

Bramwell Valley

by John Harold McCoy

One

IN THE SPRING, when clear moonlit nights are just right, gentle breezes carry the fragrance of newly bloomed night jasmine through the open windows of the fine old houses on Meljac Lane. In the second story bedroom of one such fine old house, Jilly Meljac lay sleeping in the massive old bed, the frame for which her great grandfather, Karol Meljac, had hewn from the corpse of a great oak, ravaged by lightning and causing numerous casualties in the chicken coop atop of which it fell almost a hundred years ago.

In sleep, oblivious to the ghosts of long-dead chickens, Jilly wove through a world of dreams reserved for well-adjusted sixteen-year-old girls from well-adjusted families – well-adjusted that is, except for David, who although semi-okay as a little brother was, in Jilly's estimation, crazy as a loon.

Little David's current obsession, brought on by too many ill-chosen comic books, was playing vampire. Yesterday, while running around the house gnashing his teeth and nipping at everyone in sight, as he imagined vampires did, David had bitten Jilly and consequently was grounded.

There was a new rule in the Meljac household – no more vampires. Then again, eight-year-old vampires, even play ones, don't always follow the rules. And on this clear spring night, Hugo The Terrible – David's new adopted name – stood in the moonlit bedroom beside Jilly's old oak bed with the intention of giving her another good solid bite.

The wooing squalls of two amorous cats from a neighboring yard had brought David out of his own dreams only a few minutes before. Frightened at first by the strange caterwauling, a sound he'd never heard before, and one which even grownups find somewhat unnerving, he'd eventually figured out it had something to do with cats, but nothing to do with him. David was a bright boy.

Even so, his initial fear had shocked him wide-awake and he lay there inwardly grumbling over being grounded for play-biting silly Jilly. He hadn't even bitten her hard, at least not as hard as he should have, being a vampire and all. If she knew what was good for her she'd watch out from now on because of his blood lust. You didn't mess around with blood lust. Everybody knew that, at least everybody in the stack of tattered, many-times-read comic books on the nightstand beside his bed.

He started at the sound of another cat squall from the yard below his window. He wondered if the moon was full, in which case there was always the possibility the cats below were actually *were-cats*. If there were *were-wolves*, he reasoned, then there must be were-cats, too. He decided to stay awake for a while just in case.

He sat up in bed and reached over to the pile of comic books. Taking the top one from the stack, the moonlight from the window providing enough light for his young eyes, he began scanning pages filled with pictures of fanged creatures terrorizing frightened maidens. One picture in

particular caught his attention. In it, a young woman lay asleep in bed, an ominous figure with bared teeth looming over her. David stared at the picture for a moment, a plan forming in his mind, then slipped quietly out of bed. In less than a minute, Hugo the Terrible stood in Jilly's bedroom, looming over her sleeping form.

The same cat sounds that had awakened David had brought Jilly to the brink of wakefulness, and the slight creak of her bedroom door as David crept into her room finished the job. She lay on her side, awake but unmoving, wondering what the little creep was up to. Through barely open eyes she watched him tiptoe to her bedside and bend over her.

As David's *fangs* drew near her bare shoulder, inspiration struck Jilly in the form of a slight grumbling in her lower abdomen. Barely able to suppress a giggle, Jilly farted; long, loud and fragrantly. Eyes still almost closed, she watched as David jerked upright, stood for a moment as though confused, then backed slowly towards the door.

Jilly could hold it no longer. At her sudden burst of laughter, David jumped, startled, then yelled, "Jilly, you're gross" and ran out of the room, all blood lust forgotten.

Asleep in another room, Melanie Meljac stirred as the sound of her son's yell slipped into her subconscious – and dreamed of her children playing in the backyard; Jillian teasing her little brother, pretending to eat a bug and little David yelling, "Jilly, you're gross."

Two

DAWN FLOWED GENTLY down the sides of the valley, and into the small town of Bramwell. The mountains nestling the little town between them hid the sudden harshness of sunrise and the morning sky shone in full light, the night mists having retreated into the forested slopes by the time the sun peeked over the high ridges.

As she did every morning during the quiet time between soft light and full sun, Melanie Meljac sat, coffee cup in hand, on the veranda of the big stone house on the oak-shaded corner where sedate little Meljac Lane crossed equally sedate Stillman Road.

From her veranda, Melanie could look across Stillman to where Meljac Lane became Bramwell Boulevard, an impressive name for the narrow two-lane street, on one side of which stood Bramwell's single block of what was optimistically referred to as downtown.

Of the seven businesses fronting the Boulevard, only two attracted enough patrons to keep the little business district from extinction: Walkers Drug Store, with soda fountain

and prescription counter, and the old Bramwell Movie Theater – their closest competition being 15 miles of winding mountain road away.

On Melanie's side of Stillman Road, Bramwell Boulevard ceased being the town's main street and slipped between the great oaks lining Meljac Lane. Only a few hundred feet beyond the Meljac's, and two other large homes, the lane narrowed, then ended less than a quarter of a mile away at a waterfall where a convergence of cold mountain streams cascaded into bubbling springs to become the source of the Blue Springs River. The river itself remained mostly hidden by thick forest till it emerged behind the houses opposite Melanie's on Meljac Lane. From there it flowed under the Bramwell Bridge and behind the row of downtown buildings before leaving the valley.

By leaning forward, and looking off to her right, her gaze could follow Stillman Road as it crossed the Bramwell Bridge behind Walker's Drug Store. Generations of Bramwell children, including Melanie herself, had walked across that bridge, following the winding road as it crawled up the mountain, and reaching the top, descended into Stillman Township which boasted Princeton County's only school.

Melanie Walker Meljac, daughter of the same gentleman who, at this very moment, she could see unlocking and entering the front door of Walkers Drug Store just across the street, had at twenty-one, and to the disappointment of many of Princeton County's young bachelors, married her childhood sweetheart, Karol Meljac the 4th. The happy newlyweds moved into the big rock house where Karol had been raised by an aunt. His parents, and many other valley residents, had been taken by a particularly virulent flu when Karol was only twelve. As fate would have it, nine years

later, Melanie's beloved Karol met a drunk driver at the curve in the road where Bramwell Boulevard followed the bend of the river out of the valley, leaving Melanie heartbroken, a widow with two children.

Her son, David, had been an infant at the time of his father's death, and Jilly, at seven years old, could understand only that her father would always be away. But for Melanie, the ease with which death had slipped into her life became a constant fear, and she clung to her children, not taking them out of the house for fear of losing them. Only with the start of Jilly's first year of school had Melanie, begrudgingly, allowed either of her children away from her side.

Finally, after a few years brought no further tragedies into her life, Melanie's fears subsided. The passing of time soothed her wounded soul – her children's laughter and the loving scolds of Karol's Aunt Claudia healing the pain of loss. Eventually, the big house on Meljac Lane and the little town of Bramwell, West Virginia, became again for Melanie, the happiest place on earth.

A commotion from inside the house, and a loud, "Ow" from David, probably the result of a pinch from his sister, signaled the formal beginning of Melanie's day. She smiled. Her brood had awakened.

Melanie finished the last of her coffee, stood and turned toward the mullioned double doors that opened from the veranda into the dining room. Behind her, the azaleas lining the edge of the veranda were just now beginning to bloom, but as yet, due to an uncommonly dry spring, had not fully opened to display the brilliance of color that usually blessed the valley gardens this time of year. Before entering the house, Melanie paused for a moment, glanced over her shoulder at the struggling buds and, closing her eyes,

imagined a morning rain bringing renewed life to the wilting foliage.

Some of the folks of Princeton County, especially the old-timers who'd heard stories about the women of Bramwell valley, wouldn't think it at all strange that Melanie, as she walked from the veranda into the dining room, showed no signs of surprise at the sudden patter of rain on the azaleas behind her.

"Mom, Jilly farted on me!" David's loud, whining complaint greeted Melanie as she stepped into the dining room.

Jilly countered just as loudly. "The little creep was gonna bite me again!"

The two statements together struck Melanie as absurdly funny. To the disappointment of the children, each expecting parental wrath to descend on the other, she burst out laughing.

From the kitchen, Aunt Claudia's voice carried over the commotion.

"All of you sit down. I'm bringing in breakfast."

Aunt Claudia, though totally devoted to Melanie and the children, was not famous for putting up with nonsense.

Melanie's laughter subsided as she sat down at the table. She looked at her children with mock sternness, pointing at their chairs with little jabs of her finger for emphasis. They sat down, and as both started to speak at once, Melanie held up her hand.

"Stop! If you two had any idea how ridiculous that sounded..." Her voice trailed off as she almost laughed again.

Jilly tossed a fiery look at David.

"Creep," she whispered.

David stuck out his tongue.

"Enough," warned Melanie, still smiling. "And don't call your brother a creep."

At that moment, Aunt Claudia bustled into the room pushing a clattering serving cart laden with generous proof of her morning efforts, and with the aplomb of a professional croupier, began dealing breakfast to her hungry charges. Finishing that, she pushed her rickety cart back to the kitchen, and returned with a large carafe of coffee. Filling her own cup, she handed the carafe to Melanie then sat down at the table.

"I don't like eggs," whined David. "Can't I have cereal?" A look from Aunt Claudia convinced him that eggs were just fine.

With eggs accepted and pouting beginning to fade, breakfast at the Meljac's began on a reasonably civil note.

Jilly brightened. "Mom, me and Patty..." Catching Melanie's frown, she sighed, giving her best '*whatever*' look, then exaggerated, "*Patty and I... are going up to the springs to swim after school, okay?*"

David chimed in, "I wanna go, too."

Jilly snapped at her brother, "You're too little. You'll drown like a bug."

Melanie grimaced at the renewed bickering.

"All right, you girls be careful up there. David, you and I will go over to grandpa's and have an ice cream soda when you get home from school. How's that?"

David mentally weighed swimming versus sodas, and knowing he wasn't going to win anyway, chose the soda at grandpa Walker's drug store.

"Okay," he said, "Strawberry."

Melanie chuckled to herself. *Supermom solves all problems* she thought, and was proved right as the rest of the morning meal continued peacefully.

Finished with breakfast, Jilly chugged the last of her orange juice.

"Gotta go!" she said, getting up from the table and glancing at David. "Hurry up, creep."

At the word 'creep,' Melanie stuck her fingers in her water glass and flipped a few drops at Jilly.

"Okay, okay." Jilly struck a deliberately formal pose, nose in the air.

"Come dear, sweet brother. It's time for us to walk lovingly hand in hand to school – s'that better?"

Melanie smiled and flicked more water.

"Get out of here, both of you."

Footsteps sounded on the veranda. Patty Clark, Jilly's lifelong friend, or as Melanie was fond of saying, 'partner in crime,' rushed in through the double doors.

"Come on, Jilly, let's go," she spouted with her usual morning impatience.

Then, more politely, "Hi, Mrs. Meljac."

And, to Aunt Claudia, "Hey, Anta."

Jilly had grabbed her backpack from where it leaned against the wall, and was already at the door.

"Hey, it's been raining," she said, as she stepped out onto the veranda.

David was still fumbling with his backpack as the girls disappeared through the veranda door.

From outside, he heard Jilly shout, "Come on, bug!"

Melanie got up and helped David with his pack. She walked with him to the veranda, bent down and kissed him on top of the head.

"Don't forget. We have a date for sodas later."

David smiled up at her then ran after his sister.

Three

LOUIS WALKER WAS THANKFUL the drug store he'd inherited from his father was located at the very end of the row of two-story structures that was Bramwell's downtown. Through the glass front of the store he could see his daughter's house diagonally across the intersection of the Boulevard and Stillman Road, and every morning he could wave to his grandchildren through the big side window as they walked along Stillman Road towards the Bramwell bridge on their way to school – as he was doing now.

He stood watching as the children crossed the bridge and disappeared around the bend where the road turned to climb the mountain towards Stillman Township. Had Louis' store been anywhere else he would have retired years ago, but here he felt linked to the big rock house across the way, and the only family he had left, not to mention Claudia Meljac, whom he'd known all his life. There was, also, the fact that Mel, Jilly and David had known the store as part of their lives since birth. It was as much home to them as the

big rock house on Meljac Lane. He couldn't bear the idea of this part of their world being in the hands of strangers. So, retirement was out of the question.

Louis turned as the little bells over the front door jingled. Claudia Meljac walked in.

She greeted him, kidding, "I see you're standing there doing your proud grandfather bit instead of setting up the morning coffee for paying customers."

Louis smiled. "Yeah, well, since you're here so early, I guess you didn't clean up your breakfast mess either, did you? And since when were you a paying customer?"

Claudia grunted a playful "Harrumph" and sat on one of the soda fountain stools.

"Well, is there gonna be any service here, today, soda boy?" she teased.

"Soda boy, indeed!" said Louis with feigned indignance as he walked around the counter. "Oh all right. I guess if my only customers are going to be old maiden ladies I might as well get the coffee going."

They both laughed. The little bells jingled again as Melanie came in.

Louis threw his hands up.

"Jeez, now the place is full of women."

"Come on, dad," said Melanie, beaming, "You know I'm your pride and joy, the light of your life and all that good stuff."

"If you insist," admitted Louis, trying to look resigned.

"Sit down, baby girl. I'm making coffee for her highness, here." He grinned at Claudia.

"Just get on with it, soda boy," shot Claudia.

Melanie laughed. "You two should get a room."

Both Claudia and Louis blanched, but said nothing. A few seconds went by.

Melanie giggled. "And now, a moment of strained silence."

"Put a cork in it, kid," groaned Louis.

Claudia and her father had, for many years, been close friends, perhaps more – she wasn't sure – but she still got a kick out of ragging them about her suspicions, and now that she had them on the hook she wasn't about to let it go.

"Just think, Anta," she kept on. "You guys could have a big wedding then you could be the kids' Aunt Grandma and my Aunt Mom. Cool, huh?"

Louis laughed, and Aunt Claudia gave them both a warning look, saying, "Let's move right along, shall we? Where's that coffee, Lou?"

Louis set out three cups. "Just about done," he said. "How's my grandbabies this morning?"

Claudia shook her head. "I swear, you'd think those two were mortal enemies the way they fuss and fight." She glanced over her shoulder at the magazine rack.

"Oh, and Louis; no more horror comic books for David, okay?"

Louis nodded. "How about superheroes? Maybe the spider guy, or some killer robots?"

"For God's sakes, dad," said Melanie. "Whatever happened to Mickey Mouse? Why do all kids' comics have to be so weird?"

Louis cocked his head, pretending surprise. "Ha! Listen to who's talking about weird!" He hummed a little Twilight Zone.

Both women glared at him.

"Oops," he said, "not funny, huh?"

Melanie made a face, then smiled. "You'll think it's funny when you have to referee the brats all night. What time are you coming over, Mr. Babysitter?"

Four

"ONE-THOUSAND ONE, one-thousand two, one-thousand...."

Patty lay on her stomach on the big flat rock, peering over the edge into the clear spring water just inches below her face. As her count reached thirty-five, Jilly's head burst through the surface of the water in front of her.

"*Toooo cold*," screeched Jilly, and scrambled out of the water onto the rock beside Patty. Jilly grabbed her towel, shivering. She stood up and began drying off, shaking the water from her shoulder length blonde hair.

"How many?"

"Thirty-five," answered Patty.

Swimming down into the mouth of the springs, fighting the gushing water for as long as possible, was a game the two girls had played since they'd been old enough to come up to the springs by themselves. Of course, they had been careful not to mention it around their parents, not that it was dangerous, but parents were parents.

Jilly sat down on the rock beside Patty. Though the water of the springs was frigid, the afternoon sun was warm and the girls sat basking for a moment in silence, then:

"So, I guess they'll come up here tonight," said Patty.

"Yep. Full moon. Can you imagine, like a hundred years ago... they probably wore like long black capes with hoods, and carried like torches and stuff like that."

Patty snickered. "My mom wears jeans, and brings a flashlight."

"Mine too! Bet it don't look much like a coven. I bet they look like a bunch of old hippies dancing around up here."

Both girls cracked up. Patty made an eerie 'woo woo' sound then, throwing her arms out to her sides, shouted to the sky.

"Here come the ladies of the valley – black capes, flashlights and iPods."

Jilly doubled over, laughing. "Some coven," she snorted.

"Hey, mom, you forgot your torch!"

Patty was laughing so hard she toppled over onto Jilly, both girls losing their perch on the wet rock and rolling off into the water, squealing.

After one more quick dive down into the current, they swam to the shallows and waded onto shore. Gathering towels and slipping into flip-flops, Jilly looked puzzled, scanning the ground.

"Hey, where's the phones... and my watch?"

Patty uttered an odd squeak, then yelled, "Oh no!"

She pointed frantically out to where the water from the spring basin spilled over into the rocky, shallow, river. There, bobbing along the surface, bouncing off the river rocks, a clear plastic bag was making its way down the Blue Springs River.

"Mom's gonna kill me," screamed Jilly.

Patty, already running, scooped up her own stuff and hollered at Jilly.

"Come on, hurry! We can catch it under the bridge."

"We'll never make it in time," Jilly shouted and took off after Patty.

Melanie and David, hand in hand, walked out the front door of Grandpa Walker's drug store, reaching the corner of the Boulevard and Stillman Road just in time to see the two girls emerge from Meljac Lane and streak down Stillman towards the Bramwell Bridge. As the girls raced by, Melanie managed to get out, "*What are you...?*" before Jilly's breathless cry,

"Mom, my phone..." Then the girls disappeared down the steep bank beside the bridge.

Jilly and Patty half slid, half tumbled down the bank and splashed out into the shallow river just as the plastic bag floated by almost out of reach. A last lunge and Patty snagged it. Jilly collided with her from behind and both girls sprawled face first into the foot deep water. They came up sputtering, laughing. On hands and knees, Patty raised the plastic bag over her head and yelled a triumphant, "Ta Da!"

Anxious to see what his sister was up to, David tugged on his mother's hand.

"Come on, mom. Come on!"

Melanie sighed, thinking, *I don't even want to know*, but allowed her son to drag her the hundred feet, or so, down Stillman and onto the bridge. David let go of his mother's hand and ran a few feet further down the walkway. Without slowing, he clambered up onto the railing for a better look below. Exuberance and momentum carried him a little higher than he expected, and for an instant he teetered belly down on the top bar. David panicked and instinctively grabbed for something in front of him, but there was nothing there and his weight shifted forward.

He screeched, "Mom!" and toppled over the railing.

Jilly stood in the water bending down to rinse the mud from her knees. At the sound of her brother's cry, she jerked upright, her jaw dropping at the sight in front of her.

She screamed, "David!"

Not a foot in front of her face, David hung, weightless, upside-down in the air, staring at her with eyes bulging, mouth wide open in shock. Frozen in place, she screamed his name again. David made a squawking sound.

For several seconds Jilly stood immobile, staring at David's upside-down form hanging unsupported in thin air. She was aware of Patty standing beside her, equally stunned. Another squawk from David, and both girls snapped out of it at once. They jumped forward, each grabbing a firm hold on David just as his weight suddenly returned. All three wobbled, then collapsed into the shallow water unharmed.

Jilly scrambled to her feet, dragging David up with her.

"Creep! You creep," she yelled at him. "You little creep! What were you doing?"

She shivered with fear, frantic at what could have happened if she had not been able to... *to what? ...to catch him?* She knew she hadn't caught him. As confused as she was, she had no doubt that he had not been falling, but hanging there, unsupported, in the air.

She wiped mud from his face, roughly. David looked shaken, but none the worse for wear. She stepped back from David and looked down at Patty who lay on her back propped on her elbows to keep her head out of the water.

Patty, ashen faced, was looking up towards the bridge overhead. Jilly tilted her head back and saw her mother standing at the railing looking down at them, arms crossed, face set in a very dark, very unmotherly-like expression.

"So," came Melanie's voice above the rush of the river, "...anybody care to guess just how many people are double-grounded for the next twenty years?"

Jilly whispered, "Crap," and tried to look very small.

Five

ONCE UPON A TIME, when there weren't all that many people in the world, the devil had, pretty much, free rein to putz around and do about anything he wanted, and he did. Being the devil, he didn't have a real job so he had plenty of time to fool around and just have a good time.

His real name was Lucifer, but since pronouncing it sounded a little lispy, people had taken to calling him Lucy for short. Being a bit homophobic, he wasn't too fond of the nickname, but much to his chagrin, it stuck.

Basically, Lucy wasn't all that bad of a guy, but after all he *was* the devil, so he enjoyed messing with people and causing mischief – nothing serious, just a little minor havoc to relieve the boredom. He left the really evil and terrible stuff up to normal everyday people who were much better at it than he could ever hope to be – or even wanted to be.

In those days, except for Lucy who was just a little naughty, people were full of evil and often treated each other in awful ways. Of course, no one wanted to admit they themselves were evil, so somebody came up with the idea that Lucy, whom everyone knew was hopelessly

mischievous, was a bad influence and therefore, undoubtedly, the cause of all their evil thoughts and deeds.

The idea caught on fast, and spread far and wide. From then on whenever something really bad happened, like somebody going berserk and whacking their neighbor, Lucy, the bad influence, got blamed, and in time Lucy became the focus of everyone else's evil and was shunned by all. Lucy thought the whole thing was hilarious. He even bought a bright red suit with fake horns and a pointed tail, and took to sneaking up behind people and whispering mischievous suggestions in their ears just to freak them out.

Eventually, all the misguided, self-righteous, holier-than-thous, who were convinced their own evils were the work of the devil, decided to banish Lucy to Hell so he couldn't influence people anymore. Not trusting him not to sneak out, they hired some weird women to put a spell on him that would ensure he stayed home – in Hell, that is.

Unfortunately, the women weren't as good at spells as they claimed, and the devil was able to slip out for a few hours during every full moon. As a result, and since they'd already been paid, the weird women, and forever after their descendants, had to be there during the full moon when the devil popped up – just to keep him from wandering around spreading evil.

Although over the last few thousand years Lucy had popped up in many different places, currently, he'd taken to popping up at Blue Springs in Bramwell, West Virginia. And on this night of the full moon, five very distant descendants of those original weird women sat on an old picnic table by the waterfall waiting for him to make his regular appearance.

"Anyway," said Melanie, speaking to the four other women, "David was convinced that Jillian and Patty had

caught him, and it seemed best just to leave it at that. Jilly and Patty figured it out later."

Amanda Clark, Patty's mother, and Melanie's closest friend said, "Patty scared me to death. She came running in the house blubbering that David had fallen off the bridge. It took me a while to get the whole story out of her, and by then..."

Aunt Claudia interrupted, "Speak of the devil..."

Out in the water of the springs, and onto the same big flat rock Jilly and Patty had sat on earlier that afternoon, the devil popped out of Hell. He stood there for a few moments fanning the air in front of his face with both hands, hacking and choking in a yellow cloud of sulfurous smoke.

"Damn," he gasped, "I hate the smell of that stuff."

He looked down at the rock, frowning.

"Where's my pentagram?" he asked, still wheezing.

Aunt Claudia yelled across the water, "Hey, Harry. How's tricks?"

A long time ago, in an effort to head off the women before they got too stuck on 'Lucy,' the devil had begged, "Please, just call me Harry," the first name he'd thought of at the time, "Anything but Lucy"

Still looking down at the rock, the devil repeated, "Where's the pentagram?" He smiled, wryly. "I'll get out if there's no pentagram. You guys never draw the pentagram, anymore."

Aunt Claudia chuckled, "Come on, Harry, you're not going anywhere."

Harry knew the women were powerful enough to keep him, as the devil, from wandering off but had always felt a little slighted by this modern group's lack of decorum. Still, he'd rather sit at the picnic table with the women than stand on a rock cramped inside a chalked pentagram till dawn every full moon. Harry hopped off the rock and waded to

shore. He walked the few more yards to the table and sat down with the women.

Melanie asked, "Harry, why are you naked?"

Harry shrugged. "You guys said you didn't like the red suit so I didn't wear it," he snickered devilishly.

Melanie said, "You're a smart-ass, Harry." She frowned, "...and if you don't take your hand off my leg you're gonna pull back a stump."

Harry jerked his hand back from where he had almost, but not quite, touched Melanie's thigh. He knew better than to actually touch her. He had visions of being turned into a frog or something.

Melanie smiled, reached out and ruffled his hair, playfully.

"You're so bad, Harry."

The devil tried to look innocent, "Hey, ya can't blame a guy for trying, can ya?"

In truth, Melanie would have felt a little slighted if Harry hadn't made his usual, somewhat naughty pass at her. Not that she had romantic fantasies involving the devil, but it was nice to be noticed... even if it *was* only Harry... and even if he *was* only joking.

Harry made a pouting face, "Ya know, a hundred years ago the coven women danced naked around a fire. Not that I liked having to sit out there in the pentagram all night, but I really liked watching the naked dancing. You guys are boring."

Amanda grinned, "Oh, shut up Harry. You're disgusting."

The devil feigned shock, "Moi? ...I'm disgusting? You wanna hear disgusting? I could tell you stories about some of the past coven ladies that..."

Amanda groaned, "Never mind, Harry. Times change and, anyway, we're not a coven. Covens are for witches and you know damn well we're not witches. Have you ever seen us with pointy hats and broom sticks?"

"Whatever," said Harry.

"Anyway," his face brightened, "I've got news. Are you ready?" Without waiting for anyone to say anything, he declared dramatically, "I quit."

Aunt Claudia laughed, "What'd you quit, Harry... smoking?"

The devil said, "No, really. I quit... I quit my job. No more devil."

Amanda gave him a sarcastic look.

"Well, Harry, that's really cool... a lot of crap, but really cool."

"Come on guys," Harry implored, "Seriously. I've been thinking about it for a long time. Frankly, Hell is... well, it's Hell, and I'm tired of it. Jeez... coupla thousand years oughta be enough, don't ya think?"

"Harry," said Claudia with a smirk, "I don't think it works like that."

Harry protested, "Oh yeah? If you think about it, there aren't any rules, right? I mean where are the rules? Just because I've always been the devil doesn't mean I can't quit. Where does it say I can't quit? So, that's it. I'm through with it."

Claudia was still smirking.

"I'll bite, Harry. What happens now?"

"What do you mean, what happens now? It's party time... that's what happens now! Spring break... I'm going to Ft. Lauderdale."

"Jesus, Harry, you're so full of it," Claudia scoffed. "Of all the crap you've come up with this takes the cake."

"No, I'm serious... here's the deal," said Harry. "Tomorrow night at 9:26 when the bartender at the Crystal Sands Resort Inn, in Lauderdale, has a heart attack, which I just happen to know about – one of the perks of the job – ole Harry here will just happen to, conveniently, be there

filling out an application for a bartending job. Hello sandy beaches, goodbye Hell."

Claudia laughed again. "Very funny, Harry, and on the off chance that you're trying to be serious, you can forget it. You can't quit and that's that. You're the devil... in case you haven't noticed."

Harry slapped both hands down on the table and leaned back stubbornly.

"Oh yeah? Well, it's a done deal," he announced. "I'm outta here."

"No way," said Melanie. "You're tricky, Harry, but not that tricky. I thought, after all this time, you'd know your shenanigans don't work on us. You're not going to Ft. Lauderdale, or anywhere else so get off of it."

"You don't believe me?" Harry grumbled.

Melanie reached out and patted him on top of the head.

"Harry, you're the Prince of Lies. Of course we don't believe you, silly"

Harry sat quietly for a moment, sulking.

Finally, he stood up and said, "Ok, if I were still the devil, how could I do this?"

He turned, and began walking towards the path that led down to Meljac Lane.

"Hold it right there," said Aunt Claudia.

Harry kept walking.

"Harry!" shouted Melanie, "Get back here!"

Harry snickered, began humming 'Born Free' and kept walking.

"Uh Oh! Something's not right about this." Amanda muttered.

Aubrey and Sarah Crumb, the two women – twins – who had not said anything all evening, and who hardly ever said anything, anyway, stood up and fixed Harry with identical, intense glares.

In unison, they warned, "Halt, evil one."

The Crumb sisters were very traditional and no fun at all.

Harry hummed louder and kept walking.

All five women jumped up and ran after him.

"You better get back here, Harry," yelled Amanda.

"Harry, I'm warning you," shouted Melanie.

"Harry! Stop now!" growled Aunt Claudia.

"Halt, evil one!" intoned the boring Crumb sisters in unison.

Harry kept humming and walking.

He'd already reached the Lane by the time the women caught up with him.

Melanie grabbed his arm, "Harry you'd better..." she started.

Harry stopped, abruptly, and turned to face the women, agitated.

"See... see! If I were still the devil, how'd I get this far? See, ...can't stop me, can ya? I'm not the devil anymore. I'm just plain Harry, now... and I'm going to Ft. Lauderdale." He managed to look smug, and pout at the same time.

Amanda giggled, "Are you going naked, Harry?"

Harry seemed puzzled for a second, then looked down at himself.

"Oh, crap," he said, with a sigh of frustration.

"You don't plan very well, do you, Harry?" snickered, Amanda.

"I don't care. I'm going anyway. Guys, ya gotta understand," Harry sulked.

"I haven't done a damn thing in a thousand years... hang around Hell doing nothing. That's it. No friends, no life... nothing! A figurehead for evil, that's all I am, and *I'm* not the one who's evil... never have been. Nobody can name one thing I've, personally, done that's evil. *You* people are evil,

not me. I don't mean you guys, I mean... oh, you know what I mean."

Harry looked deflated then, very quietly, "I just gotta go, all right? ... Just let me go."

No one said anything for a moment.

Melanie sighed, "Ok, Harry. Obviously, you've pulled off something... I don't know what, or how you did it, but you're right, there's no way you... well, the devil, could have gotten past us at the springs... and you did. I don't know *what* you are now, Harry. What are you? Tell me that."

"Just a guy," Harry pleaded, "...just a guy."

After another moments silence, Melanie looked at the other women.

"What do you think?"

Claudia shook her head, "Got me, I don't know."

Neither did Amanda.

Aubrey Crumb warned, "More tricks and lies!"

"Let's burn him," said her sister.

"Oh stop it, you two," Claudia admonished.

Melanie threw up her hands, and shrugged.

"This is ridiculous. I mean it's just totally crazy..." she shook her head, "... but, I guess, short of tying you to a tree, there's nothing we can do if you're really set on going. Are you, Harry? ...Are you set on going?"

Harry looked away and muttered, "Just let me go."

"Christ!" Melanie conceded. She looked at him a moment, thinking about it, then took him by the arm, tugging, "Come on. Let's get you some clothes... I've still got some of Karol's old stuff in the attic. Jeez, Harry... do you even have a last name?"

"Sure," he said, "Devil."

"Huh-uh, not good," she said.

Harry looked sheepish, "How about 'Meljac'?"

"No way!" Melanie sputtered.

Harry looked at Amanda who snorted, "Don't even think about it."

He glanced towards the Crumb twins.

Aubrey Crumb shrieked, "*Never!*" she looked about to faint. "Never will our name be carried on the foul breath of the beast,"

"*Losers!*" yelled Harry.

Aunt Claudia patted his arm, "Calm down, Harry. We'll keep it simple. How about 'Deville'? That's a nice name, and easy for you to remember."

Harry thought a moment, "Cool," he said, "Deville it is. All right, clothes and name... I'm all set, right?"

At 2 o'clock in the morning, Harry Deville – formerly, the devil – dressed in regular clothes for the first time ever, stood under the street light on the far side of the Bramwell Bridge looking back at the five women who'd walked with him as far as the Bramwell side of the river. A light fog dampened the sounds of the night, the rippling of the river below the bridge hardly audible. From across the bridge, Melanie thought Harry, standing in the misty circle of streetlight on the other side, looked rather forlorn, maybe even a little uncertain.

"So long, Harry, and be careful," Melanie called across the bridge.

Amanda and Claudia waved goodbye almost sadly.

Aubrey Crumb snarled, "Be gone, evil one," and Sarah Crumb mumbled, "Good riddance."

Harry stood there a moment longer, then turned and disappeared into the darkness of Stillman road.

"Wow. What a weird night," said Melanie.

"What now?" asked Amanda, a tinge of disappointment in her voice.

Aunt Claudia said, "Let's go home."

The Crumb sisters chanted, "He's gone! Rejoice, rejoice!"
"Oh, shut up," said Melanie.

Six

DAVID SAT AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE staring, uneasily, at his plate: pancakes with blueberry syrup, his favorite. Wary, he picked up his fork and cut off a small bite. He hesitated before putting it in his mouth. He figured it probably had poison in it. Why else would Jilly get up early just to fix him pancakes?

Aunt Claudia, though she didn't protest, had not been grateful for the help in the kitchen. Jilly just got in the way. The girl had already been at the kitchen counter stirring away at bowl of pancake batter when Claudia came down to fix breakfast.

"I wanna make something nice for David," Jilly had said. Claudia had wondered the same thing as David, not about the poison, of course, just why Jillian was, suddenly, acting so fondly towards her brother. David, resigned to his fate, decided a big bite of pancakes dripping with butter and blueberry syrup was as good a way as any to die. He put it in his mouth, chewed it up and swallowed. Nothing happened – and it was delicious. He, quickly, took another bite, hoping he could eat the whole stack before the poison got him.

Jilly sat beside her brother, looking at him, lovingly. She reached her hand towards him. David flinched.

"Oh, silly," she smiled, smoothing down an errant lock of his hair and asking, "Do you want more milk?"

Melanie, her breakfast untouched, sat at the other side of the table watching her two children.

Something is very wrong, here, she thought. She had no doubt that Jillian and David loved each other but this maternal act from Jillian was way off base.

A clattering from the veranda and Patty Clark did her usual, exuberant, morning burst through the door.

"Hey, Mrs. Meljac... Hey Anta."

Jilly got up from the table.

"Just be a minute, Patty. David hasn't finished his breakfast yet."

"No prob," said Patty.

Melanie and Aunt Claudia looked at each other. Both felt a sense of unease. In the days ahead, they would learn that, without the devil, the good got *very* good, ...*and the bad got very bad*.

Seven

EMMA PAUL WAS A GOOD WIFE. She wasn't very pretty, and not all that smart, but she kept a clean house and never shirked her wifely duties, although when those duties concerned her husband, and were of a personal nature, her performance was less than enthusiastic. Everyone agreed that Joe Paul, being no prize himself, was very lucky to have Emma as a wife.

Emma loved her home, she loved her children, she loved her little flower garden out back. She wasn't too fond of Joe. As a matter of fact, she often dreamed of how nice life would be if Joe went away, and never came back.

This morning, while watching her husband slopping down breakfast, like the pig he was, she had a new thought. Wouldn't it be better if Joe, instead of going away and never coming back, just dropped dead? How wonderfully final that would be. Unfortunately, Joe wasn't the sickly type and would probably outlive her – unless, thought Emma, things could be helped along a little. An idea began to form in her mind.

Yesterday, Emma would have been shocked at the direction her thoughts were taking, but today, ...well, today was different. Today everything seemed so clear.

'Let's see,' she mused, thinking of Joe's shotgun in the closet, or maybe the axe from the shed. Rat poison? The shotgun was probably the best bet.

Ignoring Joe, Emma got up from the kitchen table and went to the hall. She opened the hall closet, reached inside and tugged on the string that hung from the overhead light fixture. In the glare of the bare light bulb, she saw Joe's long black 12-gauge leaning against the wall. Emma grabbed the end of the heavy barrel and pulled the gun out into the hall, the stock dragging the floor. She didn't bother to pick it up all the way, but walked back to the kitchen dragging it behind her. When she entered the kitchen, Joe had finished breakfast, and without saying goodbye was almost out the kitchen door, his back to her. She, quickly, hoisted the shotgun to her shoulder, staggering under the unexpected weight of the heavy gun.

Emma Paul pointed the big 12 gauge at her husband's back and pulled the trigger. Joe, who, incidentally, wasn't the type of guy to keep a loaded gun in the house, slammed the door behind him. Though he didn't care very much, he wondered what had pissed off his wife. He could hear her through the kitchen door yelling, "Shit, shit, shit!"

Strange, he thought. Emma never cursed.

Amanda Clark answered the knock at her front door.

"Well, Reverend Morgan. What a nice surprise," she greeted the gentleman standing on her porch.

"Hello, Amanda," smiled the Reverend, "Just doing a little visiting this morning. Thought I'd drop by."

"Please, come in. Would you like some coffee?" invited Amanda.

"Yes, thank you," said the Reverend.

Amanda showed him into the living room.

"Have a seat. Give me a minute to put the pot on."

The Reverend sat down on the couch, and Amanda went to the kitchen.

Albert Morgan, Pastor of Bramwell's non-denominational – and only – church, enjoyed strolling around his little town in the mornings, occasionally stopping by to visit with a parishioner or two. It wasn't his intention to visit Amanda Clark this morning but, as he passed her walkway, he saw Aubrey and Sarah Crumb peeking out the window of their house across the street. Fearful that... well, maybe fearful is too strong a word... let's say, to circumvent them from inviting him over, he turned onto Amanda's walkway and climbed the porch stairs. He didn't want to seem rude, but he wasn't in the mood for the Crumb sisters this morning. Truth be told, he was never really in the mood for the Crumb sisters. They were, to put it simply, no fun. Not that he expected his parishioners to be fun, but the Crumb sisters took being no fun to a whole new level.

Amanda came back into the living room with a coffee service, which she set on the coffee table in front of the Reverend. She sat down beside him on the couch and poured for both of them.

"There we are," she said, handing him the cup and saucer.

Albert recoiled in horror, suddenly, powerfully, overcome by a feeling of raw lust – an, almost, uncontrollable urge to lunge at Amanda – tear at her clothing, feel her naked, writhing in his arms... smell her flesh.

"*Oh, my God...* Oh, my dear God!" he uttered in a shocked whisper, tears of shame coming to his eyes. He practically jumped to his feet.

"Oh," he stammered, "I'm so sorry. There's something very pressing... I just remembered... I have to go... I'm... I'm so sorry."

He turned and rushed towards the front door deeply shaken.

"Reverend, are you all right," asked Amanda, a little shaken herself by the Reverend's odd behavior. She stood and followed him to the door.

"Are you sure you don't have time for coffee?"

By the time she reached the door the Reverend was already outside.

"Reverend?" she exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

Reverend Morgan looked over his shoulder, "Yes, I'm fine. I just have to... I'm so sorry."

A rather stunned Amanda watched as Albert fairly sprinted towards the sidewalk.

She shrugged and thought, *Whatever*, then closed the door.

Jim Crowley, owner of the Bramwell Theater, stood on the sidewalk looking up at the marquee.

It read, "Weekly Classic Movie," and under that, "The Sound of Music."

Jim showed old classics during the week, and saved the first-run movies for weekends. Week-night business was slow, and new releases were expensive, so alternating the old movies on week-nights with the new ones on week-ends worked out fine, especially since so many of the counties older residents appreciated the old ones more – "Less sex and violence," they'd comment.

Jim stood there staring up at the marquee.

"What crap," he growled, "Schmaltzy kids, and faggoty Nazis singing shitty old folk songs."

Jim went inside, and a few minutes later emerged from the storage room with a ladder and enough black plastic letters

to change *The Sound Of Music* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Out on West Stillman Road, old Mrs. Hinkle sat in her wheelchair on her front porch muttering, "Damn tourist" with each car that passed. Young Teddy Kroger, on his way home from school, waved and smiled at her as he rode by on his bicycle. She raised her bone thin arm as if to wave back, but instead, shook her fist at him, and yelled, "Damn tourist!" but he had already disappeared down the road.

She sat there grumbling for a moment then, groaning with the effort, lifted her old body, unsteadily, from the chair, and hobbled across the porch. She opened the screen door and went inside. A few minutes later she reappeared carrying a carton of raw eggs. Making her way back to the wheelchair, old Mrs. Hinkle sat down and waited.

The UPS driver took a right off Bramwell Boulevard onto Stillman Road heading west. Over the engine noise of the big brown van, he didn't hear the egg splatter against its side, or old Mrs. Hinkle yell, "Damn tourist!"

Emma Paul drove all the way to the hardware store in Stillman Township trying to find shotgun shells. They didn't have any.

She muttered, "shit, shit, shit," all the way back. It was going to be a strange day in Bramwell Valley.

Eight

BREAKFAST OVER, kids packed off to school, Melanie and Claudia walked over to the drug store for their usual morning coffee with Louis. As they reached the entrance, the heavy glass door flung open, causing them to jump back to avoid being hit by it. A tall, middle-aged man, obviously angry, stormed out mumbling something that sounded like, "asshole." Ignoring Melanie and Claudia, he stomped away down the sidewalk.

"What was *that* all about?" Melanie asked Louis once they were inside. "Who *was* that, dad?"

"Got me," answered Louis, sounding a bit shook up. "Never saw him before. He just came in here wanting a prescription filled that was out of date. When I wouldn't fill it he started yelling and cussing, threatening me. Pissed me off... all that yelling. I told him if he didn't get out of my store I'd help him out."

"Jeez, dad, gettin' cocky in your old age, aren't you? Seriously, he looked kinda rough."

Louis shrugged. "Well, what could I do? I can't have customers coming in to a scene like that... all that yelling."

The screech of tires on pavement came from out front.

Louis said, "What the hell..." and went to the window to look outside. Amanda Clark stood at the curb with an astonished look on her face. Joe Paul's old pickup truck was stopped in the middle of the street, Joe's head sticking out the window. He was yelling something Louis couldn't make out through the store's window glass. A second later Joe sped off, tires spinning.

Amanda stood there in a daze for a moment watching the old pickup speed away, then she turned and walked in the drug store.

"What in the world is *with* Joe Paul, today?" she exclaimed.

"He comes roaring down the road like a bat out of hell in that old piece-of-crap truck of his and almost runs me down. Then he has the nerve to stop and cuss at me for being in his way."

Amanda took a deep breath. "Oh, hey! I got another one for you. Get this. Reverend Morgan was over this morning acting all freaky and..."

The little bells over the door jingled, and Emma Paul peeked in, timidly.

"Mr. Walker, do you, by any chance, sell shotgun shells?" she asked through the half-opened door.

"No, Emma. Sorry," answered Louis.

Amanda almost shouted, "Emma, what's wrong with your husband. He almost ran me down a minute ago."

Emma, retreating back out the door, said with a smile, "Oh, don't worry. That won't be happening again."

The door closed and she was gone.

Melanie, Claudia, Amanda and Louis looked at each other, wondering the same thing.

"Shotgun shells?" Louis voiced the thought with a puzzled expression.

"What would mousy little Emma want with shotgun shells?"

"Amanda," said Claudia, thoughtfully. She paused for a moment, then in a suspicious tone, "uh... what were you saying about Albert Morgan?"

"Oh, yeah. He came by this morning... you know, just out visiting. I made coffee, and sat down beside him, and suddenly he got... I don't know... just weird. He couldn't wait to get out of there; looked like the devil was after him or something. Oh, speaking of the devil, I wonder how Harry is doing out in the real world."

"Hmmm, Harry, indeed," ventured Claudia, still looking thoughtful, and still using the same suspicious tone.

Louis hadn't lost his puzzled look.

"Harry who?" He glanced at each of the women. "What'd I miss here?"

Melanie, catching Claudia's drift, said, "Whoa, there, Claudia. Come on, it's a little early to be jumping to conclusions, isn't it? I mean, a few people seem to be goofed out this morning, but surely you don't think Harry is... I don't know... doing something?"

Claudia's gaze seemed focused somewhere in the distance. She spoke thoughtfully, speculating.

"No, probably not. But it does make you think, doesn't it? All that stuff with Harry; now all this. No, I don't really think he's doing anything. But, it's funny though, right? There still could be a link of some kind. Maybe... maybe he's *not* doing something... something he's supposed to do."

Louis looked exasperated, "Is somebody gonna fill me in on this?"

Amanda said, "You know, she's right, Melanie. You gotta admit, people *are* acting mighty peculiar, and the only difference between today, and any other day, is yesterday Harry... today, no Harry. A little far fetched but still..."

Claudia sat up straight, decisively, and said, "I'm thinking, at least it might be a good idea to run it by Aubrey and Sarah; see what they think. Maybe the five of us do a little brainstorming before... well, just for the heck of it."

Louis threw his hands in the air. "Never mind. I give up... bunch of crazy women!"

Claudia laughed, "I'm sorry, Louis. It's complicated. Look, we're gonna have to skip coffee, but I promise I'll drop by later and explain what's going on, if anything. That is, if we can figure it out ourselves."

Louis groaned, "This is one of those weird valley wizard women things, isn't it."

The women were already leaving.

Louis yelled after them, "I should have had a son!"

Melanie hollered back over her shoulder, "Careful there, Dad. Just remember whose gonna be taking care of you when you're old and feeble."

Aubrey Crumb was a powerful 'weird valley wizard woman,' as Louis would have put it. So was Sarah Crumb. Neither was any more, or less, powerful than Melanie, Claudia or Amanda, but being twins, a special bond existed between them that greatly enhanced their combined abilities when they got worked up, which however, rarely happened. Short, rather plain and a little on the dumpy side, their unimpressive appearance suggested that neither were much to be reckoned with, which was far from true.

"The Reverend knows!" declared Sarah, wringing her hands, nervously.

"He senses that evil is loose in the world. Why else would he visit Amanda on this very morning?"

