

Chapter Two



Scott Saunders arrived home, as usual, to an empty house. He put on the television without checking what was on and went to the phone to call Jason.

The phone rang at the Lawson house a dozen times before he gave up. School had been such a dead waste that day he had really been looking forward to doing something with Jason. Why hadn't Jason waited after school for him as usual? Oh well, he probably had something on and just forgot to mention it.

Something niggled at Scott, but he couldn't put his finger on anything that might be bothering him. Just another day at school. Just another day in Mr. Sterling's home room, just another day when spring and the outdoors called and learning didn't. And now, without Jason, there would be no after-school basketball, or road hockey. He might as well just turn on the TV or fire up the Playstation.

He ran himself a glass of water from the tap and was trying to figure out what he should do to still his afternoon munchies when he heard the noise upstairs. He froze. Then, quietly as possible, he edged toward the stairs. There, he noticed a shimmer of glass powdering the hall carpet. He bent and stretched out a finger cautiously.

A prickle in the back of his neck was all the warning he got; so much for a guy's senses being sharpened by hunger. Something pressed into the tender skin of his throat, and all bets were off. Someone had broken into his house.

A sweet, low voice murmured into his ear. "Hello, my little lad. Let's keep this civil, shall we?"

Scott took a couple of difficult breaths, perched half on his heels with his arms stuck straight out at his sides, trying to square the voice with the situation. *A girl* had broken into his house? "You got a knife?" he managed at last, barely a whisper. His imagination was working perversely, picturing his throat slit and words emerging only as a wheeze.

She laughed, the sound miraculously musical. "That *was* a stupid question. I hope you can be more entertaining than that. We have a long way to go."

Scott felt slow and stupid. His limbs were all frozen in their awkward positions as if this Medusa had turned him to stone without so much a look at her face. Theft he could conceive of, but this was kidnaping? She was right, though, the question he had asked was stupid. It was obviously some kind of knife pressing on his esophagus, and her hands felt steady and sure, one holding the blade and the other digging into his shoulder to pull him tighter against it.

Too late, just as he had tried to slide down through her arms to attempt an escape, he remembered the noise upstairs. The girl dropped him as quickly as she had captured him originally and he ran, straight into a huge, bulky figure who had appeared from the stairwell.

Scott swerved and tried to keep his feet, but crashed into the wall instead and found himself suddenly juggling one of his mother's small prints of Degas dancers. The girl was in front of him instantly, the knife he'd now had time to register as a long tapered stiletto again at his throat. This

time, she let her companion pinion him while she tickled the point of the blade between the tendons of his neck.

“Don’t, Mr. Saunders,” she told him.

Scott, able for the first time to examine his attacker, took in her dark hair and eyes with confusion. She looked not much older than Jason’s sister Sarah, which would make her maybe seventeen or eighteen. Her black hair, obviously long and wavy, was piled in an elaborate series of pins and combs into a complex style on top of her head. She had a broad mouth, twisted now into a thoroughly unpleasant expression of curious contemplation. Scott felt the air leave his lungs. This was not natural. For one thing, she was, he was sure, no thief.

For one thing, she was not dressed like a criminal. Her clothing was as elaborate as her hair, soft brushed velvets in deep rich colors and black and gold braid. She looked like a gypsy: full sleeves, a vest, and a voluminous skirt slit up both sides to reveal red leggings that were the only practical part of her outfit. She watched him taking stock with obvious amusement. When he at last met her eyes, her mouth turned down and her expression hardened.

“Get him to the car,” she said, her eyes still on Scott’s. The hands pinning his arms tightened.

The doorbell sounded, and Scott’s muscles relaxed spasmodically, as loose now as they had previously been tight. The girl’s head whipped around to follow the sound, a murderous look replacing her previous expression. “Hide him,” she said, then paused, tense and considering. “On second thought,” she said, “get rid of whoever it is. And no tricks, because we can kill them as easily as you. Don’t get blood on your hands, my chicken.”

The realization came to Scott that these last comments were directed to him, and the point was made even more clear as the hands at last released him. He staggered away from the intruders, down the hall toward the door, never turning away from them. His second assailant was as different from the girl as he could imagine. He could hardly believe she was female, although that at least was obvious. She was massive, broad like a bodybuilder, her face a mass of folds and wrinkles. Her hair was short cropped and grey, and her eyes were completely empty. She wore what he could only think of as a uniform, in green so dark it was nearly black.

“Go on,” hissed the girl, and smiled like a viper.

Scott stumbled to the door and composed himself. What could he do to warn whoever it was? He would never forgive himself if he endangered someone else to save himself.

Slowly, he opened the door.

A heavy police officer, a good half-head taller than he was, looked up from the notepad in his meaty hand. “Mr. Saunders?” he asked.

Stupidly, Scott shook his head. “I’m his son, Scott.”

“I understand,” said the officer, smiling. “We had a report from one of your neighbors about half an hour ago that someone was lurking in your backyard.”

“Oh?” Scott sounded unconvincing to himself. The policeman would have to know something was wrong.

“Nothing strange going on?”

Scott shook his head, pleading silently. “Nothing at all. I just got home.”

The officer craned his neck to view the hallway behind Scott. “Do you mind if I take a look around?”

Warning bells went off in Scott’s head. Which would the girl consider the most threatening, to brush the cop off and risk tipping him to the situation, or to let him in and trust that she could stay out of his way? “Sure,” Scott heard himself say, and the die was cast, for better or worse.

The policeman proceeded him down the hall as Scott trailed after, thinking how this would

be the ideal moment to make a run for it, if it wouldn't almost necessarily condemn the other man to the girl's mercy. Too late, he remembered the glass on the carpet.

The big woman came out of her hiding place with a suddenness that shocked even Scott, who knew she was there. The reaction of the policeman was something even worse, and he was unable to even to grasp his holster before the woman had him in a vice grip with one thick arm pinning his hands to his sides and the other wrenching his head back. Then the girl swung out, light on her feet, the blade of her knife flashing. She cut cleanly across the officer's skin, dancing away again as the surprising gout of blood rose from the policeman's throat. Scott dropped to his knees, his empty stomach heaving and only clear bile coming up.

He heard the policeman's body hit the carpet, and then the large woman was turning her attentions to him. She hauled him to his feet, twisting one wrist behind him to immobilize him. There was even less gentleness this time. Someone was babbling, the words all spitty and barely voiced, and he realized it was himself. "Sorry – sorry – didn't mean – he wanted – would be too suspicious. . ."

Astoundingly, when the girl moved in close to him, her lips breathing warmly into his ear, she was purring. "I know, baby," she whispered. "It was just bad timing. Nothing you could have done. Now, let's all be calm and nothing else will go wrong."

They left through the back door, a more civilized method than the way the two women had entered, judging by the shattered living room window. The taste of bile lingered in Scott's mouth. The pain in his arm was a steady thing, almost forgotten by the time they reached the edge of the garden and the upper end of the Saunders' driveway. The garage door was up, and through the gloom inside, Scott made out a sleek black car, maybe a Rolls. "We're travelling in style," said the girl, smiling broadly at his growing confusion. "Poor baby. Hold out your hands."

His captor released his arms, and Scott obediently did as he was told. If he'd had any doubts about the murderous potential of this girl, the events inside had certainly cured him. She took a piece of thick wire out of some fold of her clothing and bound his wrists together. "I'll have to blindfold you too," she told him, and pushed him into the back seat of the car.

The bulky woman moved into the driver's seat, and placed a chauffeur's hat on her head at an inappropriately jaunty angle. Then darkness descended on him as the girl lowered a strip of something cloyingly warm over his eyes. She bound it at the back of his head, and the car lurched backwards. They, to whatever unknown destination, were on their way. And Scott Saunders, thirteen years old and mortally afraid for the first time in his short life, realized he had no memories between about two o'clock that afternoon, and arriving home. Another wave of fear washed over him. If this was what was happening to him, what about the rest of the kids at school? What about Jason?

