

Chapter One

March 3, 2017

In a far off clearing at the southern base of Mount Mansfield, surrounded by an old growth balsam fir and sugar maple forest, sat an object not born of that forest.

Odoriferous this woodland was with the previous autumn's shedding of waxy needles and amber and auburn leaves, wet and decaying they all were now, creating a melange of musky odours. It was a small trek up to this alcove, yet well out of sight of the radio tower Toll Road. The usual melee of tourists eager to climb Vermont's highest peak not yet present in early spring, for the weather was a moody girl—crafting a low-ceiling, overcast sky, the air damp and cool—a visible mist swirling around the alpine space creating a world apart. The barren quartz bedrock and the crooked and wind-battered tree limbs shedding steady droplets of crystalline water from the recent melting ice and snow made the vista entirely reminiscent of the Algonquin Park “Group of Seven” paintings.

The atmosphere was calm, serene, yet heavy, the air filled with a dense kind of nothing, the quiet occasionally interrupted by the caw-cawing of a far off crow or the rustling of the odd hermit thrush in a nearby bush, the knock-knock of a downy woodpecker or the scrunching crunch of brush underfoot in the trek to reach the clearing. A constant, rather irritating hum of traffic noise

off Highway Route 108 could be heard from the nearby valley, evidence that humanity, welcome and not, was certainly close at hand.

As low-lying branches were parted—the wood arthritic from the cold, groaning and creaking, threatening to break when bent—and side-swiping steps made over a set of snow run-off rivulets, the clearing came into sight, proving now that the alien object was not a hiker's mirage but a real entity, a Thing Unknown. At first glance, *maybe a baseball?* Yet, with each approaching step, the object grew in size. *No, a soccer ball? But why would such things be here?* Closer and closer now, crunching over pine cones and twigs, wading through muddy depressions choked with moss and squirming worms—the combination slimy and slippery, danger with every footfall—both guesses were wrong.

The object, the entity, this Thing, was no ball at all.

It was ovular.

No, oblong, well rounded at the top, narrowing at the bottom.

Despite the grey light in the dying afternoon hours, the foreign Thing gave off a garish white glow when the odd shaft of sunlight would push its way through the clouds and seep in between

the tree tops. The smoky-white rays landed as flickering spots of light onto the object's well rounded surface.

As the distance melted, leaving only feet left to the goal, the buzzing of flies filled the ears, a seemingly random conglomeration of House, Flesh and Coffin, just the odd one at first, then a staccato sing-song, culminating in an orchestral swarm of winged vibration, a cacophony of swirling dive-bombing sound. That sickly sweet odour which comes from putrefaction, that suffocating smell of death, filled the nostrils, the gag reflex ignited yet vomiting remained suppressed. The sensory assault dampened the curiosity not.

The misshaped object turned out not to be a pristine white after all, but a dirty yellow and ivory hue with muddy streaks and trails of insect feces covering its zigzagging cranial sutures, the overall effect the result of exposure and advanced decay. Enough matter remained inside to produce a nest of sorts, a pleasant place to lay eggs that will eject shiny-wet black larvae, and a prodigious place to eat. The remaining strands of hair have been appropriated as a conveyor belt of sorts, used to enter and exit this bony hotel.

No vacancy. Its occupants, hundreds of American Carrion beetles (Latin term - necrophilia Americana - known in the entomological world for eating anything most other insects dare not), their yellow and black bumble bee-like hard shells entwined in a writhing and undulating sea of

carnivore activity. Their home? The large upper cranium/eye socket cavity of a dis-articulated head laying on its left side. The mandible—still attached, hanging on thanks to a few remaining strings of sinew and muscle fragments—contained a full set of teeth, gleaming bright in the day's dying light, soon to sparkle in the moonlight glow which arrived with a clear and starry night's sky. The eviscerated mouth—does it boast an eternal laugh or a frozen scream?

The knock-knocking of the woodpecker, the rustling of the thrush, even the hoot-hewing of a snowy owl which had just moments ago landed on a high branch to drink in this ghoulish sight—all those beautiful sights and sounds of nature killed in an instant by the ear-piercing screams and frantic footfalls of a terror-struck discoverer fleeing horror and seeking help.

Such is the inevitable result when a kill site is discovered.

Chapter Two

November 24, 2016

“To the beginning, Jespers, it's time to return.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Chapter Three

No more than fifty minutes the journey took from Home Front Farm to the downtown core, as the midday traffic was light on this late morning. November 24th marked the date of Mrs. Underhill's 70th birthday.

Burlington, Vermont, in any other month, was a beautiful town, considered in the top five for the entire nation. The city streets and the historic red-brick buildings were lined with glorious age-old elms and red leaf maples, the foliage especially pleasing along the Church Street Marketplace. But in this off-season month when the enchantment of the town had long faded with autumn's death, leaving a bleak vista of spiny limbs and exposed buildings, even the flower beds and hanging baskets around Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream shop and the Vermont Teddy Bear Company were barren. A vicious crosswind replaced the warm summer breeze which usually wafted in from the water's edge of Lake Champlain, chilling the bones of even well-dressed passersby. Only members of the town's annual Penguin Plunge for Special Olympics would be brave enough now to venture into the lake, boating and swimming activities mere remembrances of summers past. A light dusting of snow from gently falling flakes covered the tree limbs, melting into the shoreline and onto the streets.

