

THE DEAD ZOO

BY

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Chapter one

The day was mild and fine with not a cloud in the blue sky. The springtime woods on either side were a light, vivid green underpainted with yellow. Here and there blossoming dogwoods made white spatters that seemed to float among the trees.

Alexandra hardly noticed. She was just on her way down the valley headed for anywhere else, hitching a ride with a man in a dark red Pontiac Trans-Am. The Mary Kay decal in the rear window had to mean the man was driving his wife's car, not that he had mentioned any wife. Men never did.

Alexandra knew about Mary Kay cars because one of the kids at school had a mom who was a Mary Kay lady. The Trans Ams were no big deal. The big deal was if you sold so much stuff that they had to give you a pink Cadillac to drive.

Alexandra saw herself in the designer-decorated show room of her own award-winning showplace in Beverly Hills, hers and Brad's, demonstrating Mary Kay products to the trophy wives of big Hollywood producers. The ladies had all heard about the Alexandra Look, so now of course they all wanted to buy a complete range of home beauty products from the lovely Mrs. Brad Pitt herself. As if the Alexandra Look came out of a bottle. Yeah right, ladies. You're so pathetic, you know it?

Alexandra grabbed the door handle as the car squealed around a curve. The moron was trying to impress her by driving too fast. If

he thought that was fast, he ought to drive with some of the kids on the football team sometime. He'd find out what fast was.

The man had said to call him Mac like everybody else did. Sure they did. Probably in school he was one of those losers that nobody even bothered to give a nickname to, so he had to give one to himself. Mac, whatever, was thirty or forty at least, with a belly that pooched out over his shiny white belt. At least he knew how to dress, you had to give him that. His sharply-creased red slacks were nearly the same color as the Mary Kay car. His white shoes matched his belt, and so did his gleaming silk socks. His shirt was pink-and-white striped, with the top three buttons open to show a gold chain on his hairless chest.

Around the corner the road dipped down. On the left was a junkyard for trailers, dozens and dozens of them rotting away in the sun. Yellow insulation hung out where the siding had come loose and paint was powdering off the rusty walls. Past the trailers a couple of acres of other big junk, appliances and equipment, ended in a stand of poplars. Old tractors, refrigerators, stoves and oil drums were jumbled around the main building. Little triangle flags—red, yellow, green, and blue—hung below the eaves of the corrugated tin roof. The gateposts at the entrance were sawed-off telephone poles wearing red highway cones like wizards' hats. The sign over the gate said, "HOWIE'S ANTIQUES—TRASH & TREASURES—BOOKS & RECORDS."

"Old Howie, he was something," Mac the driver said, holding his head up to keep his double-chin from showing. Her uncle used to do the same thing, except when he got so excited he forgot.

"He was?" Alexandra said.

"Yeah, that Howie. We called him Horny Howie in high school."

Here we go, Alexandra thought. She nodded politely and waited for more. After a few miles it came.

"Chilly for May," he said. "Must have been cold hitching with just that thin shirt on."

Your nipples are showing through your shirt, was what he meant.

“Mac,” she said, “would you mind pulling over for just a minute where there’s some trees? I’ve got to, you know—”

When he found a spot she got out and opened the back door for her pack. “Some things in it I need,” she said, and lit him up with a sunny smile. “Be right back.”

Inside the tree line she kept on walking through the heavy underbrush and then clambered up the hill till she reached a handy ledge for sitting in the sun. Mac had got out of the car. Way down below she could see his red and white clothes through the pale green haze of the new leaves. He must be able to see her, too, but seeing was as near as he was going to get. Mac wasn’t the type to come into the woods after her, not with those white shoes and fancy clothes.

At last old Mac gave up calling and waving his arms. Alexandra watched the red Trans-Am drive out of sight. The May sun was bright but thin. It was a little chilly in just her cotton shirt, he was right about that, so she got a light sweater out of her pack and slung it over her shoulders the way Mac always did with his.