"To accuse her of heresy!" lamented Aubrey, visibly distressed, "...and bring damnation down upon her. He'll

surely be here next. We'll tell him we were against it; that we were outvoted."

Aubrey folded her arms in front of her, frowning, then shrugged.

"Oh, posh. We're already damned, why bother."

There was a knock at the front door.

Sarah jumped, "It's him! It's Reverend Morgan."

Aubrey stood up from the sofa.

"Calm down, Sarah. Let me see who it is before we start worrying about getting more damned."

Aubrey went to the front door. As she opened it, Claudia walked in without invitation. Melanie and Amanda followed.

"We need to talk, ladies," announced Claudia, "At least, we think we do."

Sarah stood abruptly.

She cried, "He came to you all, didn't he. He damned you all, and he'll be coming here next, won't he!"

"Huh?" from Claudia.

Aubrey said, "We saw Reverend Morgan going into Amanda's earlier. He knows about Harry, right?"

"Yeah," said Amanda. "I mean, no... I mean, yes, he came to visit, but I don't know if he knows about Harry, or not. Why?"

Sarah looked relieved. "He didn't damn you?"

Melanie piped up, "All right, guys. You've got my head spinning. Let's just sit down, quietly, and start out all over again. Okay?"

Nine

QUACKRAK WAS A DEMON, which was no big deal. He had no extraordinary powers, and didn't consider himself particularly evil – at least no more evil than anyone else. The only demonic thing about him was his appearance. He wasn't very pretty. Of course, not being pretty doesn't necessarily make one demonic, but one look at Quackrak and you'd have to say, 'Yep, that's a demon; no doubt about it.'

Then again, it wouldn't be fair to single out Quackrak as far as looks go. Basically, he was a pretty decent fellow.

Quackrak lived in Hell, naturally, and had only one purpose – which he liked to call his profession – and that was to monitor the machine that kept track of incoming souls. Every few seconds, a slimy, foul smelling soul would slide down a chute and plop into a sorter to be automatically logged in and filed away where it would be forgotten for eternity: no fire, no brimstone, just filed and forgotten. He sometimes wondered what happened to souls that weren't slimy or foul smelling. From the little he knew about

mankind, he suspected there weren't any. Luckily, he was wrong, but not too wrong.

Of course, Quackrak wasn't the only demon in Hell. There were others, like for sweeping the floors, cleaning, cooking, and running errands, stuff like that, and to Quackrak's credit, they weren't very pretty either.

For the last twelve hours, Quackrak had sat at his desk twiddling his thumbs and humming to himself, watching slimy souls slide down the chute into the sorter. There seemed to be a few more of them than usual, and the machine was having a little trouble keeping up. He wondered if there was something he should do about it, but he couldn't think of anything, so he just sat there twiddling and humming. Finally, overtaken by boredom, he decided to take a break. He gave a quick check to make sure everything was working okay, then stood up and walked out of his cubicle. Out in the hall, several demons sat on the floor doing nothing constructive and looking bored.

Slackers, thought Quackrak.

He wandered down the hall looking for something to do – anything to relieve the boredom. As he passed Lucifer's office, he stopped and peeked in the open door. The office lights were off, the room lit only by the glow from the brightly lit hall. Quackrak stepped inside, and flipped the light switch by the door. The room flooded with harsh light from the overhead fluorescents, exposing the sterile neatness that places have when someone has moved out, never expecting to return.

The empty office echoed Lucifer's parting words.

"I'm leaving," Lucy had said.

"I've had it. I'm outta here. You're in charge now."

And that had been that! Quackrak stood in the deserted office feeling, suddenly, very alone, and a little scared. Lucifer gone: demons slacking off...

"Everything is going to Hell," Quackrak said out loud, chuckling uneasily at the pun despite his anxiety.

With a last glance around the room, he turned to leave, then stopped and looked back. A door on the other side of the room was slightly ajar.

Probably a closet, he thought.

Curious, he crossed the room and pulled open the door. There seemed to be nothing there, no closet, not another room, just nothing. He wondered what would happen if he stepped through the door.

This being another beautiful spring afternoon, Jilly and Patty lay sunning themselves on the big flat rock in the clear cold water of Blue Springs.

Quackrak popped out of Hell between them.

Jilly screamed.

Patty screamed.

Quackrak said, "Uh Oh!"

Ten

PINA COLADA, margarita, or frozen daiquiri. Harry couldn't make up his mind.

A tough decision in paradise, he thought, happily. Warm sun, white sand, nubile young snow bunnies frolicking in the surf. Oh, sweet Lauderdale. Definitely the closest I'll ever get to heaven.

He lay on the sandy towel looking up at the seagulls circling overhead, and breathing in the pungent beach smells: hot sand, salt spray and coconut tanning oil. He decided on the Frozen Daiquiri.

Harry got up and walked across the crowded sand towards the pool bar of the Crystal Sands Resort Hotel. The bar was an open, thatched roofed affair, common to the luxury hotels along the Lauderdale beach strip, and as always during Spring Break, overflowing with golden tanned, young college types intent on partying till they puked.

Reaching the bar, Harry squirmed his way through a group of giggly young co-eds, and waved for the bartender's attention. Over the noise of rock & roll blaring from a five-piece band by the pool, and the general mayhem of spring

break insanity, Harry shouted his drink order loud enough for the bartender to understand.

His Frozen Daiquiri came in an oversized plastic glass. Holding it high to keep it from being jostled out of his hand, he elbowed his way out of the crowd at the bar, and walked back across the, somewhat, less crowded beach to his towel.

Harry sat down on the towel and sipped his Daiquiri. The sun was warm, the Daiquiri was cold, and Harry was as happy as a pig in mud. He was already beginning to forget about the whole devil thing.

Yep, he thought, ...bartender by night, and beach bum by day. That's the ticket.

Things had worked out perfectly for Harry. The job at the hotel lounge happened just like he thought it would, and he loved it. The tips were great, and he'd already made a few friends, among them a busty blonde cocktail waitress named Alice. For Harry, life in the real world was looking good.

Eleven

"SUBTLE?" Aubrey Crumb cocked her head.

"Yeah, subtle," said Amanda. "Nothing you can put your finger on. I mean, just acting kind of different, like out of character or something. Not everybody, but enough people to make it, I don't know... just different."

Sarah Crumb looked confused. "I don't get it."

Melanie regarded the Crumb twins. "You don't think it's a little... wacky? Jilly and Patty all of a sudden so goody-goody? – really out of character for those two. And the guy going crazy at the drug store, and dad threatening to whip his ass?"

Amanda added, "And Joe Paul, who usually walks around in a dull daze, flippin' out over nothing? Not to mention the Reverend going goofy. And whatever that was with Emma and the shotgun shells – talk about out of character."

"So, that's it?... a few rude people and a coupla kids behaving themselves?" Sarah still wasn't getting it.

Claudia groaned, "Sarah, all that and it's only ten o'clock in the morning. Think about it!"

Sarah thought about it, "So?"

Amanda prodded, "Sarah, we've all lived in Bramwell all our lives. We all know everybody here, or at least almost everybody. It's Bramwell, for God's sake. People in Bramwell don't take on different personalities overnight unless..."

"Ah!" snapped Sarah, "Unless, indeed!" Her face screwed up in righteous indignation. "Unless certain persons, who should know better, and against our better judgment, released the Beast to do what he does best; spread evil and wreak havoc!"

Aubrey raised her eyebrows and nodded vigorous agreement with her sister.

"No, no," said Claudia. "Huh uh. We don't think it's anything like that." She almost laughed, imagining Harry running evilly rampant through the countryside in his silly red suit.

"No, we think it might be something else."

"Like what?" asked Aubrey.

"Well... okay, first we have to agree that it's too much to be a coincidence – all this stuff going on right after Harry leaves."

Sarah stiffened, opening her mouth to speak.

"Hold on, Sarah, please. Just let me finish before you start hopping up and down, all right?"

Sarah deflated, and Claudia went on, "Last night, remember?... Harry said we couldn't name one thing he'd ever done, personally, that was evil. I've been thinking about that and, well, can we?"

Both Crumbs fidgeted, but said nothing. Amanda and Melanie were silent.

Claudia continued, "He said people were evil, not him, and that he was just a focus for our evil – present company excluded, of course." She paused, waiting for comment.

"But..." stuttered Sarah.

"But what?" demanded Claudia.

"But he's the devil," Aubrey sneered.

"Not anymore," said Claudia.

Aubrey persisted, "Then what's going on? You're saying everybody went crazy because the Devil left town?"

"Not exactly," said Claudia. "Suppose we go along with Harry on this... that people, or some people, are naturally evil, at least to an extent, and the only thing that keeps it from coming out is... and here's where the logic gets a little foggy... but what if... well, Harry said he, as the devil, was just the focus. If all evil is focused in the devil, what happens if there is no devil?"

"What does that mean; focused?" Sarah looked confused.

"I think he meant," Claudia paused to think for moment, "... that mankind's evil gets channeled to him instead of building up in people, or something like that."

"Far fetched," scoffed Aubrey.

"Yeah, maybe," Amanda admitted. "But something's not right. Something's happening, and if Claudia's right..." she trailed off.

Melanie picked up the thread, "She means, if Claudia's right about what Harry meant, that the devil is like a sponge that soaks up people's evil and keeps it contained, then if suddenly there's no devil... what if it starts building up in people?"

"Still far fetched," said Aubrey, "...and still just a few people acting funny."

"Nevertheless," Claudia said, "If the gentle townfolk of our fair town don't settle down a little bit, and it has anything at all to do with Harry, then we need to be ready with some ideas no matter how far fetched."

Twelve

QUACKRAK WAS TERRIFIED. He lay on the rock, knobby knees drawn close to his thin chest, fetal-like, while the two incredibly noisy creatures hopped up and down on either side of him, threateningly. They had stopped their horrible screeching, and were now making loud squawking sounds like "*Oh, my God,*" and "*yuck*" and "*gross.*"

Quackrak scrunched his little red eyes closed and tried to play dead.

Jilly's hysterics had subsided, somewhat. She still shivered with disgust.

"Kick it into the water," she cried.

"No way." Patty shuddered. "I'm not touching it. My God, it's ugly."

Cautiously, Jilly bent down for a better look.

"Is it dead?"

Patty squatted down and inched a little closer. She stuck a finger out towards Quackrak, tentatively, then poked him in the side.

Despite his fear, Quackrak, being ticklish, giggled. The girls jumped back as far as the space on the flat rock

allowed, and Quackrak, sensing the creatures had retreated, opened one eye.

They don't look like they're gonna attack me, he thought.

"It doesn't look like it's gonna attack us," ventured Jilly.

The two girls and the demon regarded each other for a moment. Feeling a little better about the situation, Quackrak slowly sat up, careful not to make any sudden movements. The two creatures tried to move further away, but were already at the far edge of the flat rock.

"Just gets uglier and uglier, don't it." Patty said.

"I don't think it's dangerous, though. I think it's scared," said Jilly.

"Yeah, but what is it?" Patty grimaced. "Looks like a cross between ET and Yoda on a bad day."

"It's a troll. I bet it's a troll," said Jilly. "Or a whatdaya call it... those little green things."

"Martians?" snickered Patty.

"No, those... you know, leprechauns!"

"Can't be," said Patty, "Not here. Those are in Ireland or someplace. Besides, it's more red than green... reddish green, or greenish red."

Quackrak studied the two squawking creatures hunched up across the rock from him. Suddenly, a light went on in his head, and the truth poured in.

"People!" he exclaimed, incredulously. "You're people, aren't you! I'm in the people world."

Jilly squealed, "Oh, my god, it's quacking!"

"Like a duck," Patty said, laughing. "... a troll duck."

Jilly was giggling, loudly. Patty's laughter was getting out of control.

She stammered through it, "An ugly duckling Martian... troll... greenish..." she started losing it in laughter.

Jilly picked it up, barely managing to get out, "... greenish... reddish... leprechaun... thingie..." before both girls doubled up in hysterics.

Quackrak flinched at the new outburst. His initial fear had gone away, but his ears hurt from all the noise, and he was beginning to feel queasy. He was pretty sure these people weren't going to hurt him, but then again, they were obviously insane, and that could be a little iffy, so best to stay alert.

"Just my luck to run into crazy ones." He murmured to himself.

Then a disturbing thought came to him. *What if they're all insane... all people? What if that's why their souls are slimy and foul smelling?*

He felt cold all of a sudden. *What if I'm stuck here, and can't get home?*

Panic rose inside him, and he began to shiver.

Jilly had calmed down, back in control. She grabbed Patty's arm.

"Look. Patty, look. I think it's crying."

"What? No way."

"Really... look."

Patty looked. "It is! It's crying... I think."

Jilly reached, slowly, toward Quackrak.

"Ohhh," she cooed. "What's wrong, little fella?"

Patty chuckled. "Oh jeez, Jill, get serious!"

"No, look at it... really... the poor little thing."

Patty moved closer, still suspicious of getting bitten, or worse, but Quackrak just sat there, wide-eyed and teary, feeling very vulnerable and alone.

Aunt Claudia sat on the sofa reading. At the sound of the front door opening, she looked up from her book. Through the blur of her thick reading glasses she thought could make

out Jillian and Patty walking into the front hall with David between them, each girl holding one of his hands. She smiled at them, and nudged her glasses down on her nose for a clearer look.

She got a much clearer look.

Claudia's mouth dropped open, the book fell from her hands.

She gasped. "Oh-My-God-Jesus-In-Heaven, what is that?"

It damn sure wasn't David.

Melanie walked in from the dining room, and stopped short, eyes snapping wide. The glass of ice tea she was bringing from the kitchen dropped from her hand and shattered on the floor. She stood there staring, dumbfounded.

From the front hall, Jilly said, "Mom, we..."

Patty jumped in, unable to contain her excitement. "Look what we found, Mrs. Meljac!"

Melanie and Claudia just stared, aghast.

Quackrak sensed that things were tense and getting tenser.

He mumbled, "Oh dear."

"Good God, it quacks," Melanie managed.

"No, mom, it's talking," corrected Jilly

Patty said, "Yeah, it must be, cause it listens when you talk, and when it quacks like that it looks at you like you're supposed to understand. So it's another language, or something... maybe."

Melanie was flustered, frozen in place. She wanted to rush to her daughter, to both girls, grab them and tear them away from the improbable thing that stood between them holding their hands like some wayward, lost... something.

The girls started into the living room, dragging Quackrak with them.

"We can keep him in the guest room, and..." Jilly started to say.

"Not in my guest room, you won't!"

Melanie shuddered, then shook her head hard, snapping out of it and taking control.

She said, firmly, "Ok... what?" she pointed to Quackrak.

"What is that? Where did you get it, and for God's sake, what's it doing in my house? Give! Now!" she demanded.

It took a few minutes for things to calm down.

"You say, on the flat rock out in the water?" asked Aunt Claudia.

"Yeah," said Jilly.

"You're sure it didn't come *out* of the water?" Melanie asked.

"No," answered Patty. "He just like, 'pop' and there he was; right out of thin air. I almost peed my pants," she grinned, embarrassed. "I was so scared all I could do was scream."

"Me too," said Jilly. "But he was scared too. I know he was cause when we started screaming he curled up into a little ball, and wouldn't move."

Patty added, "... until I poked him. Then I think he laughed, just like he was ticklish or something."

Everyone had sat down in the living room, Jilly and Patty on either side of Aunt Claudia on the sofa. Melanie had moved one of a matching set of antique chairs from under the front window on the other side of the living room. She sat facing Claudia and the girls from across the coffee table. Quackrak sat on the floor a few feet from Melanie waiting to see what would happen next.

"And this was all just a little while ago, in broad daylight?" asked Aunt Claudia.

Both girls nodded their heads.

Aunt Claudia thought for a moment, sighed, then said, "Well, I don't know what it is, exactly, but I'm pretty sure I know where it came from.

Jilly confessed. "Yeah... we kinda figured something like that." She paused, then said, "But he's tame. He's not mean or anything."

Melanie and Claudia looked at each other for a moment, then at the girls, then back at each other.

"There's only one thing it *could* be," said Melanie.

She looked directly at the girls. "It's gotta be a demon."

"No way!" Jilly and Patty were both wide eyed.

"Demons are evil monsters," exclaimed Jilly, "... aren't they?"

"Who says?" asked Melanie.

Jilly looked exasperated. "I don't know... everybody, I guess. And in the movies, and stories and all."

She looked at Quackrak, pointing. "He can't be an evil demon. Look at him. He's just a little... thing, or something."

Aunt Claudia said, "Evil, or not, he doesn't belong here. You two have to put him back."

"Oh, no, Anta," Patty said. "I can keep him at my house."

"*Oh, right!*" Claudia choked back a laugh. "Just let me call Amanda and tell her we're sending a demon over as a house guest for a while; just till he gets settled." She laughed out loud, "Whatdaya think, Mel?"

Melanie chuckled, "Oh, yeah! She'll love it. No doubt."

"Hey, Wait!" Jilly said. "You said, *you two*." It had just dawned on her.

"You said *you two* have to put him back. You don't mean me and Patty... do you?" She was fidgeting, nervously.

"*Mom!* I'm sixteen... we're both sixteen. We can't do that stuff yet!" she protested.

"Then it's time you learned," declared Melanie.

Thirteen

DEPUTY HARRIS grabbed the radio microphone off the dashboard.

Christ, now what?

He depressed the send key, and said, "This is Harris, go ahead."

"Another one just for you, Jack," the voice from the radio's speaker teased.

Harris scowled and clicked the mic again.

"In Bramwell?"

"You got it," came the voice.

He clicked again. "Six calls, Janice. That's six calls in one day... from Bramwell for Christ sake."

The dispatchers voice crackled. "Yes indeedy, officer Jackie, sir. The good citizens of Bramwell require the services of the Princeton County Sheriffs Department yet once again, today. Go get em, tiger."

Harris growled into the mic, "I got your tiger hangin,' Janice."

The radio sizzled static. "My, my, we're testy today, aren't we."

Harris clicked. "Just tell me where it is, okay?"

More static, then, "All right. Uh, listen Jack, this one could be something. You might wanna watch yourself. Reports of gunshots – 1121 West Stillman Road. That's about a quarter mile the other side of Bramwell Boulevard. Pretty much just woods out that way. Probably somebody shooting at a tree, but still..." the dispatcher's voice trailed off.

"I'll check it." Harris clicked, then replaced the mic on the dash.

Emma Paul had found the shotgun shells. They were on the shelf in the closet, the same closet where she'd found the shotgun. She thought how Joe would have laughed at her for running around all over the county looking for shells when they were right there on the shelf. The thought of Joe laughing irritated her. Then again, everything about Joe irritated her.

Easy to fix that, she thought.

Emma took the shotgun and the box of shells outside and around back of the dilapidated shed where Joe kept his Yamaha Super Snowmobile.

"Stupid snowmobile," she hissed at the sleek machine as she rounded the shed. Three thousand dollars so Joe could whiz around through the woods with his drunken buddies for the two lousy weeks a year it snowed in the valley.

"I'll sell that," she said out loud, smiling to herself.

Emma had never shot a shotgun before, or any gun for that matter. When she'd pointed it at Joe in the kitchen, she'd almost dropped it. She hadn't expected it to be so heavy. One surprise was enough, so she'd decided to take it out back of the shed and try a shot or two. She didn't want any more surprises.

Behind the shed was a thick stump. Joe chopped wood for the fireplace on it. The head of Joe's long-handled axe was buried in the stump's flat top. Emma considered the axe for a moment then dismissed it. Nope, too clumsy. Besides, she was growing rather fond of the shotgun. She wrestled the axe loose, tossed it on the ground, and sat down on the stump, the shotgun on her lap.

Emma opened the box of shells and pulled out one of the three-inch red cylinders. She had never seen Joe, actually, shoot the gun, but she'd seen him clean it. She knew that moving the lever on top of the breach would open the two barrels, and that had to be where you put the shells in.

She lifted the gun off her lap and moved the lever to the side. There was a solid metallic click, and the heavy black barrel pivoted down, suddenly, striking her knee with enough force that she cried out loud.

"Oh, shit!" She bent over and clasped her knee, rocking back and forth.

Damn, damn, damn... She hadn't expected that.

The pain faded quickly and she sat up straight, the gun on her lap open at the breach. The shells were scattered on the ground beside the stump where she'd dropped them. At least she was getting somewhere – though one painful step at a time.

Emma reached down and picked up two of the red shells. She stuck them in the two holes in the breach end of the barrel and snapped the gun closed, then lifted it off her lap and held it in front of her, examining her accomplishment.

"Now you'll shoot," she said to the shotgun, rather proud of herself. And since she was, unconsciously, fiddling around with the trigger, ...it did!

The blast from the big 12 gauge was horrendous. The heavy gun jerked out of her hands and slammed, lengthwise,

into her chest. The impact sent her toppling backwards off the stump. Emma hit the ground squalling, terrified by the violence of the gun's unexpected discharge. For a few dreadful seconds, she lay sprawled on the ground on her back; eyes squeezed tightly shut, waiting for further catastrophe.

A moment passed uneventfully... then another. Cautiously, Emma opened her eyes. So far, so good... sorta. She sat up. Besides having the breath knocked out of her by the shotgun, and again by the fall to the ground, she didn't think she was hurt.

"Screw it!" she said aloud, "Rat poison! That's the way to go." Through the ringing in her ears, her own voice sounded muffled, and far away.

"1113... 1115," Harris counted off the addresses as he looked for 1121 Stillman Road. He counted 1117 just as the egg hit the windshield, splattering clear slime and yellow goo on the glass right in front of his eyes.

"You gotta be kidding me!" he groaned.

He slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to an abrupt stop. Harris opened the door and jumped out.

"Goddamn kids," he muttered, scanning the area for the culprits. Nothing. Nobody around except old Mrs. Hinkle in her wheelchair on the porch of 1117, who smiled an odd little smile and waved at him. He thought about asking her if she'd seen the kids, but decided the gunshot report was more important.

Harris turned his back to the old lady and got in the car. Lucky for him, old Mrs. Hinkle was out of eggs.

Emma squinted at the officer standing at the open door, as though squinting would make her hear better. She'd barely heard him knocking. Her ears still rang loudly from

the concussion of the shotgun blast. All other sounds were muffled.

"Paris?"

"No. Harris," said the officer, "Officer Harris."

Jack had recognized the house as soon as he pulled up in front. It was Joe Paul's place. Though Jack knew Joe from high school, they were never close friends, and he had never met Joe's wife

"Harris?" repeated Emma.

She was getting the hang of it now. If she watched his face while he talked she could make out what he was saying. She caught most of what he said next.

"... a report of gunshots from this address, or near this address."

It dawned on Emma why he was there. It had never occurred to her that shooting a gun might be against the law, although she was pretty sure shooting her husband was. But, she hadn't done that... yet.

"Gunshots?" she said, too loud.

Harris recognized the squinting and loud talking. He'd seen it before in novices who'd fired a large caliber gun for the first time.

"Ma'am, were you, or maybe your husband, shooting a gun out here?"

"Emma squinted. "What?"

"Shooting, ma'am," he said, louder. "Were you, or someone else here, shooting a gun a little while ago?"

Might as well admit it, Emma thought.

"Yes." Her ears popped, and the word sounded almost normal.

"I mean, me. My husbands not home. Am I in trouble?"

"What were you shooting at?" Harris asked.

"Just stuff," said Emma.

"Stuff?"

"Yeah, an old stump... just stuff. It's a shotgun... my husband's. I just wanted to try it," Emma said, innocently. "Shouldn't I do that?"

The ringing was fading, and she could hear much more clearly.

Harris was losing interest. Nothing wrong here, just a bored housewife playing around with her husband's toys.

"Thing is, ma'am, you're in the town limits. Discharging a firearm within the town limits is illegal. You understand how dangerous that can be with other houses close by?"

Emma was getting nervous. He wouldn't arrest her, would he?

"I didn't know, honest." She was visibly upset, now.

"Am I gonna get arrested?"

Harris raised a hand in front of him, a claming gesture.

"No ma'am, but you can't do that, okay? No more shooting, all right?"

Emma relaxed a little. "I'm sorry, really. I won't do it again, I promise." She still looked nervous.

Harris was a bit embarrassed that he'd upset her.

He gave her a friendly smile, and said, "It's okay. Nobody was hurt, and everything's all right here, right?"

Emma nodded a 'yes,' and returned his smile, meekly.

Harris said, "Ok. Well, you have a nice day, ma'am."

Emma sighed with relief. "Thank you, and really, I won't do it again."

Harris made a hat-tipping gesture, then turned and walked to his cruiser. He got in and closed the door just as his unit number came over the radio.

"Now what," he moaned.

Fourteen

AMANDA KEPT SAYING, "Unbelievable."

It was the first thing she'd said when she'd seen Quackrak. She'd said it again after she'd heard the whole story, and now, leaning against the picnic table at the springs, staring at the little demon, she said it again.

"Unbelievable!"

Patty was sulking. "I still think we should keep him."

"Yeah, right!" Amanda snorted.

Claudia was looking back down the trail towards town. She held up a hand.

"Hold on a minute."

Through a break in the trees, Claudia could just barely see Jack Harris' cruiser coming up Meljac Lane towards the springs where she, Melanie, Amanda and the two girls had brought Quackrak.

"What in the world is *he* doing up here?"

"Who?"

"That Harris boy from over in Stillman. The one that's a cop."

Melanie craned her neck to see through the trees. She spotted Harris' car.

"Great! Now what!"

Amanda squinted through the dense foliage at the approaching car.

She said, "S'ok, I got it."

She closed her eyes, concentrating. The Sheriff's cruiser came to an abrupt stop.

"That should hold him for a while," she said.

Patty looked astounded.

"Wow! Mom, how'd you do that?"

Melanie broke in, quickly. "Amanda, go down there and stall him."

"Why me?"

"Cause he had a crush on you all through high school."

"He did not," denied Amanda.

"He did so. Go down there. Hurry!"

"What am I going to say to him?"

"I don't know. Flirt, or something. Just go!"

Amanda huffed, "Melanie, I'm not gonna go flirt with Jack Harris,"

Patty was smirking. "Oh, my God, Mom. Somebody really had a crush on you?"

"No!" barked Amanda, "...well, maybe."

Jack Harris had gotten out of his car, and was looking up towards the springs.

"Just go before he decides to walk up here."

Amanda was adamant. "Mel, this is my daughter's first experience with powers. You want me to miss that?" Her voice was forceful and final.

"Oh," said Melanie, suddenly realizing the fact, "...no, of course not. Sorry. But we gotta do something to keep him from coming up here."

"Oh Hell, I'll go charm the officer," said Claudia, smirking. "And if that doesn't work, I'll turn him into a toad."

"I'd rather have a handsome prince," joked Amanda. Claudia smiled, "I'll see what I can do," and walked towards the break in the trees and the stalled police car.

Quackrak had gone along without a fuss when the two insane people he'd met on the big flat rock had dragged him down the trail to the stone house. When they'd made him sit on the floor while they jabbered with three other ones – who seemed marginally less insane – he'd sat patiently waiting to see what would happen next. When the whole bunch of them walked him all the way back to where he'd started from, Quackrak began to get bored. So far, all he'd done was walk, listen to people squawk at each other, and walk some more. At least what was happening now seemed to have some kind of purpose. The insane people had formed a line, Quackrak in the middle, the shorter ones with a tendency to screech – the ones he'd met, originally – on each side of him, and a taller one on either end. The third tall one had gone off somewhere. Each of the screechy ones held one of his hands.

Melanie stood beside Jilly, her hand resting reassuringly on her daughter's shoulder. Amanda was beside Patty, her daughter's hand in hers.

Melanie said, "Are you ready?"

Both girls nodded, nervously.

"All right, just relax... no pressure, no hurry... just one, calm, step at a time. Both of you follow along with me."

"Shouldn't we be out on the rock?" Jilly asked.

"No, this is close enough. Okay, here we go. Think back to the instant you first saw your little friend."

Amanda grinned. "*Say Hello to my lil' frin,*" she said whimsically, mimicking Pacino in Scarface.

"Mom!" exclaimed Patty; "This is serious!"

"Mrs. Clark!" Jilly looked surprised, and a little flustered by Amanda's joke. Amanda smiled and put her arm around her daughter's shoulders.

With a soothing tone, she said, "I know, I know, but sweetheart, you need to relax. You're stiff as a board, okay? You too, Jilly."

Melanie, smiled in agreement, waited for the girls to compose themselves, then continued.

"Again, imagine the instant you first saw the demon. Put that picture in your minds." She paused a moment. "Got it?" Both girls nodded.

"Now, imagine time as a line; a line between the instant he appeared, and the instant just *before* he appeared. Imagine that you can reach out and push him back along that line."

She waited a second, "Ok?"

Again, the girls nodded.

"Now, push!" she ordered.

Quackrak disappeared.

Lemonade... Every time Harris saw Claudia Meljac – Anta, as he remembered her – he could almost taste it. Aunt Claudia's lemonade in the summertime when there was no school, and not a worry in the world... he and Claudia's nephew. Karol, ...and there was Dennis Clark, Amanda Billings, and Melanie Walker, whose father owned the drug store on the corner... and the other kids from Bramwell and Stillman, all of them grown now, most gone elsewhere to bigger cities, greener pastures – Karol and Dennis... dead.

Jack Harris grew up in Stillman Township, which sported one of the few interstate on/off ramps for Princeton County. The school, and the counties' main Post Office,

several garages, a small motel, and a scattering of other businesses served the counties' modest farm and dairy industry – modest because of the scarcity of flat land in that part of West Virginia.

Jack's friendship with Karol Meljac and Dennis Clark had started in the 9th grade. The boys had known each other all through school, but it wasn't till they started junior varsity football – the three of them, especially Dennis Clark, excelling at the game – that they became close friends.

Jack had been a big boy, tall and strong, ideal for the sport – Karol and Dennis not so big, but fast and gutsy. The game brought them together, and the three boys became inseparable.

Then one day, up popped the devil. Not the fabled one from Hell, but the one that captured and imprisoned Jack's soul as completely as could the real devil himself. The one with the sun-streaked, wheat colored hair and deep, shining, brown eyes. The one with the angelic face and the body ripe with the fresh fullness of youth. Fifteen year-old Amanda Billings.

In the 8th grade, Amanda was skinny, gawky, knobby kneed and klutzy. Still, she was well liked by the other kids and not too worried about her appearance, except when it came to boys. She had no interest in Karol Meljac, at least not in *that way*. Being next-door neighbors, they had played together and fussed and fought together as children, and she didn't see him as anything but, well... just Karol. Besides that, Karol and Melanie Walker had been sweethearts since grade school, so even if she *had* thought of him *that way*, it wouldn't have mattered.

The boys who Amanda *did* think of *that way*, were Jack Harris, and to a slightly lesser extent, Dennis Clark. But, Jack and Dennis were football stars – only junior varsity, but still, Dennis and Jack could have, practically, any girlfriend

they wanted... certainly not gawky, klutzy, Amanda Billings. Then miraculously, over the summer of her 15th year, and as often happens with teenage girls, Amanda suddenly blossomed; the gawkiness of early teen years fading away, replaced by the fullness and beauty of young womanhood.

Amanda, used to being as she'd always been, didn't see the change in herself, but the boys did, and while Jack stood by, too shy to act, Amanda gave her heart to Dennis Clark.

The teen years passed. Karol and Melanie were the first to marry – Amanda and Dennis next. Jack tucked his feelings for Amanda away in a hidden place and went on with life. Then in no time at all, a girl from Stillman with music in her voice and sunshine in her hair, changed Jack's world and for a time, Jack and Janice Harris: Karol and Melanie Meljac, and Dennis and Amanda Clark were happy. But, happiness can be fleeting, and loss can be sudden... for Melanie, as sudden as Karol's tragic accident on the road by the river – for Amanda, a meaningless war in a meaningless place... Dennis lost in its violence.

Jack and Janice had, after a few years, drifted apart – love fading into the habit of being together. But that wasn't enough, and they divorced. They both worked at the sheriff's station in Stillman, and remained close friends – and occasionally, lovers between other affairs.

Life went on in Princeton County.

Lemonade... so long ago, but he could almost taste it, now.

"No," he said to Claudia, "...no particular reason. To be honest, I was just gonna drive up there, and sit a few minutes in peace... just a little breather. You wouldn't believe the stuff people are pulling, today. Just another day over in Stillman, but in Bramwell?... jeez!"

Claudia wanted to say, '*Oh, yes I would,*' but thought better of it.

"Anyway, the car just stopped." Harris scratched his head, "Figures."

A feather-like voice in Claudia's head whispered, "*We're done,*"

She said to Harris, "Uh, Louis Walker's car does that sometimes. He says it gets a little overheated, but if you let it cool a few minutes, it's okay. Why don't you try it again, now?"

Harris said, "Won't hurt to try."

He got in the car, and turned the key. The car started right up.

"Huh!" he grunted, "How about that?"

The radio crackled, "Unit 2, are you available?"

Harris snatched up the mic, and said, "This is Unit 3, go ahead."

"Jack?" came from the radio.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Oh, baby, you're gonna love this one!"

Harris keyed the mic, grinning. "Janice, did it ever occur to you that this is an official police frequency, and 'oh, baby, you're gonna love this one,' as well as just about everything else you say, is not exactly official communications protocol?"

He was chuckling to himself.

The radio sizzled static, "Oh, dry up, Jack. You love me and you know it," she teased. "Anyway, are you ready?"

"Go ahead," he said.

"Louis Walker just threw somebody out of Walker's Drugs."

"So? It's his drug store."

"Through the plate glass window, Jack!"

Claudia gasped. "What? ...*David's with his grandpa!*"

Melanie had never seen Aunt Claudia run, before. The sight of her in a pretty good trot up the trail, and through the break in the trees, was almost comical.

Jilly and Patty, jumping up and down, exuberant over their successful initiation, spotted Claudia.

"Anta, Anta, we did it! We sent him back."

Claudia, out of breath, was waving, frantically.

"*Come quick,*" she yelled.

Fifteen

QUACKRAK CAME TUMBLING through the portal door. He hit the floor with a loud, '*oomph!*' and rolled, head over heels, across the room before coming to rest in a tangled heap against the side of Lucifer's desk.

"*That was rude!*" he bellowed.

He pushed away from the desk, untangled his limbs, and rolled over onto his back. He lay there, dazed and dizzy, waiting for the stars and sparkles in his eyes and the ringing in his ears to go away. When his head cleared, he looked up at the circle of curious demons that had gathered round and were staring down at him.

"What are you looking at?" he yelled. The demons scattered.

Quackrak sat up and rubbed at a few bumps and bruises; nothing too serious, just a few tender spots. He stood up and shook off the last of the fuzziness.

"So," he muttered to himself, "...that was the people world. A little short on hospitality, I'd say."

Surely, everybody up there couldn't be as insane as the bunch *he'd* run into. Maybe he'd merely stumbled into one of

those '*wrong place, wrong time*' things. It just didn't make sense that *everybody* up there was loony-tunes – had to be just that bunch. He was tempted to try it again. It was either that, or go back to his cubicle and stare at the soul sorter for another hundred years. The more he thought about it, the more tempted he got.

What the heck, he thought.

This time, he popped out by the picnic table instead of on the flat rock, which was good since even though the rock was only about ten feet from shore, Quackrak wasn't too keen on swimming.

Quickly, he ducked down and squeezed under the wooden table to avoid being grabbed by the crazy bunch, again. Not much of a hiding place, but as it turned out, unnecessary. The crazy bunch was gone. He waited a few minutes to make sure. Yep, they were gone.

Relieved, he crawled out from under the table. Satisfied that he was really alone, he sat down on one of the wooden benches to figure out what to do next. He hadn't planed anything particular other than staying away from the crazy bunch. All he really wanted was to look around, check things out – no big deal. He figured he'd wander back down the trail towards the houses, keeping out of sight, and just see what there was to see.

The afternoon sun had set and evening shadows were creeping down the side of the mountain. Quackrak was glad for that – easier to avoid being seen.

A slight 'pop' came from the direction of the springs. He glanced towards the water.

Another 'pop.'

Quackrak jumped up, gaping towards the springs.

"No, no!" he yelled at the two demons who'd popped out on the flat rock.

He scurried to the edge of the water, jumping up and down, waving his arms and hollering, "Back! Go back!" The two demons just stood there staring, stupidly. Two more pops, and two more demons appeared on the, suddenly, too crowded rock. The newcomers teetered precariously on the edge, grasping at the other two. One more 'pop' was one too many and the whole bunch toppled into the very, very cold water.

Sixteen

THE TALL, MIDDLE-AGED MAN Melanie and Claudia had encountered coming out of the drug store earlier that day sat on the curb rubbing his shoulder. Broken glass from the side window of the store covered the sidewalk around him.

"No, no... Mr. Walker didn't touch me,"

He was speaking to Jack Harris.

"It was my own fault. I was ranting and stomping around... tripped over my own stupid feet and fell through the damned thing."

Harris was kneeling beside the man.

He asked, "Can you stand up?"

"Yeah, I'm okay, just a little bruised, and embarrassed as hell."

The man stood up, brushing pieces of glass from his clothing.

From the street, the red, blue and white strobe lights on top of Harris' cruiser turned the shards of glass covering the sidewalk into a field of multi-colored stars, and cast surreal shadows into the gloom of Stillman Road.

Louis Walker stood a few feet away from Harris and the tall man.

He said, "Jack, can you turn those things off? We'll have the whole town down here gawking around."

Harris was looking the tall man over. "You're sure you're all right?"

The man nodded, still rubbing his shoulder.

"Fine... really," he said.

Harris looked the man up and down again, then turned and walked around to the driver's side of his car. He reached inside and flipped a switch on the dashboard. The stars on the sidewalk dulled in the dim reflection of the single street light across Stillman Road.

Harris came back around to the sidewalk. He looked at Louis.

"Anything you want to do about this, Louis?" – then at the tall man, "or you?"

Louis said, "Well, I can let it go. It *was* an accident, more or less. Insurance will take care of the window; if that's all right with Mr. Simmons, here." He looked at the other man, "You okay with that?"

John Simmons brushed the last of the glass from the front of his shirt.

"That's fine with me. No problem. I have to admit, though, it was my fault." He looked puzzled, frowning.

"I don't know what's wrong with me today. The slightest little thing sets me off, and I'm not like that at all. Look, Mr. Walker, I'm really sorry. If I hadn't come back... arguing about the prescription and being such an ass about it... just stupid."

Louis was thinking about the day – about people's strange behavior.

He said, "Mr. Simmons, why don't you come in the store, and have some coffee. You too, Jack."

Harris said, "Then we're all through with this, right? No charges? Everybody's happy?"

Simmons nodded. "Yeah, and yes, I could do with some coffee right now."

Louis said, "Yes, Jack, we're okay with it."

Harris turned towards his car. "Good. That's it then. Just let me take the car around front and I'll be right with you. I need a break too."

Except for the few necessary modernizations, like the computerized prescription tracking equipment, modern refrigeration and the pressurized soda dispensers, the interior of Walker's Drug Store had not changed in sixty years. Louis kept it the way it was in his father's time, and his grandfather's time before that. He figured if people wanted modern, they could go to Charleston. This was Bramwell, and they could take it or leave it.

The soda fountain didn't lend any profit to his business and the four small tables in front of the counter weren't used as much as they once were. But it had always been as it was, and Louis liked to think of his store as kind of an unofficial landmark, of sorts: *quasi-historical*, he'd tell people, jokingly. He was long past needing profit, anyway.

When Louis' grandfather had first opened the store, he and his family had lived in the rooms on the second story of the two-story brick building. Now, some of the upstairs space was used for storage, but Louis kept enough of it clear of the accumulated junk of decades so that he could stay there on the nights when he didn't feel like facing the empty, lonely, house out on West Stillman Road. In the space not used for storage there was a small kitchen and a living room, bedroom and bathroom.

When Louis' wife died, and later, Mel had married Karol, he'd considered selling the house and moving into the little

apartment himself, but somewhere, deep in the back of his mind, was a foggy, unformed, thought, one that involved Claudia Meljac: nothing he could put his finger on, just... *something*... and that was as close as he could get to it. But it was enough to keep him from selling the house. Sometimes he laughed at himself for basing the decision on a feeling he couldn't even identify.

Another of Louis' concessions to the 21st century was the Dell with broadband Internet in the small office room behind the prescription counter. Melanie was his official records keeper. She had volunteered years ago and had demanded that he install the computer, threatening to desert her post if he didn't. So he did, and was glad he did.

It was Mel who taught him the business end of the machine, but it was Jillian and Patty who showed him how to open the world of unlimited information through the Internet. He often wondered how he'd ever lived without it.

Right now, David was in the office chasing androids through the metal corridors of an alien spaceship, fingers jabbing frantically at the game controller. He leaned this way and that, back and forth, hunching down and jerking upright, following the action of the spectacular graphics on the Dell's 21-inch flat screen. Through his headphones, the rat-a-tat pounding of his particle-beam weapon covered the sound of John Simmons' unceremonious backward plunge through Louis' plate glass window.

At the springs, Aunt Claudia, out of breath from her run up the trail, had quickly explained what she'd heard on Jack Harris' radio.

"Let's get down there," she'd said, still breathing hard. Melanie, frantic with concern for her father, and especially, David, had grabbed Jilly's hand.

"Let's go," she'd said, and the two of them had hurried towards town, Claudia, Amanda and Patty right on their heels.

The group of women emerged from Meljac Lane into the kaleidoscope of flashing red, blue and white light from the top of Jack Harris' cruiser. A man sat on the curb on the Stillman Road side of Walker's Drug store amidst a scattering of broken glass. He was rubbing his shoulder; otherwise, he didn't seem to be hurt. Louis and Jack stood on the sidewalk looking down at him.

The women hurried across the street, Melanie reaching Louis first.

"Dad, are you okay? Where's David?" She looked down at the man sitting on the curb, then at Jack Harris, "What happened?"

Louis reached out and put his hand on her shoulder, reassuringly.

"Mel, everything's all right here. David's fine. He's on the computer in the office. Why don't you all go inside? I'll be in shortly and I'll tell you all about it, okay?"

Claudia looked upset, "Are you sure you're all right, Louis? I heard on Jack's radio that...?"

Louis interrupted, "I know, I know. Jack told me, but that's not how it happened. You all just go on inside, okay?" Melanie had her arm around Jilly, protectively.

"Come on, baby. Let's go in and check on your brother."

The women had gone into the drug store to wait for Louis. The five of them sat at one of the tables, and Claudia, anticipating a long night, had gone behind the soda fountain to put on a pot of coffee. Melanie had been in the office to check on David. He hadn't even noticed her presence, so she decided to leave him alone with his computer game till after things settled down. Normally, he was oblivious to the world when he was playing on Louis' computer, and would

stay glued to it till someone dragged him away. She wasn't too happy with his obsession with fantasy, but at least, right now, it was keeping him away from what had happened out in the store. She was sure he wouldn't desert the computer till somebody went in and got him.

"What do you think happened?" Amanda asked.

Jilly sat with her elbows on the table, "Grandpa wasn't fighting, was he, mom?"

"Wow! Wouldn't that be something? Mr. Walker in a fight," said Patty.

"*Patricia!*" Amanda admonished.

Patty flinched, "No, mom, I mean it would just be somethin'. I mean, Mr. Walker and all... you know."

Amanda raised her eyebrows, "What ever *that* means."

Patty started to say, "I just mean..."

Amanda took her daughter's hand, "I know, darlin." She smiled. "Louis just isn't the type, but I'm sure there wasn't any fight. He'll explain the whole thing when he comes in."

All heads turned at the jingling of the little bells over the door. Louis entered the store: the tall man who'd been sitting on the curb followed behind him. As the two men approached the table, Louis turned to the tall man.

He said, "John, meet the ladies of the valley... well, some of them, anyway," he chuckled.

Gesturing at each in turn, he went on.

"This is Claudia Meljac, Melanie and Jillian Meljac – my daughter and granddaughter – and Amanda Clark and her daughter Patty."

To the women, he said, "Ladies, this is John Simmons." He smiled at Simmons, while still speaking to the women.

"You may have noticed Mr. Simmons sitting outside on the curb in a pile of broken glass."

John Simmons was, obviously, embarrassed.

He offered, apologetically, "I don't know what to say." He went on, smiling a little uncertainly, "I guess, 'nice to meet you' would be in order."

Looking up at Simmons, Melanie caught what might have been a blush on the man's face. She recognized him as the same man who had barged out of the store, almost hitting her and Claudia with the door earlier that day, but the 'roughness' she'd seen in him then – and had commented about to Louis – wasn't there now. She wondered if she'd imagined it, or if his apparent anger, this morning, had given him the brutish appearance. There was nothing brutish in the face looking down at her, now. His embarrassment was almost boyish, and she had to admit, the blush on his rather handsome face was almost endearing. Still, she wasn't sure how to react to the man. She was waiting for Louis' explanation for what had happened.

Louis pulled up two more chairs from another table, and offered one to Simmons.

"I see the coffee's already made. I'll get us a couple of cups," he said.

Claudia stood up, and started towards the soda fountain

"No, Louis. You two sit down. I'll get it."

"Thanks, Claudia," Louis said. He and Simmons sat down at the table with the others.

Claudia went behind the counter, set out two cups, and poured coffee.

"So, Louis," She said, without looking up, "...had any excitement around here, lately?"