Then, "Go to sleep," said the girl. "We'll pick the father up and head for the house." And Scott heard and saw nothing more.



Aaron Scribner was reading, pushing his glasses up his nose, unaware that he, like Scott Saunders, had no memory of the events of the afternoon. Beside him on the table was a glass of lemonade. He reached for it and toppled it onto the carpet. "Damnation," he mouthed and set the glass up again before all was spilt. Quickly, hoping his mother hadn't twigged, he ran to the bathroom for the roll of paper towels under the sink. But when he returned to the living room, Mrs. Scribner was already standing over the spill.

Neither of them said anything. Aaron bent to his hands and knees and wadded a bunch of

towels to sponge up the lemonade. He tossed the first wet handful onto the teak end table and tore more off the roll. Mrs. Scribner collected the damp paper before it could do any damage and smiled, shaking her head. Aaron looked up at her.

“You could help, you know.”

“I’m not so sure,” she replied, “since it gives me a perfect excuse to discipline you. Coincidentally, I need some things from the mall. I wouldn’t want to become an accessory.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

“Get a little fresh air, sonny boy. Disappearing into a book for hours at a time is fine for a relic like your father, but why don’t you aim to end up healthy instead of an aging, myopic, failed radical like him?”

Aaron tried to think of a reply, but as usual, his mother beat him to the punch. She reached into the pocket of her omnipresent brown cardigan and pulled out a shopping list and a wad of bills. Miles ahead of him, of course. She kissed him on the forehead.

“Thank you, my best boy.”

“Your only boy,” Aaron reminded her, and marked his place in *Economic Upsets in Post-War Britain* as she disappeared again into the bowels of the house calling, “Enjoy yourself” over her shoulder.

Going into the garage, Aaron unchained his bike. Something nagged at him, but he was slow to put his finger on it. He tucked a pant-leg into one sock, and only then wondered why his dog wasn’t barking. She usually set up a howl the moment she heard someone enter the garage from the house.

He left the bike where it was and stepped out the side door to investigate.

Still no sound from the back yard, when Heidigger should have been barking her head off. He was moving to check on her when a person stepped out of the shrubbery ahead of him.

“Geez,” Aaron said, startled. “You scared the heck out of me.”

The man was in his early twenties, Aaron guessed, dark haired and immaculately dressed in a crisp black suit and a white shirt with its collar loosened. He smiled apologetically. “Excuse me. I’m looking for Professor Scribner’s house.”

“Which one?” asked Aaron, laughing, at ease again. “If it’s my mom, then you’re in luck. My dad’s still at school.” It had to be one of his dad’s crazy politics students; that was much more likely than imagining one of his mother’s economics students had showed up at the house.

“Then you’d be Aaron.” The young man sounded very sure. He took a step closer to the boy. “About your dog – we really couldn’t take any chances. I’m actually very sorry.” Two other men came around the side of the garage then, one from the direction of the road and the other from the back yard.

“Is there something wrong?” Aaron was off balance. Sometimes one student would arrive at the house for extra help, or one of his dad’s famous verbal boxing matches, but the other two looked a bit old to be attending University. They all looked a bit formal to be students in any case, dressed in matching dark outfits. And what about Heidigger? “What is this?”

He began to back away, but they were quicker than him. Why should he have been in any state of readiness, to flee ten feet from his own home? One caught him around the neck and put enough pressure on his throat that he started to black out. He couldn’t, in any case, get enough air into his lungs to call out for his mother. On the third man’s hands he now saw blood.

“I’m sorry,” said the young man again. “It was necessary. We couldn’t have you alerted.” He paused long enough for Aaron to feel his head begin to spin before continuing much more softly: “You’re going to be our guest, Aaron. I’m Damon, by the way.”

They dragged Aaron, gasping, to the front of the house. The street was deserted. He begged

silently for a car, a pedestrian, any kind of intervention, divine or human. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't break the grip on him.

A car, black and expensive, sat in the drive, its motor purring quietly like a contented cat. The young man got in first, into the back seat, pulling Aaron abruptly after him. Even though there was now a respite from the hold on his throat, he was too bruised and sore to draw a breath to shout for help. The second man got in beside him and roughly forced Aaron's head down between his knees.



It might have been the vibrations of the helicopter setting down that woke me. But as I swam uneasily to a drunken consciousness, I wondered if whatever I had been forced to breathe had been meant to wear off coincidental to their arrival. I felt Jason's knees pressing heavily into my stomach; he began to stir just as I managed to pull my deadened eyelids open.

We were lying together on the floor of the helicopter on a carpet covered with a fine layer of grit and pebbles. My hands were bound in front of me, and when I was able to pull myself awkwardly up to look at Jason, I saw he was similarly constrained.

I felt awkward, embarrassed more than scared. This was the closest I'd ever been to a boy my age, and the fact I'd had no choice and had been unconscious somehow didn't make me any less shy now. *What a time to turn prude*, I admonished myself severely.

"Jay –" I whispered, and was answered by a slap which seemed to come from nowhere. Too slowly, I registered the figure bent forward in the seat next to them. Mr. Sterling, staring at me with eyes that seemed to look into the space between us as if he was somehow not resident in his own body. I raised her bound hands reflexively to my cheek, feeling the sting, and sank back down on my side to wait, studying Jason's eyelids. Behind them, his eyes moved as if he lingered in REM sleep, but I suspected he was already awake. Probably just as embarrassed as me. I didn't know if it would be worse if I found out he was liking it.

The helicopter's rotors slowed and came to rest above them. Immediately, Sterling stood, mechanically, and jerked me to my feet by the wire around my wrists. I stifled a gasp of pain, and made a surprising discovery about my teacher's apparel, something I hadn't really noted before. He was dressed, not in the casual clothes he wore at school, but formally in dark green. Neutral in its decoration but military in cut, it was obviously a uniform and not just a suit. The other men in the helicopter, the one now pulling Jason upright as well and the two pilots, were dressed the same. The pilots were both wearing aviator glasses which obscured their eyes, but I was sure that they would share the same blank look as Sterling and his compatriot.

"What the heck –" was all a groggy Jason managed before receiving a slap like I had for his trouble. He recoiled before the blow with a groan – and I felt a strange surge go through me.

It took my breath away, that slap. I looked at Jason, a new pulsing inside my skull which seemed to have far more form than a headache. I could almost trace where it had slipped through her – could have, if I'd had a finger free, pointed to the exact spot on my brain where the wave had entered, and then dissipated. Shaking my head, trying to clear it, I tried to recapture the sensation. The only way I could make sense of it was to imagine that, for a moment, what I had been directly experiencing had come from outside my own body. It was Jason's fear I had felt, the sting of Sterling's hand on Jason's cheek. I knew my eyes must be wild, because the look Jason gave me back mirrored them. I knew it, and he knew it too. His fear, his reaction to the blow, and I felt them both. My head spun.

Searching for something to center my reeling thoughts, and to break the lock between my

gaze and Jason's, I found Sterling's face and held a tenuous focus on his chin. But instead of my insides settling down, I met a wall of confused terror, strong as the panic I had experienced inside the washroom at school. The only difference was, and I had no idea why I was so sure of the distinction, that it was no longer my own emotions I was feeling. I was somehow sharing something happening inside Mr. Sterling. My world spun, and only Sterling's sudden hold on my arm stopped me from falling.

If Jason was unaware of the nature of my turmoil, when he saw me lurch he was probably attributing it to the same sense of unsteadiness he felt himself. They had drugged him, chloroformed him or something, like you only see in movies. But I could feel his attention pulling away from me, more interested in what was going on outside the helicopter than in me. And I found that through him, my focus shifted from what was happening inside myself to wondering where we'd had been taken.