Yes, to the outside world, Burlington was hibernating. But it was this down time the locals welcomed most, for it was a moment to catch one's breath between summer's road trip warriors and winter's ski enthusiasts, to rekindle friendships without the bustling melee of outsiders.

Inside a well-appointed Lincoln Town Car, the heater and seat warmers were set to a sort of Palm Springs climate, as the on-board TV screen emitted a warm glow from the flickering flames of the Yule Log channel, all so the silk stocking-clad legs of the widowed Mrs. Underhill felt no chill at all. Mrs. U, as she liked to be addressed if Ma'am was not preferred, gazed out the smoke-tinted one-way glass, reminiscing, no doubt, by her 1000 yard stare, this well-heeled Grand Dame sipping at her cocktail of choice—a customized martini made from Crème de Violette, Vya Vermouth and Nolet's Reserve Dry Gin with a special garnish: two frozen balls of pure distilled Vermont Maple Syrup which fell fast to the bottom of the glass like discombobulated eyeballs in a scientist's mason jar, the sweet essence slowly melting and mingling into the translucent indigo liquid, offering a rich flavour if not a rather disquieting display. The Widow Underhill had her driver, Jespers, make a chilled pitcher of these unique pick-me-ups, slipping the crystal carafe inside the built-in drinks bar whenever they were in the Town Car for any length of time, to help pass the time and tame her wandering thoughts. *The Widow's Peak*—Mrs. U coined the elixir. Every time she spoke its name, the moniker made her grin.

Trips into Burlington from Home Front Farm were normal enough, often for appointments, or shopping sprees to let off steam, to defend against boredom or her aberrant urges when the sap on her farm wasn't running. The drive from her late father's sugar maple spread was usually a relaxing, picturesque jaunt, but today, no, not today, for the destination was filled with purpose, the effort demanding a definite result. *The will of man—no, of woman, vanquishes all*, the old lady mused with a hint of upturned lips, threatening to widen beyond all norm, all-knowing.

“How much longer, Jespers?” asked Mrs. U, as she depressed the intercom button.

“Oh, not long now, Ma'am, I'm just heading for Main Street. We'll be on Glen Road in about five minutes or so, or would you like me to re-route via Church Street?” asked her loyal chauffeur.

There was no need for a response. He knew that's what she wanted. Every time they hit town, Mrs. U yearned to view the goings-on at the Church Street Market Place, a year-round shopping arcade full to the brim with fruits and vegetables, boutique items of all kinds, truly the social hub of this quaint town, an area Mrs. U loved to eye but never herself would experience beyond the one-way glass of her Town Car.

Minutes later as the private limo cruised along at a snail's pace: “Oh, look, Jespers,” she said, pressing again the intercom, “the Market is a bustle today, isn't it? Every time we pass, no matter how gloomy the weather, the locals are all bundled up, out there in droves, buying the farmers'

harvests or curios and trinkets of all kinds, sitting at those tiny cafe tables, drinking mulled wine. You can see their breath as they speak, talking, laughing, having such a gay time.”

Jespers didn't comment. He knew well Mrs. U's penchant for wallowing; best to let it lie.

The Town Car returned to the directed route and soon it was turning left onto Glen Road then a short right to #76, the location of a picturesque Victorian mansion, the statuesque structure standing there for as long as anyone could remember, now a combination private residence and medical facility, sporting in the shallow front yard a newly erected, colonial-styled, white wooden hanging shingle with black lettering, reading;

*~ The Mind Factory: Mental Health At Work ~
Dr. Iris Moorhouse, M.D., Psy. D.*

As the sleek sedan turned into the narrow rectangular parking lot, it made a tight U-turn to get the back right passenger window in line with the walk up to the front door. Jespers idled the engine and with as sleek a body movement as he had executed with the car, he left the driver's seat and swept up to the front door to announce their arrival. The good man rang the doorbell and soon a woman appeared on the step, sleek and slender yet petite in build, sharp facial features and flawless skin. She was dressed in a cream-coloured cashmere sweater, slacks with matching high heels, a singular strand of lustrous pearls around her neck; her rich brunette hair was styled in a shoulder length bob—the look entirely reminiscent of Mary Tyler Moore.

From the Town Car, Mrs. U couldn't hear the short conversation but she knew what would be said. She took in the sight of her soon-to-be psychiatrist, the young Dr. Moorhouse, while drinking the last of her Widow's Peak. Dr. Moorhouse squinted and stared out in vain, trying as she might to decipher the black silhouetted shape housed within the limousine, one woman at a clear disadvantage to the other. The question hanging in the air over the idling exhaust fumes—
Would it remain?

Oh, shall I view through granite eyes, the beauty of Innocence, yet to be extinguished, yet to be possessed. The toast, to Dr. Iris Moorhouse, unheard by anyone outside the Town Car, preceded Mrs. U raising and then over-turning her empty martini glass.