Everyone smiled at that, more relaxed now, especially seeing that Louis and Simmons seemed amiable towards each other.

Louis was sitting with his back to the counter. He looked, casually, over his shoulder at Claudia.

"No, nothing special. Just another day in Bramwell." He pretended to yawn. "How was your day, Claudia?"

Claudia lost patience, "Dammit. Louis! What happened here? I was... *we* were worried to death about you."

"Gee, Claudia," Louis said, innocently, still teasing, "All I did was break a window."

Claudia guffawed, "Yeah, well, you seemed to have used Mr. Simmons, there to break it with."

Louis laughed out loud. John Simmons looked even more embarrassed.

Quackrak sat on the picnic table looking at the five soaking wet demons that had followed him out of Hell. They were huddled together on the shore, shivering in the cool night air, eyes darting, nervously, in all directions. They looked scared, undecided as to what to do next.

Quackrak got up and walked over to them.

"You gotta go back," he said.

All five just stared at him.

He said, again, louder, "You have to go back to..." he stopped in mid-sentence as it, suddenly, hit him; he didn't know *how* to go back.

"Oh, that's just great!" he said to himself.

At 19, Louis Walker told his father who he was going to marry. His father promptly sat him down and gave him the facts of life; not the ones he'd told him about at 16, but the facts of life according to Bramwell valley.

"Son," his father had said, "That girl's momma is one of '*those women*,' and eventually, she will be, too. Are you sure you can handle that?"

Not that Mr. Walker Sr. was adverse to his son marrying one of *them*, and his emphasis on the words, *those women*, wasn't meant derogatorily; after all, theirs were the founding

families of Bramwell, each very respectable, not to mention rather impressive, financially. That the women of those families were... *special*, and in some vague way, a necessary part of Bramwell Valley, though no one could remember exactly why, had been accepted for so long that none but newcomers found the idea at all strange. Louis Walker Sr. wasn't a newcomer.

Louis Jr., being in love, was convinced he could handle anything, and when his wife matured enough to take her mother's place with the other women, he'd found that by staying out of *'the women's'* occasional, but peculiar business, his marriage was no different than anyone else's. Of course, it didn't hurt that the woman he'd married had an uncanny ability to make things sort of... turn out well; about which she had a *'don't ask, don't tell'* policy. Louis was fine with that. His attitude towards his daughter's *specialness* was much the same as it had been with his wife.

What had just happened in the store reminded Louis of this morning's conversation between Claudia, Melanie, and Amanda. They'd been seriously concerned over what, to Louis, seemed like just a lot of coincidental, rude behavior. Now, he was beginning to wonder. Even after only a few minutes conversation with John Simmons out on the curb, Louis' impression was that *'the slightest little thing setting him off'* didn't seem to fit the man's character. When he thought about it, there had appeared to be something off kilter about Simmons' behavior that morning, and again just before he tripped and fell through the side window. Outside, on the curb, it was as though Simmons had... what came to Louis' mind was... *'snapped out of it.'*

Claudia came back to the table, and Louis explained what had happened, assuring Melanie that David had been in the back room through it all, and hadn't heard a thing.

"Thank goodness you weren't hurt," Claudia said to Simmons.

"Lucky, I guess," said Simmons, still looking a little shy.

"Let me say, again, how sorry I am for the way I've acted today... that is, this morning and tonight. Believe me, that's not me at all. Funny thing is, ...well, I've come over from Stillman twice, today, and both times, as soon as I came across that bridge, I just seemed to get irritated for no real reason. This morning, when I went back to Stillman, I was fine... great mood; as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but tonight, when I came back across the bridge, there it was again. Falling through Louis' window seems to have knocked it out of me... or something. Anyway, I can't tell you how badly I feel about it."

"Mr. Simmons..." Melanie started.

"John," said Simmons.

She smiled at him, "John... you're not from around here, are you." It was a statement. She already knew the answer.

"No. Actually, I'm from Charleston; here on business."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an engineer, with the Bureau of Parks."

"And you're in Bramwell on business?" asked Claudia. "What's Bramwell got to do with parks? No parks anywhere in the county... that I know of."

"Well, that's kind of why I'm here. The state is interested in the springs area and..."

"Whoa, right there," Claudia interrupted. "The state'll have to get uninterested in the springs area. No offence to you, John," she smiled to soften the statement, then continued, "... but you've seen Bramwell. We can't support an influx of people here... like tourist, and frankly, we don't want to."

Simmons held up a hand, "Oh, no...no, not as a park. I agree, access alone, would be pretty disruptive to a place like

Bramwell. The state's interest in the springs, and the feeder streams flowing into them, is just the volume of water coming from them. The area downriver around Sharpton, where the riverbed widens so much that..." he hesitated, "...you know where I mean?" everyone nodded, "Well, the floor of that valley, there, is so flat that the river breaks up into a lot of smaller streams before coming together further downriver. What we're doing now is simply a feasibility study to see how to go about defining the course of the river around Sharpton to reclaim quite a bit of usable land. No impact, whatsoever, on Bramwell, but we have to know exactly how much water comes out of the springs and the feeder streams this side of Sharpton. "

"A lot," said Patty, "You can't hardly swim down to the caves..."

Jilly poked her with an elbow. Amanda shot a look at her daughter.

Jilly said, quickly, "She means, you wouldn't want to try to swim down in there cause of all the water coming out. It's a lot."

"Really," said Melanie, cocking her head at Jilly, suspiciously.

The little bells jingled again, and Jack Harris hurried through the door. "Jeez, it's pouring out there," he said.

Seventeen

IT WASN'T JUST A FEW DROPS, then a few more in increasing frequency, like a decent spring rain should begin. It was a sudden deluge. A beautiful night one minute, pouring down rain the next.

Quackrak, surprised and shocked at the sudden downpour, stood beside the picnic table soaked to the skin.

Rain, he thought. *This must be rain.*

He knew about rain. There wasn't much to do in Hell except sit around and listen to Lucifer tell stories about his past exploits... same stories, over and over and over. Quackrak was pretty sure Lucy was making up most of them, but still, he'd learned a lot... like about rain, for instance.

He'd, also, heard the expression, 'get in out of the rain,' which sounded sensible, but the only thing he could think of was to crawl back under the picnic table, which seemed a little undignified for the head demon-in-charge to do in the presence of the others.

Quackrak stood there, shoulders slumped, water pouring off his body, resigned and frustrated. All he'd wanted to do was come up and explore a bit. Now, here he was standing

in the pouring rain with these other five jokers who'd followed him out, and he didn't know how to put them back. He didn't even know how to get back, himself. The crazy people could do it, but he wasn't about to be jerked around by them again. Once was enough... except... well, maybe... if worse came to worse. He'd figure it out later.

He wiped the water out of his eyes, tried to shake it from his head. It was immediately replaced by more.

"...just wonderful," he muttered, shivering.

Quackrak shook again, then squished over the muddy ground to where the other demons were huddled by the shore.

"Straighten up!" he barked, slapping one of them on the top of the head. "Stop your silly whimpering and follow me."

He turned, took a few steps, then glanced back. The others hadn't moved. Quackrak whirled around, squished back, and whacked another one on the head.

"Come!" he growled at the terrified creature. He turned and strode off again. This time they followed.

Eighteen

HARRIS HAD RUN for the overhang outside Louis' drug store just as the rain started. He'd made it before the rain caught him, and now he stood inside the door wiping the few unavoidable drops of water from his shoulders.

"Jeez, it's pouring out there," he said.

Claudia and Melanie were talking with John Simmons. The three of them looked towards the door and smiled, acknowledging Jack's presence. Jilly and Patty had their heads together giggling about something, and Amanda - Harris felt a familiar catch in his throat. - *Amanda*. He shook the feeling away... almost.

Louis gestured with his hand, "Come on in, Jack. Coffee's on." He started to get up.

Claudia touched his arm. "I'll get it."

Amanda stood up, quickly, "No, no, let me. You guys go ahead and talk."

She smiled warmly towards Harris. "I'll take care of the big bad cop."

"I'll bet you will," murmured Melanie under her breath, grinning ear to ear.

Amanda whispered, "Stop it, Mel," and walked over to the soda fountain.

Melanie held in a laugh, and didn't holler, '*Hey, girl... is that a little extra wiggle in your walk for ole Jack's benefit?*' She wanted to, badly, but she didn't. She just kept grinning.

Jack Harris noticed Amanda's walk. He didn't know it had an *extra* wiggle, he just knew it was nice, as always, just like everything else about her.

Jack Harris felt like shit every time he saw Amanda Clark. They'd all been such close friends... all of them... he and Janice, Dennis and Amanda, Karol, Melanie, all the rest.

They had been happy back then. His feelings for Amanda were hidden somewhere, and he never thought about them, even when the whole group got together, which was often. Then Dennis decided to save the world – Dennis, the doctor – in some nothing little war-torn, third world hellhole where he couldn't save himself.

When they'd found out Dennis was dead, Harris' first reaction wasn't grief over the passing of a good friend. His first thought was of Amanda – Amanda without Dennis, and all his feelings for her flooded back in with a vengeance.

'The possibility that...' He'd caught himself there. The thoughts had lasted only an instant, but he'd felt like shit for thinking them... shit for thinking of Dennis being *out of the way*... shit for not thinking of Janice at all. Mercifully, the grief over his friend's death came quickly and covered the self-loathing he'd felt that instant before. But his reaction, his selfishness, had hurt him and he'd never forgotten it.

The death of one of them had strained their circle of friendship. Then, as if fate had decided to pick them off one by one, there was Karol, and carnage at the curve at the end of Bramwell Boulevard. And the circle was broken.

First Amanda, then Melanie withdrew into their own sorrows. Jack and Janice, living in Stillman, rarely crossed the mountain into Bramwell after that.

It was several years before he and Janice drifted apart. Then he'd gone to Charleston for a while, for the sheriff's department up there. But he missed Stillman and Bramwell, and the family and friends he had left. The transfer back to the Princeton County Department wasn't a problem, and once home again, life settled and got pretty good.

Jack loved his job, he loved Stillman, and he loved the little valley where the river flowed behind the quaint old buildings of downtown Bramwell. And no matter how hard he tried to keep it buried, he still loved Amanda Clark.

They were friendly towards each other, not like before, not getting together, paling around... never like before. He patrolled Bramwell, usually once or twice a day. He'd see her out walking, occasionally, and they'd speak, maybe reminisce a little. He'd see her at the Post Office in Stillman... other places, still friends... never like before. But sometimes, when they'd see each other, when they were talking, and maybe it was just his imagination, but sometimes, she seemed to look at him almost... he wanted to think, *longingly*, but he didn't dare. The problem was, every time he saw her, the old guilt came back... *the possibility that...* and he felt like shit.

Harris stood at the door watching Amanda walk across the floor toward the soda fountain. As she rounded the counter, she looked at Jack, waving him over.

"Jack, come over here and tell me what you want in your coffee." She busied herself with cups and saucers under the counter.

Harris crossed to the counter, leaned against it.

"Cream?" she asked, looking down and fiddling around with the cups and saucers a little more than Jack thought necessary.

He glanced over his shoulder to where the others sat talking.

"There's cream on the table," he said.

"I know," she said quietly, not looking up. "Sit down, Jack. You take sugar?"

He edged onto one of the stools, "There's sugar there, too," he said, puzzled.

"I know." Then she was silent for a moment, still messing around with the cups and saucers under the counter, almost as if she was ignoring him, using up time.

Then, in almost a whisper, "Where've you been, Jack?"

"We were outside with..." he started.

She looked up at him, suddenly, intently, "No, Jack. I mean, where've you *been*?" She said it quietly so the others wouldn't hear. "When Dennis died, and I needed you..."

Jack was stunned, "I... there was... Janice and..." his words trailed off

"And after Janice? Where were you then, Jack?" she seemed almost angry.

Harris didn't know how to answer.

"You've never said anything..."

"When could I have said anything? Out for a walk as you drove by, or stopped for a pleasant chat? In the aisle at the grocery store? How about right now, Jack? I'm asking you now. Where've you been?"

Her eyes were getting moist. She glanced at the others to see if anyone had noticed the way they were talking. No one had.

She looked back at Harris and sighed. "I'm sorry, Jack. Really. This is a dumb time for this."

She shook her head, clearing her embarrassment.

"Its just that..." She relaxed a little and grinned at him. "You're not good at secrets, Jack. Everybody knew how you felt about me, and I guess, when I lost Dennis, I thought you'd be there for me. Even later, through the years, I'd think... Well, the cops gonna make his move any day now... You never did, Jack. I waited and waited... and you never did."

Harris felt sick, like someone who'd lost something terribly valuable, or wasted precious time on nothing worthwhile. He couldn't think of anything to say. All he could do was stare at her.

"Amanda, I..."

She reached out, put her hand on his and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm still waiting, Jack" she said.

From the table came, "Mannn-dy, can you bring the whole pot?"

Melanie never called her Mandy unless she was being sarcastic, with a little singsong in the word, 'Mandy.'

Amanda peeked around Harris with an acid frown at Melanie.

"Coming up," she answered with the same sarcastic singsong.

The mood broken, Amanda set a cup and saucer on the counter, and poured Jack's coffee.

She grinned at him, "There's cream and sugar on the table."

He looked at her warmly, "I know," he said.

Jack Harris was seeing Amanda Clark now. But this time he didn't feel like shit at all.

Nineteen

HARRY HADN'T BEEN QUITE HONEST about things. Then again, he *was* the Prince of Lies, so that was to be expected.

True, mankind, not Harry, was the cause of the world's evils. And true again, Harry was merely a focal point, a sponge that soaked up most of man's evil thoughts before they got acted upon. A few other true things were: Harry really *was* tired of being the devil. And he really *was* sure he'd found a way to quit. But still, Harry hadn't been quite honest about things.

He hadn't actually lied, but he *had* based a lot on speculation. He wasn't worried about the normal, everyday functions of Hell. He was sure Quackrak was quite capable of administration, soul sorting and filing, that kind of thing. And although the maintenance and cleaning demons were a slovenly bunch, Quackrak was pretty good at keeping them in order. Yep, Hell would be just fine.

The speculation part was his hopes that in the last several millennia, mankind had matured enough to deal with their inherent evil, rationally, without Harry having to suck it all

up for them. He knew it would be a little iffy at first, but he figured it would settle down pretty quick once people realized they were on their own. That iffy first part was what he hadn't been quite honest about, or rather, had neglected to mention.

So far, everything seemed normal. Then again, it was kind of hard to notice anything out of the ordinary since, during spring break in Ft. Lauderdale; *everything* was out of the ordinary. Some people were abnormally rude, some were abnormally happy; most were just busy getting drunk and trying to get laid.

Nothing to do but wait and see.

It was almost closing time, only three customers left. The two business types in suits and ties pushed away from the bar, stood up and drained the last of their drinks. They turned to leave, one waving a, "Thanks, buddy. See ya next time," at Harry as they walked out.

Harry picked up their empty glasses, set them in the sink, and wiped down the bar. Nothing to do now but wait for the young woman at the other end of the bar to finish the drink she'd been nursing for the last hour, and he could go home. Well, maybe not go home, but he could get out of there, anyway.

Par-ty time, he thought.

He finished washing the glasses then glanced at the young woman. She looked to be in her late teens – probably with a fake ID – one of those kinky goth-dressing types with a cute face, and a god-awful-amazing body, which she hadn't seemed willing to share with any of the steady stream of guys that had been hitting on her for the last few hours. She'd just sat there at the bar fiddling around with her drinks, not talking to anyone, and it seemed to Harry, watching him.

Harry went down to the end of the bar and said to the girl, "Sorry, Miss, but I have to close up now." She looked up at Harry, but didn't make any move to leave. Her glass was empty except for a few pieces of ice in the bottom. She sat there, idly stirring the ice with her straw, just looking at him

"Miss?" he tried again.

For a moment, she didn't react, then, "I know who you are," she said.

He figured she'd heard someone say his name at the bar.

"I'm Tamara," the girl offered.

"Well, nice to meet you, Tamara. But really, I have to close up now."

She still made no move to leave, just sat there, her eyes glued to Harry.

"Tamara, really, I have to..."

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

"Waiting...?" Harry was puzzled.

"Waiting to serve you," her eyes looked a little glazed.

"Serve me...? Harry was getting nervous.

"Yes, Master. Anything you command," she started moaning, her eyes rolling back in her head. Harry thought she was about to faint.

"Anything you..."

"Miss," Harry interrupted, "I don't know who you think I am but, really, I have to close now and..."

Suddenly, she lunged halfway across the bar, grabbed both his arms, and pulled herself closer to him till her face was inches from his.

She moaned again, her voice pleading, "*Take me, master,*" her breath hot on Harry's astonished face, "*Take me now!*" She collapsed against him, holding onto him tightly.

Harry Deville stood behind the bar of the Crystal Sands Resort Inn with a cute, though somewhat demented, kinky

goth-dressed young woman with a god-awful amazing body sprawled across the bar and clinging, adoringly, around his neck. She, obviously, liked him.

All Harry could think of to say was, "Uh, hey, what do you say we go somewhere and have another drink."

Twenty

JACK HARRIS WAS SAYING to John Simmons, "I know families down around Sharpton. Having that river stabilized and the bottomland made farmable would be a godsend to many of them. Whatdya think, five... six hundred acres, maybe?"

Simmons answered, "At least five. Enough to make the expenditure well worthwhile. Everybody benefits: the farmers, the local economy, and so on. We're looking at other areas downriver with the same problem."

"Bout time," said Louis. "Don't know why they've waited so long. People up in Charleston worry so much about their big deals they forget about us little valley people."

Simmons laughed. "Well, Louis, I don't think they have to worry too much about Bramwell Valley. You people have a little paradise here."

He looked around at the others who were smiling agreement.

"Yeah, that's true, I guess," Louis conceded, "But we're lucky here, I mean economically. Bramwell doesn't depend on farming, or dairy, or much of anything, really. It's not a

place to work, just a nice place to live." He chuckled. "I guess we're just another pretty face."

The others laughed, except for Jack Harris who said, frowning, "Well, your little 'pretty face' town hasn't been so pretty today. Seems like half your pretty people decided to see how ugly they could get all at once."

He dropped the frown and grinned. "I think Louis poured one of his nasty prescriptions bottles in the town water supply this morning."

"T'wern't me!" Louis pleaded innocent.

He pointed to Claudia. "Old lady Meljac, over there, probably put a hex on everybody."

Claudia guffawed, "Oh, Louis, you old fart. If it wasn't for..."

The radio on Harris' belt beeped twice, crackled, "Unit 2, are you 10-8?"

Harris keyed the mic clipped to his lapel. "Yeah, Janice, I'm still in Bramwell, but I'm available. Go ahead."

He didn't notice Amanda bristle when he said Janice's name.

The radio hissed. "Jack, I've got more calls from Bramwell, but they're not too serious; they can wait. You need to get back over here. There's a bad accident on the off ramp of the interstate, and other calls are coming in. Every unit is tied up. You need to get back, okay?"

Harris keyed the mic again. "Right. I'm on my way."

He stood up. "Well, looks like the Bramwell town folks aren't the center of attention anymore. Gotta go. Uh, Louis, you know you're gonna have to do something real secure with that window tonight, what with all the drugs in here. Looks like quite a job, too."

"No problem, Jack," said Louis, "I have a few 4 by 8 sheets of plywood out back. That should do it."

"Of course, I'll help," offered Simmons.

"Good. You got it covered then."

Harris, turning to leave, nodded at the women, "Claudia, nice to see you again... Melanie, Amanda." His eyes lingered on Amanda for a few seconds, then he walked towards the door.

Jilly and Patty were sitting at the soda fountain. As he passed them, he stopped for a moment, smiling.

"I can't believe you two. You're all grown up already and as pretty as your moms."

Both girls blushed.

Jilly said, "Thanks, Mr. Harris."

Patty, still amazed that the policeman had a crush on her mother in high school, echoed Jilly's thanks.

Harris continued towards the front door.

"Y'all have a nice evening; what's left of it," he said over his shoulder as he left.

Twenty-one

THE ROCK WAS AIMED at the black plastic "T" – the first letter in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Since the thrower, having just turned eighty-five the previous week, wasn't quite the Stillman High School star pitcher he'd once been, it fell short of its mark and bounced, harmlessly, off the bottom edge of the marquee.

"Where'd ya get that rock?" came an angry voice from the crowd gathered round the front of the Bramwell Theater.

"Somebody get another rock."

The owner of the voice, another gentleman of advanced age, was easy to spot since it took no more than six people, or so, to constitute a crowd in Bramwell, and the group in front of the theater barely fit the description.

Except for the would-be plastic "T" destroyer, who'd hobbled out into the rain just long enough for the feeble rock toss – a pebble, really – all were huddled under the marquee in front of the ticket booth.

"What happened to *The Sound of Music*?" shouted another oldster.

"Yeah! That ain't Julie Andrews," protested another.

Inside the ticket booth, Jim Crowley, the owner of the theater, leaned close to the glass and yelled through the round hole, "Read the damn marquee. Take it or leave it!" The rock-thrower had made his way to the front of the crowd and was pounding on the glass with his fist.

"Crowley, you son-of-a-bitch," he yelled, "We came to see *The Sound of Music*, and if you don't..."

In Walker's Drug Store, just down the block from the theater, Melanie held up her hand. "Wait...shhh. Listen." Everyone got quiet, cocking their ears, listening.

A few seconds went by.

"What?" Amanda asked.

"I thought I heard someone shouting."

"All I hear is rain," said Louis.

At the counter, Jilly's ears perked, "Hey, mom, I hear it."

"Me too," said Patty.

Melanie straightened in her chair, "There. Hear it?"

"Mom," said Jilly. "That's like screaming... somebody screaming, or something."

From Louis, came, "Oh, Hell. You're right," as he jumped up and ran towards the door; Simmons and Claudia right on his heels.

Amanda pointed a finger at Jilly and Patty. "You two stay right there; don't move."

Melanie made for the office to check on David.

Louis reached the door and rushed out onto the sidewalk, his attention, immediately, drawn to the lights from the theater marquee down the block. Through the drizzle of the fading rain, he could see a small group milling around under the marquee. They weren't screaming or shouting now, but there seemed to be an air of agitation about them, maybe even fear; he couldn't be sure. He set off towards the theater at a trot.

"Louis!" he heard one of the group shout as he approached.

He could see that he knew everyone there.

The man that shouted was frantic.

"Monsters, Louis!" he spurted out. "No shit, Louis, I mean, no shit! They were all over the place."

The man looked genuinely shaken. An elderly lady was sobbing; all were, obviously, shook up. Louis glanced, quickly, up and down the street. It was empty.

From inside the ticket booth, Joe Crowley spotted Louis. He stuck his mouth up to the hole in the glass.

"They're all crazy as Hell, Lou. There ain't nothing out there."

The man who'd thrown the rock at the marquee, shouted, "Shut your hole, Jim Crowley. You were in there all safe and sound. How would you know anything?"

Jim Crowley shouted back through the hole in the glass.

"You crazy old coot. You're half-blind, anyway. You didn't see no monsters, you idiot!"

"Whoa... hold on now, for crying' out loud!" Louis held his hands up to calm them down. He turned to Fred Dicks, the man he'd encountered first.

"Just tell me what you saw, Fred."

Fred Dicks shivered with disgust. "One of em came out of the bushes across the street over there, then another one... ugly lookin' things, bout this high." He held his hand level with his chest. "Then a bunch of em came out... just stood there in the street for a minute till Ginny, here, screamed. Then they kind of went crazy... jumpin' up and down, and quackin'..."

"Quacking?"

"Yeah," the man went on, "...like a raspy quackin'. Then they ran off in all directions. Hoppin' and quackin'."

From behind him, Louis heard Claudia's, "Oh jeez!"

He shot a suspicious look over his shoulder at her. Amanda was standing beside her grimacing, guiltily.

"... scare the pants right off of ya," Fred Dicks finished.

Louis said, "Might have been kids, Fred... d'ya think?... just playing around? Or an animal of some kind?"

"Christ, Louis, I know what a kid looks like. They weren't kids, and there ain't no animals look like that. Least not around these parts, anyway."

The rock thrower shouted, "Not kids. Long fangs and big claws!"

Fred Dicks turned to the man, and said, "Now, Harv, come on." he looked back at Louis, "I don't know about fangs and claws, but they damn sure weren't human, Louis, and god-awful ugly."

"God-awful bunch of crazies, the bunch of ya." Jim Crowley's voice was muffled by the ticket booth glass. John Simmons was standing with Claudia and Amanda behind Louis.

He said, "Why don't I walk across the street and have a look around. If there's anything..."

Suddenly, the woman who was sobbing screamed.

Across the street, a demon had come out of the bushes. At the woman's scream, it ran a little ways down the street, then disappeared back into the bushes.

"Good God!" Louis' mouth dropped open. He stood staring at where the demon had been.

Fred Dicks grabbed Louis' arm. "See, I told ya. Didn't I tell ya?"

The little crowd looked close to panic

Louis yelled at Jim Crowley. "Open the door, Jim, quick. Let these people inside."

From inside the ticket booth, Crowley snarled back. "Let em buy a ticket. That's what I'm here for, to sell tickets. As a matter of fact, ya know what? I ain't even gonna show no

damn movie for a lousy six people. How d'ya like that? Go on home, the bunch of ya."

Claudia elbowed her way past Louis and the others to the front of the ticket booth, and shouted through the hole in the glass.

"Jim Crowley, I'm gonna be in there twisting your pointy little ears in a minute if you don't open the damn door. I did it when you were a snot nosed boy, and I'll do it again. Now open the damn door."

Jim Crowley shrunk a little bit. "Aw, Miss Claudia, I..."

"Open it!" demanded Claudia.

Crowley frowned, pouting for a few seconds, then disappeared through the back of the booth. A moment later, the double doors of the theater swung open.

"Come on in," scowled Crowley."

Louis ordered, "Everyone inside. Hurry up."

He herded the elderly group through the theater entrance, and shut the double doors behind them, then whirled around to face Claudia and Amanda on the sidewalk.

"Ok, you two, what's going on here? What *was* that thing?"

"Well gosh there, Mr. Walker," Amanda grinned, feigning childish innocence, "How would we know?"

Louis wasn't amused.

"Come on, Amanda. You guys weren't even surprised when ...whatever that was came out of the bushes. This isn't funny. Those people were scared to death. So let's have it?"

Claudia put her hand on Louis' arm. "It's okay, Lou. They're not dangerous, just a little startling when you first see one."

Louis sneered. "*Ha!* I knew it! I knew it had to have something to do with you guys."

John Simmons stood there on the sidewalk trying to figure out what was going on. He'd been a little rattled by the thing that came out of the bushes, but now, from the way Louis was reacting, he wondered if it was just some exotic animal, maybe a pet that got loose? Claudia's or Amanda's?

He looked at the women. "Is that thing yours?"

Amanda laughed. "Oh lord, no!" She cocked her head as if rethinking, "...that is... well, in a manner of speaking, you might say..."

Louis wasn't laughing.

He said, frowning, "Claudia, you know I never get into your business, but this time..." He looked frustrated. "I mean, Jesus, Claudia, we can't have... *things* ...running around town scaring the Hell out of people – dangerous or not."

Claudia patted his arm. "Now, Louis, don't get all worked up. We're gonna take care of it."

Louis shook his head, exasperated, then turned to Simmons, and said, "Welcome to Bramwell, John. How do you like it so far?"

After checking on David, Melanie went to the front door of the drug store and looked outside. Not knowing what the shouting had been about, she didn't want to leave David and the girls alone, especially with the big side window broken out. She was dying to know what was going on. She could see the others up by the theater walking back her way. They were talking to each other, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

As they reached her, Louis said, "Well, baby girl, you, and your cohorts here," pointing to Amanda and Claudia, "are going to have to come clean, this time."

Melanie looked at Amanda, quizzically. Amanda just shrugged, still trying to play innocent. Everybody filed past Melanie and into the drug store.

Claudia whispered to Melanie as she passed, “Guess who’s back?”

Twenty-two

EMMA HAD BEEN SITTING IN THE RAIN on the back steps by the kitchen door with the shotgun across her lap waiting for Joe to come home. She'd seen something moving around in the darkness behind the shed and by this time, after stewing about Joe all day, she was about ready to shoot at anything.

She got up from the steps, walked through the downpour out to the lean-to over Joe's Yamaha Super Snowmobile, and fired off a round into the trees behind the shed. The kick from the big black 12-gauged sent her sprawling back against the snowmobile's handlebars. At least she hadn't dropped the shotgun this time

Emma untangled herself from the snowmobile's handlebars, straightened up, and peered into the darkness beyond the shed

"Quack," came from off to her right.

Emma spun towards the sound, braced herself, and emptied the other barrel in that general direction, blowing a big chunk of wood off the edge of the shed in the process.

The muzzle flash from the blast strobed an instant of brilliant white on the scene around her. She gasped at the sight.

Now that's an infernal demon from Hell if I ever saw one, she thought, not realizing what she was shooting at was, in fact, a demon from Hell, although not all that infernal.

With that last shot, she'd barely flinched at the gun's kick. She fumbled in her apron pocket for some more shells.

At the rustle of wet leaves behind her, she whirled around towards the house. In the dim light from the bare bulb over the kitchen door, she made out two terrified demons streaking around the side of the house toward the road.

She flicked the lever at the guns breach. The barrels dropped open, ejecting the empty shells. Emma had it down pat, now. She, deftly, inserted two live rounds, snapped the barrels shut, and took off after the demons.

Emma rounded the house and into the front yard. The rain had eased, and in the shadowy glow of the streetlights she spotted Quackrak and two other demons racing down Stillman Road towards town. She ran out into the street, pointed the shotgun down the road, and let fly with two more thunderous blasts, then broke open the breach and rammed in two more shells.

"God, I love this thing!" she yelled, and trotted off towards town after the demons. She figured she could kill Joe later.

Louis knew it was bullshit aimed at John Simmons. Still, what Melanie was saying sounded plausible. He'd get the real story later, though he wasn't sure he even wanted it. Right now, he was listening to Melanie's fanciful version of what had just happened, and wondering if he was supposed to be proud that he'd raised such an accomplished liar.

“...kids,” Melanie went on, convincingly. “My son David’s friends. They’re on a monster kick, costumes and all. They pull this kind of thing all the time. That’s why dad reacted the way he did.”

Louis figured he’d help out and add a little reinforcement to the story.

“They could have caused one of those old folks to have a heart attack. Really, Mel, you should talk to...”

“Dad, I can’t control David’s friends. That’s up to their parents.”

Amanda broke in, “Well, it’s over now. Let’s not worry about it. Maybe, in the future we can get the kids interested in some other pursuit.”

With a casual move, she put her hand beside her mouth so John Simmons couldn’t see her grin, pointedly, at Louis and Melanie.

“Perhaps a *thespian* club,” she said. “I’ve noticed, lately, that *some of us* are very good at acting.”

Melanie ignored Amanda’s little witticism, hoping that Simmons didn’t catch it. ,

She said, “Anyway, no real harm done.”

John Simmons looked like he was having trouble swallowing Melanie’s explanation. He might have said so had not Emma Paul, standing in the middle of the intersection of Bramwell Boulevard and Stillman Road, chosen that moment to loose a barrage of double-ought buckshot up the Boulevard.

Emma walked down the middle of Stillman Road towards town, her shotgun at the ready. Somewhere along the way the demons had disappeared into the darkness along the side of the road, but she kept walking, anyway. Maybe she would meet Joe in his old pickup truck coming up the

road on his way home. He'd see her walking and stop. Then she'd blow his stupid brains out.

That'll work, she thought.

She reached the middle of the intersection, stopped, and stood there looking down Stillman Road past Walkers Drug Store and the bridge beyond it, then turned and gazed up Bramwell Boulevard towards the theater.

Wiley Curtis had the radio in his vintage – meaning piece of junk – 78 Cadillac turned up real loud. He whistled along with “Take This Job And Shove It” as he rounded the curve off River Road and onto the far end of Bramwell Boulevard about half a mile from where Emma stood.

Emma saw Wiley's headlights coming around the curve, and thinking, *maybe that's Joe*, raised the shotgun, sighted up the Boulevard, and fired off both barrels.

Wiley, who was just out of shotgun range – that being academic since Emma couldn't hit anything anyway – tossed the empty Bud can out the window, and turned off the Boulevard onto the dirt road that led to his vintage – same meaning – shack halfway up Bramwell Ridge.

Emma watched as the headlights disappeared.

She shrugged and muttered, “Guess not”

“What the Hell was that?” Louis' head jerked around at the sound of the shotgun blast from the street out front.

Melanie jumped up, instinctively, and sprinted towards the office and David.

Louis got up, and started for the front of the store.

“Careful, Louis,” called Simmons. “That was a shotgun. I'd stay away from the front windows.”

Simmons went to the side window that he'd broken out earlier, and peeked out around the corner toward the Boulevard.

He yelled back to the others, “You won’t believe this. There’s a woman standing in the middle of the road with a shotgun... just standing there looking around, calm as can be.”

Louis and Amanda looked at each other.

”*Emma!*” they declared in unison.

Melanie came out of the office. Over her shoulder, she said to David, “Just stay in there, and play, okay?” Then to the others in general, “What’s happening out there?”

Amanda blurted, “Emma’s out front with a shotgun shootin’ up the town.”

“Oh, Amanda, she’s not shootin’ up the town.” Louis scolded. He moved closer to the front window and looked out.

Simmons was right. Emma, soaking wet, was standing there in the road, the light from the streetlamps gleaming on the barrel of the shotgun she carried lowered at her side. She appeared to be staring at something down at the other end of the Boulevard.

Louis went to the door, opened it, and stuck his head out, hesitantly.

He yelled, “Emma, what are you doing out there?”

Emma stood in the middle of the intersection, at first, appearing not to recognizing Louis.

Then she said, casually, “Oh, hi, Mr. Walker.”

From thirty feet away, Louis could barely hear her. She seemed a little out of it... *spacey*, he thought

“Have you seen Joe?” she asked, not quite focused on Louis.

From the door, Louis yelled, “Put the shotgun down, Emma!”

“But I’m gonna need it, Mr. Walker. I gotta find Joe and...”

“Put it down. Put it down on the ground.”

“But...”

“Put it down, Emma!” Louis shouted louder, “Now!”
Emma slumped, hesitated for a moment, then slowly bent down and laid the gun on the road.

Louis went out the door and walked, quickly, across the sidewalk and into the street. Reaching Emma, he bent down and picked up the shotgun, then straightened up and looked at Emma. She was soaked to the skin, shivering, and seemed confused.

Louis put his arm around her shoulder and said, gently, “Let’s go inside, Emma.”

Twenty-three

TAMARA WAS DISAPPOINTED in Harry's answers.

"No fire?"

"Nope," said Harry.

"No brimstone?"

"Huh uh."

She raised herself on one elbow and reached, straining, across Harry's naked body to the nightstand beside the bed for a cigarette.

"Well, what's *there*, then?" she asked, snagging the pack from the nightstand and flopping back on the pillow beside Harry.

"Uh, let's see, there's my office..."

"*Office?*" Tamara was back up on the elbow again, looking at Harry, incredulously. "The devil's got an office?"

"Well, yeah," said Harry, not getting the irony. "And my apartment, of course."

Tamara flopped back down on the pillow.

She muttered, "*Jeez*, an apartment in Hell, no less."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "*What!*"

Tamara sat up, looking down at Harry, frowning.

“Ok, how about the other stuff, horns, pointed tail, pitchfork. What about that?”

Harry laughed. “A costume. A joke. A put on. It’s a long story and right now, I gotta pee.”

Tamara was getting flustered. She was up on the bed on all fours, now.

“You *are* the devil, right, Harry? I mean I *know* you are. But... but you *are*... right?”

“Yep,” he said, then added, “kinda.”

Harry got up and padded to the bathroom. He closed the door behind him, flipped on the light, and stood in front of the sink looking at himself in the mirror.

Nope, no horns, he chuckled, then, suddenly serious, shook his head.

What am I doing, here?

To the image in the mirror, he said, “A knockout, devil-worshipping, nymphomaniac throws herself at you, calls you master and wants to serve you... and you let her. That’s bad, Harry. Really bad. Not to mention the age difference. What is it, two thousand years, or so?”

He pictured her lying there in the bed naked, waiting for him.

The face in the mirror winked at him and said, “You can’t be expected to pass that up, can you?”

He scowled at the face, *You’re a cad, Harry*, but decided to feel guilty later.

Harry peed and went back to the bedroom.

At closing time, Finny Fowler came out of Papa’s Bar, and walked the half block down the sidewalk to where he’d parked his car. He was just a little drunk. As he bent down to stick his key in the car door, he happened to glance up.

That’s strange, he thought. A few seconds ago he’d noticed a young girl come out of the apartments across the street.

She was a cute little thing, late teens, bouncy curls. She got into a black Hummer. As the Hummer pulled away, it passed by him and he could see the driver more clearly. Short, washed out brown hair, middle aged, and dumpy – certainly not a cute young girl with bouncy curls. Finny was puzzled, but didn't much care. He got in his car and drove away.

Sarah Crumb aimed the Hummer up the beach road towards the hotel where she was staying. Even at this hour the streets were brilliant with headlights, spring break being non-stop twenty-four hours a day. She drove fast, weaving the powerful machine through traffic, heedless of the speed limit, and without regard for any lurking police unlucky enough to spot her and give chase, which would be unfortunate... *for them.*

She reached her hotel and pulled in, driving around to the back and finding a parking space that overlooked the beach and the ocean beyond.

Sarah turned off the car and sat for a moment watching the moonlit whitecaps rolling up onto the sand.

Finally, she reached over to her purse on the seat beside her. She pulled out a cell phone, flipped it open, and dialed. It rang a few times on the other end.

There was a click, and a few seconds of silence; then...

“So?” asked Aubrey Crumb.

“Piece a cake,” said Sarah. “Typical man, devil or not.”

“*Good. Now bring him back,*” demanded Aubrey.

Twenty-four

LOUIS BROUGHT EMMA INSIDE. He put the shotgun behind the counter then sat Emma down with the others. She still seemed a little dazed.

Claudia took her hand, comfortingly, and asked, “Where are your children, Emma?”

Emma was looking down at her lap. She answered in a childlike voice.

“With their grandma. I took them there this morning, before...” her voice trailed off.

“What, Emma? Before what?” Louis asked, gently.

“Before I...” she stopped, cocked her head, her brow wrinkled in thought.

Suddenly, she straightened up, seeming to come around.

“Oh No! Before I...” she gasped, startled at a realization.

“Oh, my goodness,” she looked at Louis, shocked.

“What”? Louis prompted.

Emma blurted out, “Before I decided to kill Joe!”

“*Gangh!*” Amanda choked out the sound, spitting a little coffee along with it. “Here we go again!” she sputtered, grabbing for a napkin to wipe her mouth.

“Christ, Emma! Where’d you get an idea like that?” Louis asked, stunned.

Emma was shaking her head, almost in tears.

“I don’t know... I can’t... I don’t know. I just started to think I should get rid of him, and I got the shotgun...”

Emma looked like she’d just awakened from a dream. She turned to Claudia, pleadingly, eyes wide.

“I must be crazy, or something.” She was sobbing, “Am I crazy, Claudia?”

Claudia pulled a napkin from the holder on the table and dabbed at the tears on Emma’s face.

“It’s okay, Emma. Its okay,” she soothed. “Everything’s a little crazy, today.”

She put her arm around Emma’s shoulder.

“You’ll be all right, darlin’.”

Claudia looked at Melanie and said, “I think Emma should stay with us, tonight.”

Melanie nodded in agreement. “Good idea, and I think everyone’s had enough for one day; too much, in fact.”

She got up and turned towards the office.

“I’m gonna get David.”

Melanie took a few steps then stopped, tuning back to Simmons.

“Mr. Simmons... uh, John,” she smiled. “I hope you don’t think we’re all lunatics.”

Simmons smiled back. “No, no, not at all.” His smile turned playful. “Uh, interesting, yes.”

Melanie laughed. “Yep. That’s us, all right – *interesting*.” Her laugh lightened back into a smile.

“But no, really, John, we’re a nice little town here. Some days we even try to act like normal people.”

Simmons chided, “Hey, don’t change for me. I’m getting to like *interesting*.”

Then, as though just thinking of something, he said, “You know, I have to be here for a few more days, finishing up and all. Perhaps someone could show me around the springs area and the...”

Melanie broke in *too* quickly. “Oh, I’d be happy to show...” she stopped, abruptly, blushing at the smirks on Amanda and Louis’ faces.

“Yeah, she’d be happy to,” Amanda said, grinning.

Damn her, thought Melanie, the blush deepening.

Simmons saved her. “Well, yes. That’s what I meant. Could you? Say, tomorrow morning?”

Melanie made a mental note to kill her best friend then, trying to sound casual, said to Simmons, “No problem. Dad opens the store at seven. Wanna just meet here?”

“Sounds fine,” Simmons agreed. “It should be very helpful.”

Amanda was still smirking. “Oh, yeah, Melanie’s very helpful.”

Melanie, shot out the thought, *‘You’re so dead.’*

Amanda flinched, but didn’t stop grinning.

She shot back, *‘Payback’s Hell, ain’t it?’*

Inwardly steaming at Amanda, Melanie smiled at Simmons. “Ok. See ya then.”

She turned and walked towards the office. She was praying that there wasn’t an unconscious wiggle in *her* walk.

Louis closed the store and went home to the house on Stillman Road. John Simmons drove back over the mountain to his motel room in Stillman Township.

Amanda and Patty were on their way home, and Melanie, Claudia, Emma, Jilly and David were stepping up onto the veranda of the big rock house on Meljac Lane.

As they approached the mullioned doors, Emma stopped.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said, still listless and looking worn out.

“Forgot what?” Claudia asked.

Emma answered matter-of-factly. “About the demons.”

Melanie stopped in her tracks. “*Oh, great!*” she muttered.

David grabbed Emma’s arm, and exploded, “Demons? Really, Ms. Paul? Demons? Did you see em? Where?”

Claudia pulled David away from Emma. “Calm down, David,” she scolded. She looked back at Emma, and tried sounding casual.

“What demons, Emma?”

Emma raised her arm and pointed a finger towards the group of trembling shadows huddled in the corner of the veranda.

“Those.” she said.

David’s gaze followed the line of Emma’s pointing finger.

He shouted, “Wow! Oh, Wow, mom. Look at em! Wow!” – at which, the terrified demons began whimpering, fearfully, crawling all over one another trying to bury themselves as far back in the dark corner of the veranda as possible – all except for Quackrak, of course, who had to maintain his composure, him being in charge and all. Besides, he already knew all about noisy people, although he was surprised that this new, smaller one was even noisier than the others.

Sighing at the inevitable, Quackrak gathered his courage and huffed himself up to his full four and a half feet. He stepped forward, bravely.

Facing the people, he said, “Sorry to bother you, again, but I’m forced to request that you aid us in getting back to Hell, hopefully, a little more gently than last time. That is, if you wouldn’t mind.”

David’s mouth dropped open at the quacking sounds. He turned to his mother, and made a disgusted face.

“Mom, that’s not a demon. It sounds like a duck or something. Demons are supposed to sound like demons.”

Then to Emma, with obvious disappointment, “Ms. Paul, are you sure those are demons?”

Emma was getting groggy. Without looking at David or the demons, she answered, her voice small and quiet, uninterested, “*I guess...yeah.*”

Melanie gathered her wits, grabbing hold of the situation.

“Jilly, go get Amanda back here. Claudia, please take Emma and David upstairs, then come back down and help me get these things to the basement.

David cried, ‘Mom! I wanna help... cause if they’re really demons...’

Melanie snapped, “*David*, just go with Aunt Claudia.”

David started to protest further. Claudia took his arm and pulled him inside the house.

With Claudia, Emma, and David inside the house, and Jilly gone to fetch Amanda, Melanie stood alone on the dimly lit veranda looking down at the bedraggled little demon standing before her.

What, she wondered, was it doing here? How had those others got here?

She chuckled to herself. Maybe it just liked her, and had brought its friends back to make her acquaintance. Hey, she was a likable person, right? She snickered at the thought.

She tended to agree with the girls that the quack-like sounds it made *were* talking, of a sort. She could almost recognize the body language and attitude that went with the sounds. A few minutes ago, when it approached them and had ‘spoke,’ she had the impression that it was asking a question, or asking *for* something.

Just for the heck of it, and not really expecting anything, she very deliberately threw a thought at the little demon. “*What are you?*”

Quackrak recoiled, astonished. The person had spoken to him.

He recovered, and answered out loud, "I'm Quackrak." Melanie was almost as shocked as Quackrak. She realized that he'd heard her, and had tried to answer.

She tried again, *'I can't understand your words. You have to talk to me without speaking out loud.'*

Quackrak backed away from Melanie, suddenly frightened. The person wasn't speaking after all. It was forcing words into his head.

Melanie caught his feelings. *'Please don't be afraid. Just think your words and I'll understand them.'*

Quackrak caught on. "Well, I'll be damned," he said, which was another of his favorite puns.

Without speaking out loud, he said to Melanie, "I got it, now. Like this, you mean."

Melanie said, "Yes. Now, tell me what you are."

"I'm Quackrak."

"That's your name. I mean *what* are you?"