I couldn't see through his eyes, or hear his thoughts. It was less specific than that. But I could sense his emotions, the curiosity that was overcoming his fear. *Thank God that guys have short attention spans.* He was saving me from my own speculations. *Being special is not what I had hoped,* I thought, and gave myself fully over to Jason's feelings, coming to me in that pulsing surety inside my skull.

It was late afternoon, by the angle of the sun. A black shadow covered half of what I could see in the view the front window offered me, cast by something outside my range of vision, although perhaps not of Jason's. In the distance, probably a good half kilometer away, I could see a two-lane paved highway, with no traffic in sight, beyond a wide margin of grass. Nearer, there was a shallow gully, which seemed to be the only interesting feature in a stretch of otherwise unrelieved gravel, separated from the field by a well-worn chain-link fence. If we could get to the fence and scale it, it would be nothing to get over that grass to the road. And if we timed it so there was a car coming. . . Somehow, I knew this analysis was more Jason's than mine, and I was glad. Being able to plan an escape, even without a clue of how to execute it, made him feel more calm.

Whatever we did, it would have to be soon, because we were on the move. Sterling lowered me by my now aching arms down to the gravel, the ground seeming to rise to meet me halfway. My balance was still off, and my vision was black-rimmed. Time was moving strangely; it seemed like an eternity since we'd landed and another while we stood there in that barren landscape, a light breeze on my face the only element of reality. If we were to get away, I would have to pull myself together, not just to be ready when Jason made his move, but to be capable of dashing after him.

It was a surreal, alien place they had brought us, and I put the clues together only slowly. Beyond the helicopter, I could make out what Jason had already seen: the fence and the distant, deserted road stretching to the horizon in each direction. Off to my left was the decrepit building which cast the shadow I had noted from inside. It stood maybe three storeys high, narrow and windowless, with enormous wheels and pulleys protruding from the top. Its use was not immediately obvious, but something clearly connected with industry, with. . . And, looking behind me, I put it together.

The flat gravel gave way to an enormous crater, wide and roughly circular, with a sloping road leading down into its depths. The shadows threw its bottom into darkness, leaving me with an impression of a possibly bottomless pit. A quarry, long deserted by the looks of it. Then the building behind her must be connected to mining in some way, an elevator, I guessed, wondering if they could be mining with a shaft and an open pit at the same time. Being able to identify the environment explained nothing. Why had they brought us here?

Sterling pulled on my arm with a jerk, directing me toward the structure. I managed to catch Jason's eye for the first time since leaving the helicopter. It was no wonder I felt so out of reality.

Just the day before, I had been mooning over this guy, hoping to spend a bit of time with him doing homework, while all the time frantically denying that I could feel anything for him at all. Now, he was wild-eyed and terse, as confused and scared as I was –

That decided me on a course of action I had not even fully thought through. I reached out for him with that strange new part of my mind, hoping to touch his fright again as I had before, to maybe find a way to send my own feelings back to comfort him with the knowledge he wasn't alone. I sensed the raw emotions steaming off him like heat radiating from a wood stove. I didn't know why I was so sure I could soothe him without even being near physically, but I wasn't surprised to feel a sensing tendril leaving me, circling toward him.

This time it was different. Without warning, I was repulsed. A gulf yawned before me as significant as the quarry behind; Jason had become a bottomless pit. All sense of his emotions was gone, and my vision went black. I stumbled, like I was falling into him, Sterling's grasp on my arm again the only thing keeping me upright. I panted, frightened and blind.

Slowly, my sight returned.

As the dark blossoms began to fade and the sunlight crept back in, Sterling's arms closed around me. I tried to jerk away, and, succeeding, fell forward onto the gravel, raking my useless hands. I looked around to see why my teacher had felt the need to grab harder hold of me, and then saw the reason. Out toward the fence, Jason was running.

I watched stunned as he left me, trying to yank myself free of Sterling who had now bent to take my arm again. None of the other three men were following Jason. *Why?*

In a day of unique and impossible experiences, the latest was by far the most frightening. Into my head came a voice, to the same place in my mind where I had first felt Jason's and then Sterling's emotions surge.

Bring Her Quickly. I Will Attend To The Boy.

I saw no one, but Sterling nodded as if he too had heard. Jason, receding, reached the fence and began to climb. Somehow, I was certain that he had not heard the voice. Sterling jerked me to my feet and, with my small honor guard, I was escorted on toward the mine building.

I lost sight of Jason immediately, and felt of my own emotions this time, a forlorn and almost paralyzing loneliness. It hadn't occurred to me to feel so hopeless when we were together, but now that he was gone, I had no strength. It was all I could do to stay upright on my feet as Sterling pulled me along.

We passed into the shadow the building. With tears suddenly threatening to spill out of the corners of my eyes, I forced myself to be angry, if only to keep my face straight. I was being stupid. It was happening, whatever it was, and it was no use panicking or losing my wits. If I was to get a break like Jason, I owed it to myself to be ready. Rallying, I found my balance at last and tugged to reposition Sterling's grip on my arm. "I can walk myself," I told him, mouth set and determined. It made me feel better to say it, although of course it changed nothing.

They led me under a sagging lintel into the gloom of the decaying tower. My eyes adjusted quickly, aided by the sunlight trickling through cracks and knotholes in the boards. Inside, the building was open to the ceiling three floors above, and packed with the machinery I'd seen protruding from the top. The building was not a straight-walled tower all the way around as I had naturally assumed. Straight ahead, the wall beyond which the quarry fell away sloped outward from just below the roof at perhaps a sixty degree angle. And this feature accommodated the base of the pulleys and the cables which ran below the slant and disappeared into a pit at the far end of the building.

An enclosed carriage hung above the platform directly below the roof, its single door open and waiting for her. *How thoughtful*, I told myself, and despite the strangeness of it, found my

mouth curling up in a grin. *Helicopters, subterranean gondolas – someone was going to a lot of trouble for me.* Despite my deep fear, I was strangely flattered. A prisoner, yes, but an important one. I shook myself, ready to laugh. It must be giddiness. That was the only explanation of the surging good humor. I tried to focus: *Jason was still outside running for his life and freedom. There had been some kind of atrocity committed in the auditorium of my school. My French teacher had gone from being a bit of a sweetheart and a definitely easy marker to a hardened, bullying automaton – or worse, a finally-revealed sociopath.* And the more I itemized, the sillier it all seemed.

I had heard a voice in my head, a voice which had to have been in my head because I had seen four men act on its instructions and a fifth person remain oblivious. I had sensed emotions transmitted through the air as easily as vibrations made waves in water. I had, in some undefinable way, changed. It was so obvious, so utterly unrefutable. Maggie Stuart had, even in a matter of hours, become something completely new. My back straightened. Whatever was coming, I was going to face it with dignity.

Sterling sat beside me with his hand resting on my shoulder through the whole harrowing journey through the darkness. The gondola lurched down its spider-slender cable, groaning and squealing as it went. But the car, although not gentle, moved quickly enough through the utter blackness of its tunnel and before I had had time to arrange my thoughts further, we had arrived at a second terminal.

The room at this end was smaller, large enough to accommodate an enormous winch and the three women in uniforms identical to Sterling's who were there to meet us. With an unjustifiable feeling of betrayal, I watched Sterling's group disappear through the room's main door as the others took charge. Finally, my hands were unbound. I rubbed the deep red welts the wire bindings had left as I was led into a smaller room off the first.

The walls of the chamber were rough, and I realized that both this room and what she could see of the corridor beyond the door were hewn out of solid rock. We were deep underground, which was unnerving enough in itself. But it didn't feel like we were in a mine. The gondola couldn't transport ore to the surface, so what had its original purpose been? Was it an abandoned mine? Or had this place been carved for some other reason? I shivered, thinking, without any reason at all, that somehow, it had all done for me.



Jason scaled the fence easily and flung himself over, barely able to catch his toes in the chain link to stop his fall. He hit the ground running, and finally allowed himself a glance back over his shoulder.

