatic, he broke a smile, pulled his hand back, and brushed his hair away from his face. Calmly, he said: "You know what the problem is with cowardly chicken-shits, Eddie? 'Cause I do. They're weak. Every... last... one of 'em. Weak as sugar-glass. Pathetic."

"Fuck this and fuck you," Eddie said. He started to turn back to his truck. "I'm outta here, you prick."

Harry straightened. "Eddie, family or not, if you turn your back on me I'll crush your goddamn skull." The threat was sincere.

Eddie stopped and looked Harry in the eyes. Neither spoke for a few seconds in the hostile silence; they only looked at one another. Harry kept his smile wide.

Eddie broke first. "What do you expect me to do? You drag me all the way out here, ask me to do you one hell of a favor, and then talk to me like that. How would you react?"

"I'm sure I don't know. No one would ever talk to me like that. I'm not weak like you." Harry turned away and went back to his car, leaning once more into the backseat. When he turned back around, he was holding two things: a brown burlap sack and a manila envelope. The burlap sack was tied at the top with baler twine. Something inside yowled thinly and tried to push its way out—a hopeless attempt. Harry tossed the sack forward. It landed with a soft thud beside the rusty bucket of water. The thing inside continued to try to escape.

Eddie didn't move. "What the hell's in there?" he asked, looking down at the sack. Most of the color had drained from his face as if he were coming to grips with the realization that he might be in trouble.

"I tell you, Eddie, women only want things for the sake of having them. They say they want something, but they don't want to take care of it. They can be so ungrateful and irresponsible. That's why I never gave Ali kids, you know that?" Harry said implacably. He moved a few steps closer, but Eddie didn't seem to notice him. He was still watching, with increasing revulsion on his face, the twitching burlap bag on the ground. "I told you, Ed..." Harry slammed the envelope he was holding in his hand against Eddie's chest. "Weak." He laughed. "She's cute, though. Maybe Jeannie would think so too."

Eddie's attention shifted back to himself. He looked down at the envelope pressed against his chest, held in place by the mayor's burly hand. "What... what is this?"

Harry relaxed his arm, letting the envelope slide. "Open it and find out. But I think by the look on your face right now you already know."

Eddie caught the package before it fell.

Harry turned his attention to the sack on the ground, kneeling beside it. "I tried to be nice, Eddie." He pulled a small knife

from his back pocket, grabbed the twisted neck of the burlap bag, and cut the twine. “Just try and remember that come the Christmas party. No need to make things awkward in the family. This is just between you and me... for now.”

While Eddie fumbled with the envelope, trying to open it, Harry reached his hand into the bag, grabbed something furry, and pulled it out. “There you are, my little princess. Just couldn’t keep your legs shut, huh?” He was talking playfully to the white cat as he held it up by the skin of its neck. It twisted lazily in his hand as he brought it near his face and spoke mischievously to it in a strange sort of sick baby-talk. “You were supposed to stay inside, yes you were, but you didn’t, no, you didn’t. No, you went out and screwed some other pussy and got knocked up.” Harry laughed and stood up, cat still in hand. “Looks like you and Lilly here aren’t so different.”

Eddie’s neck was bent down as he shuffled through the stack of pictures he’d pulled from the envelope. He no longer looked scared; he looked guilty. “How did you get these?” he asked, the defeat thick in his voice. When he looked up, Harry was standing beside the rusty bucket of water with a cat clutched in his hand. It made a low, distressed, growling sound as its limbs dangled helplessly paralyzed from its body.

“You don’t get to the Mayor’s Office without having an ear to the ground and an eye in the sky. I’ve known about you and that little piece of ass right there for months now, just never thought I’d ever need anything from you. To be straight with you, I really didn’t want to have to ever use those pictures. A man’s business is his business. It just so happens that my business is more important than you getting your rocks off every Thursday night at eight. If you’d just cooperated it never would’ve come to this.”

The pictures Eddie Corbett held so anxiously in his hands were of him and a young woman, Wynona “Nona” Finn, having a

romp in the back room of her hair salon, High Wave. She'd started the business two years before, renting one of the vacant spaces in Eddie's strip mall. It was a year after her grand opening that Nona's boyfriend, Glen, cheated on her and ran off with a twenty-something waitress from West Elm. Then it was Eddie who took the vacant space in Nona.

Most of the pictures didn't show Eddie's face. But how could they? It was buried between her legs, only black-and-white shots of the back of a bald head. The last three photographs, the ones where Nona was bent over the manicure table and he was pulling at her hair, face turned up in ecstasy, were undeniably Eddie Corbett, though. No getting around that.

"I've seen enough. You're one sick son of a bitch, you know that?" Eddie said, sliding the pictures back into the envelope. "What are you going to do with these?"

"Well," Harry said, still holding the cat, "that depends entirely on you." Then in one quick motion he turned, bent to one knee, and plunged the animal toward the bucket of water. Its hind legs kicked for the rim as its tail submerged, but Harry grabbed it tight with his other hand and pushed it under. The cat let out one final yowl, and then it was completely under. The only noise was the occasional clatter of the metal bucket's handle banging off the side of the container.

Eddie looked on, his face twisted into a look of horror and disgust. "You're... you're insane," he whispered. Not so much to Harry but to himself, as though he were coming to terms with the fact.

"Ohhhh, I don't think so. I just know how to get what I want. Weak people like you only make it that much easier. Just think, if you could've kept your dick in your pants, you wouldn't be in this mess." Harry pushed down harder on the cat, the water coming



up almost to the folds of his cuffs, small splashes slopping out onto the ground.

“So what are you going to do with these?” Eddie took a cautious step toward Harry.

Harry didn’t respond, only continued to press down on the pregnant cat in the bucket, his body hunched over, bobbing up and down as he mumbled to himself: “I don’t get it. Why doesn’t she ever listen to me? I knew a pet was a bad idea.”

“Harry?” Eddie repeated.

Again, Harry didn’t answer. Then: “Well, what the hell do you think I’m going to do with those pictures? You too stupid to figure out how blackmail works?” He glared up at Eddie, who stumbled backwards a few steps as if shoved.

Harry stood up, shaking his hands off before wiping the remaining water on the seat of his pants. “I want your lot, Eddie. We need it. Now, you can let Heartsridge use it for the festival, or I can leave an envelope like that one on your doorstep for Jeannie to find.”

“I... I—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll do it. You’re a coward, not dumb.”

Eddie looked down at his feet. “What about the negatives? I want those destroyed. I’m assuming these aren’t the only copies.”

“Correct you are, my friend,” Harry said. “And those are safe with me. You can have them after the festival’s over. I have no use for them or you after that.” He reached down and grabbed the cat by the neck, tossing its limp body underneath an old refrigerator beside them. He sighed and kicked the bucket over, spilling the water into the dirt. “I’m telling you, pets are a waste of money.”

Eddie stood there silent.

Harry turned and went back to his car, reaching into the backseat and grabbing one last thing. It was a black bag of trash,

closed at the top with a blue rubber band. "Almost forgot the reason I came here," he said.

Eddie still said nothing, only watched, his face pale.

Harry walked the bag to the mountainous pile of garbage and dropped it gently at the edge. He walked back to his car, got in, and fired up the Eldorado. As he was backing out, he said, "C'mon, Ed, everything will be fine. Cheer up." Then he laughed and sped off.

Driving toward the exit, plumes of dust twisting up behind his car, he could just barely see the silhouette of Eddie Corbett in his rearview mirror, standing there, slouching, and slowly moping back to his truck. Then the dust closed in like a curtain, and Eddie was gone.