"Oh. Sorry. I'm Qua... I mean I'm a demon. You know... from Hell."

Quackrak told her the whole story; how Lucifer had gone, leaving him in charge... the door in Lucifer's office, the whole thing.

"So, the others just followed you out," Melanie stated the obvious.

"Apparently," said Quackrak. "Either that, or they were just messing around in the office and stumbled through. They're all maintenance demons, and pretty stupid."

At that moment, Amanda and Jilly came around the house, and up the veranda steps.

Catching sight of the six demons, Amanda stopped short, gawked for a moment, then chuckled, "Oh goodie! We're

havin' fun now. Got yourself a whole herd of em, there, don'tcha, Mel?"

Turning to the newcomers, Quackrak concentrated on Amanda, and tried out a thought on her.

"I'm Quackrak," he attempted.

Amanda flinched, "*Whoa...* I caught that. The little monster can project."

Quackrak stiffened. "Monster indeed!" he huffed at Amanda.

"Oops, sorry," she apologized.

"Apology accepted," said Quackrak, magnanimously. "But, I'm a demon, not a monster – big difference."

"Yeah, we kinda figured." Amanda waved it off.

Jilly felt like she was missing something. She glanced at Quackrak, then at her mother, then at Amanda.

"What's going on?" She asked, puzzled.

"How come you guys are making faces and stuff? Somebody say something."

"We *are*," grinned Amanda.

"Huh?"

"We're talking with your little friend, here."

Then it hit Jilly, "Oh, jeez, you're doing that *thing* you and mom do, sometimes."

"Projecting," offered Melanie.

Jilly was surprised. "*He* can do *that*?"

"Probably not on his own," said Melanie. "Just with our help. You can, too, sweetheart. Go ahead, try it," she urged. Jilly shook her head, waving her hands in front of her, dismissing the idea.

"No way! I can't do that stuff," she protested.

"*Stuff*?" Melanie raised her eyebrows.

"Weird stuff. You know... like *you* do."

Amanda laughed. "Yeah, Mel, you're weird. I've been telling you that for years."

Melanie gave Amanda a warning look, but couldn't help grinning.

She turned back to Jilly, saying, "That's what you said; you and Patty, both, about sending him back this morning, but you did."

Jilly sneered. "Come on, mom! You and Mrs. Clark did that. It wasn't really us."

"Yes, it was," Melanie assured her. "You and Patty."

Jilly looked unsure for a moment, then ventured, "Really?"

"Really," confirmed her mother. "Now, talk to your little buddy, there."

Jilly looked at Quackrak, still unsure. Then she shrugged, and leaned close to the little demon's face.

She said, loudly and deliberately, "Can-You-Hear-Me-In-There?"

Quackrak stumbled back a step, startled. "Yes" he blurted, silently. '*I can hear you.*' With a twinge of sarcasm, he added, '*in here.*'

Jilly jumped. "Oh, Oh," she stammered, excitedly. "I heard him... and he said he heard me... and I heard him back, again. This is *so* cool!"

She jerked around towards her mother. "Mom! I really *can* do stuff, can't I?"

Amanda patted Jilly's head. "Great, kid. Now whip me up a handsome millionaire."

Jilly giggled, "Oh, Mrs. Clark, you're already a millionaire, aren't you?"

"How bout a poor cabana boy, then," Amanda suggested.

"How about a poor cop from Stillman," Melanie kidded.

Amanda bristled. "How bout I turn you into a turtle, Miss Smarty-Pants."

Aunt Claudia's voice came from the breakfast room door.

"Now children, don't squabble."

Melanie looked at Claudia, concerned. "Is David..."

"Tied to the bed," Claudia said, smiling. "No, he's fine. Don't worry. I had to promise him a fresh, shiny, demon first thing in the morning, though."

Claudia stepped out onto the veranda. "So, you're going to put them in the basement?"

Melanie said, wearily, "Right. We'll deal with them tomorrow."

"What's a basement?" asked Quackrak.

Jilly piped in. "It's not a real basement. It's a rec room. It's got floors, and furniture, and a TV, and a patio out back and all."

"Ok," agreed Quackrak, seeing he had no choice. "But I have to get back soon because with Lucy gone, I'm in charge and..."

"Who's Lucy?" asked Melanie.

"Lucifer, I mean," Quackrak went on. "and I have to..."

"You're kidding," Melanie was snickering.

Amanda went wide-eyed, then cracked up.

"*Oh my Gawd!* You call the devil, Lucy?"

Quackrak looked back and forth at the two women, wondering what he'd said that was so funny.

Aunt Claudia dampened the levity. "Ok, you two, stop with the hysterics, and let Quack..." she stopped in mid-word, silent for the instant it took to stifle the urge to laugh, herself, "... let Quackrak finish what he was trying to say."

"What I was trying to say," continued Quackrak, rather haughtily, "is that I have to get back because Dread is the only one there.

"Dread? What's Dread?" asked Jilly.

Quackrak shuddered. "He's the keeper of the Unspeakable Archives. You know... in Underworld. Frightening fellow. I never go down there, myself. We don't get along.

Twenty-five

THE CREATURE KNOWN AS DREAD, keeper of the Unspeakable Archives, walked the dank, dark, corridors of Underworld. A foul, stagnant, mist swirled at his feet; stray wisps of malignant evil curling through the fetid air he breathed.

Spawned by man's first evil deed, Dread was neither man nor demon, but the fleshing of both; a creation of necessity, doomed to spend eternity as the caretaker of souls shunned by Hell itself: souls whose malignant auras permeating the very walls of the vaults that imprisoned them; souls so vile that their presence, alone, would corrupt and poison even Lucifer's domain.

Here, in this citadel of the grotesque, were the spirits of history's perpetrators of true horror: a man who had practiced genocide in Germany, a woman who had bathed in the blood of young girls in Hungary, a doctor who had butchered prostitutes on the streets of London; all of the world's most evilly depraved tyrants and despots.

Alone in his cavern of the macabre, where not even the demons of Hell ventured, Dread reigned supreme, custodian of abomination and malevolency.

On the lighter side, Dread liked ice cream, good music and sitcoms – when he could get the TV to work. As for evil, it was just part of the job. He could take it or leave it. Of course, being immersed for several thousand years in a place where the essence of pure evil just seemed to soak right into your skin, he *was* a bit amoral to say the least.

Dread reached the end of the corridor and stopped at the massive iron door that separated Underworld from Hell. He put his ear to the cold metal and listened. There didn't seem to be any activity on the other side, so he took one of the rusty keys from his belt, and after a little fumbling managed to jam it into the grime encrusted door lock. He made a mental note to find some WD40 for that lock.

Dread turned the key and cracked the door open just enough to peek out – nope, nobody out there. He pulled the door open wider, stepped out and tiptoed down the brightly lit hall towards Lucifer's office and the little mini-fridge where Lucy kept his private store of cherry-vanilla ice cream.

Twenty-six

MELANIE WAS TALKING, but Simmons was only half-listening.

Sitting on the bench beside the old picnic table by the springs, he was much more interested in how the morning sunlight shined through the strands of Melanie's ash-blond hair.

'*Lovely,*' he mused, distracted, hoping he hadn't said it out loud.

"... and it was Karol's great grandfather who built the first house in the valley," Melanie was saying, her head deliberately tilted to catch the sunlight in her hair.

On an impulse, she raised her face to the sky and shouted, "*Hey, Karol,* you old dummy. Why didn't you build the house up here by the springs? It'd be worth a fortune, now!"

Simmons laughed at her sudden outburst, thinking it was endearing.

He said, "Well, you could build one up here now, couldn't you?"

“Unfortunately, not.” Melanie sighed. “It’s a designated wildlife sanctuary – no building. So that’s *that*. Anyway, I’m certainly not complaining. I wouldn’t trade the whole world for my house right where it is. I love... well, I love... everything here: this valley ... Bramwell...”

Simmons nodded. “I can understand that, easily. Anybody would. It’s so peaceful... uh,” He laughed, again. “except for last night.”

Melanie gulped. “Oh boy! Right... Last night.” They both laughed, but Melanie was thinking of her basement full of demons, *and you don’t know the half of it*.

“Anyway,” she said, “now you know the whole history of our little piece of paradise, at least as much as I do. So, I’m going to shut up. Your turn, now.”

She smiled at Simmons. “Tell me the story about how John Simmons is going to enrich the lives of our poor, unfortunate, neighbors over in muddy little Sharpton Valley.”

“Not that complicated, really,” said Simmons with a casual shrug. “Pretty much boils down to just digging a ditch. In other words, one reasonably deep, straight path for the water flowing into the valley to follow, instead of dozens of shallow, meandering, streams that dry up and reform every summer. The idea is that farmers will have consistent tillable areas instead of one place this year, and another place the next. As it is now, they can’t even get machinery from one planted area to another without it getting mired down.”

Melanie said, “Ah ha, another paradise is born. Will there be palm trees?”

“Of course!” said Simmons, grinning. “...and an oasis with hula girls. What else would you like?”

They both laughed, leaning close to each other unconsciously, their faces almost touching. Melanie pulled back, abruptly, a deliberate attempt to appear shy, demure.

She decided, too late, that it just looked ridiculous, and covered it by standing up. She hoped Simmons hadn't noticed the blunder.

Simmons *did* notice. He added it to her list of endearing qualities.

They walked, unhurriedly, down the trail towards town. With the warmth of the late morning sun, the cool spring breeze rustling through the trees on either side of the trail, the woman strolling beside him literally glistening with charm – Simmons imagined some cosmic cupid setting the perfect stage and jabbing at him with little arrows. As they walked, he resisted the urge to take her hand, wondering what she would do if he did.

Melanie was trying to remember how to look animated and interesting without flouncing. Her natural *girl* skills had gotten rusty over the years from lack of use.

She frowned mentally, embarrassed by her own thoughts. *I'm acting like a teenager with a crush.* She considered making him stumble into her, just to see what would happen, but dismissed it as unfair... then, again, what the hell.

Simmons stumbled slightly. He looked surprised, but kept walking.

Damn, not enough, she thought.

Amanda was sweeping her front porch. As Melanie and Simmons passed by, she called out.

“Hey, the big oaf cop asked me out to dinner. Big deal. Lakeside Inn in Stillman – the discriminating diners delight and roach capitol of the world.” She pointed a finger down her throat and pretended to gag.

“Anyway, you guys wanna come along? I hear their fried chicken is marginally digestible.”

Simmons looked at Melanie. “Uh... okay with you?”

“Great,” she answered, and taking his hand in hers, shouted back to Amanda, “Yep, I got another big spender over here, too. We’re on.”

Twenty-seven

NO LUCK. The mini-fridge in Lucifer's office was empty. It wasn't even turned on. Dread closed it, quietly, then glanced towards the door to make sure nobody was hanging around in the hall. He didn't need some dumb demon peeking in and catching him rummaging around in Lucy's office. He'd already been caught during an ice cream raid once before, and Lucifer had threatened to boil him in oil if he ever came out of Underworld again. He'd had nightmares about that.

Even so, to Dread's knowledge, the only place in the entire universe where ice cream could be found was Lucifer's mini-fridge, and the prize outweighed the risk. Besides, he suspected that Lucy was only bluffing about the boiling in oil thing. Who would do that to somebody?

So far, the hall outside the office door looked clear. Apparently, the ugly little freaks were off somewhere doing whatever it was they did. He probably had time to check through Lucy's desk before sneaking back to Underworld. He'd once found some little chocolate raisin things in one of the drawers that had been pretty tasty.

Keeping an eye on the hall, Dread crept across the room to Lucifer's desk. He bent down and opened the top drawer – nothing. He tried another one, same thing – empty, not even a paper clip. That was odd.

He closed the last drawer, straightened up, and looked around. Come to think of it, the whole room looked odd... too neat, everything in place. Except for that door over there... open a crack, must be a closet. He figured he might as well check it out.

Dread had red eyes, ideally suited for peering around in the eternal gloom of Underworld. Although the bright lights in the halls of Hell weren't much to his liking and hurt his eyes a bit, on his infrequent forays for ice cream he endured them as a necessary evil – so to speak. The brilliant noon sun of Blue Springs was a different story.

Dread screamed as twin spears of fire pierced his eyes and burned into his brain. He cupped both hands over his face and fell to his knees, too close to the edge of big flat rock. Scrambling blindly to escape whatever was happening, he tumbled into the cold water of the springs, gasping in shock as the frigid water closed over him. His mouth and throat filled with freezing liquid, choking him into panic.

Flailing in terror, Dread's feet found the bottom, and in desperation, he thrust upward. His head broke the surface and he instinctively gasped for air.

Lungs burning, eyes punished by the blazing noonday sun, Dread swayed, wobbly, trying to keep his balance in the current of the neck deep freezing water. He coughed violently, choking, spewing out gouts of water and sucking in air. Mercifully, after a few minutes, his lungs began to clear, the panic and the burning in his chest subsiding. He tried to calm himself enough to take stock of his situation.

'Doors.' The word appeared in his mind along with the memory of the first time he had opened the big iron door between Underworld and Hell. For a thousand years he'd considered it just large piece of metal on the wall of the only world he knew, the reason for its existence, unknown... till he figured it out

Doors between worlds.

Apparently, he'd blundered through another one... and into a world of...

Stuck in a world of fire and ice and pain!

At the thought, the fear and panic returned. He whirled around, frantic, his tortured eyes searching for the way back. His feet lost their purchase, and the current claimed him again, tumbling him towards the sandy bottom.

Fear and panic won, and with a great convulsive gasp, Dread's lungs filled with water. Sanity fled, and as his helpless thrashing became weaker and weaker, consciousness followed.

Dread's limp body rolled with the current towards the edge of the springs basin where the water flowed over the rocks and into the shallow river.

Twenty-eight

HARRY SAT UP. *Something was strange* – something besides the big gray and white pelican with its droopy bill rammed into the basket of food on the sand beside the beach blanket. Harry shooed at the pelican. It gave him an angry hiss and backed off, but didn't fly away. The bird ruffled its feathers, flapped its wings a few times, and settled down on the hot sand, waiting for another chance at the goodies in the basket.

Harry pulled the basket a little closer to him. The big bird blinked, its eyes following the goodies.

Tamara lay asleep on the blanket beside him. Her tanned body glistened with oil, and smelled of coconut. She stirred at his movements, but didn't awake.

Something felt different. Harry shook off the feeling. Nothing was wrong in paradise. Maybe too many oysters for lunch.

He was hot, sweating. He thought of getting up and walking down to the water to cool off. The pelican stretched its neck towards the basket. *The damn thing's reading my mind.* He shooed at it again. The bird stood up, took a few steps backwards, and pooped.

“Gaaa,” Harry growled at it, disgusted. He dug his hand into the sand and flipped a handful at the rude bird. The pelican flapped, furiously, and rose into the air, taking off in search of easier pickings.

Harry wiped the sweat from his eyes and stood up. He looked down at Tamara, wondering if he should wake her. Deciding not to, he turned and walked down the sloping sand towards the gentle whitecaps of afternoon low tide.

Sarah Crumb was not asleep. She didn’t dare sleep around Harry. Maintaining the ‘Tamara’ illusion was not a lot of effort, but if she weren’t conscious it would slip away. She could imagine Harry turning over and planting a big kiss on Sarah Crumb’s pudgy face.

Hi, Harry. Surprise! How bout another little smooch? She sniggered at the mental picture.

Sarah was getting uncomfortable. She opened her eyes and looked down at her body. A tinge of redness was beginning to show through the sweat and tanning oil. ‘Tamara’ would probably look great with a nice glowing tan, but ‘Sarah’ had sensitive skin. Maybe that was enough sun for one day.

She sat up, shaded her eyes with her hand, and peered through the brilliance of sunlight reflecting off white sand. She spotted Harry standing in the water, spent waves lapping at his feet. His back was to her, and he seemed to be staring out over the ocean. She wondered what he was thinking about.

She sat watching Harry, as he stood there at the edge of the ocean, his gleaming body, the wind in his tousled hair. He looked so...

She caught herself. *‘Stop it, Sarah!’*
She watched him for a moment more.
Suddenly, her shoulders slumped, and she sighed, resigned.

'Damn it!'

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

They had agreed, she and Aubrey, that the devil should be in Hell where he belonged. It had been a mistake to let him escape.

Trickery, lies, typical devil's work. That's how he'd gotten out. He couldn't just quit being the devil. That was ridiculous.

It was Aubrey's idea to bring him back, and Sarah was all for it, but neither had a clue as to how to go about it. After making, and discarding, several plans, they finally decided to fall back on what every woman knew: when in doubt, go for the libido.

So, Sarah had whipped up 'Tamara' and had gone for it. Now, here she was, lying on a beach in paradise, and there was Harry, standing in the rippling tide under the golden sun like some goddamned Adonis or something... and she, Sarah Crumb, bastion of all that was righteous, was falling for the evil bastard.

She felt like laughing out loud at the absurdity of it all. She imagined some third-rate author's lame attempt at a book title: *The Devil and Sarah Crumb*.

Yep, that'd be a winner, for sure.

A tingling sensation on her shoulders interrupted her thoughts. *Sunburn*. She *really* had to get out of the sun.

'Tamara' picked up a towel. As she dabbed at the sweat on her face and neck, something wispy, almost unnoticeable, touched her mind.

Something was wrong.

Twenty-nine

THE LAKESIDE INN in Stillman, wasn't in Stillman, and wasn't beside a lake. In 1965, a traveling antique buyer, scouring the back roads of Appalachia with the idea that 'one man's trash was another man's treasure,' came upon a marshy pond located in a small hollow between the mountains a few miles from Stillman Township. Near the pond stood three weatherworn brick walls, the remains of the long defunct Rawlings Mill, which had survived the ravages of time and encroaching forest.

Gerald Bowman stopped his car on the side of the rutted, tree-canopied, road and got out for a better look. He stood there for a while enjoying the beauty of the pristine little hollow. Then got back into his car and drove thirty miles to the nearest decent restaurant for dinner.

Five years later, Gerald Bowman came back to Stillman Township and built the Lakeside Inn around the three surviving brick walls of the old Rawlings Mill. Through the passing years, it remained the only decent restaurant within thirty miles in any direction.

John Simmons was impressed. From Amanda's description, he'd expected little more than a truck stop diner, which the Lakeside Inn, definitely, was not. He was just beginning to realize that Amanda held very little to be sacred when it came to her sense of humor. He liked that about her.

The two couples sat at an elegantly appointed table beside a large floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the pond. Through the window, they watched as a lone figure rowed a small boat through the afterglow of evening, across the still water of the pond, and towards a low wooden platform on the other side where several families of raccoons had appeared, waiting for their dinner of scraps from the Inn's kitchen.

Melanie said, "They do that every evening – kind of a tradition here at the Inn. Some evenings, I drive the kids over, and we just sit in the parking lot and watch the guy row across and feed the raccoons."

The waiter arrived bringing ice-cold martinis with large Spanish olives for John and Jack. Melanie and Amanda had ordered Brandy Alexanders. The bow-tied waiter handed them each a menu, and left.

Simmons took a sip of his drink then set it down and picked up a menu. He opened it and looked inside. After a quick glance at the Inns impressive fare, he squinted over the top of the menu at Amanda.

"Fried Chicken, eh?" he teased.

Amanda grinned. "Sorry. I meant Chicken Marsala."
Everyone laughed except Jack.

"Apparently, I missed that one," he said, smiling anyway.

"Don't worry, it wasn't that good," Melanie assured him.

"*Ha!*" Amanda sneered, and buried her face in her menu.

Jack took a healthy drink of his martini, and said to Simmons, “Gotta try the Prime Rib, John. Trust me. Big thick ones. You can cut em with a fork.”

“You read my mind,” said Simmons, “Nice and rare.”
Amanda closed her menu and announced her decision.

“Fish, I think. Salmon.”

“Same for me,” agreed Melanie. “The Salmon Almandine,”

Jack looked up at a passing waiter, and said, “We’ll order, now.”

Night had come by the time they’d finished dinner. Outside, the pond had disappeared in darkness, but inside, subdued, indirect lighting, and the glow from the little gold hooded lamps on each table shown on old brick and polished wood, burnished brass and white linen.

Simmons swallowed his last bite of Prime Rib, and drained the few remaining drops of Merlot from his wine glass. He set the empty glass down, wiped his lips with the linen napkin, and sat back in his chair looking very satisfied.

To his three companions he said, “This place is a treasure,” then, jokingly, “Do you think they’d consider moving it up to Charleston?”

Jack feigned shock. “Hey! No way. This one is for us poor mountain folk. You guys have all the fancy restaurants you need up there in Charleston town.”

Amanda put on her best Ozark accent, and smirked at Simmons. “I reckon yer gonna have to move down here to the boonies if’n ya want good vittles, Mr. Simmons.”

Simmons laughed, and for an instant, the thought actually crossed his mind. He liked these people: Jack, the big cop, as tall as Simmons himself, friendly and quick with a smile. -Amanda and Melanie, both beautiful, intelligent, and graciously cultured, but playful as kittens. He thought of Melanie’s father, Louis, and her Aunt Claudia. No one in

these valleys had treated him like an outsider – a far cry from the impersonal bustle of Charleston.

They ordered tall coffees laced with sweet liqueurs and topped with whipped cream and crushed cherries. Simmons was enjoying himself, immensely.

They laughed, and talked, and laughed some more: at Jack's funny stories of his experiences as a cop, at Amanda's and Melanie's tales of mountain lore, and the improbable, but hilarious misadventures of their, sometimes, wayward kids. Simmons was surprised to find himself contributing as much to the merriment as any of them.

Melanie held up a hand and said, "Listen!" Through the door of the cocktail lounge came the sound of music: a three-piece band – piano, bass and drums. They were playing an old standard song.

Melanie sighed, and said wanly, "I haven't been dancing in ten years."

She turned, suddenly, to Simmons, and said, determinedly, "You know what? You're going to fix that right now, sir."

She pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. Simmons took the hint and stood, also. He took a step back and bowed deeply.

"My pleasure, Madam," he said, and turning to the others, "If you'll excuse us?"

Taking Melanie by the hand, he led her towards the Lounge.

Amanda elbowed Jack. "Well?" she said, frowning at him.

"Huh?" he grunted, "Oh... right. Would you like to dance?"

"Thought you'd never ask, officer," she smiled, coyly.

They both got up and walked, hand and hand, towards the music.

Thirty

FOR DREAD, DYING WAS IMPOSSIBLE. Losing consciousness due to a massive overload of numbing shock, pain and panic, wasn't. Nothing in Dreads half-eternity of experience, not even the bright florescent lights in the halls of Hell, had prepared him for the piercing brilliance of high-noon in the upper world – not to mention the searing cold of the frigid water gushing out of the springs.

Dread's body lay crumpled among the barely submerged rocks at the edge of the springs basin. He came to with a start. A flood of sensations returned and he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, anticipating the stabbing pain from the blinding light.

He was freezing, and ached from a dozen scrapes and bruises, but fearful that movement would bring on something even worse, he lay very still. A minute passed, then another. Nothing happened. A thin edge of relief opened in Dread's mind, and he grasped at it, desperately.

He could sense no warning glow through his eyelids, and dared hope that the brightness overhead had gone away, or at least, dimmed. He opened his eyes a slim fraction of an

inch and saw... blessed darkness. The relief blossomed, but wasn't quite total. He was still freezing.

Carefully, he tried sitting up. No problem. He was banged up a little, but not really hurt. Standing up on the wet, slippery, rocks was a bit tricky, but after a few slips, and some frantic arm waving for balance, he managed it.

He stood on the rocky rim of the basin, water splashing around his ankles and into the river below. He looked around, his crimson eyes shining through the dark night of a world he'd never imagined.

I don't think this is Lucy's closet, he thought.

Thirty-one

AFTER MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS of being in love with Amanda Clark, holding her in his arms on the dance floor was an almost painful relief from the yearning he'd felt for so long. His arms around her, the feel of her body against his, her face against his chest at last, and no longer a dream: the reality of it was dizzying, the smell of her hair, intoxicating.

"If you hold me any tighter I'm going to puke on you, Jack," she kidded.

Harris choked on a laugh. He looked down at her upturned face.

"Damn, Amanda" He smiled, still chuckling. "That was romantic."

She smiled back at him. "Damn, *yourself*, you dumb cop. Do realize you've never held me before?"

"I'm holding you now," he said, softly.

She stared up into his eyes, her face showing her own pent up relief. "Yes, you are. Finally."

She leaned into him, her face against his chest again, and with a catch in her voice, said, “What can I do to make sure you never let me go, Jack?”

He bent down and nipped her ear playfully. “This is where I’m supposed to say, ‘I love you, right?’”

She kicked his ankle. “Oh, great! *That* was romantic,”

She snuggled closer to him “... and about damn time.”

Harris let out the breath he’d been holding for twenty years.

Simmons and Melanie were dancing a few feet away. Melanie reached out and poked Amanda on the arm.

“Hey, you guys,” she said, “This is a family place. That doesn’t mean start one on the dance floor.”

Amanda sneered, “Go away, you old hag. Us young, beautiful, people are having sex here.”

From the low stage, the piano player glanced towards the dancers.

“Oh, my God, Amanda, that guy heard you,” Melanie said in a loud whisper.

“Oh, Jesus,” Amanda cringed in embarrassment, quickly sidestepping around Jack, putting him between her and the stage. She peeked over Jack’s shoulder. The piano player had looked away, but was grinning. Scrunched behind Jack, she looked over at Melanie with a mischievous giggle. Melanie had pulled the same move with Simmons, putting him between her and the piano player; sharing Amanda’s embarrassment.

Jack looked at Simmons, and said, “You see, John? That’s why I like Bramwell women. Never a dull moment.”

The remark earned him another kick from Amanda.

Thirty-two

ON THE CARPETED FLOOR of the Meljac's basement rec room, five demons lay on their stomachs like a group of neighborhood children, faces cupped in hands propped on elbows; eyes glued to the TV. They'd been like that all day.

Off to one side, Quackrak sat in a straight-backed wooden rocking chair staring down at them, disgustedly. He was fuming with anger. Figuring he would try it one more time, he pointed the remote at the TV and clicked the *off* button.

The five demons on the floor erupted with an ear splitting caterwauling, rolling around, kicking their feet and pounding the floor with their fists – a comic parody of spoiled brats.

Quackrak, quickly, clicked the TV back *on* and the demons settled down, contented.

Beyond frustration, Quackrak, suddenly, lurched forward, and screamed down at them,

"We have to go!"

They ignored him.

The same scene had been repeated over and over throughout the day. Since discovering the television, the five maintenance demons had refused to move, and because of their reaction, turning it off was out of the question. With a loud sigh, Quackrak sat back in his chair and stewed.

Melanie and Aunt Claudia had decided the demons weren't any danger, and that Quackrak seemed responsible enough to keep the other five in line if they started getting quirky. Both women had laughed at the idea of a *responsible demon*, but it did seem to fit. So in the morning, David was allowed to come down to the basement

David was a little disappointed at the lack of demonic behavior, but being the only kid in town with demons in his basement more than made up for it. Now, if they would just stop that ridiculous quacking. Maybe he could teach them to growl, or something.

On the other hand, a tribute to youth, and its acceptance of life as it is, was the fact that David never once asked why there were demons in his basement.

Melanie decided to keep David home from school, at least today. There was no way he would be able to keep the demons a secret, and she didn't want him ending up in the school's equivalent of a loony bin, whatever that might be.

Aunt Claudia had explained to Quackrak that just after midnight the TV stations available to Bramwell would go off the air. She came up with the idea of using the remote to, gradually, over an hour or so, turn down the brightness on the TV until the picture was no longer visible. Hopefully, by around midnight, the others could be weaned off of it, so to speak. If it worked, they could start thinking about getting them all back to Hell.

Quackrak had no idea what she meant, but was willing to try anything. Claudia showed him how to do it, and at an hour before midnight Quackrak pushed a button on the

remote. The picture on the television dimmed almost imperceptibly. The maintenance demons didn't seem to notice.

By One a.m. the screen was almost blank. With the last note of the National Anthem, the station went off the air leaving only the barest outline of a test pattern.

One more click, thought Quackrak.

He held his breath and pushed the button.

Instant Pandemonium!

Thirty-three

“HOW BOUT THIS ONE?”

Amanda was trying out sexy poses in the mirror of the ladies room.

Standing beside her, Melanie was leaning into the mirror, a tube of lipstick in her hand.

Through pursed lips, she said, “You’re thirty-seven, Mandy. Sexy, you ain’t. Try a nice intelligent look.”

Amanda grunted. “Intelligent won’t get me in the sack with Jack Harris.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Melanie, “Figuratively speaking, I’d say you’re already in the sack with Jack Harris.”

Amanda frowned into the mirror, and tried another pose.

“He’s shy. I need a gimmick to jolt him into throwing me down on the floor and jumping... “

She grimaced at her reflection. “My God, listen to me. I’m a slut!”

She scowled at herself for a moment, then sighed. “Hey, better a slut than an old maid, right?”

She dug into her purse, brought out a small spray bottle of perfume and, absently, squirted herself in her eye with it.

“*Damn*,” she muttered, grabbing a tissue from the box on the counter, “That was brilliant.”

Melanie laughed, “Better watch where you’re squirtin’ that stuff, slut.”

Amanda dabbed at her eye with the tissue.

“I just get nervous when I think about dying a lonely old...”

Melanie wasn’t listening.

“Amanda,” she interrupted.

“Huh?” Amanda was still dabbing.

“Have you felt it?”

“Sure!” Amanda grinned, “Grabbed right hold of the little sucker. Hey, come on, Melanie, I’m not that much of a slut.”

“No, no...” Melanie protested, “Jeez, Amanda, that’s not...” she stuttered, embarrassed.

“I meant, tonight, every now and then, I get this feeling that something’s... *off*. I don’t know... hard to explain, but I feel like something’s wrong.”

Amanda was leaning into the mirror, still dabbing.

Without looking at Melanie, she said, “*Yep!* Just waiting to see if you’d say something about it.”

“So,” asked Melanie, “What d’ya think?”

Amanda stopped dabbing and backed away from the mirror.

“Don’t know,” she said, “...’why I was waitin’ for you to bring it up. I don’t think it has anything to do with Harry, though. Most everybody seems to have settled down with the weird stuff, so...”

“Yeah, I thought the same. Gotta be something else.”

Amanda shrugged, picked up her purse and turned to leave.

“Looks like we’ll just have to wait and see. Come on, let’s go seduce some men.”

Simmons said to the cocktail waitress, "Take your time bringing the coffee."

They'd decided they'd had enough to drink for one evening.

He gestured towards the two empty seats. "They're in the ladies room."

The waitress nodded and left.

Simmons settled back in his chair with a contented sigh.

He said to Jack Harris, "This is great. Wish I were rich. I'd eat here every night."

"No argument there," agreed Jack.

"Hey, I got an idea," he said, grinning. "Let's marry our two rich women; make em bring us here regularly."

Simmons raised an eyebrow. "Rich? ...Amanda and Melanie? You're kidding."

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, I am... sorta. Then again, *Meljac* and *Clark*; those two names are on half the deeds in Bramwell valley; so maybe not rich, but damned well off – old Bramwell families, that kind of thing. Then there's Melanie's dad, Louis; he's no pauper, either. Add in the Crumb sisters, who live in the house right across the lane from Melanie, and you've got all the money in the valley right there at the intersection of Bramwell Boulevard and Stillman Road."

He laughed, "All nice and tidy. No loose change floatin' around the valley for people to trip over."

Simmons asked, "And these Crumb sisters, who are they?"

"Sarah and Aubrey," said Jack, "Their dad moved down to Florida about ten years ago, right after the mother died. Of course, the sisters couldn't go with him."

Simmons frowned. "What do mean 'of course?' You put it like they had no choice."

“They didn’t. When the mother died, either one, or both of the sisters had to take her place, otherwise there would only be three...”

Jack stopped in mid-sentence, and was silent for a moment, tapping a finger on the table, considering whether to go on. He took a deep breath, adjusting himself more comfortably in his chair, then looked Simmons directly in the eyes.

“John, ...the uh ...the women,” he hesitated, thoughtfully, then went on, “Melanie, Amanda, and the Crumbs, and especially Claudia...” he stopped again.

“Damn! I shouldn’t have started this. Too much good old Lakeside Inn alcohol.”

Simmons said, “Hey, you’ve got me hooked. Don’t stop now.”

He saw Jack glance up. Neither of the men had noticed Melanie and Amanda approach the table. Melanie was right behind Simmons.

She leaned down close to his ear, and said, “Boo.” Simmons jumped, then laughed. They all did.

“My ears are ringing,” said Melanie, taking her seat.

Amanda said, “Mine, too. Somebody must be talking about us.”

Jack pointed at Simmons, innocently, “Wasn’t me... it was him. He started it.”

Simmons straightened, guffawing, “*Oh yeah, right!* Blame it on the new guy.”

Amanda gave Jack a little peck on the cheek, saying, “That’s all right. You guys talk about us all you want. Just keep it clean. You weren’t saying anything naughty, were you?”

“Of course not,” answered Jack, then under his breath he teased, “Maybe a little bit.”

“Jack!” Amanda scolded. “Not even a little, ya hear?”

She leaned over and gave him another peck on the cheek.

Simmons said, smiling, “I assure you ladies, the conversation was all flattery.”

Thirty-four

THE LITTLE FREAKS WERE HERE. Dread could smell them. His long pointed ears twitched, each in different directions, listening for the freak's annoying jabbering. He heard nothing but the breeze rustling the leaves in the trees, and the scattering of lonely insects calling for mates.

Dread raised his head, sniffing the night air. The little demon's smell was faint, not close; but there was something else, something vaguely familiar. In a moment he realized the obvious; it was souls – just the smell of souls, but different – barely recognizable.

Odd, he thought. A soul was a soul. No matter where you were, they should smell the same, shouldn't they? He took a deep breath, slowly, sensing, separating the nuances of the night scents. Yes, definitely souls, but missing something. What?

He held the air in his lungs for a moment, then released it with a sudden whoosh of revelation.

Corruption! That's what they were missing. *Abomination and depravity...* they had none of that. Unlike the foul, malignant,

souls of Underworld, or even the, simply, evil souls of Hell, the smell of these souls was like nothing he'd ever imagined. These souls were... *Clean!*

He breathed deeply, again and again, willing out all but the one smell, the scent of pristine souls, glowing souls with none but mere traces of sin and perversion.

Dread was overcome with desire. These shining souls – he had to find them. After millenniums in the company of only the most unutterable vileness, here were souls whose essence was virtually pure. He had to have them... all of them.

He looked around for the easiest way to go... anywhere, wherever these souls were. The shallow water in which he stood seemed to flow towards a glow in the sky, a reflection on the bottom of the low clouds, perhaps from the shining souls. He decided to follow the river towards the glow.

In no time at all, Dread found himself underneath a curious structure. A span, of sorts, that stretched from one bank of the river to the other. The glow in the sky was almost directly above it.

Here, the riverbank was steep, but the slope was easy to climb. At the top, where the bridge touched ground on the Bramwell side of the river, Dread emerged from the shadows and into the light from the street lamps. He walked to the center of the road and stood, staring, mesmerized by the town before him.

Joe Paul got real perky when he drank. He was real perky tonight. He left the bar in Stillman, zoomed up the Stillman side of the mountain, roared down the Bramwell side, tore across the bridge, and splattered Dread all over the grill of his crappy old pickup truck.

Thirty-five

SINCE THE HEAVY IRON DOOR made a rather loud ‘ka-chunk’ sound when it closed – sure to attract attention – and since Dread figured he’d only be out of Underworld for a few minutes, he’d left it open just the merest crack. All would have been okay had Dread been able to snag the ice cream from Lucy’s fridge, tippy-toe back up the hall, and sneak back into Underworld, unnoticed. The freaks were too stupid to put two and two together, so the ka-chunky sound the door made when it closed wouldn’t have mattered once he was safely back inside. As it was, the heavy iron door between Underworld and Hell being open the merest crack... was *not* okay.

Writhing and curling its way out of Underworld through that merest of cracks, a misty, gray, putrescence swirled through the halls of Hell, leaving the normally glistening white walls fouled and streaked. The thick fulsome stench spilled from the hallway into Lucifer’s empty office, filling it with a vile fog that roiled its way through every crack and crevasse... and door.

The gray squirrel, frightened by the sudden boil of water out in the springs, leapt from the picnic table and streaked towards the nearest oak tree. From a high branch it watched as a dark cloud erupted from the bubbling water, and spread across the surface, rolling it's way onto the shore and down the path towards Meljac Lane.

Thirty-six

BEING SENSITIVE TO BAD VIBES, which made her sick at her stomach – and since she was getting bad vibes now – Tamara bent over and threw up in the knee-deep surf of the Atlantic Ocean. Harry had been holding her hand, but when she hurled, he let go and jumped out of the way.

Her unexpected retching caused Sarah to lose concentration, and for an instant, her ‘Tamara’ facade almost slipped away. She regained her composure, splashed water on her face and stood up straight.

Harry was a few feet away, backing towards the shore, carefully avoiding the ebb and flow of the water where Tamara had lost her lunch. He beckoned her to follow him out of the water.

They reached the shore and walked across the white beach to where their towels lay spread on the sand. Harry sat down on his big beach towel, and used another, smaller one to dry the salty water from his body while ‘Tamara’ rummaged through the ice filled cooler for something cold to drink. She fished out an ice-cold can of coke, pulled the tab then sat down on the towel beside Harry.

She said, "That was the most embarrassing thing I've ever done."

Harry reached for her, rested his hand on the back of her neck, massaging gently, tenderly.

"What happened out there, Sarah? You were fine one minute, and barfing all over the place the next. Are you okay, now?"

She bent her head forward, enjoying the feel of his hand on her neck.

She said, "I don't know. I just got this feeling all of sudden that something terrible..."

Suddenly, her head snapped up, jerked around to face him.

"*Wait... What?*" she stammered.

"Huh?" Harry grunted, quizzically.

"*What... what did you say?*"

"I said are you all right, now?" He looked puzzled.

"No, I mean what did you call me?"

Harry's hand moved from her neck to around her shoulders. He pulled her close and kissed her, lightly, on the forehead.

"Sarah," he said, softly. "I called you Sarah."

She pulled away and leaned back, staring at him, expressionlessly for a moment, then drew her knees to her chest, hugging them with both arms.

Sighing, she asked, "How long have you known?"

Harry smiled warmly, and said, "Since the first time we made love. You may be a witch, Sarah, but you're still a woman, a very passionate woman. You lost it a dozen times that night."

Sarah muttered, "...*m*'not a witch... told you that before."

Then, suddenly indignant, she sputtered, "Hey! If you knew, then why did you let me... you've been lying all along by letting me..."

Harry threw his hands up, laughing, “Whoa, there tiger! Who lied to who, here?”

Sarah wanted to be angry, but it was hard to do with Harry. She pouted, instead.

“That’s different.”

“*Really*,” Harry scoffed with his own playful indignance.

”Sarah looked away, rested her chin on her drawn up knees, and fixed her eyes on the ocean.

“Well... still... You took advantage of me, Harry.”

“Poor baby,” Harry smirked.

She slapped at his leg, absently, “Stop it... s’not funny.”

Harry’s said, warmly, “Sarah, listen...”

She ignored him, still pouting.

“Yoo hoo...” he teased.

“I’m not talking to you,” she murmured.

Harry grinned to himself.

He said, “Ok,” and lay back on the beach towel, eyes closed.

A few minutes went by while Sarah fidgeted. “Well?” she said.

Harry ignored her.

“Harry?”

“I’m not talking,” he said.

“*Harryyyy*, talk to me,” she slapped at him, again.

“Ow!” Harry sat up, grinning.

“All right,” he said. “But first, get rid of that ridiculous ‘Tamara’ facade. Then we’ll talk.”

She scowled, haughtily, “Why, ... you’re bored with your little fantasy girl toy, already?”

Harry laughed. “Just do it, and I’ll tell you why.”

“Oh, all right,” she said, scanning the beach. “Is anybody looking?”

“It’s fine. Go ahead.”

Sarah hesitated, the idea of losing Harry making her feel sick all over again. Reconciled to the inevitable, she closed her eyes for only an instant. 'Tamara' shimmered, then faded.

Under the drab, austere, and very unflattering attire in which the Crumb sister's chose to bore the world, Sarah Crumb wasn't at all dumpy. She might be described as 'pleasantly plump' by those who felt the need to describe some lack of perfection, or 'bursting with health' by those who, habitually, saw the best side of life. The time spent under the Florida sun had enhanced the 'pleasantly plump' part to a pleasantly light honey hue. The resulting overall appearance was downright pleasant.

Over the last few days, the righteous severity of her normal expression had softened, replaced by an almost perpetual smile. The few early strands of gray blended with the sun-streaked hair clinging wetly, framing her face, giving her a fresh, almost cherubic look. In a different sort of way, 'Tamara' had nothing on Sarah Crumb.

Harry looked at her and smiled, "There," he said, "That's why."

Thirty-seven

JOE PAUL SLAMMED ON THE BRAKES. The crappy old pickup screeched to a stop in the middle of Stillman Road halfway between the end of the bridge and the scattering of broken glass on the sidewalk beside Louis Walker's boarded up window. The pickup's old engine coughed, sputtered a few times, and quit.

Joe sat hunched behind the wheel, gasping with relief that the deer – that must have been what it was – hadn't come crashing through the windshield. At that speed it could have killed him. *Poor Emma*, he thought, *...woulda' broken her heart.*

He sat for a moment listening to the pinging of cooling metal, and the slight hiss of steam escaping from a hole in the radiator; the sounds intrusively loud in the stillness of the night. The crash had scared him half-sober, but that still left him half-drunk.

Joe hiccupped a few times, and fumbled at the door latch. The door, which usually stuck, and required a hefty bump from his shoulder to open, was already ajar, and the momentum from his hefty bump against the already open door almost sent him sprawling out onto the pavement. A

series of frantic grabs and fast footwork saved him from minor tragedy, but not from an undignified exit.

Once out of the truck, and standing rather wobbly upright, Joe looked back down the road towards the bridge for the deer, or as he'd decided to think of it, the venison. By the side of the road near the vacant lot behind the Crumb sister's house, he spotted a dark shape on the ground. It looked too big for a deer, but he'd mowed that lot for the Crumbs a hundred times, and had never seen anything there, before. Joe walked, unsteadily, over to have a look.

For the second time in one night, Dread regained consciousness and opened his eyes. A human was bending over him, weaving back and forth.

It slurred, "What the Hell are you, anyway?" – then fell over backwards, landing on its rump. Dread sat up, and regarded the human. It was sitting there on the ground looking a little dazed.

"What the Hell are you, anyway?" it repeated.

Dread stood up, then reached down and grabbed the human by the neck. He picked it up and held it in front of him, inspecting its soul while it screeched and flailed its arms trying to get away. He decided he didn't want this one. It was okay, far better than what he was used to, but it had a few stains and some gray streaks on it. The souls he'd smelled, before, were pure. Those were the ones he wanted. He dropped the human and raised his head, sniffing.

Ah, there they were, off to the right... and much closer than before.

The human had scrambled away on its hands and knees, cussing and screaming. Dread ignored it, and strode off in the direction of the pure soul scent. As he passed the crappy old pickup, he could hear the human yelling something through the rolled up window. It didn't sound happy.

Thirty-eight

TO EVERYONE'S RELIEF, after the TV went off, the fit lasted for only thirty seconds or so, and with nothing interesting going on, the maintenance demons flopped down on the rec room floor and went to sleep. Quackrak still sat in the wooden rocking chair rocking back and forth and stewing.

Patty had stayed over while Amanda was at dinner with Jack, Melanie and Simmons. She and Jilly were on the floor playing Scrabble. Claudia, hopelessly addicted to coffee, had just come down from the kitchen with a fresh mug. She settled back in an old recliner.

“What d’ya bet your moms talked those boys into going dancing after dinner?”

“*Boys?*” Jilly wrinkled her nose without looking up from her game. “They’re not boys. They’re old, Anta.”

Claudia laughed. “Yep, maybe even forty. Old and gray.”

Jilly looked up, frowning. “*Nooo*, I just mean, you know. They’re like... just too old to dance and stuff.”

Patty wore a quizzical expression. “I’ve never seen my mom dance. Do you thing they did? I mean go dancing, really?”

Claudia took a sip from her mug. She smiled, reflecting idly.

“I remember when she was your age – your mom, I mean – right here in the basement, with Karol and his friends.”

She glanced at Jilly. “Melanie, too – all of em just dancin’ their little hearts out.

“*Eeww*... that’s creepy!” Patty shivered.

Claudia laughed again. “Why?”

“I don’t know... just is.”

Something heavy slammed hard against the outside door. Patty and Jilly jumped, squealing, both crabbing frantically backwards across the floor to Claudia’s chair.

The door shook from another jolting impact.

“*Anta*,” screeched Jilly, huddling at Claudia’s knees. She and Patty clung to each other, terrified.

“*Quiet!*” demanded Claudia, her arms around the girl’s shoulders, protectively.

“Be quiet! – Be still!”

Jilly whimpered, “Anta, what...”

“Shush!” Claudia whispered.

Quackrak sprang from the rocker, reaching the door in a few surprisingly fast bounds. He looked angry, pounding the door with his fist, and quacking furiously at whatever was on the other side. He obviously knew what it was. The commotion had awakened the other demons. They were jumping up and down, quacking their heads off.