The moon landscape, with its black tower, was deserted. He slowed to a walk.

Where were his pursuers? Did no one care if he escaped? His initial elation was tempered by a suspicion he had had for a while now, since earlier that day, that Maggie Stuart somehow was the center of all the strange events he had witnessed. What contributed to the idea? It was probably enough that she had been the only one who had avoided the auditorium earlier. When he had fled from that hellish room, unable to pretend any longer that he was enchanted like the rest of the students, it had hardly triggered any surprised reaction in him that Maggie would be the one he'd barrel into in the hallway.

And so, he blamed her, for his kidnaping, for what had happened in the auditorium, for Mr. Hunt's experiments in the classroom of the night before. For his heart, beating like a bird's.

Far off, on the highway, he saw a car.

Although there was no hope of catching it before it disappeared, no chance, honestly, of

even being noticed by its occupants, he began to run.

But in his mind, there came a cold voice, so final and commanding that he ground again to a dead halt. *Stop.*

He was alone. Spinning, he scanned the horizon. “Where are you?” he whispered, his voice not obeying him. He braced himself to run again.

Don’t, Mr. Lawson. The voice came again, insistent and intensely persuasive. *You’ve Found Our Mine Field. Believe Me, You Don’t Want This To Be A Proven Fact.*

Jason found himself unsteady, his weight on one foot. He tried to right himself, but it wasn’t just his balance that was betraying him. Something was touching him, although there was no one and nothing in sight. Pressing at him, soft and smothering as a blanket. He used his arms to try to push it away, but his hands met no resistance in the air.

There was a long period of silence from the voice, and finally the probing ceased. *Well, Mr. Lawson,* it came again at last. *I Think It’s A Very Good Thing You Were Brought To Me.*

Jason knew he’d hardly have to shout to make the owner of that silky, hateful voice hear him, but he couldn’t help himself. All his tension poured out: “Screw you, man!” and he was off again.

The explosion rocked him back off his feet to the soft grass before he’d even heard it. Even when he knew what had happened, the sound echoing through his ears was more like a memory of a sonic boom than the thing himself. Dirt and sod rained down on him. He reached forward in blind panic, mouth full of soil, touching his feet, his knees.

Miraculously, everything was intact. The voice came again. *Mr. Lawson. I Must Insist You Come Back. The Next Mine May Be One You Explode, Not Me.*

Jason was screaming. He knew that now, but he couldn’t stop until his throat was sore and he began hyperventilating instead, sobbing. Through the haze surrounding his head, the massive weight on his skull, he heard the voice one more time: *Jason, Stay Very Still And Wait. We’ll Come And Get You. I Don’t Think The Highway Is Such An Urgent Goal Now, Is It?*

Disregarding the warning not to move, Jason rolled over onto his side and drew his legs into his chest. His entire body shook. And in his ears, the sound of the explosion lingered.



Jan Stuart was caught in traffic, just short of five o’clock, on Eglinton near the 401. She tapped the steering wheel with three short-bitten nails, absent in irritation. On the passenger seat sat a small white cardboard box, tied with string. Butter tarts, from Maggie’s favorite British bake shop near Jan’s office on Bathurst north. It would be a gesture, to help make peace. She knew she hadn’t been spending nearly enough time with her daughter for a very long time – the thrill of a new and long-overdue romance had not so much diverted her from attention to Maggie, but made her realize how little she had given her.

The news came on the radio, and Jan, wanting to shut the world out, hit the presets until she came up with a station still playing music.

They would order out for Chinese, she decided. It would be a treat. Butter tarts for dessert, with their almond cookies. Throw moderation to the wind. The traffic edged forward, and Jan, slow to respond, was rewarded with a honk from the car behind her.

She felt like a very bad mother. It was a feeling which had come and gone through most of Maggie’s existence, but seemed particularly acute today. So much guilt. Why couldn’t she have provided some stability, some continuity for Maggie? Friends, boyfriends, had come and gone. She was still searching herself, no idea at all what she really wanted out of life. Her job was interesting,

she supposed, but she had done nothing at all to infuse Maggie with a sense of adventure or possibility. And so her daughter spent her young life alone, nose in a book, dreaming of – dreaming of Jan couldn't guess what.

But how could Maggie ever be expected to form close friendships, when Jan kept herself so aloof? *You*, she told herself, tilting the mirror down to smooth a straight length of blond hair and the wrinkles growing around the deep-set eyes, *you are thirty-eight years old, and you've hardly lived. When were you going to start?* Maybe she and Maggie could do it together, but only if Jan could begin to build a bridge between them.

She felt better, having a goal. Of course she had to be prepared for Maggie to want to go her own way in the coming years. She was a teenager now. But maybe things would be easier for her if she knew that her mother could also be a friend.

The car behind her honked again, and Jan put the car in gear.

"Maggie," she told the traffic ahead, "I love you, sweetie." It was just fancy, of course, but she imagined she could hear Maggie's voice calling back to her.



"Maggie!" called Janice. "Marguerite! I've got a treat for you. Come down, sweetie."

Jan pulled the key out of the lock and pocket it. She flipped on the front hall light and listened carefully for any sounds of life.

After half a minute, she dropped her smile and strode business-like to the kitchen. She set the butter-tart box on the counter by the sink. It was a relief, really, when Maggie wasn't home. It could only mean she was out with a friend or two, doing something adolescent. The bedroom light she had seen driving up must have been left on that morning. Any time now, Jan would be getting a call, Maggie asking what time to be home, if there was anything planned for dinner.

Unless. Unless Maggie had come home angry, or upset, and was hiding in her room. Unless half a million things.

Jan went to the stairs, her own unease making her trot. An enormous woman, more a building than a human being, blocked her way. Another, smaller but no less threatening, stepped out from the shadows of the living room and blocked her retreat. A lamp was switched on, and by its light she saw the swarthy face of the man she had thought she was in love with thirteen years before in Paris, and then in Greece. Before he ran away, and took everything that mattered with him.

"Hello, Jan," said Nick Marino.



Not more than fifteen minutes later, Jan Stuart and Nick Marino sat in chairs, tied back to back in the upstairs walk-in closet.

Jan's jaw was set. After the initial shock, the usual anger that rose whenever she thought of her long-departed ex surged back, and she was determined not to be the one to speak first. If she did at all. What was there to say that hadn't been said through lawyers and Interpol officers, that hadn't been yelled over telephones and through crowded airports?

It was Nick eventually who broke the silence. "Maybe if we'd tried some of this kinky stuff before, we'd still be married."

For some reason, although she'd already decided to make him suffer either by silence or rage, her response matched his in tone. "Eh, you," she said, "you shutta you face." Her overdone

mimicry of his slight accent used to make him laugh. Now, the words out of her mouth, Jan regretted her familiarity. It felt like weakness.

“Does this mean we’re talking again?”

Then, old anger surged back. “Not until I get my lousy child support, you deadbeat.”

“Hey,” said Nick. “I’ve been having a bad year. Years. Whatever.”

Jan lowered her head, the cords in her neck resisting. “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

She felt Nick shift in the chair behind her. “I don’t think they’re going to kill us,” he said, slow enough for Jan to doubt the statement immediately.

Practical Jan kicked in with a short, sharp shock, as she was fond of saying at the office.

“Why don’t you give me a run-down, a precis, so I can feel as confident?”

Nick was silent for a long moment. Then, so quietly Jan wasn’t convinced she heard him right, he said, “God, I’m so sorry.”

She laughed, briefly and very strained. It was a struggle to form his name, which she hadn’t allowed herself to say in years. “Nick, what’s going on here?” And then, because the moment seemed to demand a little bit of truth, “I am scared. I am scared out of my wits.”

“Me too, Jan,” he said, her name sealing the truce between them. “Me too.”

She laughed again, nervously but easier. “Why on Earth did I ever marry you?”