Mac, poor Mac. Their own fabulous yacht the USS Alexandra sipping cocktails on the bridge with all his other millionaire jet setter friends wondering where good old Mac had ever found his teen princess. Nobody knew that would be the very night that Mac passed away tragically in a fatal blaze while she watched helpless and heartbroken but the firemen wouldn’t let her run inside to save him.

The sun came out from behind a cloud, warm on her face and on her legs where the faded denim was stretched tight. Her knees showed pale through the holes in her ripped jeans. She examined her wrists and hands, which were pale and disgusting from being indoors or with gloves on all winter. But soon the sun would turn her skin the color of honey, with the tiny blond hairs showing yellow against it. Makes you shine like you’re lit from inside, Brad always said. Brad was the same way himself in the summer, all blond and honey-colored and glowing.

Little puffy clouds were moving down the valley. Alexandra put the sweater back in her pack and started down, angling along the hill to avoid the steep path she had taken up to the ledge.

When she was almost to the road a tangle of briars blocked her. She was looking for a way through, picking carefully at the prickly canes, not comfortable in the woods, when a black police cruiser passed by and slowed. Fear flashed out from the pit of her stomach. The fright faded, and she could think again. How could he see her through the brambles? Maybe he was stopping for something else. She hunkered down and stayed still.

The car stopped beyond her, and the backup lights went on. The officer backed the car as easily as if he were driving front wards. The car came to a stop, skidding a little in the gravel, right in front of where she was hidden. So he had seen her after all.

But when he got out of the cruiser he never even looked in her direction. He walked toward the rear of his shiny cruiser and with the toe of a polished black shoe he nudged at a heap of something lying just off the blacktop. At first Alexandra thought it was rags, dirty old sweat pants or something. When the policeman bent over and lifted a leg free of the heap she saw it was a dead animal, a half-starved dog of some sort.

The policeman opened the trunk of his patrol car, took out a crumpled Hefty bag, and worked it over the carcass. He slung the load aboard and slammed the trunk lid. Then he headed straight for Alexandra. She stayed motionless, even though she knew she was caught. But he stopped short of her and looked down as he fiddled with his zipper. Then he fished his big thing out and let fly, splattering on last year’s dry leaves. When he was done he milked it and flopped it for such a long time she was afraid he had spotted her after all and was showing off. Finally he put it away, though, and got back into the black cruiser with “**LUXOR POLICE DEPARTMENT**” written on the side.

Alexandra watched the car drive off, not scared anymore but just thinking about the policeman. He had been wearing a gray uniform with sharp creases in the pants. He looked a little like Ed Harris, that same soldier look. He was kind of cute except for that weirdness with the dog, and not even gloves on his bare hands to keep them clean. That was gross.

Where was he going to take a dead dog, anyway? Maybe the dog wasn't dead and he was taking it to the vet. She saw the dog in a big yard with a whole bunch of other dogs that the police had already saved, all of them barking hello and wagging their tails. They were going to be seeing eye dogs for little blind kids. The yard full of dogs switched off in her head, and she went back to picking her way through the brambles to the road.

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Chapter two

The sun was warm enough to make Alexandra feel like walking a little. She pulled her shirt tails out and pushed her hair up under a green John Deere cap from her pack. That way she'd look like a boy and no more Horny Howies would stop and hassle her until she was ready to hitchhike again.

The pack and the cap made it hot walking along. Sweat ran between her breasts and down her stomach, making a dark patch where it soaked into the waistband of her pre-faded, pre-ripped jeans. Alexandra swung along easily, walking against the traffic to make it clear she wasn't looking for a ride. The late afternoon sun was in her face. She ought to know what direction that meant she was headed, but she couldn't remember science stuff.

Around a bend she came upon a small town laid out below her, a mile or so ahead where the valley ran into joined another, broader valley. The town was on her side of a small river with a bridge over it. On the other side of the bridge open fields ran into wooded hills and mountains beyond. Big barns and smaller farmhouses clustered around the silos that rose up here and there, like a picture in some magazine.

Alexandra found a shady place under a tree and sat down so that the trunk hid her from the road. She didn't want anybody coming up on her if she drowsed off. People had been known to do stuff to girls when they were asleep, or at least pretending to be.