Through the din, Claudia could only catch a little of what Quackrak was, unconscientiously, projecting. It sounded, astonishingly, like, “...*better get your ass back where*...” She didn’t want to wait around to find out what that meant. She stood, dragging the girls up with her.

“Stairs,” she said, not taking her eyes off Quackrak and the door, “...up the stairs. Now!”

The three of them bolted across the room and clambered up the stairs. At the top, Claudia pushed the girls through the kitchen door, following them and slamming the door behind her. She herded them to the small dinette, grabbed them each by the arm, and sat them down forcefully.

“*Stay!*” she commanded. Then, seeing they were almost in shock, she knelt down, took each by the hand, and said in a soothing voice, “It’s okay. Trust Anta, all right?”

Then, very deliberately, “You *know* I won’t let anything happen to you, right?”

The words had the desired effect. The girls calmed slightly, reason peeking through the fear on their faces. They *did* know they were safe with Anta... still...

“...w-w-what’s out there, Anta,” stuttered Jilly, more confident now, but still scared.

“I don’t know,” Claudia admitted. “But whatever it is,” she smiled, trying to lighten things up, “we can always just zap it, right?”

Jilly and Patty both laughed nervously, each suddenly remembering they weren’t entirely defenseless.

“Right, ...zap it,” Jilly stammered, not sure what zapping entailed, but it sounded good.

Thirty-nine

AUBREY CRUMB AWOKE for the second time. The first time, she'd been roused by what sounded like some guy hollering and screaming down in the street outside, but when she got up and stumbled to the window, all she'd seen was crazy Joe Paul's crappy old pickup tearing through the intersection at the Boulevard, and disappearing up Stillman Road. She figured she must have dreamed the hollering and screaming part.

This time, it sounded like somebody banging on something. ...*probably dreaming that, too*, she thought, drifting back to sleep.

Nope, there it was again... louder.

What, the...

Aubrey turned over and looked at the clock on the dresser. It was after one o'clock in the morning. She got out of bed, padded to her second-story bedroom window, and looked out, again.

Nothing... the bridge off to her right, the side of Louis's store across the street, the intersection off to her left...

deserted, like it was supposed to be at one o'clock in the morning.

She turned from the window, walked out of the bedroom, through the hall and into the front guest room. From the windows of the guest room she could look down on Meljac Lane. All seemed quiet in that direction too, though there were lights on in the Meljac and Clark houses across the way.

The phone in the living room downstairs rang. Aubrey scowled: people hollering, pickup trucks and things banging, phones ringing and what-have-you ...at one o'clock in the morning!

She left the guest room, went through the hall and down the stairs, not bothering to turn on any lights. She'd lived in the house all her life, and could navigate its rooms and halls blindfolded.

The dim yellow glow from the street lamp out front shone through the big bay window of the living room. Aubrey shuffled across the worn carpet, and flopped down on the couch. She reached over the arm of the couch to the end table, and picked up the phone.

Before she finished the word, "Hello," Sarah's voice screamed through the receiver.

"Aubrey... I've lost them! I've lost..."

"Wha..?" Aubrey started to ask.

"My powers!" Sarah's voice sounded frantic.

"Aubrey, I've lost my powers!"

Aubrey leaned back on the couch, sighing skeptically, wondering how much her sister had had to drink.

From the phone, Sarah's voice pleaded, "Aubrey, are you there?"

Aubrey sighed again, sat up slowly, and said, "Ok, Sarah. Calm down. You haven't lost your powers. That doesn't happen. Just tell me what's going on."

Sarah spoke fast, sputtering, “I was levitating over the bed... just playing around...”

“Bed?” barked Aubrey. “What were you... slow down. I can’t understand...”

“... and I just ... just suddenly, I just fell right on top of Harry. I almost broke his...”

Aubrey barked again, “Why were you levitating over Harry? What are you doing down there, Sarah?”

Sarah took a deep breath, then answered coolly, an edge to her voice, “I’m doing what we agreed... whatever it takes to bring him... *Damn it, Aubrey*, that’s not the point. Didn’t you hear what I said? My powers! I fell right out of the air.” The picture popped into Aubrey’s mind; Sarah, hanging over Harry’s bed... falling...

In spite of her usual sanctimony, she chuckled, then surprised herself by asking, with an uncharacteristic grin, “...uh, what did you almost break, Sarah?”

The phone was silent for a few seconds, then, from Sarah, angrily, “*Was that supposed to be a joke?*”

Aubrey couldn’t resist. She chuckled again. “Well, you said you almost broke his...”

“Aubrey, listen to me, will you? I tried other things, simple things. They’re gone. I can’t do anything.”

Aubrey, more serious now, said, “Wait a minute.”

She put the phone down on the end table, got up and walked to the bay window. She looked outside at the street lamp.

‘Off,’ she thought at the light.

It stayed on.

Forty

THAT'S JUST GREAT, thought Dread. He could hear Quackrak, the world's biggest tattletale, jabbering his creepy little head off on the other side of the door. The freaky little runt probably couldn't wait to run and tell Lucy that Dread was out of Underworld.

In his haste to get to the deliciously clean souls, Dread had forgotten all about the freaks. Now, he could hear them inside the house going berserk, as they usually did when he was around.

In answer to Quackrak's rather rudely put demand to get his ass back to Underworld, he yelled through the thick wooden door, "I would if I could, dummy, but I don't know how."

Quackrak yelled back, "If you hadn't been messing around in Lucy's office you wouldn't be here in the first place."

"I wasn't in Lucy's office," Dread lied.

"Liar!" accused Quackrak through the door.

Dread shouted back, "Oh yeah? How about I bust this door down and kick your ass?"

It was an empty threat. Quackrak, despite his size, was mean as the dickens when aroused, and Dread had no desire to tangle with him. Of course neither of them could, actually, hurt the other, but the loser would never live it down – literally, *never*.

Before Quackrak had a chance to call his bluff, Dread bellowed at the door, “Anyway, so what? It’s none of your business you little troll. You’re not the boss.”

“Yes I am,” Quackrak hollered. “Now that Lucy’s gone, I *am* the boss. So there!”

Dread frowned. *What was the freak talking about? Lucy gone? What did that mean?*

The latch on the door rattled, and the door swung open. Quackrak stood there, defiantly, looking up at Dread.

The little demon railed at him, “You can’t come in here. You gotta go hide someplace.”

“Why,” growled dread.

“Cause you’re ugly as sin. You look just like people think a demon is supposed to look. You’ll get em all riled up, and cause trouble for all of us. Get outta here!”

Dread snorted. “*You*, callin’ *me* ugly? Ever look in a mirror, you little ghoul?”

Quackrak snorted right back. “At least I don’t look like a poster for a horror movie!”

“Oh yeah?” Dread was livid, but he couldn’t think of anything really good to say.

“Oh yeah?” he repeated, blustering.

Quackrak sensed he had the upper hand.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, the coincidence suddenly occurring to him. It was obvious how Dread had gotten out of Hell; the big clod had been after ice cream again, and had stumbled through the portal. But what was he doing here, at this particular house?

“What are you doing here?”

“None of you’re business.” Dread brushed off the question. “What dya mean, you’re the boss?”

Quackrak looked surprised. “What? You mean you don’t even know?”

“Know what?” Dread was getting nervous. The little freak looked too confident.

“Lucifer quit, and he left me in charge.” Quackrak smiled, wickedly, “I’m the devil, now!”

“*No way!*” stormed Dread.

“OK, Maybe not the devil,” Quackrak relented. “But he *did* leave me in charge, so... well, that’s it. I’m in charge.”

“For how long?” asked Dread.

“Forever,” said Quackrak, smugly.

Dread was unconvinced.

“You got any witnesses?”

“Yep, right behind me.” Quackrak gestured over his shoulder at the maintenance demons who were vigorously nodding their heads up and down in agreement.

Dread opened his mouth to protest, then stopped, puzzled. Quackrak was hopping up and down, excitedly, jabbing his finger, pointing at something behind Dread.

The little demon babbled, “*Now you’re in for it. You’re gonna get it, now!*”

Something hit Dread from the side hard enough to knock him to the ground. He tried to get up and run, but he couldn’t move.

Forty-one

SINCE THEY'D BEEN DRINKING at the restaurant, Jack was being extra careful.

"It's a wonder we got home at all," Amanda teased, "with old lady Harris, here, driving,"

"Yeah, right," the big cop protested, not taking his eyes off the road. "I can see the headlines now – Local Cop Jailed For Speeding Drunkenly Through The Mountains."

"Then, you shoulda' let me drive," grinned Amanda.

"*Good God!*" Melanie gulped from the back seat. "I'd walk home, first. You ever been in the car with Amanda driving? – not enough valium in the world!"

"Hey," Amanda huffed, "I'm a good driver!" Then, over her shoulder at Simmons, "Don't listen to these two, John. They hate me cause I'm younger than they are."

"She is not," muttered Melanie.

They had just come across the bridge and had reached the corner of Stillman Road and Bramwell Boulevard. Instead of turning left onto Meljac Lane, Jack turned right onto the Boulevard and pulled up in front of Walker's Drug Store where Simmons had left his car.

Jack said, “How about I just dump you girls off here? You don’t mind walking home alone in the dark, do you?” He forced a disinterested yawn and waited for a reaction. He expected a pinch, or something, from Amanda. He got it.

“*Ouch!* Okay, okay, we’ll walk you home,” he said with a laugh.

Amanda leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and smiled at him warmly. “That’s more like it.”

She kissed his cheek again, lightly. “But, you know what? I feel so good, and it’s so beautiful out, I *want* to walk home alone in the dark.”

From the back seat, Melanie said, “She means so we can talk about you guys before we get home.” – then added, glancing over the back of the seat, “No, really, the houses are right there.” – referring to the other side of the intersection.

“We’ll just walk across...” She lowered her head in a slight pout.

“...the dangerous intersection,” A mischievous grin beginning on her face.

“...in the black of night,” The grin widened.

“...with lord knows what, lurking in the shadows.”

In the seat beside her, Simmons laughed out loud, and Melanie giggled like a schoolgirl.

Melanie and Amanda, having decided they really did want to stroll leisurely home alone, had already walked to the front of Melanie’s house by the time the taillights of the two cars disappeared around the curve on the other side of the bridge.

“*Damn it, damn it, damn it!*” Melanie was shaking her head, visibly upset.

“I can’t believe I sat there in the back seat of that car giggling and gushing like a teenaged girl on a first date.”

She took a deep breath. “Jesus, Amanda, what’s got into me? Seems like I embarrass the hell outa myself every five minutes around that guy.”

Amanda wore a big smirk. “You’re in luuuuvv, lady.”

“Come on, that’s stupid. I just met him”

“Menopause?” Amanda chuckled.

“Stop it, Mandy, I’m serious.” She was getting more upset.

“I’m making a fool out of myself, every time I’m around him.”

Amanda took her arm, stopping her on the sidewalk.

“Look,” she said, gently. “You’re not making a fool out of yourself, okay?”

“But…” Melanie was biting her lip.

“No buts, listen to me, Mel. It’s time you met someone. You’ve been alone for, what, nine years… since Karol died?”

Melanie looked away. Her shoulders slumped, and she whispered, “*Karol*.” A small tear appeared in the corner of her eye.

“No!” admonished Amanda. “ Stop it… don’t go there, all right?”

Melanie brushed at the tear and straightened up.

“Right,” she said, then laughed nervously. “Too many drinks.” She took another deep breath.

”I guess I’m just a little confused.”

She looked Amanda in the eyes, “Thanks, Mandy.”

Then, with another nervous laugh, “Whoa! …a little mini breakdown, there. I *have* been alone too long. Remind me not to drink when I’m lonely.”

“Hey,” said Amanda.

“What?”

Amanda smiled, “Don’t drink when you’re lonely.”

They both laughed, then walked around the side of the house towards the back patio... *and Dread.*

Forty-two

AMANDA SPINTEDED around Dread's prostrate form and through the rec room door, almost knocking Quackrak over in the process.

"Patty!" she yelled, scanning the room for her daughter. She turned on Quackrak. "Where the hell are the girls?"

Melanie burst through the door right after her. "*Jilly*," she called, loudly.

Quackrak was trying to explain, but Melanie and Amanda were too overwrought to concentrate on his thoughts. Melanie ran for the stairs leading up to the kitchen.

She screamed, "Claudia," just as the door at the top of the stairs opened, and Aunt Claudia appeared.

Claudia yelled down, "Melanie, be careful. There's something outside..."

She didn't get to finish.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Melanie shouted, "*Damn right there is!* Where are the girls? Are they all right?"

Jilly and Patty crowded behind Claudia at the kitchen door. Jilly craned her neck to look around Claudia and down the stairs.

“We’re okay, mom. Did you see something outside?”
Melanie stopped halfway up the stairs. She ignored her daughter’s question.

“Thank God! Claudia, keep the girls up there till we figure out what’s going on down here.” She turned and hurried back down.

Amanda had seen that Claudia and the girls were all right. She was beginning to catch some of what Quackrak was projecting, and was staring, intently, at the little demon, trying to get it clear.

Quackrak was having trouble concentrating. He had never experienced violence before, and was badly shaken by whatever it was these women had done to Dread. The other demons had disappeared, probably hiding.

Melanie rushed by Amanda and Quackrak, and out the basement door. Outside, she approached where Dread lay on the ground, and looked down at the creature under the invisible web she’d thrown over it to keep it down. She couldn’t believe it was still alive.

Amanda, seeing the monster at the door of the basement, had acted out of instinct for her child’s safety, and had thrown enough energy at it to kill anything alive. As they rushed into the basement, Melanie had seen that it was still moving, and had thrown the web over it. Now, seeing it clearly, she was glad she had.

When Quackrak and his little buddies had made their first appearance, everyone had freaked out. But this one – this one was different. This one was straight out of a scene from the Apocalypse – the classic demon of nightmares. Melanie shuddered.

Amanda came out of the basement. She had the whole story from Quackrak, or what he knew of it, and had calmed down a little. She looked down at Dread, shook her head violently back and forth and made blubbering sounds.

“It’s official, I’ve gone stark-raving mad! Take me to the funny farm!”

She finished her act, and bent over Dread’s struggling form.

“Yes, folks, that’s a real-live, honest to God, Demon – just like you see in the movies.”

She raised her hands above her head: her body tensed.

“Step back, ladies and gentlemen, I’m squashin’ the damn thing!”

Quackrak ran out the basement door, “Please, wait!” he cried.

Forty-three

SARAH HUNG UP THE PHONE.

“Aubrey, too,” she said, stunned. “What’s happening, Harry?”

She sat propped up in the bed beside Harry, her back against the headboard.

Harry had a pretty good idea what was happening.

“Sarah,” he said, turning towards her, then hesitating for a moment, wondering how she was going to take it.

“Did any of you ever wonder *why* you had powers?”

“Of course,” she answered, offhandedly, dismissing the obvious, but continuing anyway. “They’re to keep you from getting out of...” She stopped, her face blank, expressionless, then a quizzical frown.

Suddenly, her mouth dropped open, her eyes went wide, eyebrows arched. “*Oh No!*”

“...fraid so,” said Harry.

“You knew we’d lose them?” she said, accusingly.

“Huh uh.” Never even thought about it till just now. But that’s *gotta* be why they’re gone. Just figures, right?”

Sarah sat up straight, gaping at him. “*Just figures?* That’s all you can say... *just figures?*”

“What do you want me to say?” Harry ventured, timidly. She waved her arms, frustrated and angry at Harry, not knowing why?

“Oh, I don’t know, she cried, sarcastically. “How about, *just figures!* Say *just figures,* again, Harry! That helps!”

“Sweetheart, I just meant that...”

“I know, I know, I know...!” she collapsed against his chest, almost in tears. “I’m sorry ...I’m sorry... not your fault. But what am I going to do, Harry?” She choked back a sob.

Harry said, “About what?”

“*Damn it, Harry!*” she jerked away, angry again.

“About my powers! They’re gone, Harry! Don’t you know what that means?”

Harry sat up in the bed, scooted back against the headboard, and regarded her from a more confident position. He spoke firmly, but with tenderness.

“No, baby. I don’t know what that means. But I *do* know this; you have all the power you need to keep me where you want me. I’d like to think that was enough power for one person.”

“Oh, Harry, it is.” She fell against him, again. This time, tears did come to her eyes, and she sobbed, “I don’t know, Harry, I don’t... I’m so confused.”

She sat up, again, suddenly.

“Okay,” she stammered, wiping the tears from her eyes, trying to compose herself. She turned, sitting cross-legged, facing him.

“Okay,” she repeated, wiping the last tear and taking a deep breath. She desperately wanted him to understand what she was feeling.

“You’re right,” she began, awkwardly, unsure how to continue so it would make sense.

“I don’t... I don’t actually *need* powers. Not anymore. But it’s always been a part of me... just life. My mother, my grand mother, and on back for God knows how many centuries...”

“Two hundred,” injected Harry.

“Huh?”

“Two hundred centuries,” he said, grinning.

“Two hun...?” she saw his grin.

“*Harry, stop it!*” she whined, irritated, but smiled in spite of herself, knowing he was just trying to lighten her mood.

Harry pinched her nose, smiling with her.

She *did* lighten up; glad and warmed that Harry was the way he was with her.

Forty-four

THE HIDEOUS CREATURE grunted, but didn't squash.

"Great!" blurted Amanda, "The damned thing's immortal."

She had slammed it with everything she had, but it just lay there under Melanie's web blinking up at her, unharmed.

Quackrak rushed out and bent over Dread, yelling, "What did I tell ya? Didn't I tell ya? You should've hid somewhere like I told ya!"

Dread didn't react to Quackrak's rant. His gaze was locked on the two women looking down at him, his eyes darting back and forth between them.

True, a few minutes ago one of them had hit him with something as massive as the door between Hell and Underworld, and had knocked him flat on his ass. True again, the same woman, at least he thought it was the same one, had just tried to squash him with something even more massive. Also true, they were probably responsible for whatever was holding him down, sprawled on the flagstones of the patio unable to move – but all that wasn't important.

What *was* important was... their souls – *they glowed!* The Master of Underworld, Keeper of the Unspeakable Archives, Ascendant of the First Evil Deed, sighed like a contented baby, and smiled, almost lovingly, up at the two women with the shining souls.

Melanie's face wrinkled in disgust. "*Oh – My – God!*" she choked out with a gasp. "Is that thing smiling at me?"

Amanda bent over and looked at Dread's face.

"Looks like it," she said. "I think it likes you, Mel." Dread kept smiling, wriggling a little to get more comfortable under the constricting web.

"There, see," said Amanda. "That was probably an orgasm. Yep, it likes you."

"Oh, Jesus, Amanda! Enough jokes, okay?"

Amanda was joking to keep from screaming. The last few minutes had stretched her nerves to the point of shattering. When she and Melanie had rounded the house to be confronted by the unthinkable thing on the patio... so close to her child, to both children; the force she'd unleashed at the horrid thing had been an instant reflex, unprepared, too much, too fast. She had acted before thinking, and the results had been a tearing at her psyche. She was still reeling from it.

Amanda turned to Melanie, the grin from her joke disappearing abruptly.

She snarled, "*I want it dead, Mel.* God, I want it dead, so bad... that thing... so close to Patty and Jilly..." she trailed off, shivering with anger.

Melanie nodded, sympathizing. She felt the same maternal rage, but seeing Amanda almost rip herself apart with her initial reaction had kept her from doing the same. Right now, she couldn't take her eyes off the ridiculous smile on the monster's face. Amanda's joke had made her skin crawl

with a kind of humorous revulsion. She didn't know whether to laugh or gag.

Now that everyone had calmed down, she turned to Quackrak to get the whole story on this new beastie. But Amanda had *not* calmed down, or regained her composure as Melanie had expected – not in the least. Whether Dread was immortal, or not, Amanda had found a way to deal with him. You just plain never... *ever*... threatened Amanda's baby.

Forty-five

PEOPLE WHO THOUGHT it was cool to refer to everything by a silly vernacular called them ‘Hogs.’ People who owned and rode them, and thought ‘Hogs’ sounded stupid, just called them bikes. The people who built them called them Harleys. It’s hard to tell what Hank Crotts called his, cause Hank hasn’t been around for a while. As a matter of fact, no one has heard from Hank since shortly after he showed up in Bramwell.

Nobody knew where ole Hank came from; just that one fine summer day he had come around the curve from River Road onto Bramwell Boulevard, and had ridden that big shiny Harley, with its deafeningly loud exhaust pipes, right down the main street of town all the way to the intersection at Stillman Road. If there had been a traffic light at the intersection – like there was ever any traffic – ole Hank would have ignored it. He was just that kind of guy; a free spirit some would say, but in truth, just an asshole.

Of course there *was* a stop sign, and since Stillman Road was there first, the Boulevard got stuck with it. So, in the

absence of a traffic light to run, ole Hank, the free-spirited asshole, ran that.

If Jack Harris had been cruising around nearby, maybe he would've just pulled out his trusty gun and shot ole Hank off that big bike for breaking the law that first time – probably not, but it would have saved a lot of trouble right off the bat. As it was, ole Hank just breezed right through, past the big rock house on the corner, up Meljac Lane onto the springs trail, finally pulling to a stop beside the old picnic table where Amanda Clark sat watching her three-year-old daughter play in the mud beside the clear Blue Springs water.

Ole Hank turned off the noisy machine, kicked down the kickstand, and let the heavy bike lean slightly till it rested securely on the stand. He pulled his right leg over the tank, and with both feet on the ground, sat back on the seat eyeing the strikingly beautiful woman sitting at the old wooden table.

Ole Hank had had his share of good-looking women, but nothing like this one. You never found one like this around biker bars, and that's where ole Hank liked to pick his up... near closing time when they were drunk and easy. Ordinarily, he didn't mess with these classy types. They were usually stuck up, and wouldn't have anything to do with him. But this one was smiling at him.

Amanda was surprised. You didn't see bikers in Bramwell, but she wasn't afraid. Amanda Clark wasn't afraid of anything this side of Heaven or Hell, and in her case, that definitely included Hell. So she smiled at ole Hank; just being friendly. The biker seemed to take that as an invitation. He pushed himself up off the bike's seat, and sauntered over to the table, then hitched up his pants and sat straddling the bench a few feet from her.

“Names Hank,” he drawled, elbow on the table, leaning on it, arrogantly.

Amanda put her own elbow on the table and leaned on it, mimicking the biker’s machismo.

She stuck her hand out and drawled back at him, pleasantly, “Well, hi there, Hank. What’cha doing around these parts?”

Ole Hank thought he’d died and gone to paradise. Now, if he just hadn’t tried to force the issue... but being an asshole, he did.

If little Patty hadn’t been there, Amanda Clark would have probably just run away. But little Patty *was* there, and when it came to anything that could threaten her daughter, Amanda Clark had a very dark side.

She kept the big shiny Harley in the shed behind the house. Maybe someday she would give it to Jack Harris... if he promised not to ask where she got it.

Forty-six

THE PATIO ERUPTED in a blaze of light, the air sizzling with astral energy.

“Excalibur!” hissed Amanda, wrenching the fabled relic out of a thousand years past.

A phantom whirlwind gusted across the flagstones, its sound a dissonant cacophony of tortured banshees, drowning Quackrak’s futile protests.

Melanie recoiled in shock at Dread’s scream as his smile turned into a grimace of pain from the sudden burning brilliance. Quackrak lunged at Amanda, literally crawling up her ridged body, grasping desperately at the gleaming sword of legend, which she held high above her head, poised to strike.

Melanie was, momentarily, numbed, shaken by the intensity of Amanda’s unrestrained use of power. It had the feel of dark violence; a realm of magic and sorcery their kind had chosen never to enter. She cared nothing for the creature on the ground, but she feared for her dearest friend. Amanda had always been insanely protective of Patty, and now, even though Patty was safe, she could feel how the

strain of Amanda's first, uncontrolled, crack at the monster had unraveled her, left her running on momentum and instinct. Melanie was afraid that if Amanda killed the creature in her present state of mind, it would push her into a kind of darkness from which she couldn't return.

It had to stop, *now!*

Melanie tensed, gathering her own power, her mind expanding, encompassing the scene before her, every muscle in her body vibrating with the effort to project her will, to claim and command her surroundings, and bend them to the reality she desired. She felt her power collide with Amanda's, creating a churning turbulence between them. But Amanda was already weakening, her abilities badly depleted. Another push from Melanie, gentle, so as not to harm her friend, and Amanda's magic shimmered and collapsed, the patio, suddenly, dark and silent.

Amanda stood for a moment, arms still above her head, but her hands were empty, the sword gone. She staggered, slightly, then caught herself. Quackrak let go of her and fell to the ground landing on his rump.

Melanie stepped towards her, reaching out, but Amanda, breathing heavily, waved her off.

"It's okay," she panted, breathlessly, "I'm all right." She leaned over forward, and braced herself, hands on her thighs, catching her breath.

"...s'okay," she whispered between pants.

A moment more, a few more deep breaths, then, "Okay!" she said, again, standing up almost straight, and breathing more normally. She shook her hair out of her eyes, an embarrassed grin creeping onto her face. She looked drained and weak.

"Let me try that again," she said.

Melanie started to protest, "No, you're..."

"...kidding, kidding." Amanda managed a weak laugh.

She took another deep breath, back in control.

“All right, what then? We gonna keep it as a pet... sell it to a circus? What?”

Forty-seven

IN MOST WAYS, Harry was a pretty capable guy. His evil-management skills were superb. As a bartender, he was a natural. To Sarah's delight, though she wouldn't tell you about them, there were a few other things he was good at. But as far as driving went... well, not so much.

Everything was going fine till, right out of the blue, the answer to why he'd been having the feeling that something was strange, suddenly, dawned on him. Harry's mouth dropped open, and his eyes went wide.

"I'm still the Devil!" he cried in surprise, unconsciously jerking the steering wheel, and swerving across two busy lanes of traffic.

Lucky for Harry, people tend to get out of the way when large black Hummers come roaring towards them, so aside from a lot of horn honking, and a few ruffled feathers, no real harm was done. Harry regained, reasonable, control of the big SUV and swerved, erratically, back into the lane he'd started from.

"Harry, you're gonna kill us!" Sarah's face had turned pale. She braced herself with both feet on the dashboard.

Harry was staring straight ahead, leaning forward slightly, and gripping the wheel with both hands.

“I knew it!” he declared. “I knew something was wrong.”

“*Pleeeeeease*, slow down, Harry.” Sarah was wishing she’d taken the extra insurance on the rented Hummer.

“...and what are you talking about? What do you mean ‘something’s wrong’... aside for us about to get creamed on the highway... *slow down!*”

A little color was coming back to her face, but she was still braced for impact.

Harry was looking back and forth between the road and the sky.

“What are they pointing at?” he looked puzzled.

Sarah glanced out the window. “What... who?”

“Those people in those cars,” he replied.

Sarah snapped at him, impatiently, regretting it at once, “That’s called *the finger*, Harry, ...the bird.”

Harry glanced at the sky, again. “I don’t see any bir...”

Sarah persisted, “What do you mean, ‘something’s wrong?’”

Harry had slowed the Hummer to a respectable speed. He didn’t think he was doing too badly. After all, he’d only learned to drive yesterday.

“It just hit me,” he said. “I’m still the devil.”

“Yeah, I heard that part. Whadya mean?”

“Well...” Harry thought a moment. “The other day, when I told you guys I wasn’t the devil anymore; that I quit... uh, well... I didn’t actually *do* anything... like something formal... you know, like submit a resignation” He chuckled at the thought. “...or perform some kind of ceremony, or whatever.”

“And?” Sarah prompted.

Harry went on, not too confidently, “I just kinda... uh... decided.”

“You decided,” Sarah grunted, sarcastically.

“Yeah, ...decided... like a personal commitment... *not* to be the devil anymore.”

Harry wore a slightly guilty ‘okay-I’m-not-really-convinced-myself’ look. Sarah felt the old feelings of righteousness creeping back into her brain.

“You tricked us,” she said, suspiciously.

“No, no,” Harry protested, upset at her where her thoughts were going.

“Really, I didn’t. I honestly believed that it would be enough to just stop, to refuse, to just... just... *quit!* And it worked, right? I walked away, didn’t I? Please believe me, it wasn’t a trick.”

Sarah wanted, needed to believe him, but...

“Then what’s this about, Harry? What do you mean you’re still...”

“No,” he said. “I don’t think that’s quite right. I mean I don’t think I’m *still* the devil.”

He paused, thinking, then said, “I think I wasn’t, but I’m going to be... *again.*”

Sarah moaned, “Jeez, Harry! You’re the devil, you’re *not* the devil, you’re the devil again. What’s next? You’re a fairy princess? What the hell, Harry? You’re not making sense.”

“...fairy princess?” he frowned.

“A joke, Harry!” Sarah was getting frustrated, afraid he had lied to them, and desperately wanting it not to be so.

“Look,” she said. “A minute ago you practically yelled, ‘*I’m still the devil,*’ then you almost killed us, then you started babbling, ‘*I’m the devil... I’m not the devil...*’ she shook her head, confused. “Go back and start over, Harry. Please, you’re making me dizzy.”

Harry was looking at the road. “Makes sense to me,” he mumbled to himself.

“*Damn it, Harry!*” she shook her fist and stomped at the dashboard.

Harry flinched. “Okay, okay!”

Sarah slouched in her seat. “Sorry,” she offered, meekly, embarrassed over her outburst.

Harry tried a conciliatory smile, suddenly realizing the state she was in. He decided he’d better explain everything clearly before she exploded again.

“No, I’m the one that should be sorry,” he began. “I’ve been kind of holding my breath for the last few days, hoping everything would turn out right. But I keep getting this itchy little feeling that it wasn’t. Now I know why.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, then, in a resigned tone, “You guys were right all along.”

He glanced over at Sarah, and smiled, ruefully. “I guess I should have listened, huh?”

“Watch the road, Harry.” Sarah still wasn’t happy.

“Right,” he said, eyes snapping back to the front.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I think what happened was; and keep in mind that being the devil is no small thing.”

“Big deal,” Sarah muttered under her breath.

Harry frowned, looking a little insulted. “Hey, there’s only one devil, you know!”

Sarah snickered in spite of her pique.

“*Anyway, as I was saying,*” he said, haughtily, “Remember the other night, I was talking about rules, and I said I could quit if I wanted to because there weren’t any rules? Well, I figured, since I was the only devil that ever existed, I could make all the rules I wanted about devil stuff and...”

“Devil stuff?” Sarah sputtered, then laughed out loud.

“*What?*” Harry snorted, insulted again.

Sarah laughed again, louder this time. Harry pouted, his eyes darting back and forth between her and the road.

Calming down, Sarah managed to stammer, “Harry, do you have any idea how insane this seems? I’m sitting here in a rented Hummer, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, with The Devil, the Evil One himself, for Christ sakes – whom, I might add, I am currently screwing – listening to him talk about devil stuff... I don’t know whether to laugh, cry or scream. Give me a hint, Harry. Which one should I do?” She finally ran out of steam.

“I think,” ventured Harry, cautiously, “We should stop and have a drink ...no, five drinks” He smiled. “And have a nice calm talk.”

Forty-eight

DREAD FELT WHATEVER had been holding him down melt away. Taking advantage of his sudden freedom, he jumped to his feet and grabbed both women by the neck, hoisting them off the patio floor and holding them up in front of him. Now, if he could only figure out how to get to their souls.

Quackrak yelled, “Stop it!” – and kicked Dread in the crotch so hard the big fiend’s feet almost left the ground. Dread dropped the women and fell to the patio floor howling in pain.

“*You little bastard,*” he screamed in agony.

The two women crumpled to the ground, but recovered quickly. Through a fog of pain, Dread watched them spring to their feet, both women screeching and gesturing wildly as though they were throwing something at him. Right now, he didn’t care what they did as long as they stayed away from his crotch.

In half an eternity, Dread never imagined something could hurt so bad. He rolled around on the flagstones with tears in his eyes. All he could think of was the pain, and finding that

boiling oil Lucy was always threatening him with – and dipping Quackrak in it till the little bastard sizzled.

Quackrak was pacing back and forth, waving his arms, yelling, “*Enough, enough, enough!*”

Again, Amanda reached into the past for Excalibur, but there was nothing there. She shouted words of power. They sounded empty. A thought raced through her mind... of these last few days; the feeling that something was wrong. Melanie had stopped even trying.

She grabbed Amanda’s arm. Her voice was frantic.

“It’s not working. Nothing’s working.”

“*Our powers are gone*” The words came from Aubrey Crumb. Aubrey stood at the edge of the patio looking, numbly, at the incredible scene in front of her.

She said, calmly, dazed, without expression, “Anyone care to introduce me to whatever these horrors are that you seemed to have unleashed?”

Dread was breathing heavy, but recovering from the pain.

He looked up at Quackrak and panted, “Who’s that?”

Quacked looked at Melanie and Amanda.

“Who’s that?” he asked,

Melanie and Amanda were both staring at Aubrey.

Aubrey sighed, shook her head slightly, and said, “Never mind... too much for me. I’m going home.” She turned and walked away, around the corner of the house.

Aubrey’s appearance, and subsequent disappearance, somehow dampened the action on the patio. All eyes were glued to the spot where she had stood.

Melanie recovered first. She whirled on Dread.

Quackrak yelled, demanding, “Stop it! Now!”

He pointed at Melanie, “You stop!” then at Amanda, “You stop!” then down at Dread, “...and you stop!”

The little demon’s commands halted the impending renewal of frenzy before it began.

“Be still, be quiet, and listen,” he went on, insistently. Everyone was still, quiet, and listening, all of them, even Dread, oddly relieved that he’d taken charge. Quackrak pointed down at Dread, who had managed to sit up.

“This is Dread,” he said, “and it would be best if you’d stop trying to kill him. You can’t, anyway,” he added.

Melanie sneered, “Good God! That’s that unspeakable keeper thing you were talking about. What’s it doing here?”

Quackrak answered with a tinge of sarcasm, “That’s what I was trying to find out before you showed up and flattened him.”

Melanie snapped back, “Well, you’d better find out in a hurry before ‘Mandy the Madwoman’ over here flips out again, and lops his head off.”

Amanda did a little imaginary swordplay to drive the point home.

“First of all,” said Quackrak, “he’s not the unspeakable keeper thing. He’s the Keeper of the Unspeakable Archives. And second, the reason he’s here is... uh,” he looked down at Dread, impatiently, “I asked you before. Why are you here?”

Dread growled, nodding towards the women, “I want their souls. And there are others here. I want them, too.”

Quackrak frowned. “Why? You’ve got vaults and vaults full of them, already.”

Dread said, “None of your business.”

“Look,” said Quackrak, trying to be reasonable, “you don’t... I mean we... us... in Hell and Underworld, and all... we don’t get souls like these, at least as they are now. They go...” It occurred to him that he didn’t know *where* they went, “...somewhere else. Besides, you only get souls from dead people. These are still alive.”

Dread shrugged. “I’ll just kill em then.”

Melanie shoved Quackrak aside and stuck her face inches from Dread's.

"Here's a flash for you, slime ball. If you thought it hurt when quacker, here, kicked you in the balls, wait'll you feel my genuine, Italian leather, pointed toe, high heel shoe kicked up your evil ass!"

Amanda shook a warning finger at Dread.

"You really don't wanna tangle with her," she said. "She's a real bitch this time of month."

Melanie snarled, "God Damned right, I am!"

Quackrak freaked out.

He screamed at the top of his mental lungs, "*Nobody's getting any souls!*" Then to Melanie, more calmly, "And please don't kick him."

Melanie gasped, incredulously, "Don't kick him? Are you crazy? He just threatened to kill us."

Quackrak waved his hands in front of him, dismissingly. "Nobody's going to kill anybody. You're just overreacting."

Melanie practically shouted, "*I'm* overreacting? Why you little snot..."

Quackrak huffed, insulted, "Now, that was uncalled for. Please, if we could all just calm down for..." He stopped in mid-sentence, tilted his head back, sniffing the air, a curious expression on his face, then blurted out, "Oh, no, no, no! Dread, what have you done?"

At that moment, a slight breeze stirred the air, bringing with it the subject of Quackrak's sudden realization. Amanda and Melanie both clasped their hands to their mouths.

Melanie choked, "Good Lord! What is that stench?"

Amanda was trying to keep from retching.

"That, ladies," Quackrak was speaking to Melanie and Amanda, but was staring, accusingly, at Dread, "...is essence of pure evil. Lovely scent, don'tcha think?"

He said to Dread, with false pleasantness, “Would you like to tell the nice ladies, here, why they’re about to puke all over their nice clean patio”

Dread had shrunk a size or two, and had, totally, lost his demonic appearance.

He muttered, guiltily, “...uh.”

Quackrak was wearing a big, sarcastic, smile.

“Oh, the cat seems to have gotten Mr. Dread’s tongue.”

His big smile beamed even more sarcastically.

“Please allow me. You see, when *somebody*,” he paused for effect, “...leaves the door to Underworld open,” another pause.

Then Quackrak exploded, angrily, “*Very bad stuff gets out. Right, Mr. Dread?*”

Forty-nine

ANOTHER THING Harry was good at, was finding nice little bars – cool, dark, comfortable places to just sit around in and talk for a while. He had a knack for it. This one was in a Steak House across the road from the beach.

It was between lunch and dinner hour, and except for the bartender, he and Sarah had the place all to themselves. They sat at a cozy booth as far from the bored bartender as the small room allowed.

Harry took a first sip of his icy scotch and water, smacked his lips with a pronounced, *abh*, and chuckled.

“What?” asked Sarah.

He said, “I was just thinking of that little ‘take-me-master’ act you did the night we met.”

Sarah blushed, stirring her drink, idly. “I thought I was pretty good.”

“*Sooooo* Corny,” he mocked.

“You fell for it.” She grinned, coyly.

“Fell for it? Hey, a cute babe throws herself at me: I figured I’d died and gone to heaven.”

He caught himself. “Oops. That didn’t come out right.”

Sarah laughed, “Nope, Harry, it didn’t.”

“Anyway,” Harry laughed too, “I just figured I’d gotten lucky.

He reached across the table and took her hand, “...very lucky.”

They looked at each other for a moment, smiling, then Sarah pulled her hand, gently, away from Harry’s. Her smile faded, and she looked down at her drink.

“So,” she said, not looking up, her voice very quiet. “What’s next for us, Harry? We live happily ever after? A little house somewhere? Maybe a white picket fence?”

It wasn’t really a question. She didn’t expect Harry to answer, and he didn’t.

Finally, she looked up at him, a sad smile on her face.

“You’re going back, aren’t you, Harry?”

Harry’s sigh was surrender to reality. “I don’t have a choice,” he admitted to her, and to himself.

Sarah sat up straight, her own reality-check kicking in. She shook her head slightly, shaking off the sadness... shaking off... *what? ...a silly dream?* – Small town girl finds happiness living in the suburbs with the devil?

“When?” she asked, matter of factly. Then, without waiting for an answer, she grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly, her voice pleading.

“What if you don’t, Harry?” What if you just don’t? What if we walk on the beach, and we just keep walking, and the sun never goes down, and...”

She pulled away from him, suddenly.

“*Shit, Harry!*” she spat out, angrily. “It just makes me wanna break something.

She snatched up her drink from the table. Harry thought she was going to throw it, but she chugged it down, instead.

She finished the drink and slammed the glass down on the table, punctuating her frustration.

“When?” she asked again, more composed.

“Now,” he said.

“Right now?” she prodded.

“Well, no, not like *right* now, like right out the door. But there’s evil afoot, Sarah, so tonight for sure.”

“*Evil afoot?*” Sarah suppressed a laugh in spite of her sadness.

“Yeah,” Harry looked puzzled. “What?”

“Never mind,” she said, smirking. “We’ll go with the *evil afoot.*”

Then, more seriously, “Do you think something has happened?”

“I *know* it has,” he said. “I just don’t know what. I do know one thing, though; I have to go back, and I have to be what I am, or rather, what I’m supposed to be. I honestly thought I could change it, but now I see that, well, whether I like it, or not, there *is* a Hell, and there’s got to be a devil in it. I don’t know what else to say, Sarah.”

Sarah reached out and touched his face for a few seconds, then stood up.

“Neither do I, Harry,” she said. “But whatever it is...” she turned towards the door, “What the hell, let’s say in bed,” – then mumbled to herself, “...*least I’ll get my powers back.*”

Fifty

TWO EGGS OVER EASY, stack of pancakes and sausage. It looked good on the breakfast plate – it didn't look so good on the ground beside the road where Jack left it after the smell hit him.

The day started out great. The Mockingbird nesting in the tree outside his bedroom window woke him with its usual early song. Most mornings, he seriously considered shooting the damn thing and going back to sleep. This morning he yawned, stretched, thought of Amanda, and happily yelled, "Good Morning, bird."

Harris hopped out of bed, showered, and hummed a pleasant song. After donning a fresh uniform, he jumped in the car and drove to the Waffle House for breakfast. He whistled a tune all the way there.

After breakfast, he headed the cruiser up the Stillman side of the mountain, over the top, and down the Bramwell side. Just before he reached the Bramwell Bridge, the smell hit him. That's where Jack slammed on the brakes, pulled to the side of the road, jumped out of the car, and ralphed up the two eggs over easy, stack of pancakes and sausage.

Breakfast at the big rock house on the corner of Meljac Lane and Stillman Road consisted of toast and coffee. No one in the Meljac family was taking any chances on putting anything else in their stomachs that might not stay there. Melanie had spent most of the early morning wishing the chef from the Lakeside Inn had died in childbirth.

The children had stumbled back to their beds, their time spent hanging over the toilet having exhausted them both. Emma hadn't stirred since she'd gone upstairs the night before. The horrible smell still permeated the air, clinging to everything, and showed no signs of dissipating. Melanie doubted there was full stomach left in the entire valley.

Quackrak, his scatterbrained crew of demons, and a much-chastened Dread, were stuck in the basement till something could be figured out as to what to do about them. As frightening as Dread was in appearance, not to mention attitude, he seemed to defer to Quackrak, and the little demon had promised to set the big fiend straight about messing with living people's souls.

Melanie had taken the loss of her abilities in stride at first, just one more insane problem on top of all the rest. But now it was beginning to sink in, and she was feeling tendrils of panic. Claudia's powers had also disappeared, but her staidness was helping Melanie keep it together. The older woman was confident there was an explanation, and a solution.

As far as Melanie was concerned, one thing was certain: Harry was a dead man. She was going to hunt him down and skin him alive, roast him over a slow fire, have a nice, old fashioned, town barbeque – baked beans and slow-roasted Harry. She was sure Amanda would go along with the idea.

Obviously, the ex-devil hadn't left them with the whole story when he went trotting off to Ft. Lauderdale. She could

forgive Harry's omission of the 'oops-there's-no-devil-to-blame-stuff-on' adjustment period – maybe he didn't even know that would happen – but, he had to have known that Hell wouldn't continue to run merrily along all by itself forever. It occurred to her that Harry, the women, everyone involved, had taken Hell for granted for so long that they had lost sight of the fact that Hell was, to put it bluntly, 'some serious shit,' and had to be run by a serious Devil, not a four and a half foot demon.

Yep, Ole Harry skewered on a big barbeque spit. Might as well stick Dread on there while we're at it: a few kegs of beer, fun for the whole town.

The two men looked like painters in their white pants and shirts, white masks cupped over mouth and nose. Only the 'Environmental Protection Agency' logo on their caps, and on the side of the white van, identified them for who they were.

Jack stood by watching one of them pour the little vials of spring water samples out onto the ground. The other one was folding maps and charts that had been spread on the old picnic table.

"Well?" he asked.

"Nothing," said the man folding the maps. "Absolutely pure, good ole West Virginia spring water. There's nothing out of the ordinary in the air, either. Soil samples are what you'd expect, at least in this area. According to these charts, there has never been any mining in this valley, so no abandoned mines for gases to leak out of. Satellite images, weather radar... nothing special. I think what you've got here is, well, in a nutshell... something stinks."

Jack wrinkled his nose at the air. "Yeah, but what could smell so bad, so suddenly? It's got people puking all over the place."

“I don’t know,” answered the map folder through his white mask. “But we haven’t found anything to justify sending a full team out here. I sympathize, really, I do. It’s awful, but it doesn’t fit any profiles that raise a flag. Occasionally, clouds of particulates from any number of sources: landfills, sewage treatment facilities, whatever, will blow in and settle in a valley. It goes away in time.”

Jack wasn’t satisfied.

“You think that’s what it is?”

“No.” The EPA man shrugged. “If it were, there would be traces in the air. I’m just sayin’, anything we’d be concerned about – anything hazardous – would show traces.”

The man scratched his head. “The best you can do is get in touch with the local physicians, pharmacists, hospitals, paramedics: anyone who might become aware of an illness, a health complaint, anything out of the ordinary that could be connected to this. Give them a heads-up about it, just in case.

Jack frowned, unhappily, “So, in the mean time, we just puke and bear it, right?”

Fifty-one

“IT WAS ONE of them damn bigfoots, that’s what it was.” Joe Paul was drunk as a skunk.

“These here mountains are full of em. Damn thing near killed me. They got my Emma too. She put up a fight, though – shot up the place with my shotgun before they drug her off somewheres.”