“Same reason I married you, I guess.”

“Which is?”

“We’re both a little crazy.”

She didn’t reply.

“How else would we have ended up in a closet like this?” he said.

Jan’s emotions suddenly rebelled. “You tell me.”

Then she felt the fingers of his right hand brush her left. She reached back as far as she could and was just able to take his. They sat for a moment in silence, the skin of his hand warm and leathery against the callouses on her palm.

“What the hell,” said Janice. “Let’s go for broke.”

She reached her right hand back and took his left.

“Jan –” he said, but nothing else came.

“God, I’m scared,” she said at last. The almost painful extension of her arms was suddenly necessary, absolutely necessary, to stop her from cracking. His worn hands, remembered even after all this time, remembered even with fondness, were no small part of this. The truth was, he was the biggest unhealed wound of her life, the guy she’d never really stopped loving, no matter how awful and ridiculous things had become. Her parents had adored him when they’d met him – hours before the wedding on a beach in Greece. They had returned for Maggie’s birth a year later, when things were starting to fall apart, and hadn’t noticed anything was wrong. And then. . .

Harrison, thought Jan. First guy I meet that I think I might have a chance with in nearly three years, and now you wander back into my life.

But she held onto Nick’s hands with a strength born out of more than fear.

After a minute or two, Nick sighed and said, “Sorry, you know this is nice and all, but it kind of hurts.”

Janice agreed and they dropped one of the hands. With the other, there was no extra pressure, no quick squeeze of affection or recognition. She felt like she was receiving comfort from a stranger, someone who was terrified that his intentions would be misconstrued. It was so unlike him, to be cautious in matters of physical contact –

But, she caught herself. She hadn’t seen the man for years. He could have changed. He could be more responsible, more considerate. Anything was possible. There was a dangerous

respect growing in her every moment he chose not to squeeze her hand.

They were tied with some kind of nylon cord around the waist, chest, and ankles. Their arms were tied at the elbows, giving them some freedom of movement, but not enough to entertain even the hope of reaching the knots, much less untying them, which were behind Jan's right shoulder.

The door of the closet opened and their captors entered. Janice had to crane her neck uncomfortably to get a proper look at the new arrivals.

The girl inside the room looked to be in her late teens. She had dark hair and fine features, and a slim athletic frame over which she wore utterly outlandish clothes. Jan took in the velvet and elaborate, ridiculous hairstyle, and felt even more out of her mind. The second woman, the one who had tied her up and then added Nick to the deal, to his evident surprise, was dressed more functionally but no less strangely in a dark green uniform which seemed barely able to contain her enormous bulk. The young woman glanced down at Jan and Nick's joined hands.

"That's very nice," he said. Her tone was pleasant, but mocking. "I see you've settled your little differences."

Jan dropped Nick's hand. "Where's my daughter?" she hissed.

"Perfectly safe," she said. She sighed theatrically. "What a shame. I was hoping for some more small talk before getting to the meat of the matter. Ms. Stuart, your daughter is in good hands. Or at least, in closely enfolding hands, if you understand me. We have her, and your usefulness has unfortunately come to an end. We thought, Nick, we might need you for leverage with Marguerite; unfortunately for you, things are going very nicely."

"Where is she?" Jan spat.

"Aren't you the least bit worried about what's going to happen to you?" said the young woman.

"Get out of my house," Jan whispered.

"Jan," said Nick, a warning in his tone.

"Nicky, I can take care of myself," Jan shot back, which instantly started them both bickering.

The young woman had been listening intently, head cocked, as if she was getting a good deal of enjoyment out of their argument. The two fell silent.

"Excellent," said the young woman, bringing her hands together. "Fight it out. Now is a very good time to confront your demons, perhaps even make amends."

She placed his hand on the door knob. "Don't worry; you won't be uncomfortable for too much longer."

Then, turning to address her companion, the lightness dropped completely out of her voice. "Check their bindings."

She left the room without looking back.

The other woman pulled at the ropes around them, while Jan shut her eyes so she wouldn't be a willing witness to this part of the indignity. Soon, she nodded her approval to the girl who waited just outside the door, and they left, closing Jan and Nick in.

He sighed. "You know," he said. "They've been holding me prisoner for a week, and I didn't see it. They came to my flat in Paris and convinced me I wanted custody of Maggie."

"Shh," said Jan.

"Huh?"

"Listen—" she whispered. There was a dull whoomph sound. Jan closed her eyes in horror. "That's what they meant. That's what they're doing. They're setting my house on fire."

Nick listened. It was unmistakable, a faint crackle. He tried to place the sound in terms of

the house's geography.

"Can you tell where it is, from the sound?" he asked.

"Don't be stupid," she replied, her voice colorless and strained.

"Why didn't they light it in here? Why didn't they set fires all around the house?"

"They probably want to make it look like an accident," she said. "So it doesn't look like arson."

"It is arson," said Nick.

"Well, whatever. I hope I'll be around to collect the insurance if it comes out looking like an accident. I could do with the money." It was a slam, directed at him. Jan's anger was back, worse because the situation was even more hopeless now. It was impotent fury. "So, Nicky old friend, what's the plan?"

Silence. From Janice, as the crackling took on definition, "I thought you always had the answers to everything."

She started crying, quietly, the tears running down her throat and into the neck of her blouse. Because there was nothing he could think of to say, Nick stayed silent.



Scott woke to darkness, disoriented. He was in a moving car, with no memory at all of having fallen asleep. They had made one stop along the way, he remembered that. But as to how long they had stayed stationary or when they had begun again, he could recall nothing.

He opened and closed his eyes a few times with no visible effect, groggy and confused. He could feel a knee against his, and hear a soft, tuneless hum from the person who owned it, but that was all the information he had. Only slowly did he remember the events leading up to his present situation.

After blinking a dozen times, he realized his eyelashes were brushing back and forth across the velvet sash the girl had bound around his head. And beside him, well, that would be her.

"You're quite the little sneak, aren't you?" There was cold amusement in her voice. "He's been awake all this time, listening to us. How long have you been listening to us, my little worm? Were you listening when we made our little detour?"

Still sleepy, he yawned. "What?" He strained his ears for other sounds, but all he could hear was the bump of the road under the car and the low hum of the engine. "I mean, no, I didn't hear anything but what you just said. I was asleep," he finished lamely.

The girl laughed at that, pleasantly enough, he thought.

She didn't speak again for some time. There was nothing to think about, nothing to sense, but the soft brush-brush of his eyelashes, and the occasional variations in the car's motion. Eventually, in the silence, he raised his hand to the back of his head to untie the blindfold.

Before his fingers could even touch the knots, the cold steel of her knife blade was pressing into the skin under his ear.

"I'm not far away, not now, not ever," she whispered. "You just leave that alone. I'm right here." Then she laughed again, that same friendly, girlish sound. The metal slid away, the flat of the blade drawing itself crisply across his throat.

He hardly dared to breathe in the new silence. When the air began to move into his lungs again, he was light-headed. A whirring sound began, somewhere over on her side of the car. Listening, he identified it. She was sharpening her knife. *Good*, he thought, *a girl who takes better care of her cutlery than her guests.*

He rolled his neck, able to keep his hands at his sides only by a constant, conscious effort.

Everything was stiff. He closed his eyes, for the tiny comfort it gave. There was something very disconcerting about being sightless with his eyes open.

The skin of his neck prickled where the knife had rested. Pictures began to form in his mind – *she has put away the sharpener. Playing with the knife, she watches the reflections from street lamps paint the blade with streaks of red like blood. She considers the exposed neck of the boy sitting next to her, helpless and blind. . .*

Reflexively, Scott's bound hands reached his throat, fingers locked protectively. His breathing quickened. The flesh around his fingers crawled as if already sliced opened.

"You must have quite an imagination. Relax." She laughed again. "I put the knife away with the stone. Really! You don't think I'd carve you up after taking all this trouble, do you? You're of no earthly use to us gutted, you know. That's why it's good I was sent to get you instead of my dear brother. I inherited all the tact in our family."

Scott was not comforted by the notion that he might soon be meeting others with less restraint than the young woman beside him, but his breathing slowly came back to normal. His hand stayed near his neck, however; the crawling sensation refused to leave him and pulsed all the way through his body in jagged waves.

It didn't help, he supposed, the way her leg bumped up against his in the motion of the car, and, even in the danger and uncertainty of the situation, he remained a fourteen year old boy. He'd only seen her briefly, but she was very, very pretty. It was the first time he'd ever felt ashamed of being attracted to a pretty girl. How could he even think that way, when a police officer was dead and gutted in his parents' house?

"You're scared of me?" asked the girl, breaking the stillness. She sounded incredulous. "Are you?"

Scott saw no reason to deny it. "Why shouldn't I be?" That was it, no use trying to play brave now. He had the distinct feeling she was taunting him.

"You should be scared." She moved her leg in against his, this time, he thought, deliberately. "When I think about it, well, I can only imagine what it looks like to some little worm like you. I was born to it, of course. I don't expect you to understand what I'm talking about."

This seemed to demand a response. "That's okay," Scott told her.

Her voice lowered confidentially as she continued. "You know, it's going to be kind of sad when all this comes to an end. I mean, you're just a boy and all, but you're kind of cute."

Scott shivered. *When this all comes to an end.* How to respond to a statement like that? The question he really wanted to ask was one he didn't dare voice – *how old are you?* He had a gut feeling she wouldn't ask it of him. The world had turned into the Twilight Zone. She wouldn't ask because either she already knew, or she couldn't take the chance that he would ask the same of her. *How old are you?* Either impossibly old or impossibly young, he didn't care and didn't want to know.

I'm fourteen, thought Scott, as hard as he could, as if he could anticipate her interest and send the answer through the air to her.

She began again. "I'd take the blindfold off if I could," she said, "but it's orders. You're not to know where we're going until we get there. Although I don't see why it matters."

There it was again, the cold hand of fear sliding up Scott's spine, reaching icy fingers around his throat. "You know," she continued blithely, "I'm going to feel really bad about killing you."

She was actually making a joke about slitting his throat. "Ah?" was all Scott could think of to say.

She leaned closer and whispered, warm in his ear, just his name: "*Scott Saunders. . .*"

“Scott,” he echoed, listening as if for the first time to the dry, blown sound of his own name, as if he were dead already and only a breath of wind remained of him.

“Scott,” she repeated firmly. “We’re here.”

The car pulled to a standstill. She helped him out, both his clammy hands in hers. “I’m Aria,” she said, as the car pulled away again. “That’s the best short form of Arabella that Father could come up with. It’s not quite proper, but it’s better than Ella or Arab, I suppose. I’m sorry they couldn’t greet you in more style, but, my darling, you are a secondary player in Papa’s little drama. Shall we?”

She led him across a short expanse of grass, and onto concrete. “Steps now,” she told him, and talked him down a short flight of stairs. “Now comes the magic,” she said, but what he heard was the whirr of an elevator motor springing to life.

“Welcome to my world,” she said. In front of them, he heard the doors of the elevator car slip open. “Going down.”



There was no moon that evening. Puddles glistened yellow-silver in the reflected light of the street lamps, but the sky was overcast and dark. There was a fine haze descending slowly over the corner of Dunsinene Avenue. All was solemn and funereal.

Farther into the subdivision, the silence around the elementary school was broken by the thin echoes of voices and the crackle of two-way radios. Six blue and white police cars were parked around the driveway near the front doors, trailing ghosts across each of the surrounding houses in turn from their circling red lights.

An elderly maroon Ford pulled into the parking lot. Its sole occupant, tallish and thin, was in his late thirties. He wore a battered fedora and beige trench coat, looking for all the world like a police detective from a 70s television series.

Police Constable Carla Szaba met him at the door, with the shortness of temper he had come to enjoy as his right.

“You took your sweet time getting here,” she told him, leading him into the building without waiting for a greeting. “Morritz is thrilled already to have to call you in.”

The detective frowned grimly. “Want to cut the act and tell me what going on?”

Szaba’s lip curled. She pushed a dark lock of hair behind her ear and refused to look at him. “It started with P.C. Kerr going missing around four this afternoon, which you already know. At least, I assume you do, since it was all over the police band. Now we’ve got at least four missing kids, all from this school, and Kerr, as you also probably know, is in the morgue with his throat cut.”

She stopped, and the detective glanced to the double doors ahead. “The auditorium?”

She nodded. “They call it a ‘gymnasium,’ actually,” she corrected coolly, “combination gymnasium and auditorium. Hard floor, stage at one end.”

“Blood everywhere,” he added. “Any sign of a victim?”

“Coroner says *victims*,” she told him. “At least three, for the amount of blood. And if no more than three, they’re all dead. He’s doing tests now to see if he can sort out some different serotypes.”

He rested one thin hand on the door handle. “Anything been moved?”

Szaba allowed herself her first smile of the encounter, wan and sour. “If you’d been here two hours ago, you’d have been in luck, Tamblyn.”

His hand tightened on the handle, began to open the heavy door. He paused. “You want to

send me someone in, preferably someone who isn't queasy? I'll need some notes taken."

She turned away, and came close to spitting her answer. "Yes, sir."

When he'd disappeared inside, she allowed herself one bitter shot at his back: "Our very own Witch Boy, on the hunt. Huh."



Inside, Detective John Tamblyn took stock slowly, taking in every arc as he turned. "Garish," he said at last under his breath.

The first thing he'd noticed was incidental to the facts: the color scheme. The walls were white with green trim and the school emblem, a huge four-leaf clover, logoed over a basketball hoop. The blood slicked the three complete walls; the fourth was occupied mostly by the stage. Strangely, there was none on the floor except near the junction of the walls and where it had been tracked around by child-sized runners. It had dried to a dense brown where it was thickest, and, under the strong fluorescent lights, still retained a shimmer of red where it was thin. When it was all wet, bright red and green on white, it must have looked like Christmas.

Turning to the agitated constable who had just entered, Tamblyn asked, "So, what's been moved?"

The young officer didn't come any further into the room, even as Tamblyn himself moved in and began a slow circuit, craning to examine the smears of blood, such a small number of footprints for two hundred public school students with no memory of the afternoon's events, for all that blood on the walls. The blood that looked like it had been painted on. He replied, flipping up the cover of his pad, "There were candles, black wax. Thirty or forty of them; I'm not sure of the exact number. They were entered into evidence. That's all that's been taken out of the room."

The detective nodded, satisfied. He scanned the room, taking note of the greasy circles of black wax, their number and pattern. He was getting more and more uneasy himself as time progressed.

They left the gym. Carla Szaba was nowhere in sight, but a beefy veteran cop, Detective Lieutenant William Morritz was waiting.

"Cambry, Tamblyn," Morritz greeted them. "Walk with me," he continued, addressing just Tamblyn.

"So, John," began Morritz when they had passed the double doors into the school's north wing. "Tell me what's going on here."

Tamblyn answered with questions of his own. "You're telling me that none of the students have a clue what happened this afternoon? And that with all that blood in there, the most we've found on those kids are traces in the treads of a few of their sneakers?"

Morritz nodded. "That's the picture. Not too pretty."

Tamblyn sighed. "Well, at least I know why I'm here." He paused, taking stock. "I'll need some more time. For now, let's behave like detectives, why don't we? Some prints, some samples, some measurements – let's cover all the bases before we go off fantasizing about cults and satanic rituals, okay? Bad for moral, right?"

"John. . ." Morritz grimaced. "We called you in, okay? Give us some results."

He turned and left, responding to a hail from one of the other officers about a nearby fire alarm just called in.