Joe hung his head. “Poor Emma... probably got all ate up by now.”

Wiley Curtis was only, slightly, less drunk than Joe. Both men sat on a wooden bench on Wiley’s front porch. The bottle of whiskey they passed back and forth originated from a traditional rather than a formal source, and had no label.

“You’re so full of shit,” Wiley Curtis said. “Ain’t no bigfoots around here, or anywhere else for that matter. The way you treat Emma, she probably just run off with somebody. Ain’t no bigfoots around here.”

“Oh yeah?” slurred Joe. “Whadya think that god-awful smell is? It’s bigfoots, that’s what it is.”
Wiley wasn’t buying it.

He scowled, "If there's so damn many bigfoots around here, how come I ain't never smelt em before. How come that, huh? You're so full of shit."

Joe hadn't thought of that.

"Still," he grumbled, "Just go on out there and take a look at the front of my pickup. If there ain't no bigfoots, then tell me what done that."

Wiley scoffed, "Deer! That's what."

Joe was getting annoyed. "I s'pose a big ole deer grabbed me by the neck and lifted me clean off the ground, too."

Wiley cackled, "Guess you pissed him off, Joey boy."

He took a long pull off the bottle.

Joe stood up, angry.

"Up yours, Wiley. I'm going over to the Stillman Bar and find somebody to hang out with that ain't no damn lunatic."

"Oh, come on, Joe." Wiley laughed and waved his hand at the bench.

"Sit your ass back down here. I'm just kiddin' around, for Christ sakes."

Joe hesitated, appearing to think it over, though he had no intention of going anywhere.

"Come on," coaxed Wiley, offering Joe the bottle. "Sit down here and tell me what you been blubberin' bout all morning. And this time, start at the start instead of the middle cause it don't make no sense."

Joe calculated for few seconds; decided he'd won that round, and sat back down on the bench. He took the bottle from Wiley and downed a hefty slug, then leaned back against the weathered boards of Wiley's 'rustic' shack.

"Awright," he began, with a little hesitation for dramatic effect.

"Last night... middle of the night..." he stopped, and looked Wiley right in the eye to make sure he had his attention.

Wiley nodded for him to go on.

Joe continued, "I'm comin' cross the bridge, right?"

Another nod from Wiley.

"And right there in the middle of the road, a big-assed bigfoot..."

Wiley threw up his hands. "There you go again."

"Okay, okay," Joe conceded, "But it was some kinda big-ass... it weren't no deer, awright?"

Joe stopped to let his point sink in, then went on.

"Anyway, here I come cross the bridge, and *wham!* Damn near wrecked my truck all to hell. Hit that sucker so hard it bounced all the way into them Crumb girl's back lot."

Joe took another swig then passed the bottle to Wiley.

"So there I am, sitting in the middle of the road beside Louis Walker's store, my poor ole truck steamin' and sputtering, and so far, I'm just like you: I'm figurin' I hit a deer, right?"

"Right," agreed Wiley. "That's what I'd be figurin'."

Joe took the bottle back, drained an ounce, or two, then said, "Well, that ain't what it was."

Wiley was losing patience.

"Well, what the hell was it? Get on with it, will ya? I ain't got all day."

"I am, I am," sneered Joe. "Just hold yer horses."

He grabbed the bottle back from Wiley and took another drink.

Wiley scowled, "Why don't I just go in the house and take a nap while you figure out what you wanna say next?"

Joe stood up, angry again.

"What the hell you got to do, anyway, Wiley, cept lay around here and drink all day? You wanna hear what happened, or not?"

"Aw Jesus, Joe! Don't be so damned itchy," Wiley protested. "Just sit down here and tell the dag-blamed story."

It ain't no Hollywood movie, ya know. Now come on, get on with it. You want a *'please?'* Okay, *please...* how's that?" Joe chalked up another win and sat back down.

"Awright," he said, taking the bottle from Wiley.

"Anyways, there I am, standin' in the middle of the road lookin' all over the place for a dead deer, and I see somethin' layin' over there in that lot behind the Crumb's house. So I go over there to take a look. Turns out it ain't no deer at all. First thing I thought was I hit some guy, then I look closer, and it ain't no guy, neither."

He took a long, slow hit off the bottle.

"Wiley, I'm gonna tell you somethin' you ain't gonna believe."

Joe leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He set the bottle down on the rough planks of the porch between his feet.

In a, surprisingly, sober voice, he said, "Wiley... swear to God, if they was ever a fiend from Hell walked the face of the earth, there it was, right there on the ground in front of me."

Wiley reached down and snatched up the bottle.

"Damn, Joe," he said, with a taunting grin. "First we got bigfoots, now we got fiends from Hell. Hey, ya know what? I got a unicorn tied up out back. Wanna see it?"

This time Joe didn't react with anger.

He said, in the same sober voice, "There's more... a lot more. You gonna shut yer ass up and listen, or what?"

Fifty-two

THE BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS didn't list Bramwell, West Virginia as the sarcasm capitol of the world. Maybe they didn't even list sarcasm capitols. It didn't matter, though, since the prevalence of sarcastic attitudes in Bramwell was temporary, and was only because of recent events. Hopefully, it would go away. But right now it was in full swing. Practically everyone in the Valley seemed to be taking part. And Louis Walker was carrying it right along.

Claudia sat at the soda fountain, her ever-present cup of coffee on the counter in front of her. Behind the counter, Louis was trying to act cute, but it came off as just what it was: sarcasm.

He said, all smiley-like, but not at all amused, "Just a little flight of fancy, here, Claudia – a silly little thought, right off the top of my head."

His smile got sillier, and he tapped the top of his head.

"This smell: you guys didn't just happen to have anything to do with..." He stopped, and with an expression of, obviously, phony embarrassment, appeared to dismiss the thought.

“Oh, no, no, how could I even think...”

Claudia wasn't amused, either. She glowered at him.

“Cut the crap, Louis.”

He cut the crap, and stood with hands on hips.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, what?”

“Well, why have there been several people in here this morning commenting on all the racket and lights coming from the general vicinity of ‘guess who’s’ house in the middle of the night last night? Oh yeah, and then, coincidentally, there’s the rather noticeable smell that you girls don’t seem to be particularly bothered about.”

Claudia frowned. “Louis, do you really think we have something to do with everything that goes on around here?”

Louis cocked his head, pretending to mull it over.

“Yep!” he said, finally, with another irritating grin.

Claudia, pointedly, ignored his response.

“This coffee’s cold,” she said, indifferently.

“Oh, now we can’t have that, can we?” he offered, his sarcasm softening only a bit. He reached behind him for the carafe. As he poured, he spoke, this time without the sarcasm.

“You know, Claudia, for the last forty years or so, I must have said to myself, ‘Louis, it’s none of your business,’ a zillion times. And not just me: everybody knows, when it comes to you women, or anything out of the ordinary happening in the valley, it’s just best not to get too curious. Always been that way... probably always will. Even my wife, God rest her soul; I can’t count the times I bit my tongue and let things slide. And I never had a problem with it, not really. I knew what I was getting into when I married her, and it didn’t matter. Same thing with Mel when she came of age.”

He pretended to cringe. “And of course I’d never dream of butting heads with Mistress Claudia.”

Very wise of you,” she said, loftily, but with a grin.

Louis continued, a little playful sarcasm creeping back into his voice.

“But just this one time – just once. I’d like to say to myself, ‘Louis, old fella, you finally got a straight answer about something from one of them.’ So, wha’dya think, Claudia? Just once, huh? About this smell?”

He set the carafe down and leaned against the counter, staring her in the eye, expectantly.

Claudia was silent for a moment, returning his stare – then thinking, *what the hell*, she said, “Okay, Louis. Just this once. Here’s the deal. The Devil has gotten out of Hell, and has gone to Ft. Lauderdale to be a bartender. There are six demons in our basement, and The Keeper of the Unspeakable Archives has escaped from Underworld. On his way out, he left the door open, and the essence of pure evil is seeping out into the valley. That’s what the smell is. Don’t worry, it doesn’t do anything; it just stinks. On top of all that, we women have lost our powers and can’t do anything about any of it till we figure out how to get them back. That’s about it for now, Louis. Anything else you wanna know?”

She leaned back a little, folded her arms across her chest, and waited for a reaction.

Louis didn’t react. He just stared at her with a blank expression.

Fifty-three

“ ...EVER LIGHT IN THE HOUSE ON and Emma nowhere to be seen... at one o'clock in the morning.”

Joe Paul finally had Wiley's attention.

“Where was she?” Wiley asked.

Joe snapped back, impatiently, “Hell, Wiley, I done told ya she got ate up, didn't I?”

“Ahhhhh,” Wiley scoffed, “How'ya know she got ate up? How'ya know she didn't just run off somewhere like I said?” Joe rolled his eyes back and exhaled a long, disgusted, breath.

“Wiley,” he said, “Are you *tryin'* to be an asshole, or are you just naturally one? Didn't I just tell you that when I went outside to look around for her there was holes in the shed that looked like shotgun holes, and my shotgun was gone out of the closet? Don't that prove she was defendin' herself? And since she weren't around nowhere, well, she musta got ate up, or somethin'. Just makes sense, don't it?”

Wiley, the unbeliever, said, “Nope.”

“Does to me,” said Joe.

Wiley scratched his beard. “Did it ever occur to you to call her mamma’s house... see if she was there?”

“Huh uh,” grunted Joe. “What it occurred to me to do was go back over to the Stillman Bar. That’s what it occurred to me to do. If she was already ate up, no sense hangin’ around getting’ ate up, myself.”

Suddenly, unsure of his logic, he added, “Well, maybe I’ll call her mamma later, just to see.”

Wiley was looking at the bottle, wondering which would last longer, the few swigs left, or Joe’s story.

“Anyway,” said Joe, “I go out and get in the truck, and head back down towards town. I figured whatever that thing was down by the bridge woulda run off by now, and I could get on back over to Stillman.”

He reached over and took the bottle from Wiley, drained half the remaining contents, and went on.

“Just as I get down to the corner by the Meljac place, I see this big...”

He gave Wiley a threatening look.

“...and goddamnit, Wiley, if you make one smartass remark, I’ll knock you right in the head with this here bottle!”

“Hell, I didn’t say nothing,” Wiley said, indignantly.

“Awright, then,” said Joe. “So I’m down there by the Meljac house, and all of sudden some kinda big, cracklin’, light starts flashin’ back there on the patio down behind the house. I look over there, and there’s one of them witch women – I think it was that Clark girl – standing there with her arms stuck up in the air and her hair flyin’ all around like they was some kinda storm goin on back there. I don’t know what she was doin’ cause I seen all this just as I was passin’ by. But you can bet it was some kinda damn heathen ritual. And I bet you another thing: it had somethin’ to do with that monster from hell I hit.”

Joe finished up his story, figuring it was the best one Wiley had heard in a long time.

“Anyway,” he said, “I just drove right on past, and right on over to Stillman.”

Wiley snatched the bottle before Joe could finish it off.

He said, “You’re just lucky you didn’t get seen. It don’t do to get mixed up in them women’s business.”

“Well,” said Joe, a little peeved, “It don’t do for them to be makin’ monsters that eat a man’s wife, neither.”

Fifty-four

THE REVEREND ALFRED MORGAN was not a pervert. He was a healthy, thirty-five year-old, unmarried man who, like any reasonable guy, appreciated attractive women. Nothing wrong, or immoral, about that. Alfred was a preacher, not a Priest. That being the case, Alfred found no problem with being attracted to Amanda Clark. But, what had happened during his visit with Amanda the day before yesterday had shocked him to the core.

Basically, the fantasies he'd experienced were, although perhaps a tad over the line, pretty much a normal guy thing – not everyday normal, but not all that rare.

What had shaken him so badly was the overwhelming urge to, physically, act – to play them out. It was as though a dark and hidden part of him had surfaced, telling him, '*go ahead... do it.*' He shuddered to think what might have happened if he hadn't left – *fled* was more like it; fled out the door, down the steps, out into the street, and all the way home.

Equally disturbing was the persistence of the fantasies, lasting all day and into the night. No matter what he did, he

couldn't shake them off. He tried prayer, but his concentration failed, his mind wandering back to Amanda's delicious... *attributes*. By the time Alfred collapsed into bed, he felt that his faith and his soul were lost.

Alfred awoke the next morning feeling nothing out of the ordinary. The harrowing events of the day before seemed like an odd dream, half-remembered, and a little foggy. He could recall what had happened, but only vaguely, and in the light of a bright new day none of it seemed all that dramatic. He remembered visiting Amanda Clark. He remembered thinking how terrific she looked, and even feeling a little aroused; that's why he had left: it was embarrassing, not to mention inappropriate. The oddest part was that he remembered spending the entire day consumed by guilt over it, but couldn't imagine why. The simple fact was, Amanda Clark was a knock-out – the best word he could think of – and getting a little turned on by a good-looking woman wasn't the worst sin Alfred could think of.

He decided he'd better drop back in on Amanda with some explanation as to why he'd made such a fool out of himself. This time he'd keep his eyes on her face instead of her... *attributes*.

Alfred's day wore on in the usual manner with the usual duties and the usual responsibilities. By evening, the events of the day before were all but forgotten, and a visit to Amanda Clark didn't seem so important after all. Alfred went to bed confident that all was well with the world.

It was *this* morning that Reverend Alfred Morgan awoke to find that all was, definitely, *not* well with the world. Alfred opened his eyes to the bright new morning. Anticipating a satisfying morning yawn, he took a nice deep breath. Lungs filling with evil essence, eyes popping wide with surprise, Alfred leaped out of bed and ran for the bathroom, gagging and retching all the way.

Fifty-five

LOUIS WAS GRUMBLING, “Jesus, Claudia. A simple ‘none-of-your-business’ would have done just fine.”

“Well,” Claudia wore a smirk, “You asked.”

Louis said, wryly, “I asked a sincere question. I didn’t ask for underworld keepers and devil bartenders. And, oh yeah, let’s not forget demons in your bottom... s’cuse me... your basement.”

He sneered, and added, “Come on, Claudia... really!” Claudia’s response was snappish.

“No, *you* come on, Louis! You think we’re to blame for this? How do you think a few women go about making a whole valley smell like old curried vomit? You wanna tell me how you figure that?”

“I don’t know!” he said, a little louder than he’d intended. “I don’t know how you women do *any* of the stuff you do.”

“Stuff? What stuff?” she asked, huffily.

“*Stuff!*” he almost shouted. “I don’t know; just stuff!” he repeated, throwing his hands up. He caught himself, and lowered his voice.

“Claudia, there are creepy creatures running around all over the place. The town smells like a ship’s bilge. God knows what else is going on. And you guys aren’t the tiniest bit surprised at any of it. So, what am I supposed to think?” He stopped for a breath, and softened a little.

“Okay, look,” he paused again, searching for the right words.

“Here, in the valley, people get born, myself included: we grow up with everything around us being simple facts of life; including weird wizard women.”

Claudia smiled at Louis’ favorite description, but didn’t interrupt him.

“Anyway,” he said, “Like a kid born on Mars; the kid wouldn’t think Mars was strange. Same with you guys; nobody from around here thinks there’s anything strange about you guys being... well, what you are. Nobody even cares; just another day in the valley. But, dammit, Claudia, when the crap hits the fan like it has the last few days, then people *do* start to care. I think it’s time you came clean about what’s going on.”

Claudia didn’t hesitate. She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender.

“You asked for it,” she said.

She slid off the stool, walked to the front window, and turned the hour hand on the cardboard ‘Be Back In A While’ sign an hour ahead.

Turning back to Louis, she said, “Hitch your pants up, Lou. We’re going for a walk. I’ve got a few friends I want you to meet.”

Fifty-six

THE LIGHT FROM THE FULL MOON shining on her naked young body, her long, curly, red locks whipping around her head: Myra Hinkle danced with wild abandon, whirling, leaping into the air, laughing and shouting with the other four naked women while the Devil sat out on the big flat rock and...

A fly buzzed across the porch and landed on Myra's nose. She snorted, and woke up just in time to grunt, "...damned tourist," at a passing car. Her rheumy old eyes followed the car as it headed up Stillman Road. She didn't wonder where it was going. Wherever it was, she'd already been there... enough times.

Myra closed her eyes, trying to recapture the dream, the dancing, the laughter, but it wouldn't come – gone, just like the youth; long gone.

The damned smell was still there, though.

"Stupid kids," she grumbled aloud, referring to Melanie, Amanda and the Crumbs. She had too much respect for Claudia Meljac to include her in the complaint, although she couldn't imagine how Claudia had let it happen.

Myra knew they'd let him out. She knew it the moment he'd escaped – the moment she'd felt the few powers she had left begin to fade. Not that she would miss them. At her age, powers got scrambled up and did funny things, so she didn't mess with them anymore except to add a little heft to her egg tossing.

“Stupid kids,” she muttered, again.

Something had to be done about that damned smell.

Getting up out of the wheelchair was always chore enough, and coaxing her creaky old joints through the house to the basement door was hell on her rheumatism.

At eighty-nine years old, getting down the steep, rickety, old basement steps was a nightmare – not the spooky kind of nightmare, just the ‘pain-in-the-ass’ and potentially dangerous kind. So much so, that she hadn't tried it in almost ten years.

Myra figured one of two things would happen. She would make it to the basement where she just *might* be able to do something about the smell, or she'd fall down the stairs and break her neck, rendering the smell academic. Either way would work.

She solved the problem by sitting down on the top step and painfully, laboriously, lowering herself to the next one, step by step, sitting and resting on each one till she reached the bottom. She didn't want to think about how she was going to get back to the top. She'd worry about that later. Right now, the important thing was getting to the book.

There wasn't any real power in the book of witches' spells Myra's mother had given her for her fifteenth birthday. For a sorceress, even one that hadn't come of age yet, witchcraft was pretty puny. Still, puny or not, some of the spells actually worked, and when she was a kid they'd been fun to play around with.

When Myra came of age, and later when her mother relinquished her place with the women of the valley to Myra, the book had been tucked away in a corner of the basement with all the other artifacts of childhood.

What prompted Myra's sudden quest was the fact that anyone, even an old retired sorceress who'd lost her powers, could read a spell. If memory served right, there was something in the book about conjuring up a wind, and Myra figured if she could find the book, maybe – just maybe, she could get a good, respectable, wind going. With any luck the damned smell would just blow away. It couldn't hurt to try.

Myra rested a few minutes on the bottom stair step, then, with surprisingly little difficulty, she stood up. Conquering the stairs had given her a feeling of competence she hadn't experienced in a long time. It felt good for a moment till all the things she hadn't thought of flooded in. The bulb in the single ceiling fixture was over ten years old. What if it didn't work? What if she fell and hurt herself? Could she recover with enough strength to make it back up the stairs? What if she got stuck down here for days? What if...?

Screw it, she thought, ...spend my life with 'what ifs'... never get anything done.

The few steps to the middle of the small basement, then looking up and reaching for the short chain hanging from the light fixture, made her dizzy. She lowered her arm and looked down, waiting for the dizziness to pass, then reached up, this time without looking, and pulled the chain. The dusty old bulb did itself proud, and the basement lit up – not brilliantly – Myra chuckled, but good enough for spell casting.

A few old trunks were stacked in the corner, boxes piled against a wall filled with who knows what. The book had to be in all that junk somewhere.

Fifty-seven

THE BIG-SHOT DEMOGRAPHICS EXPERTS dismissed the idea with a casual, “*Naaa.*” So, no chain motels ever got built at the foot of the off-ramp in Stillman Township. That was lucky for Simmons because if there had been a Holliday Inn, or a Ramada, he would have stayed there out of habit.

That being the case, the only motel worth considering was the Stillman Lodge. The lucky part was, the same Gerald Bowman who had stumbled upon the pristine little hollow where he had built the Lakeside Inn also owned the Stillman Lodge, and since Mr. Bowman was a stickler for quality, the Lodge was modern, but quaint, old, but in an antique way, and breakfast at the motel’s restaurant was down-home-delicious.

The young waitress with the crisp pink and white uniform was straight out of a Norman Rockwell print.

“Hi, what can I get’cha?” she bubbled with bright eyes and cheery smile, her heavy accent a song from the backwoods of misty mountains and forested valleys – a far cry from the impersonal efficiency of Charleston.

Simmons was thinking of freeways and traffic jams, regretting today would be his last drive over the mountain into Bramwell – and the last time he would see Melanie Meljac.

...how the morning sunlight shined through the strands of Melanie's ash-blonde hair.

The waitress was fidgeting.

“Oh, sorry,” Simmons apologized, “...guess I was daydreaming.”

He ordered breakfast.

The Normal Rockwell smile beamed, “Comin’ right up,” and she flounced away.

Simmons waited for his order, his mind wandering.

...walking down from the springs, he resisted the urge to take her hand, wondering what she would do if he did.

He barely noticed the waitress set the cup of coffee on his table, and prance off again.

...she took his hand in hers, and shouted back to Amanda, “Yep, I got another big spender over here. We’re on.”

Simmons idly sipped at his coffee, smiling at his thoughts.

...I haven’t been dancing in 10 years. You know what? You’re going to fix that, right now, sir.

“Here ya are,” said the crispy pink waitress, setting the plate in front of him.

“Want that coffee warmed up?” she asked.

“Huh?... Oh yes, please,” he answered, snapping out of his reverie.

The waitress moved the coffee pot over his cup, but stopped before pouring.

“Well, would you look at that,” she said, staring out the window, and looking a bit awed.

Simmons glanced towards the window. Outside, the morning was bright and sunny.

“A beautiful day,” he said.

“No, ...up there.” She leaned across the table, her head tilted upward.

Simmons looked again, following her gaze – out the window, across the parking lot – Main Street, and the little post office on the other side.

Beside the post office, Stillman Road branched off Main Street, and began its crawl up Stillman Mountain where, broaching the top, it fell into the town of Bramwell. At the crest of the mountain, a distinct line divided the beautiful spring morning in Stillman Township from the roiling, black, storm clouds looming over Bramwell Valley.

“Now, ain’t that weird,” said crispy pink. She dismissed the phenomena with a shrug and poured Simmons’ coffee.

Fifty-eight

THERE WAS A LITTLE PROBLEM with the spell. Oh, it worked okay. Thing is, the spells in the book were meant to be read by simple, run-of-the-mill witches, not a full-blown, adult sorceress; even one who'd, temporarily, lost her powers. So, when Myra Hinkle read the spell it was like driving a tack with a sledgehammer. But at least the book had been easy to find.

Way back in 1965, before he became Princeton County's most successful entrepreneur, Gerald Bowman, the antique hunter, would have been delighted to run across the dusty old desk with the broken leg that had been propped against the wall in the Hinkle's basement since before Myra was born. Had he acquired the desk, with the peculiar book tucked away in the top right-hand drawer... well, there's no telling what might have become of ole Gerald.

Myra leafed through the book looking for the 'wind' spell, hoping it didn't require any special props. Witches were notorious for incorporating nonsense items in their spells, and Myra was pretty sure she didn't have any eyes of newts or dead men's toes laying around.

She found a spell for a ‘light spring rain’ that needed a drop of virgin’s blood. Myra chuckled; thinking there damn sure weren’t going to be many ‘light spring rains’ around these parts any time soon.

Love potions, bountiful crops, there was even a spell for summoning the devil. She had to laugh at that one. She tried to picture some dumb witch trying to call up Lucifer... no way.

She found what she was looking for near the end of the book. ‘*A Refreshing Breeze*,’ as the spell was called, required nothing special other than to be intoned by the voice of a fair-haired witch.

A little late for fair hair, she thought. Grey would have to do.

She read through the spell several times before trying it out loud. Satisfied she could get through it without stumbling over the words, she stepped to the center of the floor, and in as confident a voice as she could muster, she gave it a try. Nothing happened. She waited a few minutes, ears cocked, expectantly, for some hint of wind from outside.

Still nothing.

Myra tossed the book at the desk and limped towards the stairs.

“What a bunch of crap,” she mumbled to herself.

Fifty-nine

ON THE INTERSTATE, just north of Atlanta, yet another in a series of close calls. Harry was talking, not paying attention to his driving, as usual. Dirt and gravel spewed as the big black Hummer swerved out of the median and back onto the hardtop at ninety miles an hour.

“Oops,” said Harry, nonchalantly.

Sarah was at the edge of her seat, both white-knuckled hands gripping the dashboard, her face pale.

“Harry,” she said, calmly, quietly, resisting the urge to scream at him, “Would you pull over, please?” She still gripped the dashboard.

Harry was, blithely, unconcerned by the close call.

He said, innocently, “Sure. You need to go? You hungry? I see an exit up there a ways.”

Her nerves had had it. Harry loved driving the big Hummer, but Sarah loved living, more.

Sorry, Harry, she thought. *Your driving days are over.*

“Yeah,” she said, releasing the breath she’d been holding. “I gotta go. Let’s get off, here.”

She relinquished her grip on the dashboard, and scooted back in the seat, hoping Harry would get the Hummer off the highway without killing them.

She rehearsed it silently in her mind. Let's see, now. How about – *Gee, Harry, you look tired. Why don't I drive for a while?* Lame, but the best she could think of.

Harry tooted along the next half mile, then up the exit ramp. At the top, he turned onto a country road, found a small diner a few hundred feet away, and turned into the parking lot without running into anything. He pulled in a parking space in front of the restaurant and turned off the engine.

Sarah grabbed her purse, opened the door, and got out with a sigh of relief. She hadn't needed to use the bathroom before Harry's last incident, but she damn sure had to pee, now.

Harry hadn't gotten out, yet. He was stretching, arms over his head, and with a big yawn.

Good sign, she thought.

She walked around the front of the Hummer, and as Harry opened the door, she waved him back, saying, "I'll just be a minute. You don't have to get out."

Harry said, "Okay," and shut the door. He leaned back in his seat, apparently content to wait.

Sarah strode towards the door of the diner relishing the safety of solid ground under her feet. It was amazing, she thought, how Harry, eternal lord and master of hell itself, and whose mind held the wisdom of eons, could be such a scatterbrain behind the wheel of a car. She suspected it had something to do with being immortal – simply not recognizing the concept of personal danger. Whatever it was, Harry's remaining time on earth was going to be spent as a passenger. Sarah wasn't immortal.

Sixty

EMMA HADN'T LEFT the Meljac's guest room since she'd awakened hours earlier. She sat on the edge of the bed staring out the second floor window at Louis' store across the way. She had been watching when Claudia walked across the intersection and went in the store. She was watching, now as Louis and Claudia came out and were walking back across the street towards the house. She wondered if Louis had locked the front door to the drug store, and how long he would be out – and if her shotgun was still leaning against the wall behind the soda fountain counter.

She got up and went to the bedroom door, opened it and peeked out. The upstairs hall was empty. She left the room, tiptoed to the landing at the top of the stairs, and looked down. No one in sight, no sounds drifting up from below. She waited there; ready to back out of sight if Louis and Claudia came through the front door.

A minute passed, then two. The house remained quiet except for what might have been the muffled sound of voices, not in the house, maybe from the basement. That must have been where Louis and Claudia went.

She moved quickly, quietly, down the stairs, across the foyer to the front door. With a last glance behind her, she opened the door; slipped out, and dashed across the porch, down the steps to the walkway, and out into the Lane. A few more strides and she was at the intersection across from Louis' store. There was no traffic, and only a few pedestrians wandered the sidewalk far down at the other end of the Boulevard.

Having made it out of the house, past Louis and Claudia, Emma no longer cared if anyone saw her. But, before rushing across the intersection, something funny, something odd about her surroundings stopped her. The day had been bright, cheerful and sunny when she'd watched from the bedroom window as Louis and Claudia walked through the warm spring afternoon. But now, in the few minutes it had taken her to make her way from the Mejac's guest room to the street, the day had darkened, the air oppressive, heavy and damp. Black clouds had gathered, boiling down from the sky, threatening to touch the very tops of the Lane's great oaks and the eaves of the red brick buildings on the other side of the intersection.

A breeze moved a lock of hair into Emma's face. She brushed it away. The breeze stiffened, insistent, no longer a breeze, but a steady wind, growing stronger, blowing more hair into her face. As she raised her hand to push it back, something stung her on the arm. She jerked her arm down, rubbing it, puzzled. On the top of her head, another sting – hail – she could see the tiny round balls of ice bouncing off the road in front of her.

The rain came suddenly, in torrents, with more stinging hail whipped by the, steadily, increasing wind. She started to turn back – to the safety of the big rock house behind her, then she thought of Joe, and the glorious, cleansing, roar of her big black shotgun. That did it. She gathered her courage,

braced herself against the onslaught of wind, rain and hail, and bolted across the intersection.

Rain-drenched and hail-battered, she reached the store just as the wind turned to fury. She grabbed, frantically, at the door handle, fumbling, her hands slipping on the wet metal. It was unlocked... *oh, thank you, lord.* Fighting against the wind, she pulled it open and stumbled inside.

Sixty-one

THE VOICE ON THE PHONE SAID, “He’s sitting right here beside me, Aubrey. He can hear every word I say.”

Aubrey was angry. “Then, tell him to stop it!”

“Huh? Stop what?” came the voice.

Aubrey shouted into the phone, “He knows what! This damned storm, that’s what. It’s a hurricane, here. Tell him to knock it off!”

Aubrey heard muffled shuffling sounds from the phone. She thought she heard Sarah whispering to Harry, ‘*She thinks you’re doin something...*’ – then more shuffling sounds.

Sarah’s voice came clear, “He’s not doing anything, Aubrey. What are you talking about? Just because it’s storming there... you’re not making sense.”

Aubrey shouted back, “It’s not just storming here, Sarah. It’s... it’s... unnatural. It’s a conjured storm. I can feel it. More shuffling sounds and she, distinctly, heard, ‘*That’s crazy*’ from Harry.

Then from Sarah, “That’s crazy, Aubrey. Why would Harry be conjuring up storms in Bramwell?”

Aubrey had no answer for that. She changed the subject.

“Are you bringing him back, or what?”

“Yes,” said Sarah, “...well, I’m not really bringing him. It was his decision. It’s going to be all right, Aubrey. Everything is going to be back to normal.”

Aubrey huffed into the phone, “Well, it damned sure isn’t normal here, now. Somebody’s up to something. If not Harry, then somebody else. Just get back here, and... oh yeah, I almost forgot. Tell Harry his demons are out, and running around all over town.”

She slammed the receiver down on the phone, and sat staring across the room at the hail rattling on the big bay window.

Conjured, she thought. It’s gotta be. Nothing natural about a hurricane right out of a clear blue sky.

Sixty-two

JOE'S CRAPPY OLD PICKUP TRUCK jolted its way along the twin ruts that wound down the side of the mountain from Wiley's cabin to the River Road end of the Boulevard. Joe was hunched over the wheel, intent on keeping the pickup on the poor excuse for what Wiley referred to as his private road. Pouring rain, worn-out windshield wipers, and the effects of Wiley's moonshine weren't helping.

"Whooooaaa!" Wiley's butt bounced two inches off the seat. He held on for dear life, furtively eying Joe's muddy boot pumping the brake.

"Ain't got the best brakes in the world, does it, Joe?" Wiley complained, anxiously.

"It stops when I need it to," declared Joe over the clattering of assorted junk bouncing around in the bed of the pickup. "That's all you need to know, Wiley,"

It was a quarter-mile, or so, from Wiley's 'rustic' cabin down to the Boulevard – a very steep quarter-mile – and Joe was starting to get anxious himself. Wiley was right about the brakes, but pumping them usually helped. Not this time, though. All his pumping was only giving him about an inch of brake pedal, and at this speed, it wasn't near enough. The Boulevard was coming up fast.

Wiley was pressing himself against the back of the seat, wide-eyed and looking scared.

He yelled in panic, “Joe, you better get yer foot on that damn brake good and hard, or we gonna go right across the Boulevard and into the river.”

Joe stomped on the brake as hard as he could, his back arching with the effort. Too many years of too many stomps for the worn out old brakes, and the last inch of pedal gave way as Wiley’s prediction came true.

The old pickup went into the dip at the end of Wiley’s private road at forty miles an hour, then up a slight incline to the pavement of the intersecting Boulevard – and sailed across without touching hardtop.

On the other side, the drop down to the river was only seven feet, or so, but the river was only two feet deep, and the old pickup didn’t slow down much before arriving at its final, and rather abrupt, destination. Lucky for Joe and Wiley, it had gone airborne nose up enough so that it slammed flat into the riverbed on all four wheels rather than nose first. The two feet of water was good for a terrific splash – if there had been any witnesses they would have been greatly impressed – but it did zilch to cushion the impact.

The old pickup hit the rocks of the riverbed hard... crumpling, shattering, and slamming Joe and Wiley down into the seats that collapsed under them. The displaced water rushed back to reclaim its place. Then, for a moment, all was quiet... except for Wiley.

“God dammit, Joe, you dumb bastard.... goddamn beat up old piece of shit pickup... you stupid son of a bitch.”

Joe yelled, “Oh shut the hell up, Wiley. What the hell you s’pect me to do? The damn thing just wouldn’t stop. You ain’t hurt, anyway.”

Wiley was thoroughly shaken up, and more than a little dazed.

He sputtered, “What’dya mean I ain’t hurt? ...jarred my goddamn guts out is what it done, you idiot.”

Joe ignored Wiley’s tirade, and jerked at the door handle; giving the door a good shoulder bump to open it. It didn’t budge. He tried again. Still stuck. He leaned to his right to get a little momentum, then rammed his shoulder against the door as hard as he could. The door gave, suddenly, and fell off into the river, a surprised and flailing Joe Paul tumbling out with it.

Sixty-three

EVERYONE WAS GETTING RESTLESS. Quackrak, except for getting up occasionally to whack at an overly rambunctious demon, hadn't moved from the rocking chair for two days. One of the squeally girls had pulled a low stool up beside him. He couldn't tell if this was the Jilly one, or the Patty one since they were both about the same size, and humans all looked alike.

He had figured out that the big ones were adults, but they were all about the same size, too, so he'd given up on trying to tell them apart. The short one, David, was easy to remember. That one was, obviously, an adolescent.

Jilly regarded him, curiously, then asked, "How come you make people do such creepy things when you posses them?"

Quackrak looked blank. "When I *what?*"
He had no idea what she was talking about.

Jilly tried again. "You know, like when their heads twirl around, and they puke green pea soup."

Quackrak laughed. "Do people puke green soup if their heads twirl?"

“Nooooo,” moaned Jilly. Talking to Quackrak could be a little exasperating.

“Just when they’re possessed,” she clarified.

“Possessed by what?”

Jilly sighed. “By you... possessed by a demon.”

It was Quackrak’s turn to be exasperated. More insanity.

He said, “Why would I want a human? I barely have enough space in my room as it is. Just a few knickknacks – where would I keep a human?”

He was trying to imagine including a ‘green pea soup puking’ human among his possessions. An unpleasant thought.

“So, you don’t possess people? Jilly was vaguely disappointed. “...take over their bodies? ...make them talk like the devil?”

Quackrak raised his eyebrows. “My goodness, whatever for?” He chuckled to himself, thinking Lucifer would have gotten a kick out of that one.

Jilly was silent for a moment, then wrinkled her nose, realizing, “You guys aren’t really like evil, demonic type, demons at all, are you?”

Quackrak shrugged. “Guess not, unless you include weirdo over there.” He gestured towards Dread who was sitting on the floor in a corner grumbling to himself.

Jilly glanced over at Dread, apprehensively. “He’s evil?”

“No,” admitted Quackrak. “Just stupid.”

At the sound of the basement door opening, Jilly looked around to see Aunt Claudia coming in from the patio. Louis followed her in. He got halfway through the door before stopping in mid stride.

Louis stood, frozen, leaning slightly forward, his mouth forming an O, and his eyes widening at the scene before him. He gaped at the creatures lying on the floor watching television, and the one sitting in the rocking chair looking

for all the world like it was having a pleasant, everyday, conversation with his granddaughter – not to mention the one hunched up in the corner; the one that looked like something out of a cheap horror movie.

Louis made a gasping sound, then in a shocked whisper, said, “*Oh my dear God!*” His mouth stayed opened after he spoke.

Claudia turned around to Louis. She stood for a few seconds watching his reaction as he took it all in, then said, with a humorous smirk, “Well, Louis, what’dya think of our new friends?”

“They’re... they’re,” stuttered Louis, pointing at the floor in front of the TV.

“Demons,” offered Claudia.

Louis’ eyes darted towards the corner. Claudia caught where he was looking.

She said, almost laughing at his discomfort, “And that’s Dread, Keeper of the Unspeakable Archives. Remember? I think I mentioned him before.”

She walked around Louis and shut the door. She didn’t notice the wind picking up outside.

“Okay, Louie, m’boy,” she said, with a mischievous smile. “You’re about to get the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Grab a seat, and I’ll tell you the tale of demons, devils, and the women of the valley.”

Sixty-four

SIMMONS SAT IN THE CAR in front of Melanie's house waiting for a break in the downpour. The drive from Stillman, over the mountain and down into Bramwell, had been a little unsettling. He'd driven up the Stillman side of the mountain on a beautiful spring morning, and down the Bramwell side into a raging storm. The strangest part, other than the fact that there shouldn't be a storm here at all, was that up near the top of the mountain, he could have gotten out of the car, walked ten paces into the storm, then turned around and walked the same number of steps right back into a clear day. He had seen isolated patches of rain before, but never anything so sharply defined. It was as though the storm was reserved for Bramwell Valley alone. Just plain weird.

Finally, tired of just sitting there, he gave up waiting for a break, and decided to make a run for it. He opened the car door and stepped out, prepared to run for the shelter of Melanie's front porch. He took one step, slamming the car door behind him, and was instantly soaked to the skin.

The rain on the windshield had been deceiving. What had seemed to be a pretty good rain turned out to be buckets of water pouring from the sky.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself, sprinting towards the house.

He decided the veranda was closer, and in this case, closer was better, so he chose it over the front porch. He didn’t bother with the steps, and the running jump from the sidewalk onto the veranda carried more momentum than he was prepared for. The tiles of the veranda were wet and slippery – with the expected results.

Oh Christ! Not another window. The thought flashed through his mind as he skidded towards the mullioned doors.

Melanie sat on the sofa in the living room with Claudia and a rather bewildered Louis. She’d been in the kitchen staring, curiously, out the window at the sudden onslaught of wind and rain when Claudia brought Louis up from the basement.

Surprised, at first, that Claudia had exposed Louis to what was going on downstairs; she now felt relief that the cat was out of the bag, so to speak. The ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ thing with her father was something she had never felt comfortable with. It always amazed her that her mother had been able to sustain it for a whole lifetime.

As for Louis, his acceptance of life with the women of Bramwell Valley had been ingrained since birth. It was simply the way it was. But, what he’d seen in the basement – that was just *too* weird. Actual demons and devils were a far cry from what he’d always imagined as normal, everyday, valley mystique, and now that the initial shock had worn off he was getting a little pissed.

“All these years...” he accused, “...years, hell, centuries! The devil – the actual, bona fide, in the flesh devil, has been

sitting up there,” he pointed in the general direction of the springs, “... on a rock.”

“No, dad,” soothed Melanie. “Just a few hours a month.” Louis threw his hands up and exclaimed, mockingly, “Oh! Excuse me! ...just a few hours a month. *Jesus Melanie!*”

He dropped his hands, and waited for somebody to comment. The few, resulting, moments of awkward silence were interrupted by muffled thunder – and the sound of John Simmons’ ungraceful encounter with the veranda door.

With some frantic backpedaling on the slippery tiles, Simmons managed to hit the door with slightly less force than it took to shatter the thin, mullioned, panes of glass. Even so, the impact was jarring, and surprisingly noisy, not to mention embarrassing. Thankfully, no one was around to witness his second bout with something breakable in less than a week.

He was having that thought when the door swung open and Melanie gasped, “Oh, my God, John! Are you all right?”

Sixty-five

JOE AND WILEY sat on the riverbank watching as the current tried, and failed, to claim the remains of Joe's crappy old pickup.

"Least it ain't gonna float away," said Joe.

He held the half-pint bottle of bourbon he'd rescued from the glove compartment up in front of him.

"And it didn't break my bottle, neither."

"That ain't no bottle; that's a thimble," Wiley snorted.

"It's better'n you got. You didn't bring nothing." He twisted off the cap, and downed half of the little bottle, then turned to Wiley with a humorless smile.

"I guess you ain't too proud to drink the rest of it, are ya," he said, passing it over. Wiley grumbled, took the bottle and finished it off, then tossed it into the river.

The rain had ended as abruptly as it had begun, and the howling wind had died just as suddenly. Now, it was no more than gusts that came and went. But the sky remained gray and threatening, as though it had unfinished business. Joe stood up, looking around, and sniffing.

"Hey! It don't stink no more," he declared.

Wiley wrinkled his nose, and inhaled.

“Bout damn time,” he said, hoisting himself up off the bank.

Both men stood for a moment sniffing the air. Joe turned, and began crabbing his way up the slope of the bank to the pavement of the Boulevard. Wiley followed.

Reaching the road, they lingered long enough for a few more exaggerated sniffs, then, with no particular destination in mind, began ambling towards town. They had only gone a dozen steps when Joe stopped.

“Ya know what?” he said.

He was staring down the Boulevard past the downtown buildings. Even at that distance he could see the big rock house on the corner where the Boulevard crossed Stillman Road and narrowed into Meljac Lane.

“Lemme guess,” grinned Wiley. “The Bigfoots are comin’, right?”

Joe turned on Wiley, fuming, “That’s what I need, Wiley. My truck just got all wrecked to hell, and I need your dumbass wisecracks.”

Wiley was still grinning. “Ah, I’m jus kiddin’ round, Joe. Don’t get yer balls in a uproar.” He dropped the grin and tried to look serious.

“I’m sorry bout yer truck, Joe. Really. You know I didn’t wish it to get all wrecked. Come on. Let’s go on down to the bridge and see if we can hitch a ride over to the Stillman Bar.”

Joe didn’t budge. “Hold on a minute, Wiley. I’m wonderin’ somethin’ and I’m trying to tell ya about it. Now just think on this a minute.”

Wiley rolled his eyes. “On what?” he groaned, expecting another one of Joe’s long tales.

“Just think on this,” Joe repeated. “Whether you believe me or not, last night I got grabbed and throwed around by a

monster. Then I go home and find out Emma's been shootin' up the place with my shotgun, and she ain't nowhere in sight. Then I drive by the Meljac place and see them women out back jumpin' around, and lights flashing – probably some kinda witch orgy. Then the whole valley fills up with the smell of skunk farts. Then today, right out of a sunny sky comes a damn hurricane – startin' and stoppin' just like that. Then my truck just runs right into the river and gets all wrecked up. Now, Wiley, don't that all seem kinda strange? ...it all comin' at once like that?"

Joe finished, and waited for Wiley to comment. It was satisfying to see Wiley, for once, just shut his mouth and think a minute.

"Well," Wiley ventured, scratching his head, thoughtfully, "Ain't no brakes on the pickup."

"Awright," conceded Joe. "I'll give ya that one. But how bout all that other stuff?"

Wiley looked stumped for a moment, then said, "You ain't thinkin'..." he raised his eyebrows as it came to him, "...the women?"

"Damn straight, that's what I'm thinkin'," said Joe. "And I'm about to go down there and find out what's goin on, right now."

Sixty-six

JACK STOPPED THE CRUISER, and rolled down the window. He yelled at the two men standing beside the road.

“Joe, what’s your pickup doing out in the middle of the river back there?”

He wanted to laugh, but that wouldn’t have been very officer-like, so he resisted the impulse. He already knew what had happened. The picture rolled through his mind of ole Joe Paul tearing down the mountain, bouncing along the glorified path Wiley Curtis called a driveway. The brakes probably gave out on his piece of junk pickup. The cartoon image of Joe and Wiley’s screaming faces as the old truck sailed across the Boulevard and into the river made the laugh hard to resist.

Joe had his hands in his pockets, trying not to appear too concerned. “I guess it just finally gave up the ghost. The brakes quit while we was comin’ down the mountain.” His tone of voice suggested it was no big deal. Wiley nodded agreement.

Too casual for just now crawling out of a car wreck, Jack was thinking. *These old boys are up to something.*

He didn't dwell on the thought. Whatever they were up to, Joe and Wiley were slackers, not troublemakers.

"Where you fellas headed?" he asked.

"Over to the Stillman Bar," answered Joe. "Gonna go hang around the bridge; see if we can hitch a ride."

Jack jerked his thumb towards the back seat. "You guys hop in back there. I'll take you down to the corner."

He flipped the lock open for the back doors. Joe and Wiley got in.

From the back seat, Wiley said to Jack, "Hey, that smell washed away. You notice that?"

Emma couldn't believe her luck. First, she'd found the shotgun, right there behind the soda fountain counter where Louis had left it. And now, *low and behold, will you lookee there...* Joe the pig, and his worthless buddy, Wiley, being delivered right out front by that nice Officer Paris... or was it Harris? ...*Whatever.*

Even the freaky storm had gone away, taking that awful smell with it, and leaving everything calm and quiet outside.

Should be good shootin' weather, now.

She watched as the two men got out of the car. They exchanged a few words with the Officer, then the cruiser took off across the intersection and up Meljac Lane.

Yep, delivered on a platter. Now if they'll just come in here.