Tamblyn lifted off his battered hat and ran his fingers through his blond hair. "Back in public school," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought it?" He bent to drink at a water fountain which only came up to his knee.

When he looked up from the fountain, the photo caught his eye. He straightened slowly, captivated by the familiar face. The caption, on a plaque below, was “Westbrook Staff”, and the current year. He scanned down to the names listed below, grimly breathless.

“Son of a bitch,” he hissed under his breath. “The son of a bitch.”



“Brace yourself, Jan. I’ve got an idea.”

Janice grimaced. Her hands were raw and becoming tender. While the house burned, they had been alternately struggling to reach the knots and extricate themselves from the ropes, and resting to let the feeling seep back into their hands and feet. Janice was almost sure now they had lit the fire almost directly underneath them, in the big storage closet this side of the garage. A perfectly reasonable firetrap. She prayed if they were going to die, the smoke killed them before either the fire got them or they went smashing through the floor into the lower level.

“Jan?” asked Nick.

“Do you mean brace myself literally or figuratively?” she said, then, with despair, “They have Maggie.”

“Yeah, but let’s get out of the burning house first, okay?”

“What’s the plan?” Jan was feeling suddenly exasperated. It was a fine time, your daughter kidnapped, your death imminent, to imagine the most important thing on your plate was hating your ex-husband. She had been trying to learn not to procrastinate, especially where strong negative emotions were concerned. Deal with things when they happen was her recent self-help book inspired mantra. Focusing on escaping the fire felt like throwing away all her hard work.

She took a breath and tasted smoke.

“I’m going to tip the chair over to my left, your right. Towards the rack on the far wall. I think that might loosen the ropes a bit.”

Give us both concussions, more like, or break our arms, she thought, but kept it to herself with considerable effort. She probably could handle a broken bone or two if it meant not burning to death. “Okay,” she said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, kid,” he said. She felt his shoulders relax. He had been primed for a fight too. Now came that condescending tone she hated – “Just fall with papa.”

“Tell me when.” She gritted her teeth. There’d be lots of time to fight as soon as the end of their lives weren’t a heartbeat and a crashing floor away.

“Count of three. No time like the present. Okay?” asked Nick. “One. . . Two. . .”

Janice had an idea.

“Three!” said Nick and swayed momentarily to the right, using the momentum to carry them left to the floor.

Janice used the fall to twist against the ropes. By pulling Nick’s arm further around the side of the chair, she found she could turn almost right around to face the knots over her shoulder. The ropes around her right elbow loosened just as they hit the ground.

Janice cried out as she landed, her chin taking the brunt of the impact.

There was a moment of silence. When Nick spoke again, he sounded shaken. “Jan? That was bad stuff, Jan. No more trips for me. Jan? You okay?”

Janice didn’t answer. Part of her, a small part, once over the pain, was jubilant. The rest was strictly business. She twisted as far as she could and found she could reach the knots. Her fingers were cramped and numb, but she set out trying to untie them with her one free hand.

Nick found his right elbow pulled into a new place by the ropes, and the configuration of

their bindings had drastically changed since before the fall. He managed a peek over his shoulder to see what Janice was doing.

“Beautiful,” he said, appreciatively. “Just tell me next time before you carry out one of your brilliant ideas.”

Janice was making no progress on the knot. Realizing it was her only option, she got her mouth up to the rope and began to gnaw. She had to pause and restart every dozen seconds when her teeth felt tired. As each strand broke in her mouth, it was like she was grating the enamel off her teeth.

“If this is going to take a while,” said Nick finally, “maybe I should start yelling for help.”

He turned away and let the muscles in his neck relax. It wasn’t helping to overstrain them. Their salvation was completely out of his hands, and nothing he could do to aid her progress. He watched the wall and followed the cracks in it up to the empty clothes rack. The floor was warm.

Then, softly, he started to sing.

Janice stopped long enough to say, like she had cotton in her mouth, “I like that. Keep going,” and went back to work.

Nick sang snatches of every Christmas carol in his meagre repertoire, representing four different languages. He could hear the grating sound of Jan’s teeth against the nylon ropes playing out-of-key counterpoint, but didn’t think a joke about it would go over well. The carols didn’t really seem appropriate after a while, and he switched into some Buddy Holly.

“Didn’t he die in a fiery crash?” asked Janice.

“Keep eating rope, girl. This is your life.” Nick fell silent. At least she hadn’t told him his singing hurt her ears or anything else guaranteed to make him defensive.

Jan stopped. “Just talk to me,” she said. “Tell me about Rome.”

“Well,” said Nick. It was a long time ago. Those memories should still be good, even if they were distant. He had been very happy then. “There was the time we were all high on life after seeing Roman Holiday, right? And we tried to find all the places in the film. You were Hepburn – man, I can’t even remember what you were wearing, and I know you’d want to hear I did. They did a remake of that I saw on television not so long ago. . .” He talked, without thinking, without any direction in mind. He told her about eating the best pizza ever in the filthiest restaurant in the universe, about long lazy afternoons bookended by lunch and dinner and filled with wine, about selling his paintings in the street to keep their apartment another week.

Finally, the last few strands of rope came away in a bunch. The ropes loosened. Nick stopped talking to listen to the fire. How much time had elapsed? Minutes, precious minutes. He noticed for the first time how warm the floor was.

“Done,” said Jan, and pulled the ropes away. She rolled to her knees.

Nick freed his arms and lifted a coil of rope over his head. Jan got her feet free. She shambled awkwardly away from the chair and got slowly and painfully to her feet.

Her leg cramped and she collapsed. “I didn’t realize I was so stiff,” she said, out of breath. The smell of smoke was heavier in the air.

“Maybe we’d better keep down and not talk too much,” said Nick, taking her arm. He got to the door on his hands and knees and reached up to touch the knob. “Warm,” he said, pulling back.

“I noticed,” said Jan, hand to the floor. “Aren’t we supposed to stay low, put wet cloths over our faces. . .?” She rubbed at the cramp, but her heart was sinking slowly through her body to her heels. She was so proud of what she’d done, but it wasn’t enough and they were still going to die.

“Good thinking that,” said Nick, wheezing now. “Next time, tell me before. . . Did I already say that? Look, Jan, we’re getting out of here.” He looked around the closet. “We can use the

vacuum cleaner for a battering ram.”

Janice didn't answer, just nodded. Her lungs were beginning to burn. If she tried speaking, she didn't know if she'd bawl or choke. She helped him lift the vacuum off its hook, not daring to say she wasn't sure they could batter down the door with it. The chance of escape seemed so slight. At least, she thought, she was grateful for once of the shoddy hollow construction of the modern doors, happy for not being in the historic Victorian townhouse she had looked at a couple of years ago downtown. Gorgeous, and way out of her price range, but man, did they know how to build real doors in those days, solid and heavy.

And thinking about the Victorian house she would never now buy, Jan Stuart began to sob.

Then, past hope, there was a distant voice calling over the growing roar of the fire which wasn't, no matter how she wished, going out. “Anyone here? Ms. Stuart! Ms. Stuart?”

“Here!” Janice screamed, her voice breaking with the previous exertion and her intense, almost painful relief. “In the hall closet upstairs – we're locked in.”

Please, she thought, don't let it be a trick. Please don't let me be imagining this.

The voice spoke again, this time from just outside the door. “Ms. Stuart?”

“We're here!” she cried. “This one.” She moved forward and banged her knuckles against the door.

An agonizing moment of silence followed. Then, the voice said, “I take it the lock wasn't part of the original house plans.”

“Deadbolt,” Jan managed, “just slide – just slide it –”

“Padlock,” he shouted back, correcting her. “A new addition, I guess. I need something to jimmy it. Hang tight.” She heard footsteps moving away.

She wanted to scream for him to come back, to stay with her - *Don't leave us!* “Hurry,” she mouthed. Nick pressed into her, filling her nose with a mixture of smoke and the scent of his skin. There was no time. Below, she heard the distinctively sickening crack of some part of the ceiling losing integrity.