Emma broke open the shotgun and checked the two rounds in the breach. She touched each one with a fingertip, and giggled.

"I think I'll name you two Joe and Wiley."

She snapped the breach closed, and raised the gun towards the door. Joe and Wiley were gone.

"No!" she cried out loud, lowering the gun and rushing to the front window. She reached it just in time to see the back of Joe's shirt disappear around the corner of the building.

Surely they weren't going to walk all the way to Stillman. Joe wouldn't walk out to the street with the garbage can, let alone all the way to Stillman

Emma whirled around and ran to the back of the store, past the prescription counter, and into Louis's small office. She knew there was a backdoor. As a kid, she and the other children had run in and out – in the front doors, and out the back doors of all the downtown stores, laughing and playing, loved and smiled at by shopkeepers and customers alike... it being Bramwell, and all.

She jerked open the back door. The slope of the riverbank began only a few feet away, and just to the right, at the Stillman Road end of the buildings, loomed the rusty girders of the old Bridge. The men were nowhere in sight.

Sixty-seven

GONE, FINALLY – the wind, the rain, and thank God, that horrible smell. The sky was still gray, but beginning to clear, a hint of sunlight edging the clouds.

Reverend Gordon stood on the steps of the chapel enjoying welcome breaths of clean, fresh air. He'd opened the front double doors and the back door behind the pulpit to allow the slight breeze – all that was left of the storm – to carry out the last vestiges of the rank odor.

So far, the day had not been kind to Albert. The ghastly stench he'd awakened to was enough to sicken the heartiest residents of the valley, including Albert. But it wasn't revulsion from the smell, itself, that had held him on the brink of nausea all day – it was a vague sense of its origins: something subtly vile that assaulted him personally, spiritually. Its presence in the church seemed especially wrong – that's the best word he could think of... *wrong*.

Then the storm coming, so sudden and violent, without any warning of lowering sky or approaching clouds. There was something unnatural in the wind that wailed through the eaves, and the hail that threatened to shatter the church's

only stained glass window; the one he'd begged for so long and that he'd finally paid for out of his own pocket.

During the hours of gale driven rain and hail, Albert sat in the empty church, in the first pew, staring at the cross on the wall behind the podium, listening to the buffeting of the wind against the building, and breathing in the foul odor that seemed to gather around him. There was no doubt in his mind that nature had played no part in what was happening. No wounded opossum had crawled under the church to die a smelly death. No rotting raccoon lay beneath the azaleas surrounding the church parking lot. And though storms occurred in the valley, they simply occurred, they never *raged*; not like this one. As far as Albert was concerned, all of it was just somehow... and there was that word again... *wrong*.

His calling, or rather the education that formalized his dedication to it, had taught him to dismiss ideas like the ones twitching around in his head. But Albert was Bramwell Valley born and raised. And even here, in this consecrated house where he served a higher power, the teachings of the church resided in his brain side by side with an inherited acceptance of other knowledge, other ways. It was those other ways that crept into his mind even as he sat staring at the cross, the supreme icon of his faith.

What didn't fit, though – and of course he was thinking of the women – was that they didn't delve into this type of dark and foreboding magic – not the women of the valley. They dealt with elementals: the spirits of the earth, the sky, and water; ancient science passed from the consciousness of mother to daughter through millennia. Sorcery, yes, but a sorcery of light; benign, irreproachable; perhaps even a gift from... *somewhere* – although Albert wasn't really very comfortable taking that last thought too far.

But they would know. If there was darkness in the valley, the women would know, and Albert wanted answers. The walk down to Meljac Lane wasn't far, but he decided to take his raincoat just in case.

Sixty-eight

DAVID SAT ON THE REC ROOM FLOOR – very, *very* disappointed. What started out to be the coolest thing ever had turned out to be a whopping dud. Probably, no kid in the whole world had their own real-life, honest to goodness demons, right there in their own basement – six of them – plus a monster. But nope, not even close to cool, just boring.

First of all, except for the monster, they didn't even look like demons. They were too short. He'd seen his share of demons; the comic books were full of them. They were supposed to loom over people, growling, and flexing their creepy claws. These were too short to loom, and as far as growling went, forget it. He might have been able to get over the no-looming part if they just looked a little more gruesome rather than just butt-ugly. But that quacking noise? – Yep, forget about growling.

As for the monster, that was a whole different story. Dread was, definitely, cool. At least, he looked cool. Right now, he wasn't acting very cool, though – just sitting over there in the corner grumbling to himself. Then again,

whad'ya expect? Every time Dread started to get up, mom hollered at him to sit back down. And you don't mess with mom if you know what's good for you. Still, as far as cool went, Dread had potential.

Anyway, all said and done, the whole demon thing was a bust. He wished he could have gone to school today, but mom said he had to stay home and help her watch the demons – make sure they didn't get out and cause mischief. Of course, that was bull. What she really meant was, she thought he was a blabbermouth and would blabber all over the school about the demons. Well, he had to go back sometime, probably tomorrow... and maybe just tell a few friends. What's the good of having demons, even goofy ones, if you can't tell anybody?

Silly Jilly had to stay home today, too, but you could bet old Batty Patty from next door was in school blabbing to everybody. Probably be five hundred giggly girls hop-scotchin' across the mountain to see the demons after school. None of his friends; just five hundred giggly girls hop-scotchin' across the mountain.

At least Jilly had stopped acting so gross. Not that he hadn't liked the blueberry pancakes she'd fixed him for breakfast yesterday, but all that goody-goody big sister stuff she'd been doing was icky. Even mom and Anta thought it was icky. They didn't say anything about it, but he could tell they thought it was icky. They kept looking at each other and wrinkling their faces. He was glad Jilly had quit it and gone back to acting right.

He glanced over where Jilly and that stupid demon in the rocking chair were just sitting there staring at each other. Every now and then, they would nod, then just keep staring. How dumb can you get?

A noise from upstairs caught his attention. It sounded like something banged against the veranda doors, or maybe

grandpa slammed them on his way out. Grandpa didn't look too happy when he'd come in the basement with Anta a little while ago. He looked really surprised when he saw the demons, and especially Dread. Then, he'd made Anta go upstairs with him. They were probably going to have one of those talks. Grownups had a lot of talks. David sighed a bored, *'whatever,'* and went back to his drawing.

He had a pretty good picture going. It didn't look exactly like a demon, but so what; the demons didn't look exactly like demons, either. He rummaged around in the crayon box till he found a good red one. Maybe some blood around the mouth would dress it up a little.

Concentrating on getting the blood on the fangs just right – he'd added fangs, too – he didn't notice the real demon till it flopped down on the floor beside him. David was startled, but delighted that one of them had, finally, decided to pay him some attention.

“Quack,” it said

“Quack, yourself,” David said back, giggling.

“Quack,” it said, again.

Apparently, conversation was out.

On impulse, hoping to get something going before the demon got bored and wandered off again, David pushed his drawing towards it, and handed it the red crayon. The demon grabbed the crayon and stuck it in its mouth.

“No!” David yelled, too late to grab it back.

The demon chewed it up and swallowed it.

“You're not s'posed to do that!” exclaimed David. “It'll make you sick”

He wasn't really sure eating crayons would make you sick, but you still weren't supposed to eat them. Everybody knew that. He scooted the box of crayons out of reach, just in case the demon got any ideas.

That was the moment Dread decided he'd had enough. He was up, across the room, and out the door before anyone could blink.

Sixty-nine

TRAVELING NORTH ON ROUTE 52, one can take the tunnel that burrows under the ridge of mountains separating the gentle rolling hills of northern Virginia from the rugged terrain of southern West Virginia. Or, one can take old route 52: a harrowing, twisting snake, crawling up the craggy face of Big Walker Mountain, then a breathless roller coaster decent down the other side into Bluefield, West Virginia – not recommended for the faint of heart, but a lot more fun.

Since Harry was a fun guy, he'd suggested the old route. What he really wanted to do was drive the big SUV over the mountain, himself. But, when he'd suggested that part, Sarah had explained how she suddenly remembered the insurance her credit card carried on the rented Hummer only covered her. Harry didn't know anything about insurance, but she had looked a little nervous when she explained it, so he figured it must be important. Much to his regret, he was forced to accept that his driving days were over.

They stopped for a breather at the top of the mountain, pulling into a small rest area with a few benches and a sign that read, ‘Scenic View.’

Sarah turned off the ignition, arched her back, stretched, and yawned. “Let’s get out for a minute... take a break, okay?”

Harry perked up with a hopeful look.

“You sure you don’t want me to dri...”

“Oh, no, no, I’m fine, really,” Sarah reassured him.

She opened the door and hopped out before he could pursue the subject. She shut the door, then looked back through the open window at Harry.

“Come on, Harry,” she said. “Let’s walk around for a few minutes... shake out the kinks.”

The rest area was less than a hundred feet of widened shoulder where Route 52 reached the crest of Big Walker Mountain. At the very top, the old highway crossed the state line between Virginia and West Virginia, then wound its way for two miles down the nearly sheer facade of the West Virginia side, and into the town of Bluefield. But it was the view from the Virginia side of the mountaintop that was truly spectacular.

Harry and Sarah stood by the low stone wall at the edge of the ‘scenic view’ where, far below, the endless miles of low Virginia hills and valleys faded off under a light haze to a distant horizon that seemed an infinity away. Sarah braced herself with both hands on the iron rail that ran along the top of the low wall at the very edge of the precipice.

Leaning, precariously, out over the rail, she said, dreamily, “I love places like this, Harry: like the top of a mountain, or an ocean shore; places where you can look out and see forever without anything getting in the way. I guess... I don’t know... I guess you feel like you get a break from everything. Problems can’t crowd around you in all this

space. You get a chance to back off and regroup... kinda. You know what I mean?"

Harry did, though he hadn't really thought of it consciously till Sarah put it into words.

Sarah pushed back from the railing and stood up straight. She turned, facing him.

"Twenty miles, Harry," she said, her voice turning solemn. "Twenty more miles, and we're there; back to once a month at midnight. You sitting out on your rock, and me at that old picnic table with the Bramwell girls club. Are you sure, Harry? Are you really sure?"

Harry reached for her, pulling her close, folding her into his arms.

He said, "If you're asking if I want it to be like that... no, I don't. You know I don't. But..."

He didn't have to finish.

"Yeah, I know," Sarah whispered, "...I know."

Seventy

BOTH OF THEM DRUNK AS A SKUNK, thought Harris, as Joe and Wiley walked away from the cruiser.
...probably the best place for that old pickup truck is right where it is, in the middle of the river instead of those two roarin' around in it.

Glancing across the intersection, he saw Amanda walking across the narrow strip of lawn that separated her house from the Meljac's. She waved, noticing Jack just as she reached Melanie's front steps.

Jack smiled to himself. *Ah, A ray of sunshine on a dreary day.*

He flipped on the cruiser's flashing red, blue and white strobes, and gunned it across the intersection. Pulling even with the Meljac's walkway, he stopped, leaned across the passenger seat, and with a grin, shouted out the window.

"Officer Harris here, Mam. What seems to be the problem?"

Amanda posed, coquettishly – a lady-in-distress – and pleaded, "Oh, Officer, Officer, come quickly. I've been attacked by an itch, and need scratching."

"Well, Mam, the Princeton County Sheriff's Department is always ready to..."

Amanda wiggled her hips, and smiled, naughtily.

“...help in any way we...”

She wiggled again, and Jack cracked up, unable to continue.

“Okay, Okay,” he conceded, laughing. “You win!”

Amanda walked up to the car window, leaned down and asked, smiling, “You staying dry, today, buddy?”

“Tryin’ to,” he answered. “Looks like it’s over now, though. That was weird, huh? ...the way it came up so fast?”

“Yeah, it was. Hey, speaking of weird, I’m going in to visit my weird neighbor. You got time to stop by a while?”

Jack reached to turn off the ignition.

“Sure, I’ve got a few minutes. You think she’ll give us some coffee if we ask nice?”

“*Ha*, a masochist!” Amanda grunted. “Apparently, you’ve never tasted Melanie’s coffee.”

“Shall I tell her you said that?” Jack grinned.

“Uh, best not.”

“How about the part about her being weird?”

“Uh, best not that, either.”

At the table in the dining room, Melanie hovered over John Simmons and dabbed at the small cut above his eyebrow with an alcohol soaked cotton ball. She figured she knew him well enough by now to rib him a little.

“You really do have a thing about glass, don’t you, John,” she teased.

Simmons was already embarrassed enough – doubly so by the fuss Melanie was making over the tiny cut. The jibe made him blush.

He said, “You wouldn’t have a rock handy, would you? ...something I could crawl under?”

Melanie smiled. That was the second time she'd seen him blush – that boyish look – unpretentious. She wasn't sure why she found it all that attractive, but she did.

“As long as you stay away from my good china,” she kidded.

She heard Amanda call from the foyer, “Hello, anybody home?”

From the living room, Claudia answered, “In here.”

Melanie dabbed one last time at Simmons' eyebrow. Still in a ribbing mood, she yelled over her shoulder loud enough for Amanda to hear, “There's no coffee here if that's what you're looking for.”

She heard Amanda say to Claudia, “Is she lying? She's lying, isn't she.”

And Claudia's answer, “Yep, she's lying.”

Amanda's voice came through the dining room door, again.

“Claudia say's you're lying.”

Melanie shouted back, “Claudia's right, but I'm not making it.”

To Simmons, who was chuckling over their banter, she said, “There now. I've nursed you back to health, and set straight that pesky neighbor. My work is done. What say we go in the living room and lend a little class to the party?”

Simmons stood up. Melanie took his hand and led him into the living room.

Spotting the rain-soaked Simmons, Amanda smiled and said, “Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

Melanie glanced at Simmons. “Yeah,” she snickered, “John just came through the door, *so to speak*.”

Claudia frowned. “Oh, come on, you two. Leave the poor man alone, for cryin' out loud.”

Jack Harris spoke up, “John, take my advice. Get out of town before these two tear you to shreds. They've been

terrorizing me since grade school. No mercy... either one of em.”

John Simmons was getting that good feeling, again – the openhearted warmth of these people of the valley, and Melanie, still holding his hand. He cringed, inwardly, at the thought of going back to Charleston.

“Well, so far, I’m enjoying the attention,” he said.

“Enjoy it while you can,” said Jack. “They’ll probably eat you, later.”

That got him a poke in the ribs from Amanda.

Louis walked in from the kitchen. The cup in his hand belied Melanie’s no-coffee claim.

“Hi, Louis,” said Jack. He indicated the cup, “Got any more of that in there?”

“Oh, hi Jack,” greeted Louis, “Didn’t know you were here. Uh, sure. There’s a fresh pot in the...”

“I’ll get it,” Amanda interrupted, and started towards the kitchen.

As she passed by Melanie, she whispered a barely audible, “*Liar.*”

Simmons heard it, and suppressed a laugh.

Amanda walked through the dining room into the kitchen. As she reached for the pot on the counter, the basement door flung open, and Jilly emerged, panting from her clamor up the basement steps.

“Mrs. Clark,” she cried, breathlessly, “Dread’s run off!”

Seventy-one

JOE AND WILEY stood on the sidewalk beside the drugstore watching Jack Harris' cruiser race across the intersection with the emergency lights flashing.

"What the hell's he up to? Ain't nobody doing nothing," grumbled Joe.

Wiley craned his neck and gestured toward the Meljac house. "Aw, there's Miz Amanda standin' over there. He's just messin' round with her. That ole boy's been sweet on her ever since I can remember."

"*Miz* Amanda, hell," mocked Joe. "You mean *Witch* Amanda, don'tcha?"

Wiley squinted up his face, fed up with Joe's constant griping.

"Jesus Christ, Joe – fer cryin' out loud! You and me both been knowin' all them girls since kindergarten. You was pullin' Amanda's pigtails up at the school when..."

Joe tried to interrupt, but Wiley went on, "...no, just hold on a minute cause another thing. If I remember correct, *and I do*, you was a mite sweet on Sarah Crumb all through

seventh grade, and her sister, Aubrey, too – cause you couldn't tell em apart. You remember that, do ya?"

Joe sneered, "Well, they're all grow'd up, now, ain't they? And you know what happens when that bunch grows up: they turn into witches just like their mommas."

Wiley squinted his face up again.

"Joe, you dumb shit, sometimes you act like some outsider city idiot comin' round here wagglin' yer finger and going, *Ooo, Ooo*, look at the witches, and stuff. Just what do you think would happen if there *weren't* no witches in Bramwell?"

Joe deflated a little, and mumbled, "I don't know, but still..."

Actually, Wiley didn't know, either. It was something no one ever thought about. But, at least it shut Joe up.

Wiley put a little conciliatory whine in his voice to smooth things over a bit.

"Come on, Joe. Let's go on out by the bridge and hitch a ride over to Stillman; play some pool or something."

Joe was still staring back at the Meljac house. Jack Harris and Amanda had gone inside.

"Huh Uh!" he snapped, with finality, his mind made up.

"I told ya I was gonna find out what's going on over there, and that's just exactly what I'm gonna do, right now."

He stepped off the sidewalk, and started across Stillman Road towards the back of the Crumb's house.

Wiley said, "Goddammit, Joe, I ain't gonna..."

"You comin' or not?" Joe called over his shoulder.

"*Shit!*" Wiley mumbled, and followed Joe across the street.

Seventy-two

THE REFLECTION ON THE LIVING ROOM WALL from the flashing lights of the sheriff's cruiser caught Aubrey's eye. She took a last swipe at the top of the piano with the feather duster, then stepped to the bay window and looked out across the Lane just in time to see Amanda Clark wiggle her hips at Jack Harris.

Aubrey Crumb had never wiggled her hips at a man. As a matter of fact, she never even smiled at one – no point in it; they never smiled back. Oh, there'd been some boys in high school, even some dates. But they never turned out very well. So, Aubrey Crumb was *not* a romantic.

Hussy, she thought, watching Amanda saunter up to Harris' cruiser.

Aubrey turned away, sneering, dismissing the scene across the Lane. She stood for a moment, absently swiping the duster at the shade on the floor lamp beside the bay window, then turned back for another look through the glass panes.

Jack Harris had gotten out of the cruiser. He and Amanda walked to the front porch of Melanie's house and stood there for a moment hand-in-hand. Without knocking, Amanda opened the door, and they went inside.

For a moment, as Aubrey's gaze lingered on the empty porch, an instant nostalgia, maudlin and bitter, whisked through her mind.

Front Porches with ceiling hung swings were for lovers, right?

Not her front porch, of course. No lovers had ever stood hand-in-hand, or sat in the ceiling hung swing there; unless you included that idiot, Joe Paul, back in the seventh grade, hanging around her and Sarah... sniffin' around both of them cause he couldn't tell them apart. Idiot! How he'd ever managed to snag a nice girl like Emma was beyond Aubrey.

Speaking of idiots – *now, here was a coincidence.* Through the picture window on the far side of the living room, she saw idiot Joe, and his worthless sidekick, Wiley Curtis, slinking across the street towards her house looking like two ferrets up to no good.

Now what?

Curious, she crossed to the picture window and watched as Joe and Wiley reached the sidewalk. They lingered a moment as if checking to see if anyone was watching, then hurried across the small lawn, disappearing from her view. Apparently, they were headed behind the house. Joe mowed her lawn once a week in the summertime, but it didn't need mowing now. There was no reason for him, or Wiley, to be messing around back there. Still curious, she turned from the picture window and went to the kitchen.

As she leaned across the sink to look out the back window, she heard Wiley scream.

"Obhhhhh, shit!"

Seventy-three

JOE INTENDED FOR THEM to sneak around the far side of the Crumb house, then across the Lane, hopefully unseen. A little more sneaking would get them to the Meljac's back patio where they could do some serious snooping.

Passing under Aubrey's kitchen window, and reaching the corner of the house, Joe gave the hesitant Wiley a shove and urged, "Go on!"

Wiley, whispered, "Awright, awright, I'm going."

Although from different directions, Wiley, the town drunk, and Dread, the Keeper of the Unspeakable Archives, chose the exact same moment to step around the exact same corner. The terrified '*Oh, shit*' Aubrey had heard through her kitchen window came as Dread grabbed Wiley by the neck and lifted him off the ground – which wasn't an aggressive move on Dread's part; just a habit he'd gotten into lately to get a better look at people. Of course Wiley, dangling from Dread's grip, thrashing and screaming, didn't see it that way. It damned sure looked aggressive to him.

To Joe's credit, as much as he wanted to, he didn't run. Loyalty to his friend – but, mostly way too much of Wiley's moonshine – filled ole Joe with the courage to rise to the rescue. Without thinking, he grabbed a garden hose conveniently hanging from a rack on the side of the house,

ran right up to Dread, shoved the nozzle at the beast's face, and squeezed the lever. Nothing happened.

A little voice in Joe's head said, '*...should of turned on the faucet, dumbass.*'

As Dread's other hand closed around Joe's neck, and he felt himself lifted off the ground, an image of last night's encounter beside the bridge with the same monster flashed through his mind – *been there, done that* – and he didn't even bother to scream; just hung in the air, thrashing his legs, and gasping at Wiley.

"Now, (*choke*) ...do you (*gurgle*) ...believe me?"

Dread examined the souls of the two people he held in front of him. One of them, he'd seen before, and the other one didn't look much different. Neither shined. Anyway, the whole shining soul thing was pretty much academic, now. The only way to get souls out of people was to kill them, and Quackrak had warned him about that... some kind of rule against it, or something – very disappointing. He'd only picked these two up out of curiosity.

His examination of Joe and Wiley was interrupted by the appearance of another human just off to his side.

Aubrey had grabbed the first thing she could find to use as a weapon, and had rushed out the back door when she'd seen what was going on. As Dread turned his head to look, he caught a solid thwack in the face by Aubrey's broom.

Surprise, rather than pain, caused him to drop Joe and Wiley, and since Aubrey was winding up for another swing, he jumped back out of the way.

Aubrey's second swipe missed, and her cry of, "*Abomination from hel...*," was cut short as she stumbled to recover from the momentum of the missed swing. Wiley was sprawled on the ground clutching his bruised throat and whimpering.

“Oh, Miz. Aubrey... Miz. Aubrey, thank God you showed up!”

Joe, also sprawling on the ground, wasn't that concerned. He'd been grabbed, hoisted, examined, and dropped by the monster before. It was getting to be old hat.

“Oh, stop yer blubbering,” he snapped at Wiley.

“...*from Hell!*” finished Aubrey, catching her balance and scrunching her face up in concentration, hoping to drag up some last vestige of her lost powers – enough to send the demon beast back to where it came from. The effort proved pointless, so she wound up for another swing with the broom.

Quackrak, having been in pursuit of Dread since the latter bolted from the Meljac's basement, arrived at the scene just in time for Aubrey to adjust the trajectory of her broom.

Thwack!

Taking the hit from the broom full in the face, and not having the advantage of Dread's weight, Quackrak went tumbling.

“Get em, Miz. Aubrey,” cried Wiley.

Joe's mouth dropped open, aghast at seeing a new ghoulie. “Christ! Where the hell did that one come from?”

Dread stood back and watched as Quackrak took the broom in the face and tumbled head over heels and landing in a heap. He looked down at the two humans cringing on the ground, and at the one with the broom reeling off balance, trying to recover from her overzealous swing. As he took it all in, Dread did something he'd never done in his entire existence.

He laughed.

Seventy-four

MYRA'S BONY OLD RUMP WAS SORE from sitting on a stair step, and raising herself up to the next one, one at a time, all the way up the basement stairs, the same way she'd gotten down. Thirty creaky old steps – she'd counted them. Now, if she could just remember why she'd gone to all the trouble to start with. It had something to do with Lucifer being out wandering around. She couldn't remember exactly what.

But, the spell had worked, and that's all that mattered to Myra. It had been a very long time since she had done anything powerful, and even though it had only been a silly witch spell, not real sorcery, it still felt good.

Myra sat on the top step, exhausted, waiting for enough strength to return to her tortured old joints so she could stand up and make her way back to the front porch. Lord knows how many damn tourists were lurking around out there. Somebody had to keep an eye on them. Maybe, with a little luck, the storm had blown them all away.

Blown away... the smell – that was it! Now she remembered. She'd gone down to the basement looking for the book,

hoping to conjure up a wind to blow away that horrible odor. Must have worked, she didn't smell it now.

Enough lollygagging. Myra braced her hands against the door jam and managed to haul herself, painfully, to her feet. She stood a moment, waiting for the dizziness of old age to subside, then turned and shuffled her way through the house and out to the front porch. Her cane was propped against the wall by the front door and since she was still a little wobbly from her ordeal, she snatched it up on the way by, just in case.

The wind and rain had stopped. Only a slight breeze stirred the new spring weeds growing in Myra's front yard.

Gotta get that lazy Joe Paul up here to mow them damn weeds.

She sniffed at the air. Yep, clean and clear. No more smell. Her thin lips curled into a toothless, but satisfied, smile.

"Ole Myra's not too old to save the day," she chuckled.

Unfortunately, more than the smell had blown away. Her geranium plant was gone, pot and all, along with the rusty little aluminum table it had set on. The plant hadn't flowered yet – actually, it had looked kinda dead – but she had tended it all spring, and had high hopes for it. Half of someone's TV antenna lay crumpled out near the road. But, more importantly, the spot near the end of the porch where her wheelchair had been was empty.

The beginnings of panic turned to relief as she caught sight of one of the chair's wheels just visible over the edge of the porch where the wind had blown it off onto the ground and tipped it upside down.

Good solid old chair. She sighed with confidence. *Probably no damage done.*

Myra hobbled across the porch, and with the help of her cane, sidled down the three steps to the weed covered ground.

Good solid old cane don't hurt none, either – although, once on the ground, the cane, with its tendency to sink into the wet earth, proved more of a hindrance than a help. By the time she made it around to the side of the porch her slippers were soaking wet. No matter. They would dry out, eventually.

The wheelchair looked fine, just upside down was all. Getting it right side up was awkward; she almost fell over it several times in the process. An image came to her mind of her father standing over her when, as a little girl, she had tripped over a wheelbarrow.

He had said, laughing at his own joke, “Seems like one never quite finishes falling over a wheelbarrow, do they, girl.” She hadn't caught the humor in it till now.

Panting, exhausted from her efforts, Myra lowered her aching backside into the seat of the chair. She sat for a moment catching her breath, then grasped the rollers to wheel herself around the side of the porch to the front steps. No good. With her weight, the wheels had sunk almost an inch into the wet ground, and the strength in her frail arms wasn't enough to budge the darn thing. She would have to get up and push it.

Ain't that just grand. She grimaced at the added hassle. It had yet to occur to her that without her powers, as limited as they had been, it would be next to impossible for her to get the chair up the steps onto the porch, and after several minutes of pushing, grunting and stumbling, she stood in front of the steps, facing that fact.

For the first time since her powers had disappeared, Myra suddenly realized how much she depended on them – not for anything earthshaking, just a little extra boost for emergencies – like now, for instance.

Unacceptable. That's what it was. Just plain unacceptable.

Myra shook her head in disgust.

Damn it, Claudia, what in the world was in your head; lettin' them girls screw up everything like this – lettin' the devil out, an all.

She pulled the wheelchair away from the steps, struggling to get it turned around so she could push it out to the street. Time to go down there and have a talk with Claudia and them girls – see what the hell was goin' on. If they couldn't figure out how to set things straight, then by God, she would.

A few more minutes of grunting and groaning and Myra managed to wrestle the chair over the wet ground and out to the pavement – and that was it. She collapsed into the seat, the last of her strength drained.

Myra settled back, relaxed for minute, and braced herself for the coast down Stillman Road to Claudia's place – downhill all the way, or she wouldn't have even attempted it. She'd have to find that lazy Joe Paul and his crappy old pickup truck to get her and her wheelchair back home.

All settled in, she gave the rollers a little push, and the chair began its leisurely coast towards town. Myra's wheelchair was a good one, and only the slightest touch of her fingertips on one, or the other, of the rollers kept its course straight and true as it coasted along. A gentle pressure on the brake lever would keep its speed in check on the downhill grade – or would have, had not the fall over the edge of the porch bent the pads away from the rim of the wheel.

As the chair jiggled a little to the right, Myra tapped the left roller, and it straightened out, nicely. As it started picking up a bit too much speed, she gave a little tug on the brake lever and... nothing happened. She tried again. Nothing. The chair was beginning to roll too fast for comfort, and Myra gave the lever a hard tug. Still nothing, and the speed was increasing. Myra tugged, frantically, at the

brake lever, starting to panic as the chair continued to roll, frighteningly, fast down Stillman Road towards the intersection – and the bridge... and the river.

One last, fruitless, tug of the lever, and Myra gave up. She grasped both armrests, and hung on for dear life. It was going to be a hell of a ride.

Seventy-five

DAVID WAS PRETTY SURE somebody would figure out a way to blame him for Dread running off. He had never heard the expression ‘crap rolls downhill,’ but, being the youngest person in the family; he’d had ample experience with the concept.

“Wasn’t *my* fault,” he said to the little demon sitting on the floor in front of him drooling red crayon.

“Quack,” agreed the demon.

When Dread had made his getaway, with Quackrak in hot pursuit, Jilly had bolted up the stairs to tell the grownups. David figured she was probably up there right now blaming it on him.

David got up, and went to the door. He peeked outside to see if Dread and Quackrak were on the patio. Not seeing them, he went out for a better look. They were nowhere in sight. As he turned to go back inside, Jilly appeared at the door, frantic.

She cried out, “David, catch him!”

“Wha...?”

The little red-crayon drooling demon streaked by David, ran across the patio, and disappeared around the corner of the house.

“You little creep,” yelled Jilly. “Why’d you let him out?”

Yep, there was the blame, awright.

David yelled back, protesting, “I didn’t... s’not my fault.”

Jilly rushed out, grabbed David by the arm, dragging him across the patio.

“Come on. We’d better catch him before mom finds out, or you’re dead.”

“I’m not gonna be dead. I didn’t do nothin’,” David complained, but yielded to Jilly’s tugs. He followed her at a stumbling run around the house, and out into the Lane – too late. The demon was nowhere to be seen.

Seventy-six

“FRAZZLED!” Myra Hinkle shouted to the trees.

“*Frazzled all to hell and back. That’s what I am.*”

Myra liked the sound of that description.

“*Nerves just frazzled all to hell,*” she said it aloud, again, satisfied that it fit the situation perfectly.

Flying down Stillman Road, whizzing through the intersection, her momentum finally giving out as she coasted across the bridge – the wheelchair had come to a stop just as the road began to curve up the slope of the mountain on the other side of the river. The ride had been harrowing, but without mishap, and if Myra hadn’t already settled on ‘frazzled,’ she probably would have chosen ‘exhilarated’ instead.

Kinda overshot it a little there, didn’t ya, old girl, thought Myra as she reached down to the chrome rollers to turn herself around for the trip back across the bridge.

Her fingers and palms were sore – frictions burns from touching the rollers as she’d fought to keep the chair on a true course as it had sped down Stillman Road.

“*Had worse,*” she muttered, absently.

Myra grasped the rollers, whispered an “*ouch*,” or two, and with some pulling and tugging, managed to get turned around and pointed back towards the bridge – and at whatever the hell that was that had appeared out of nowhere in the road behind her; although Myra knew very well what it was.

“Quack,” it said.

Gawking, Myra exclaimed in surprise, “Now, there’s something ya don’t see everyday!”

Sarah drove the big black Hummer down the mountain and around the last curve just before the road crossed the Bramwell Bridge.

Suddenly, Harry jerked forward in his seat, peering through the windshield. He glanced at Sarah, then back out the windshield.

“Please tell me that’s not what I think it is!” he said, his tone unbelieving.

Sarah had seen it too.

Keeping a straight face, she said, “You mean the little old lady in a wheelchair being pushed across the bridge by a baboon?”

“It’s not a baboon. It’s a...”

“Yeah, I know what it is,” Sarah interrupted. “Aubrey told me they were running around all over town.”

Harry stammered, “This-is-not-good.”

Sarah couldn’t help but chuckle at the look on his face.

“This is serious, Sarah,” he said, frowning. “It’s not funny. People aren’t supposed to see them. Ever! Or even know they exist.”

Sarah scoffed, “Come on, Harry. Anyone who’s ever been to a movie, or read a comic book, knows about demons.”

“They know the myth,” Harry countered. “They don’t really believe it. They’re not supposed to come face to face with the fact that demons are real, or even that *I’m* actually real, for that matter?”

Sarah nodded towards the middle of the bridge with a smirk.

“Too late, now, Harry. The cat... er, demon, is out of the bag.”

“Anyway,” she added, “that’s Myra Hinkle in the wheelchair. I’d venture to say she knows all about you and your demons.”

Harry looked blank.

“Hinkle?”

“Yeah.” Sarah grinned, mischievously. “Think back about sixty years, Harry – long, curly red hair, pretty face, great body?”

Harry said, “I don’t remem...”

“...dancing around the fire?” Sarah suggested.

Harry looked back out the windshield at the old woman in the wheelchair on the bridge in front of them. Recognition, and a tinge of embarrassment, dawned on him simultaneously.

“Oh, my goodness.”

Seventy-seven

IT WAS JUST A MOMENT'S DIZZINESS followed by an overwhelming sense of intense confidence and self-assuredness. Melanie felt it; so did Amanda and Claudia.

In the big black Hummer, Sarah swerved when it happened, and barely avoided hitting the bridge railing.

Aubrey Crumb almost fell on her face with her broom in mid-swing when the feeling came.

Myra Hinkle thought the dizziness was just old age till she felt the rest of it, then she simply smiled to herself.

Melanie steadied herself against the kitchen counter till the dizziness faded.

“Harry’s back,” she surmised.

“Oh, goodie!” Amanda chortled, leaning on the counter for support. “I’m a witch-bitch again.”

Claudia was least affected; only a slight sense of vertigo as her powers flowed back into her body.

“Well! Back to normal. Thank God for that,” she said, whooshing out a breath of relief.

“But, we’ll get thankful later. Right now,” she looked at Amanda, “what, exactly, did Jilly say?”

“Just that Dread had run off. I went in and got you two right away. ‘Help me with the coffee pot’ was the best I could think of on short notice.”

“It’s okay. We’ll gloss it over later,” said Claudia. “Although, Louis has been downstairs, and has seen...”

“Good Lord,” Amanda gasped. “He knows?”

“Yep. He saw the whole bunch, and I’m sure he knows we’re not in here helping you with the coffee pot. Anyway, that’s not the problem. Dread waltzing down Bramwell Boulevard is what we need to worry about.”

She stopped talking, and tilted her head, quizzically.

Amanda said, “Yeah, I hear it, too.”

All three women’s heads filled with the projection from Aubrey Crumb.

You better get over here and collect your monster before I turn it into a pile of ashes?

“Ah!” Melanie smiled. “Problem solved.”

Dread stopped laughing. From where he stood at the back corner of Aubrey’s house, he could see the big black Hummer coming across the bridge. He didn’t know exactly what it was, but he knew exactly who was in it. He could feel Lucifer’s presence even from that distance. Panic gripped him. Being out of Underworld was bad enough, but if Lucy caught him out here among humans...

I’m going to get boiled in oil for sure, this time, he thought.

What to do? ...Run? ...Run where?

Quackrak, wiping dirt off his face from his tumble across the yard, had sensed Lucifer, too. He knew there would be hell to pay – another of his favorite puns – but his relief at Lucy’s return outweighed his fear of being caught. Lucy would fix everything. They could all go home – safe and sound counting souls in his cubicle, the maintenance demons sweeping floors and running errand, and Dread?

Quackrak wondered if he could talk Lucy into welding the door to Underworld shut.

Seventy-eight

“THERE HE IS!” David blurted out, pointing up Stillman Road towards the bridge.

He and Jilly were standing out by the intersection hoping to see where the red-crayon drooling demon had run off to. Jilly looked where David was pointing. She spotted the little demon pushing Mrs. Hinkle’s wheelchair towards them.

“Now, that’s just *too* weird,” she said, giggling at the sight.

“Yeah, that’s just too weird,” David echoed Jilly’s observation. He wasn’t sure what was weird about it, but if his sister thought it was weird, it probably was.

In less than a minute, Mrs. Hinkle’s demon-powered wheelchair rolled up to where they stood.

Mrs. Hinkle raised her hand, and said over her shoulder, “Stop here.”

The demon stopped pushing and stood behind the chair as though waiting for further instructions.

Getting weirder by the minute, thought Jilly

Mrs. Hinkle said, “I was just coming to see your Aunt Claudia. Oh, and this...” she gestured at the demon, “wouldn’t happen to belong to you, would it?”

Jilly wasn't sure how to react. She didn't know if she should admit knowing anything about the demon, or not.

David decided for her.

“Yeah, and he ran off, and if mom finds out...”

He stopped in mid-sentence as something new caught his attention.

“*Wow!* Look at that neat car!” His gaze locked onto the big black Hummer that had just come across the bridge.

The big SUV rolled up to them and stopped in the middle of the road. Sarah Crumb stuck her head out the window.

“Hi, Myra... uh, Jilly. Hey David.” She looked nervous at seeing the children.

“Whatcha got there, Myra?” she asked, with an uncomfortable nod towards the demon.

Mrs. Hinkle smiled a humorless smile, and answered with obvious sarcasm.

“Well, Sarah, this here's my new house boy. Just hired him. Found him walkin' down the road the other side of the bridge, and figured he might need a job.”

Her humorless smile turned to an angry frown as she continued, “Of course, if that feller sittin' in that monstrosity of a car with you is who I think it is – *and it is!* – then you know damn well what I got here, don'tcha. Question is, what's it doing traipsin' round all over town? And while we're at it...” she straightened up as tall as she could in the wheelchair, and peered into the Hummer.

“Hello there, Harry,” she shouted. “Mind if I ask what the hell *you're* doing traipsin' around where you ain't supposed to be – that is, while we're at it?”

The Big SUV was too high for her to see through to the passenger side, but she could hear Harry's rather timid response.

“Uh, hi, Myra... uh, nice to see you, again.”

“Yeah, I *bet* it is,” Myra grunted.

Sarah turned to Harry with a suspicious frown.

“Harry?”

“What?” he replied, defensively.

“Harry, what’s going on here?”

Her suspicion lent an edge to her voice.

“You’ve been acting funny ever since you saw...”

She glanced out at Myra, then back at Harry, it suddenly dawning on her.

She gasped, “Harry, did you... were you and Myra...?”

“No... no! Nothing!” Harry shrugged innocently, then added, “Well... not really.”

“Harry, you son-of-a-bitch!” Sarah exploded.

Harry raised his hands in front of him, warding off her anger.

“Please, Sarah, it wasn’t like that... not at all,” he protested. “Just flirting... playing around...”

Sarah snapped back, “With naked women dancing around a fire?”

Myra Hinkle was enjoying the show.

She said, laughing, “Oh, Sarah, don’t get your panties in an uproar. That was sixty years ago, and wasn’t nothin’ anyway.”

Sarah was still fuming.

“We’re gonna talk about this later, Harry,” she declared, venomously.

Seventy-nine

THE RETURN OF AUBREY'S POWERS coincided with the momentum from the last swing of her broom. Surprised, and a little stunned, she let go of the broom, stumbling a few steps, following the direction of her swing to keep from falling flat on her face.

Recovering her balance, she shook the dizziness from her head, and stared at the monster. It was laughing – a grotesque parody of a laugh.

At her? she wondered. *Let's see how it laughs when I turn it into a dog turd?*

Joe and Wiley were huddled together on the ground like two scared kids. The sight of that would have made her laugh, too, if it wasn't for...

The monster's laugh ended, abruptly. It took a step forward, then stopped. It glanced around, this way and that, furtively, seeming unsure what to do. Aubrey got the impression it was about to run off.

With her powers back, she projected to all the other women, wherever they were.

You better get over here and collect your monster before I turn it into a pile of ashes!

The response from Melanie was immediate.

Oh, good, you found them. Can you bring them back over here- round back through the patio door?

Baked, or broiled, replied Aubrey.

Please, Aubrey, before anyone sees them.

I've got a better idea, Aubrey said, *I'll just send them over.*

She closed her eyes, and gave Dread and Quackrak a hard mental push.

No, Aubrey! No! Melanie projected frantically. *The kids are down there. If you send them and they pop up in the same space as David and Jilly...*

Too late, came from Aubrey.

Dread and Quackrak disappeared, and due to a slight miscalculation on Aubrey's part, so did Joe and Wiley.

"Oops," Aubrey muttered, looking at the ground where Joe and Wiley had been.

She shrugged. "Serves em right." – and went back into the house to finish her dusting.

Melanie hurried down the basement steps. She knew Aubrey was competent enough to make sure the space where she sent Dread and Quackrak wasn't occupied by anyone, or anything, but still, as a mother it was her duty to freak out.

She reached the bottom of the stairs just as Jilly and David came in through the patio door leading their wayward demon between them.

Seeing her mom, Jilly said, "This one got out, too. Wait'll I tell you where we found him."

David piped up, "It was pushing an old lady around in a chair with wheels."

Jilly spotted Dread and Quackrak standing in the middle of the room, their heads darting this way and that, obviously wondering where they were and how they got there. Joe Paul and Wiley Curtis sat on the floor looking stunned.

"Hey, they're back," she said, surprised. "Oh, and Mr. Paul, and Mr. Curtis... uh, I didn't know you were here."

Quackrak quacked a few times, puzzled, then projected, “*What!* What happened?”

Dread raised his head high, and roared, “That’s it! I’m killing everybody.”

“Oh, no you’re not!” yelled Melanie, angrily. A wave of her hand, and Dread was flat on the floor, unable to move.

“Joe, what are you guys doing here?” she demanded

“We were... we were... we were,” Joe was having trouble getting it out. His face was slack, and he looked in shock.

“That thing attacked us!” he finally managed, pointing at Dread.

“Oh, he did not,” protested Quackrak. “He was just looking at your souls.”

To Melanie, he said, “Please let him up. He isn’t going to kill anybody.” He looked down at the beast. “Are you, Dread?” It was a statement rather than a question.

Dread, totally immobilized, managed to make a *‘buh uh’* sound.

Melanie hesitated a moment, then said, “All right, but if I hear one more threat from him, he’s toast.”

Another wave of her hand, and Dread was able to sit up.

Quackrak said to Melanie, “Lucy is back. We’re all going home now, right?”

“What? Where? Where is he?”

“I don’t know, but he was in a big black thing, and it was very close,” answered Quackrak.

“Black thing?... like a car?”

“What’s a car?”

“Never mind,” said Melanie. “Probably a car, and if he’s around here he’ll show up, eventually. Just stay put, and keep him out of trouble.” She nodded towards Dread.

“Right now there are people upstairs I have to attend to, but I promise you’ll be going home soon. Joe, you and Wiley stay here, too. I’ll be back down in a little while to explain.”

She turned, and started back up the stairs. Halfway up, she stopped, and turned back with a curious look at David.

“...Old lady in a chair with wheels?”

Eighty

IT WAS TRUE. John Simmons *did* have a sister who lived in Bluefield, and he *did* drive down from Charleston to visit her and her family rather often. The part he'd related about there being a small branch office of the Parks Department in Bluefield, and the nature of his job making it not really matter which office he worked out of, was also true. The rest was a lie. Not a bad lie; just one of those innocent little lies people inject into conversation to hide embarrassing motives.

He was saying, "...and with no real family left in Charleston, well, I've thought of moving to Bluefield, or somewhere down in this area, for quite some time."

The truth was, it had never occurred to him till just this moment while sitting there in Melanie's antique chair, and if Simmons thought he was fooling anyone, he was mistaken.

Jack was sitting in the other of the two matching chairs, and Louis was on the couch facing them. Both knew exactly why John Simmons had developed such a sudden attraction to their part of the country, and from the grins on the two men's faces, Simmons could tell he'd gotten caught.

He tried to save it with, "...uh, it *would* be nice to be around family."

Jack and Louis glanced at each other, knowingly, then looked back at Simmons. They both sat there, deliberately silent, waiting for John to dig a deeper hole.

Simmons grimaced, embarrassed by their smirking scrutiny, then laughing out loud, gave it up.

"All right, you guys. Come on, now."

Jack's grin widened as he ribbed Simmons, "Let's see, 'quite some time' – that would be about three days since you met her, huh?"

Louis held in a laugh, "Well, Jack, ya gotta admit, it *is* beautiful *her*," he snickered, "Uh, I mean *here*."

Jack threw in, "Oh yeah, beautiful trees, and stuff. Right John?"

Simmons leaned back in his chair with a resigned sigh.

"Jeez, gemme a break, guys," he groaned with a smile.

Jack and Louis cracked up.

A knock at the front door gave Simmons the break he was looking for. Louis stood, and went out to answer the door, giving Simmons a good-natured slap on the back on the way by. A moment later he returned to the living room followed by Albert Morgan.

To Simmons, he said, "John, I'd like you to meet our very esteemed Reverend Albert Morgan."

He motioned towards Simmons, "Reverend, this is John Simmons. He's down from Charleston doing surveys for the Parks Department. Right now he's surveying my daughter."

Louis and Jack cracked up, again.

Simmons stood up and offered a hand to Albert.

"Just ignore these two jokers," he said. "...seems they've got nothing better to do than rag on poor, defenseless, strangers."

He shook Albert's hand, and added, "It's very nice to meet you, Reverend."