Then there was a new, explosive crack and the door of the closet was open.

“Come on,” said their rescuer. “I don't know how solid this floor is.” In his hands, he held the screw-in metal leg of one of her office chairs.

She followed the man out of the room, Nick trailing. Now that she was able to concentrate on him, he was very familiar. Not much taller than she, perhaps five eight or nine, he had dark salt-and-peppered hair receded back from his forehead in a distinctive widow's peak. He was lean, she could tell, but solid not slender, with strong shoulders and an athletic way of moving. Where had she seen him before?

He led them away from the stairs and toward the side bedroom that Maggie occupied. Maggie! Where was she? She should have been home from school.

“My daughter –” she managed, choked, to the man's back.

He replied without turning. “She's not here.”

Relief surged through her. Far off, she heard another fine sound, the siren of a distant fire engine. But the walls of the hallway were already blackening, and smoke, she had seen, choked the stairwell.

In Maggie's room, the window was up and the top of Janice's extension ladder, tips swathed in paint rags, rested on the sill. The man didn't wait for Jan and Nick, but threw a leg over the window ledge and disappeared from view.

Jan followed, backing herself down the ladder at a pace which under other circumstances would have been reckless. Another pair of sharp reports came from the inside of the house. By the time Nick's feet reached the ground, their rescuer was gone.

With a certain amount of wonderment in her voice, “That was Maggie’s science teacher,” said Janice as they moved into the front yard. Even here, on the far side of the building from the kitchen, the heat was nearly unbearable. “I remember, I met him at parents’ night.” Earlier in the year, when everything was normal.

They had linked arms. “What was Maggie’s science teacher doing in your house?” asked Nick.

Janice shook her head. “I don’t know. But let’s not mention him, all right? I get the feeling we shouldn’t say anything.”

Nick rose, about to argue, then said, “Okay, just like you say.”

In front of the house was the real activity. There were two big fire trucks pulling in, along with a police car. The Fire Chief’s van entered the court and moved in to direct the action. Jan turned to Nick.

“Not a word yet, okay? See what they know first. Until I say, you’re a friend, you came for a visit, we were asleep when the fire started and have no idea how it happened.”

“It’s your call,” said Nick. “I won’t say a thing.”

An officer noticed them, arm in arm under the neighbors’ crab apple tree and came running up, calling to another officer over his shoulder. Two more police cars came rolling up the street, sirens flashing. Janice closed her eyes and savoured what she could of the air, not quite spoiled by the smoke pouring out of her beautiful home, all ruined.

They’d taken her daughter. They’d burnt her house. She would see they paid for turning her life upside down.

The officer introduced himself and led them back to his squad car where there were blankets and mugs of coffee. A severe looking fair-haired man in a trench coat met them there. Janice put on a face of utter bewilderment, pretending to be in deep shock. But deep inside her burned a desperate, implacable hatred for whoever had taken Maggie and burned her house, and an even blacker desire for retribution.



They had let me sleep for a while on a pile of fabric in the little room. I’d dropped almost immediately into a deep sleep, unusual for me, despite their eyes watching me. I had been drugged, though, twice already that day, and my body was at about the limit of its resistance to stress.

I didn’t dream. The next thing I knew, a rough female hand was shaking me awake. They pulled me to my feet, then robed me in a voluminous dress of soft white wool which fell in curtain folds to my feet, and gave me soft slippers to replace the shoes they took away. I was so transported trying to figure out what was going on that I hardly felt embarrassed when they took away everything but my underwear and the tiny bra Jan had finally felt I needed only a few months before.

I was blindfolded and led out of the chamber down a steeply inclined path which took me further into a growing coldness, not of temperature but of even greater heightened senses. I knew even before they removed the blindfold that someone had come to meet me, and that at least one question would finally be answered – that of who it was who had brought me out of Westbrook, out of my school, away from my home, and to this cold stone world.

When my eyes were uncovered, I found myself standing on a slab of smooth-polished black stone before a huge door opened to welcome me, to usher me in to the next stage of my descent. Beyond it, a tunnel curved downwards into semi-darkness, and out of sight. And appropriately, Lucifer himself was there to greet me, bearing a candle. All that was missing was the standard

warning: *Abandon hope all who enter.*

The man was handsome, in a dark way, his straight poise enough in itself to make me catch my breath. He stood before the doorway on its single step, which seemed unnecessary because he was so tall to begin with, unnaturally tall. His clothing was immaculate: a loose black suit which seemed almost a part of him; crisp, darkly creamy shirt; rich satiny tie with a somber red design worked through it.

The hair which curled around his temples and against the nape of his neck was dark, set off by a few strands of silver glowing in the soft candlelight. His short beard accentuated his fine cheekbones on its way to meet the shocks of black curls at his ears, trimmed to perfect symmetry.

But the more I looked at him, and he seemed perfectly happy to be scrutinized, the more he disturbed me. Even though I could see each of his features perfectly, something prevented me from putting the whole picture together and getting a sense of what his face actually looked like. I was full of impressions of him, but found nothing to hold on to. He seemed only half aware of me, as if contemplating some problem beyond my knowledge.

Around his shoulders, he wore a black cape which swept the floor. With this addition to the ensemble, I was reminded of pictures I'd poured over in the library, of eighteenth century gentlemen in their noble, mysterious finery. He couldn't have presented himself in a more appealing costume if he'd known about those, and maybe he did. At first at least, his look made me feel comfortable, as if somehow this whole situation was an elaborate prank for my benefit.

But I kept looking at him, trying to see his face, to see what he looked like, and still I was rebuffed in my attempt. And, on second thought, that cape was more Dracula than Victorian gentleman, and made the whole impression slightly wrong, like a picture hung just a little crookedly.

It was the thing that really began to upset me, the cape; that, and his tallness and the shifting, impossible face. He seemed to come closer – but then I realized it was because I had walked forward toward him. He stood on the step smiling crookedly at me as I came close, so that I had to look straight up to see his face, and joined his eyes with mine at last. I had never felt so tiny in my life.

Well Met, he said softly, capitalizing each word precisely in my mind, just as he had when his voice had reached me above ground beside the helicopter. Here, at last, was my captor and my host. I stood directly before him now, close enough that the shifting cape brushed the wool of my wool dress, its blackness overwhelming the white. My eyes had become locked with his and I could see nothing but his face, so beautiful but all wrong: too refined, too perfect, and completely impossible to piece together although all its elements were there in front of me. His eyes, I saw, were holes, the irises so dark they merged with the pupils, both black. The face shifted, distorted, righted itself, all around those impassive hollows.

He seemed brittle, faded around the edges, as if he were an old photograph perhaps singed in a historic fire. There was an aura of age about him. I tried to put my finger on the impression he gave, and could only come up with the idea that he seemed to be all charcoal and smoke, burnt and refined by fire. *The Burnt Man*, I thought, and laughed to myself. *The Dark Man. The Man, the one who had been calling to me. He was the stamen of a delicate flower, the rock that drew sailors to their doom at the center of Charybdis.* I didn't know him, and yet the moment was full of import, full of half-shadows of something grand and frightening.

You Are Mine Now – You Shall Stay With Me, he intoned, as quietly as before, and reached out to grasp my shoulder with a hand as cold as ice. He pulled me closer, onto the step with him, and lowered his mouth to my ear, his lips nearly brushing my cheek, that cape wrapping us together, away from the others in the room.

I felt myself falling again, not fainting or buckling weak-kneed, but into him. Drawn in, as if I were metal and he an magnet. It was very like the feeling I had when I thought of Jason, but stronger, and wilder, and much, much more dangerous. “I am very pleased,” he said, speaking in a whisper, but into the air for the first time. Then, his cloak repulsed me, and, in a flurry of dark fabric, he was gone.