"Same here," returned Albert.

Jack spoke up, "Albert. Good to see you again, buddy. Been a while."

"Oh, hi Jack," the Reverend looked around Simmons to where Jack was sitting. "Yeah, it has."

Louis said, "Come on, sit down, Reverend. Claudia and Melanie are in the kitchen with Amanda doing whatever it is women do in the kitchen. Sorry about all the silliness. We were just giving John, here, a hard time."

Claudia appeared at the dining room entrance holding two coffee cups.

Noticing Albert, she exclaimed, "Reverend! How nice." She looked at the two cups in her hand.

"Well, this won't do, will it? Wait. Hold on just a sec, Reverend. I'll be right back."

She turned and walked back into the dining room towards the kitchen.

"Look out, guys," warned Louis. "She'll probably be back with that cart of hers stacked with God know what. Might as well sit back and get prepared"

Louis was right. A few minutes later Claudia, and her serving cart, came clattering through the dining room door.

"Coffee cakes and everything." Claudia declared, proudly. "All nice and formal. How's that?"

Melanie and Amanda came in behind her.

"Reverend. So glad you came by," Melanie greeted Albert warmly.

Amanda said, "Reverend, I've been concerned about you. You seemed upset the other day when you were over."

Albert, feeling it best not to elaborate, said, "Oh no, it was nothing. I've been meaning to come by and apologize. So," he smiled, "I apologize."

Amanda returned the smile, “Apology accepted.” Then, pointing at Claudia’s cart, said, “Now let’s have some goodies.”

She started to help Claudia serve.

Claudia protested, “Sit down, kid. You’re in my way.”

Amanda and Melanie sat down on the couch beside Louis while Claudia bent over the cart.

Again, came a knock at the front door.

Claudia straighten up, chuckled, and said, “Gonna need more chairs.”

“I’ll get the door,” said Amanda, getting up and going out to the foyer.

The sound of the door opening, a few muffled greetings, and she emerged from the foyer wearing a huge smile.

“Hey, everybody. Look who’s here,” she announced, delighted at the prospect of watching Melanie and Claudia squirm as they introduced Louis, Jack, John Simmons, and the Reverend Albert Morgan – *to the devil*.

Eighty-one

“DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT,” Jilly warned. She’d caught Dread eyeing the patio door.

“Mom will skin you alive.”

Dread scowled, and flopped down in Claudia’s recliner. Being skinned alive didn’t sound very pleasant, but neither did being boiled in oil – which is, probably, what would happen when Lucy caught him out of Underworld. Not much of a choice.

Dread sat back and sulked.

It should have been so simple: a scoop, or two, of delicious cherry-vanilla ice cream, a quick dash back to Underworld, and no one would have been the wiser. If only he hadn’t been so damn curious about that stupid door in Lucy’s office. Dread cringed just thinking about it – agonizing sunlight and freezing water: run over by a crappy pickup truck, banged around, kicked in the balls and glued to the floor – he decided to sit right where he was and wait for Lucy to come and get him. No use adding ‘skinned alive’ to the list.

Joe Paul had figured out where he was. He recognized the Meljac's basement from the hot summer days when he mowed the lawn and Miz Claudia would sit with him by the patio door for a spell while he cooled off with a glass of lemonade. He was, also, pretty sure how he got here, and it was what he had been telling Wiley all along – witch work, pure and simple. You don't just pop out of somebody's backyard into somebody else's basement unless it's witch work.

Wiley's voice was almost a whisper, "I shoulda known better'n to go along with your bullshit. Look what you got us into. What're we gonna do now?"

Joe turned to Jilly with an inquiring look, and since he'd heard her back-talking the monster, his tone held a little more respect than he would have offered the average sixteen-year-old.

"Miss Jilly, do you think it'd be awright with your momma if we just headed on out, now?"

Since Melanie had told them to stay till she returned, he figured it would be a good idea to get some kind of permission before they took off.

Jilly hesitated before answering. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Uh, I don't know, Mr. Paul. I guess so – I don't know."

Joe pushed it while he had the chance.

"Well, you just tell your momma she don't have to do no explaining. Me and Wiley, here, we figure we know all we need to know bout what's going on. Ain't none of our business, anyway."

He motioned to Wiley, "Come on Wiley; best we be on our way."

He started towards the patio door, Wiley following close behind.

Jilly said, "Mr. Paul, maybe you better wait till mom..."

“Oh, don’t you worry yourself, Miz Jilly,” Joe reassured her. “We’re just fine. No reason to be bother’n yer mamma no more.”

Joe and Wiley made it out the door, across the patio and around the house before Jilly could protest further.

Eighty-two

MYRA WATCHED as Sarah pulled the big black Hummer around the corner to the front of the Meljac house. Jilly, little David, and the demon Myra had found wandering on the other side of the bridge, had walked to the house and around the side to the back patio.

Myra could see the patrol car that belonged to the Harris boy from over in Stillman parked out in front of the house. It looked like the place was full of people, or would be once Sarah Crumb and her passenger went inside. Harry Deville, Sarah had said it was. Harry Deville indeed! Mr. Lucifer the Troublemaker was more like it. Lucifer the Liar. Myra could think of a few other things more imaginative than Harry Deville to pin on the old bastard. She hoped Claudia would have enough sense to set things straight now... send Mr. Smooth Talker back where he belonged – and where he wouldn't be tellin' his sweet drippin' lies to... Her mind drifted back sixty years for just an instant.

“Harrumph” she grunted, shaking off cobwebbed memories.

Myra turned her chair around and pointed it up Stillman Road towards home. No sense going in and getting mixed up with a bunch of people. Too much explaining to do. Too many 'hellos and 'how are yous' – all that nonsense. Just go home, and hope things get back to normal.

She reached down and brushed her fingertips across the rollers of the chair – that's all it took now that her powers, as feeble as they were, were back. The chair started rolling up the road as if it had a life of its own. She'd gone only a few yards, just into the intersection far enough to see around in front of Walker's Drug Store, when she stopped the chair. Wasn't that Joe Paul's wife? – what was her name? Emma – that was it – standing in front of the Drug store with a shotgun slung over her shoulder lookin' like some bird hunter about to stroll across a field.

"Emma... Emma Paul," Myra shouted across the road, "s'that you, girl?"

Emma waved absently with her free hand. Her voice came; a listless whine.

"Oh, hey there, Miz. Hinkle. Yeah, it's me."

Myra rolled across the street and stopped at the curb in front of the drug store.

"Had any luck?" Myra inquired.

"Luck?" Emma looked puzzled

Myra pointed at the shotgun, and grinned, "Just joshin' ya, girl."

Emma caught the joke. "Oh, this," she said, indicating the gun on her shoulder. "I'm just... just..." her nose wrinkled like someone trying to think of an excuse for something.

"Personal, huh?" Myra offered, "Just walkin' around downtown in broad daylight with a shotgun for personal reasons?"

Emma's nose was still wrinkling for an excuse.

Somethin' way off kilter, here, Myra was thinking. You never saw Emma Paul out and about unless it was at the market over in Stillman, or maybe the Post Office. Even then, that worthless husband of hers would be sittin' outside in his crappy old pickup truck waitin' for her. So, standin' on the corner of Bramwell Boulevard and Stillman Road with a 12-gauge shotgun propped on her shoulder and a casual, "Yeah, it's me"... nope, not the Emma Paul Myra knew.

Emma's nose stopped twitching.

"Miz. Hinkle, you seen Joe round here anywhere?" Her voice sounded small, a little confused.

"Come over here, Emma." It was a gentle command.

Emma hesitated, then crossed the few feet to the curb.

Myra reached out, took Emma's free hand: a maternal gesture.

"Now, Girl, tell me what you're up to out here with that canon you got over your shoulder."

The truth was, Emma Paul wasn't really sure what she was doing on the corner of Bramwell Boulevard and Stillman Road with a shotgun slung over her shoulder. A few minutes ago she'd found herself standing inside Walker's Drug Store staring out the side window at a big black Hummer, her memories of the last few days more like a dream than real life, and parts of the dream were missing; notably, the parts pertaining to the shotgun. She vaguely remembered walking to town the night before, then spending the night at the Meljac's house. How she'd wound up in Mr. Walker's store, and why the hell she was carrying Joe's shotgun was a mystery.

Sleepwalking!

Could she have been sleepwalking? She'd heard tell of people walking all over the place and doing all kinds of crazy things in their sleep. Maybe that was it. She had just got right up in her sleep, gone and got Joe's shotgun, and

sleepwalked right into Mr. Walker's store with it. No other explanation; cept maybe going slap crazy. Could be, after all these years, old asshole Joe had finally drove her slap crazy. Could be she was gonna take that big ole shotgun, put it in her mouth, and just put herself out of her misery. Could be. But then again, there seemed to be something else about the shotgun that just kinda nagged at her in some way.

"Well, girl, you gonna tell old Myra what you seem so troubled about, or you gonna keep it bottled up inside till you bust?"

Emma figured she could get away with a bit of lying as long as she didn't make it too fancy.

"Oh, I ain't troubled or nothing. It's just that Joe told me to bring the gun down here to Mr. Walker. Maybe he's going huntin' or something. But Mr. Walker ain't around nowhere so I guess I'll just take it on back home. I'm just hopin' Joe won't be mad or nothin' cause I didn't find Mr. Walker."

Myra grunted and spit in the gutter; not much spit, more a gesture of contempt than a good spit.

"If that worthless husband of yours gives you any grief you just come an tell old Myra. I'll hex him up good. That'll fix his wagon."

Emma remembered her momma once telling her about old Mrs. Hinkle. Seems the old lady was one of *'them'* way back when. That being the case, it probably wouldn't hurt to do a little complaining; maybe get Joe all hexed up. Maybe he'd keel over and die or something. Wouldn't life be sweet then.

"Well, he probably ain't home, anyway," she said. "Probably over to the Stillman Bar gettin' all liquored up with that bunch over there. Won't even remember bout the gun when he finally comes home."

Curiously, when she'd thought of Joe dying, the shotgun had felt, suddenly, warm and comfortable; tingly, in her

hands, and something had begun gnawing at her... something about what she was doing before she saw the big black hummer from the side window of Louis' store... something...

Myra Hinkle had turned slightly in her chair and was looking over her shoulder, her eyes squinting.

She said, "Ain't that him and his drunken buddy comin' round the side of the Meljac place cross the street over there?"

Emma glanced up, spotted Joe – and remembered everything.

"Gottcha now, you bastard!" she exclaimed.

Eighty-three

IT WAS ALL LOUIS COULD DO to keep from wringing Amanda's neck. He could tell the mischievous little vixen was loving every second of it. Louis had put two and two together the minute Amanda introduced the pleasant looking gentleman she'd escorted into the living room along with Sarah Crumb. He didn't know whether to be scared, mad, or simply astounded at finding himself face to face with the one person he hoped he never deserved to meet – if 'person' was the right word to use for the... Louis shivered just thinking about it.

The Reverend Alfred Morgan, oblivious to the ludicrousness of the whole affair, and wearing an innocent smile, was shaking Harry Deville's hand.

"Same here," he replied to Harry's 'very nice to meet you.'

Louis felt like jumping between the two men; shouting, "*No, no, you can't.*" But... can't what? Can't meet and greet like two ordinary people? – the Reverend and the devil? – and a cordial, *nice to meet you... same here?*

Unbidden, a part of him found the humor, sardonic as it was. *Gee, Louis, just two happy fellas making new friends. Right?*

He glanced at Claudia, looking for something in her face... something... anything. Surely she wouldn't let it go on if it were really as obscene as it seemed to him. But she was smiling – more cordiality – like everything was just peachy.

Louis wondered how peachy everything would be if a crowd of demons spewed up from the basement and started frolicking and quacking around the living room.

Hey, Reverend, never mind them. They're just demons. Oh, and the big scary one is... what was his name again?... oh yeah, Dread! They belong to the guy you're shaking hands with. Have another croissant.

Amanda was saying to John Simmons, “You two have something in common. Harry is interested in the springs, too.”

Melanie almost choked. She shot out, silently, *Good God, Amanda. This is awkward enough. Knock it off.*

“Oh, really?” said Simmons, “Are you with the state, too?”

“Uh... no, uh,” Harry stuttered, caught off balance by Amanda mischievousness.

“Just as a tourist,” he recovered. “So, you're with the state?” he smiled at Simmons, joking. “Not gonna plug it up, are you?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that,” Simmons smiled back. “Just a statistical study.” He gave the short version of his work with the Parks Department.

When he finished, the Reverend spoke up, “Mr. Simmons,” he glanced at Harry to include him, “Mr. Deville, I hope you gentlemen will be with us for a while. I'd love to see you both at services this Sunday.”

John Simmons, not noticing the odd silence that suddenly filled the room, or the fact that Louis almost spilled his coffee in his lap, said, “Thanks for the invitation, Reverend.

I look forward to it. I'm not sure I'll be here this Sunday, but I certainly plan to be back in the near future."

Amanda decided she'd caused enough mayhem, and as the Reverend turned to Harry for his response, she quickly jumped in.

"I don't think Harry will be around very long."

She added, with a slight emphasis, "Will you, Harry."

"I, uh," Harry sensed the tension in the room but was at a loss as to why everyone was so uptight. The fact that he was having a conversation with an ecclesiastic didn't seem so strange to him. After all, he and the Reverend were in the same business, so to speak. Although, he wasn't sure the Reverend would see it that way.

"Right," he answered. "Just dropped by to say hi," and not being able to resist a little dig of his own, "on my way south."

Aside from the initial cordialities, Sarah hadn't spoken since she and Harry arrived. She wasn't sure how much Louis, or Jack Harris knew about Harry, but was positive the newcomer, Simmons, and of course the Reverend, had no idea whose company they were enjoying. One thing she was certain of, Harry's cavalier attitude would, eventually, turn things weird if she let him keep talking.

She said, "Claudia, we just came by to pick up those things from downstairs. Do you mind?" She had sensed the presence of the demons in the basement.

"What things?" It took Claudia a second to catch on.

"Oh, right. That... uh, stuff."

Sarah had stood up, motioning with an almost imperceptible frown for Harry to do the same.

No one heard Emma Paul exclaim from across the street, "*Gottcha now, you bastard!*" But, they heard what Emma did next.

Louis jumped up, and rushed towards the front door.

“Damn that girl. She’s gonna kill somebody with that thing!”

Eighty-four

JOE AND WILEY DUCKED.

“Shit, Joe! Your wife’s gone crazy as hell!”

Joe raised up, cautiously.

“Emma!” he shouted across the intersection. “It’s me, darlin!”

The next shot came so close he felt the breeze as the double-ought buckshot whizzed by. Emma’s aim had improved, somewhat.

Both men got the hint and dove into the azaleas beside the house.

Huddling in the bushes, Wiley observed, wryly, “You know what, Joe? From the looks of things, I’m thinkin’ she knows damn well it’s you. Maybe she done had enough of yer bullshit and decided to blast some buckshot up yer sorry ass.”

“That ain’t it, Wiley. Poor girl’s just confused, that’s all.”

On the other side of the intersection, Myra Hinkle sat slumped down in her wheelchair, hands clasped over her ears. Emma had let loose with the two blasts from the big 12-gauge right over the top of Myra’s head.

“Emma Paul!” She shouted, “Girl, what the hell are you tryin’ to do? You almost blew my head off with that thing.” Emma was busy reloading her shotgun, mumbling, “*Joe... Wiley,*” as she inserted the two shells into the breach.

As Emma raised the gun towards the general direction of the Meljac house, Myra scrunched back down into her chair and covered her ears again. She barely heard Joe Paul yelling.

“Emma, them monsters is gone now, darlin’. Ain’t no reason to be shootin’ that thing no more.”

Whammm!

The concussion from the blast, so close to Myra’s head, almost shook her dentures right out of her mouth.

She shouted, “*Thop id, Eeba!*” She gummed her false teeth back in place and tried again, more clearly.

“*Stop it, Emma!*”

Emma’s shot had missed its mark by a good ten feet. She was lining up for a better one with the second barrel.

Peering down the sights, she said, casually, “Sorry bout that, Miz Hinkle. Maybe you ought to kinda move off to the side a bit till I finish up here.”

She didn’t wait for Myra to move.

Whammm!

From the other side of the intersection came, “Owww! Oh shit! God damn it, Emma. You hit me.”

As Emma broke open the breach of the shotgun to reload, Joe popped up out of the azalea bushes vigorously shaking his hand where a pellet from Emma’s last shot had nicked his thumb.

He held the hand up so Emma could see from across the road, and with a whiny shout, “Lookee what you done, girl.” Myra didn’t hear Joe’s complaint. All she could hear was the ringing in her ears, and the muffled sound of Emma Paul humming a happy tune.

Joe, taking advantage of the time it would take Emma to reload, scrambled from the azaleas and sprinted across the intersection, hoping to get to Emma before she had time for another shot.

He didn't quite make it.

With less than ten feet to go, he watched in horror as Emma slammed shut the breach, raised the barrel of the big 12-gauge, and pulled the trigger. The blast from the business end of the shotgun was deafening as the gout of flame and gun smoke belched forth point blank at his chest.

Eighty-five

PATTY CLARK took the short way home from school. There was no way to shorten the walk up the Stillman side of Bramwell Mountain, but once you reached the top you could get creative. If you were careful, and brave enough, you could almost run straight down the nearly vertical side of the mountain and right down into Bramwell – or more like slide down, swinging from sapling to sapling like a monkey swinging through the trees.

Once at the bottom, you could run along the side of the river a short ways to the bridge, scramble up the bank, and you're there. A little scruffy on shoes and clothes, but a lot shorter than the winding road from the top of the mountain – more fun, too. She and Jilly had done it a hundred times; of course, not when David was with them. The little creep would probably loose it, roll down the mountain, and break his neck.

But this time, it wasn't fun that spurred Patty to get down the mountain and across the bridge as fast as she could; it was what sounded like gunshots coming from somewhere in

town. It never occurred to her that running *towards* the sound of gunshots might not be the best idea.

Patty made the last swing from the last sapling without mishap. She ran along the sloping bank of the river, reached the bridge, and climbed up the bank to the road. As she turned to jog across the bridge, the scene on the Bramwell side of the river, framed by the structure of the old bridge, caused her to stop. Her gaze followed the road across the bridge, past Mr. Walker's drug store, and to the intersection of the Boulevard and Stillman Road.

Was that old Mrs. Hinkle in her wheelchair – with her hands covering her ears – and Emma Paul with a shotgun? No way! Mrs. Paul wouldn't be shooting a shotgun in town, would she?

That was the moment Joe Paul decided to be a hero. From where she stood, two hundred feet away, Patty watched, aghast, as Joe sprang from the bushes beside the Meljac house and rushed across the intersection, his arms reaching out in front of him as Emma Paul slowly, deliberately, raised the barrel of the big black shotgun, and loosed a hellish burst of red flame directly into her husband's chest.

Eighty-six

LOUIS JERKED OPEN THE FRONT DOOR and rushed out onto the porch. Spotting Emma Paul at the far corner of the intersection with a shotgun pointed towards the house, he uttered a startled, "*Whoa*," did a quick about face, and jumped back through the door; colliding with everyone else who had crowded into the foyer to see what was going on.

"Jesus, she's at it again," he declared, turning back for a more cautious peek outside.

From behind him came Claudia's voice, "For God's sakes, Louis, be careful. What's going on out there?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute," Louis answered, poking his head out for a quick look.

Jack Harris spoke up, "Lewis, I need you to come inside, and let me handle this. Please, just shut the door. I'll go out the back way and check it out."

Simmons said, "You want me to go with you, Jack? Maybe I can help distract her."
Jack had already turned to go.

Over his shoulder he said, “I don’t think so. I’d better keep it professional. If I let a civilian get shot I’ll be cleaning toilets at the station house for the next ten years.”

Amanda had rushed back into the living room, and was looking out the window.

She said, “Jack’s right, guys. You’d better let him handle it. I can see Emma from here, and she’s pointing that thing right at the house.”

Except for Jack, who was headed towards the kitchen and the back door, everyone came back to the living room and joined Amanda at the front window. Amanda wasn’t too happy about Jack going outside while Emma was waving her shotgun around. She covered her concern with a joke.

“Hey Jack, toss me your gun. I think I can pick her off from here.”

But, Jack had already reached the kitchen, and didn’t hear the nervousness in her voice.

Louis stepped back from the window.

“The veranda,” he said, nodding towards the dining room.

He, and John Simmons, headed for the dining room for a look out the veranda’s glass doors. Amanda, Claudia, and Reverend Morgan stayed by the living room window. Melanie was nowhere in sight. At hearing the first gunshot from outside, she had hurried to the basement to check on the kids. In all the excitement, no one had noticed that Harry Deville and Sarah Crumb had followed her.

Amanda was leaning towards the window for a better look. Suddenly, she straightened up.

“*Patty!*” she cried. “...from school!”

Her voice was frantic.

“Patty’s out there – coming over the bridge!”

Across Meljac Lane, beyond the Stillman Road side of the Crumb house, the far end of the Bramwell Bridge could just barely be seen from the window. Amanda was freaking out.

Eight-seven

WHEN JACK SAID he would go out the back way, everyone assumed he would go through the rear door of the kitchen, and down the outside stairs to the patio. From the edge of the patio you could cross the few feet of lawn, and walk up the bank to the road. Since Emma's attention, and her shotgun, seemed to be focused towards Meljac Lane, and the front of the Meljac house, Jack could approach the intersection, and Emma, from Stillman Road instead of head on.

But, that's not what Officer Jack Harris did. Noticing the door to the basement stairs was ajar; he decided it might be a good idea to take that route instead. Melanie and the kids were in the basement, and on his way out he could advise them to stay inside. With that in mind, he rushed through the door and hurried down the stairs.

Most Police Manuals don't list procedures for dealing with Keepers of Unspeakable Archives, or even your average, garden-variety demon for that matter. So when Jack reached the bottom of the stairs, and came face to face with

Dread, Quackrak, and the crew from hell, he was forced to improvise.

In the basement, Harry was about to blow a gasket. He stood in the middle of the floor ranting at Dread and the demons.

“Idiots!” he shouted. “What were you thinking? Do you have any idea what could happen if people...”

“Oh, calm down, Harry,” Sarah Crumb interrupted his tirade. “You’re gonna give yourself a heart...” she stopped, then sniggered, “Do you even have a heart, Harry?”

Dread, his fear of being boiled in oil dampening his menacing appearance considerably, stood behind Melanie, using her as a buffer between himself and Harry’s anger.

He said to her, pleading, “Please, just tell him we haven’t done anything wrong. At least I haven’t. I can’t speak for *those* freaks.” He indicated Quackrak and the others, disdainfully.

Melanie wasn’t sympathetic.

“You call picking people up by the neck and dangling them off the ground, nothing?” she said.

Quackrak, watching the exchange, chuckled, enjoying Dread’s discomfort; though his own predicament wasn’t much better.

Everyone turned at the astonished cry from the bottom of the stairs where Jack Harris had just caught sight of what was going on in the basement.

“*Jesus H Christ!*”

The big cop stood there, dumbstruck, his face pale, a chalk-white contrast to his dark blue uniform. Like Louis, and everyone else in the valley, he was seldom surprised at the occasional oddness where *the women* were concerned – but he was now. Instinctively, his hand went to his gun.

Dread tensed, threateningly.

Melanie gave Dread a warning look, and growled, “Don’t!”

To Jack, she said, “It’s okay. Don’t freak out, Jack.” She wanted to laugh at the expression on his face, but didn’t think he would appreciate it in his present state.

She glanced back at Dread. “Go sit down,” Dread scowled, but not wanting to antagonize Melanie – he still hoped she would intervene with Lucifer on his behalf – he flopped down in the recliner, grumbling to himself and eyeing Jack, suspiciously.

Harry frowned, saying with a disgusted tone, “Oh, that’s just great. “You’ve got more control over him than *I* do.”

Aside from Jilly, sitting in a chair watching expectantly, wondering what was going to happen next, the only ones in the room taking everything in stride were David, and the little red-crayon drooling demon. They were on the floor huddled over a new drawing.

David looked up at Melanie, his voice all innocence.

“Mom, when they go home, can I keep this one?” He nodded towards his new friend.

“*Oh, Yes!*” exclaimed Harry, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“*Yes!* Of course you can keep that one. How about you, Sarah? You want one, too? And Melanie – no doubt you’ll want me to leave Dread with you, right? Hey, I got an idea. Everybody wait right here. I’ll run down to hell and bring back some more. There’s enough for everybody.”

Harry ran out of steam and sighed dramatically.

“Are you through, now, Harry?” Sarah was facing him, arms crossed on her chest, tapping her foot on the floor like a chastising schoolteacher.

This time Harry’s sigh was apologetic rather than frustrated.

He said, “All right, I’m sorry.” He looked around the room. “Everybody, I’m sorry. It’s just that...”

“*Yoo boo... bello!*” came loudly from an astonished Jack Harris, who still stood frozen at the bottom of the stairway.

“Oh... uh, Jack,” Melanie turned her attention back to Harris.

“...n..never mind,” Harris stuttered, “Just... never... mind.”

His face had gained some color, but he still looked stunned. He began edging his way along the wall towards the patio door, his eyes not leaving Dread.

Harry tried a lame attempt to help. “Mr. Harris, these are,” he made a sweeping gesture at Dread and the demons, “... uh, mine. Exotic pets, and...”

Harris wasn’t buying it. “Never mind,” he repeated, shaking his head. “I gotta go... gotta tend to Emma, and... gotta go.”

He reached the door, and rushed outside.

Eighty-eight

NO WOLVES, OR BEARS, nothing dangerous like that, at least not that Myra could remember – not in Bramwell Valley. But, there were varmints galore, and in the old days, when just about everyone had a chicken coup behind the house, it wasn't uncommon to hear the sound of a shotgun in the middle of the night when a wild dog, or big ole raccoon, decided to dig its way under the wire for a midnight chicken dinner.

Once, when Myra was twelve, she'd seen a mangy gray fox chasing one of old man Meljac's turkeys right down the middle of Bramwell Boulevard in broad daylight. Karol Meljac had come running down the road after them waving his shotgun, and cussing the little gray fox for all he was worth. From the sidewalk someone had yelled, 'Shoot the little bastard, Karol.' Of course Karol wasn't about to fire off that big shotgun in the middle of town. Myra had the feeling he was waving it around more to impress the fox than anything else.

So, Myra knew about shotguns, and the long red shells packed with gunpowder and double-ought buckshot. She

was pretty sure Joe Paul did, too. But, watching him rush across the street headlong into the barrel of Emma's twelve-gauge – well, either he was just dumb or..., *or nothing*, she thought, ...*he's just dumb*.

Still, dumb, or not, ole Joe didn't deserve to have those nasty lead buckshot pellets blowing his guts out all over Stillman Road. So, Myra hitched up her shoulders, gave the subject a little concentration, and imagined that those pellets, rather than being in the red shell Emma had just loaded into to her shotgun, were safely tucked away in the pocket of her worn old cardigan.

She felt the slight droop of her sweater pocket from the sudden weight of the lead pellets an instant before Emma pulled the trigger and unleashed a burst of fire, gun smoke and paper wadding – but no buckshot – right into dumb Joe's chest.

Eighty-nine

“CHRIST, SHE SHOT HIM!” exclaimed Louis from where he stood watching through the glass panes of the veranda door.

Startled cries came from the living room. Louis thought he heard the sound of the front door being flung opened.

Beside him, John Simmons gasped, “My God! We should, uh – ambulance! Louis, where’s the phone?” He had already turned to go make the call.

“Wait,” said Louis.

“Wait, a minute,” he repeated. “What the hell?” His voice rose in disbelief. “She missed him. How could she miss him? He was right in front of her.”

Across the intersection, Joe Paul was hopping up and down in the middle of the street, slapping at the front of his smoking shirt and screeching at the top of his lungs.

“Damn... damn... damn... Emma!”

Emma had dropped the shotgun and was standing on the curb with both hands covering her open mouth as though she’d just realized she’d done something awful – or was maybe just shocked that she’d missed.

Louis opened the glass door and stepped out onto the veranda. Off to his right he could see Amanda out in the street. She had left the house and was running towards the bridge. She seemed focused on something other than Emma and Joe Paul.

As Louis started across the veranda, Wiley Curtis popped up out of the azaleas beside the house. Surprised, Louis stopped short.

“Wiley, what in God 's name are you...? *Umph!*”

He grunted as John Simmons bumped into him from behind.

“Oh, sorry, Louis,” Simmons apologized.

Wiley was standing in the azaleas waving his arms up and down.

“She shot him!” he ranted. “Did you see that” She shot him with that shotgun!”

Louis said, “Calm down, Wiley. He doesn't look like he's hurt. What are you doing crawling around in the bushes, anyway?”

Wiley pointed at Emma. “Hidin' – hidin' from her.”

Louis tried again, “Wiley, what the hell is going on? What are you guys doing around here? And why is Emma shooting at Joe?”

“We weren't doing nothin,” proclaimed Wiley, innocently. “We was just walkin' around, and Emma pops up and starts shootin.”

Louis glanced across the street. Joe Paul had finished slapping at his shirt, apparently satisfied that he hadn't sustained any damage. He'd jumped up on the curb, and was hugging Emma.

Still under the impression that his wife was 'just a little confused' from her confrontation with monsters, Joe patted her on the head and cooed, “It's awright Emma, darlin'.

Them monsters is gone, and old Joe's here to take care of ya, now.”

The fact that Emma hung rather disinterestedly in his arms seemed to have escaped his notice.

Jack Harris, still a little dazed from his experience in the Meljac's basement, had finally reached the scene and was standing on the sidewalk beside Joe and Emma. Seeing that Joe had Emma under control, he retrieved the shotgun from where Emma had dropped it, and as a precaution, opened the breach and ejected the spent shells.

For the moment, he just stood there on the sidewalk, unsure what to do about the situation. Arresting Emma Paul was the last thing he wanted to do, and from what he'd seen in the Meljac's basement, he thought he had a pretty good idea why Emma had flipped out.

He said, “Joe, why don't you take Emma home. I'll do what I can to smooth all this over, that is, if there aren't any complaints from anyone. I'm going to hold onto this shotgun. When you want it back you can come over to the station in Stillman and pick it up.”

“Yep,” said Joe, still cooing at Emma. “We just gonna go on home now, darlin'. You'll feel better after you fix me some dinner before I go on over to the Stillman Bar.”

Without commenting to Jack, he took Emma by the arm.

“Come on, darlin. Let's go,” he said, starting with her towards West Stillman Road.

Emma didn't object, but Jack thought he detected a reluctant frown on her face as they walked away.

From where she sat in her wheelchair, Myra Hinkle said, with a wry smile, “Well, Jackie, boy, all's well that ends well, right?”

Jack looked down at her. “Are you all right, Mrs. Hinkle?”

“Oh, I'm just hunky-dory,” Myra answered. “Just sittin' here watchin' all the excitement.”

Jack said, “Let's just be thankful it didn't get any more exciting than it was. If that shotgun shell hadn't been a dud, I'm afraid it would have been a little more than exciting.”

“Funny how things work out, ain't it,” Myra said, then added, “Here, I got somethin' for ya. Gimme your hand.”

Jack held out his hand while Myra dug around in her sweater pocket. With a satisfied grin, she reached out and dropped something into his palm.

“There,” she said, “Well, see ya around, Jackie boy.”

Myra grasped the rollers of her wheelchair and wheeled off up Stillman Road without another word.

Jack stared at the little pile of buckshot in the palm of his hand.

“*Well, I'll be damned,*” he muttered to himself.

Ninety

CLAUDIA AND REVEREND MORGAN were waiting in the dining room when Louis and Simmons came in off the veranda.

Louis said, "Can you believe it? It was a dud. Looked like it shook Joe up a bit, but he's all right. Poor ole Jack's out there trying to figure out how to handle it. I don't think he wants to arrest Emma, but him being a cop, and Emma shooting off a gun in the middle of town – and at her husband for cryin' out loud." He chuckled at Jack's predicament.

"Well," said Reverend Morgan, "With all that's been going on – that freakish storm, and other things," he remembered his own experiences of the last few days. "I'm surprised everyone in town's not out shooting up the place." He smiled to show he was joking.

"Other things, indeed," mumbled Louis under his breath.

Out loud, he said, "I saw Amanda out in the street. She was running towards the bridge. What was that all about?"

"Patty," answered Claudia. "Amanda spotted Patty coming home from school, and she freaked out; what with that shotgun blasting away and all. I'm sure Patty would have known better than to walk into anything, but you know Amanda when it comes to her daughter. She took off out of here like the Calvary to the rescue."

“Can't blame her,” said Louis. “If Jilly had been outside, I'd have been having a fit, too. Where is she, anyway?”

“In the basement,” said Claudia, “with Melanie and Mister... uh, Deville, and Sarah.”

“You know,” observed Reverend Morgan, “I almost didn't recognize Sarah Crumb when she came in. Something is very different about her.”

Claudia nodded agreement. “Yeah. I noticed that, too. And come to think of it, what was Sarah doing with Harry? I didn't even think to ask.”

At that moment, Amanda appeared at the veranda door, a protective arm around her daughter's shoulder. Jack Harris followed them as they came into the dining room.

Patty squirmed out from under her mother's arm, and said, “Where's Jilly. She's in the basement, ain't she.”

“Patty!” admonished Amanda.

“I mean *isn't she*.” Patty frowned, embarrassed. “Jeez, mom, right in front of everybody.”

She pulled away from her mother and hurried through the dining room towards the kitchen and the basement stairs.

At mention of the basement, Jack tensed.

He said to Amanda, “Should she be going down there with those... whatever they are?”

Amanda was caught off guard. “Oh,” she uttered with raised eyebrows. “You ... you've been down there?”

Claudia caught where the conversation was going, and fearful that Simmons and the Reverend might get too curious, she jumped in.

“Ok, gang, the excitement's over. Let's get back to my cart full of goodies.”

She gave Louis a playful pat on the butt.

Louis laughed, “Hey! Watch what you're touching there, you old hussy.”

Claudia smiled, and gave Louis a push towards the living room.

“Just git. Go on, now.”

Eye contact, and the slightest little wrinkle of her forehead, alerted Louis to what she was trying to do.

“Right,” he said, taking the Reverend by the arm. “Let's get to those croissants before the coffee gets cold.”

As everyone started for the living room, Amanda hesitated.

“You all go on in. I'd better go down and check on Patty. She seems all right, but I think she got quite a jolt seeing that gun go off right at Joe Paul.”

She turned, and walked off towards the kitchen.

Ninety-one

“...FIVE, SIX,” Harry completed a quick demon head count.

Frowning at Dread, he added “...and one errant unspeakable archive keeper.”

Melanie said, “They’re all here, thanks mostly to Quackrak. Although that little one,” she nodded towards the red-crayon drooling demon, “likes to wander around a bit too much.”

She decided to give Dread a break, and not mention all the trouble he’d caused. No point to it since it was all about to be over, anyway.

Amanda came down the stairs from the kitchen.

Typically flippant, she asked “Well, is everybody ready to go to hell?”

Sarah Crumb wasn’t amused.

“Yeah,” She answered, looking at Harry, her voice sounding odd, tinged with irony.

“They’re all ready to go back to hell, aren’t you, Harry?” Not waiting for a response, she turned away, and walked out the door to the patio.

Harry stared at the patio door, baffled.

“I’d better...uh... I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, and followed Sarah out onto the patio.

Melanie, like the others, had noticed the change in Sarah, and the peculiar way she acted with Harry. She couldn’t wait to get Sarah alone, and find out what was going on.

Jilly and Patty had been strangely silent, at least for them: no giggling, none of their usual excited comments about every little occurrence.

Jilly spoke up, an uncharacteristic whine in her voice.

“Mom, is this gonna be over now? Me and Patty don’t have to do anything, do we – like put em back – like we did with Quackrak that last time – or more weird stuff?”

Melanie let the ‘*Me and Patty*’ pass. She could see her daughter was upset – not a good time for correcting grammar. Jilly and Patty were sitting on an old wicker settee. Melanie sat down between them.

Taking them both by the hand, she said, “OK, girls, let’s have it. Spill.”

Jilly sighed. “We just want things to be normal, mom. I mean nothing’s really bad or anything. It’s just... it’s just...”

Patty said, “Mrs. Meljac, it’s just that we don’t wanna be witches.”

She glanced at her mom for a reaction.

Amanda smiled. “Sweetheart, we’re not witches, we’re sorcerers.”

Jilly said, “We don’t wanna be that, either, Mrs. Clark. We don’t wanna be anything. We just wanna be normal kids like other people.”

Melanie sensed there was more going on than just bored griping.

As soothingly as she could manage, she said, “Darling, you *are* normal, just as normal as anyone in the world. But you’re not the *same* as everyone in the world. No one is.

Everyone is special, and everyone has their own special gift.”

“But, everything is so crazy.” said Patty.

Amanda knelt on the floor in front of her daughter. She reached out and cupped Patty’s chin, maternally.

“Yes baby, it’s crazy now, but trust me, all this craziness can never happen again. After tonight, things will be back to good old Bramwell boring.

Melanie said, “Tell ya what we’ll do. You girls just hang out down here for a while. Amanda and I will go upstairs and start clearing out all the company. When they’ve all left, you and Patty go over to Patty’s house for the night. Take David with you. And here’s the deal. Tomorrow morning when you wake up, everything will be back to normal. How’s that?”

Amanda reached out and pinched both girl's noses.

She said, with a grin, “We’ll do the voodoo, and there’ll be no more ghoulies in Bramwell Valley.”

Jilly and Patty giggled.

Ninety-two

THE SUN HAD GONE DOWN, the glow of the streetlamps from Stillman Road offering the only light on the patio. Sarah was sitting on a low cement bench, her back to the house. As Harry approached, she raised a hand slightly, cautioning. Without turning to face him, she spoke in a quiet voice.

“Don’t, Harry. Don’t say anything. Just let me talk.”

Harry started to say something, decided against it then sat down beside her in silence.

Sarah sat still for a moment, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes focused somewhere in the darkness beyond edge of the flagstones.

“Harry,” she began, “I...”

She paused for a moment, then, “I just...”

Another moment passed as she tried to gather her thoughts.

Harry said, “Sarah, I think I know what you’re...”

Suddenly, Sarah stood, and turned to face him.

“Harry, you really need to just shut the hell up and listen, ya hear! This is hard. This is really hard. You have no idea...” Her voice trailed off. She stood for a few seconds, her eyes

closed, then sat back down on the bench. She studied the flagstones at her feet without speaking.

A car went by on Stillman Road; the sound of its passing seemed loud in the quiet night.

Harry ventured, carefully, "Can I talk now?"

Sarah sighed, then raised her head and looked at him with a sad smile.

"Yeah, Harry. You can talk now."

Harry said, softly, "I started to say, I know how you feel, but I guess I don't; not really. I don't even know how I feel. I mean, just imagine, Sarah, in all eternity; I don't mean in a normal lifetime, I mean in all *eternity*, I've never been in love with a woman. And now..."

Sarah bristled, "And now, what, Harry? How about Myra Hinkle, huh?"

Harry laughed, "Sarah, look at me..."

She turned away in a huff.

"Come on, Sarah, look at me," he said, still a little laugh in his voice.

Sarah refused to turn around.

She mumbled, pouting, "You better stop that damned laughing before I turn you into a goat."

Harry took her by the shoulders and forced her around to face him. She offered only token resistance, then gave up and leaned into his arms.

"Nothing, Sarah. It was nothing," he said, tenderly. "Flirting... just flirting, playing... nothing."

Another car passed on Stillman Road. A dog barked somewhere in the distance. They sat for a while in each other's arms, unspeaking. Then Sarah looked up into Harry's face. A tear on her cheek sparkled in the glow of the streetlamps.

"Harry," she whispered.

"Hmm?"

“In the coming years, when you pop out on your rock at the springs...”

Another tear appeared on her cheek.

“...if I dance naked around a fire... will you flirt with me?”

Ninety-three

REVEREND MORGAN decided not to pursue his suspicions about the women being involved in the strange occurrences of the last few days. Except for Emma Paul's adventures with a shotgun, everything seemed reasonably normal at the Meljac house. The gathering of friends was as common as any he'd ever attended, and he'd especially enjoyed meeting the newcomers, John Simmons and Harry Deville.

Everyone was leaving, and Claudia was walking Albert to the front door.

"Albert, I've got a big ole goose in the freezer. How about coming down for dinner after services, Sunday?"

"Wonderful," said Albert, then grinning, he added, "Goose is good."

Claudia laughed. "Darn right it is. Okay, I'll expect you."

On the front porch, Melanie and John Simmons were saying goodnight. As Albert emerged from the foyer, Simmons said, "It was nice meeting you Reverend. I should be back in a few weeks and I look forward to attending your services."

Albert smiled. "Great. I look forward to having you. Oh, and Melanie, please tell Mr. Deville that it was a pleasure to meet him."

"I will, Reverend. See you Sunday for dinner, right?"

"Looking forward to it," said Albert, as he went down the steps to the walkway.

At the sidewalk he passed by Amanda, who was standing beside the sheriff's car saying goodbye to Jack Harris.

Amanda said, "Goodnight Reverend," as he passed.

Albert nodded. "Goodnight Amanda. You too, Jack"

Albert took his time walking home. It was a beautiful spring night, and there was no doubt in his mind that his little town of Bramwell, West Virginia was as normal as could be.

In the basement of the Meljac house, everything was, under the circumstances, as normal as could be expected.

Having cleared the house of company, Melanie, Claudia and Amanda had come downstairs, and were preparing to send Harry and his crew back to where they belonged. Sarah had stayed on the patio. She had already said her goodbyes to Harry and didn't want to face the reality of him leaving.

"Whadaya think, Harry," said Claudia. "How do you want to do this? A simple abracadabra and a puff of smoke, or do you want us to all go traipsing up to the springs and make a big deal out of it?"

"Quackrak looked at Harry, imploringly, "Can we please make it simple? I would really just like to go home."

"All right, no big deal, then," answered Harry. Then glancing at Claudia, he chuckled. "And no puff of smoke needed."

Melanie said, "Well, Harry, I hope you've learned a lesson from all this. No more wandering off to Ft. Lauderdale, okay?"

Amanda directed a frown towards Dread and the other demons and added, "And when you come out for your monthly visit, for God's sake shut the door after you."

"Sorry about that," Harry said, with an embarrassed smile. He gestured for all the demons, and Dread, to gather round.

"All right, guys, we're outa here."

"See ya around, Harry," said Claudia.

"Bye, Harry," from Melanie.

"And don't forget about closing that..." Amanda started to say, but realized she, Melanie and Claudia were alone in the basement.

Ninety-four

LUCIFER STOOD IN THE BRIGHTLY LIT HALL in front of the door to Underworld.

“No way,” he said, “I’m not coming in there. It stinks.”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Dread from just inside the door. “And it’s dark, and damp...” he turned slightly, and held up a hand, indicating the interior of Underworld, “...just disgusting.”

“Of course it is,” said Lucifer, “It’s Underworld, for cryin’ out loud. It’s supposed to be that way.”

“Why?” demanded Dread, “Why do I have to live in these conditions? Quackrak doesn’t. I didn’t see anybody up there in the real world who does, and that’s where these nasty souls come from in the first place. So why am I gettin’ the raw end of the deal?”

Lucifer gave Dread a sympathetic smile.

“I don’t know, Dread. Look, just hang in there for a while, and I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

Dread begged, “Please. Just try to hurry it up. I can’t stand this much longer.”

“I’ll get right on it. I promise,” Lucifer assured him, trying to make his smile a little more encouraging.

After checking on Quackrak, and grabbing a sandwich from the cafeteria, Lucifer went back to his office and sat down at his desk. The computer screen was flashing, ‘You’ve Got Mail.’

He reached for the mouse, placed the pointer on the mail icon, and clicked.

From: sarahcrumb@adv.com

Hi, Harry

Sorry it took so long for me to write, but it was, literally, hell trying to find your email address.

Gee, I don’t know where to start. So much has happened since last year. I’m sure the others told you why I never came back to the springs during full moons. I just couldn’t bear it. Besides, they don’t need me anymore now that you realize you can never really leave.

Aubrey and I have bought a beautiful house on the beach in Ft. Lauderdale. It’s not too far from the Crystal Sands Hotel, and those wonderful memories. You should see Aubrey. Wow, has she blossomed. I miss Bramwell something terrible, but getting away from the mindset that Aubrey and I had there, well, it’s done wonders for both of us. Aubrey is actually dating someone. Can you believe it? As for me, I’m just not ready for that yet. I guess I’ve still got a little of the devil in me... haha.

Anyway, enough about me. I was amazed to hear about Melanie and that guy from Charleston. Boy, that was fast. I only met the guy once, but knowing Melanie, he must be really nice. I’m sure they will be very happy.

Of course, the news about Jack Harris and Amanda was not at all surprising. That was a long time coming, but inevitable. Everyone knew they'd get together, eventually.

I was so sorry to hear about Joe Paul. His wife must be devastated. I can't imagine how he mistook rat poison for sugar.

Oh, guess what. I bought that Hummer. I thought you'd get a kick out of that.

Well, that's all for now. I'll write more often now that I've found your email address.

Love, Sarah

P.S. I miss you, Harry. You'll never know how much.