THE LIGHTS WERE STARTING to go on as she got close to town. She passed Vic's Guns and Ammo, and a sign that read,

"Welcome to Luxor—Rotary International, United Methodist Church, Straight ahead. Welcome." After that came the Luxor Diner, with weeds coming up in the cracks of the parking lot. Sidewalks began and small houses gave way to larger ones.

Alexandra crossed the street to look at a little park no bigger than a building lot. A sign said Luxor Memorial Park, but there was no memorial unless it was the three-tiered fountain in the middle. The fountain was dry. There were no swings or slides, no flowers to look at, no paths to walk on, nothing to do in the park but sit on the stone benches on either side of the out-of-order fountain. The only sign of life was a couple of empty malt liquor bottles and a crumpled paper bag that she came across when she ducked behind a hedge to pee.

Parking meters appeared when she headed into town again, five minutes for a penny, an hour for a nickel, two hours for a dime. The houses gave way to shops, most of them closed and dark.

Light came from the top windows of a small, square Victorian building across the street. Yellow bricks showed through where the dark red paint had flaked off. The trim around the tall windows had been painted so many times that the edges looked rounded and blurred. Over the door it said Municipal Building, Erected 1880. Alexandra considered the arithmetic and gave up.

But they had a woman from France on television who must have been practically as old as that building, a hundred and twenty or something. She looked like one of those dried-up corpses they found in glaciers or something. Personally Alexandra would rather be dead than look like that.

She was about to leave the town hall behind when a green-light sign on the far side caught her eye: POLICE. Covered wooden steps led up to the second floor, and she saw the nose of the black cruiser sticking out from behind the building. She pictured the cute Ed Harris officer sitting behind a raised desk up there on the second floor, but all she could actually see through the windows was the blue flicker of a TV somewhere out of sight.

A BIG FISHEYE MIRROR looked at Alexandra from a corner of the ceiling. The question was whether anyone was keeping an eye on it. The manager of the Great American was in his raised cubicle where he could see the whole store, but he had his eyes on whatever he was doing at his desk. There probably wouldn't be any real security guards in a rinkydink little market like this, but still.

Alexandra put the big picnic pack of assorted lunch meats in her shopping cart, along with the squeeze bottle of mustard and the lettuce and cheese and bread she had already collected. She wheeled the cart to an aisle full of stuff like toilet paper and detergents that clerks didn't bother to watch because the packages were too big to swipe. She made room on a waist-high shelf by sliding out a six-pack of paper towels with one hand while with the other she hid the rest of her groceries in the empty space. She couldn't see anybody in the fisheye mirror, which was the good thing about mirrors. If you couldn't see them, they couldn't see you. In a minute she had built herself a couple of sandwiches and wrapped them in the plastic bag the bread had been in. Still nobody in the mirror. She sucked back her stomach, lifted her shirttails, and slipped the package down the front of her jeans. Then she replaced the paper towels so as to hide the leftover groceries, abandoned her empty cart, and headed for checkout. On the way she picked up a large bottle of Pepsi from the cooler.

Two of the open stations had lines and there was some kind of trouble at the third. A bearded bum with an enormous plastic sack full of deposit cans was raising his voice at the cashier.

"It's store policy, sir," the girl on the checkout said. "We only take returnables from customers."

"I was good enough to fight in Vietnam," the bum said. "Now you telling me I ain't good enough to cash in a few goddamned cans?"

"I just explained to you, sir. It's store policy."

While everybody was watching the bum, Alexandra sneaked a Snickers bar from the rack and began to unwrap it. If anybody happened to spot the candy bar before she got it eaten, she had

enough to pay for it and the Pepsi both, with even a little small change left over.

"Policy my ass," the man with the beard said. "It's the goddamned law you've got to take cans from anybody brings 'em in."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir. You can talk to the manager if you want to."

The manager had been hurrying over from his perch, but he stopped at a safe distance from the man. "What seems to be the trouble here?" he said.

"She won't cash in my cans because I ain't a customer."

"That's store policy. Nothing we can do about it."

"Man can't be a customer till he's got money in his pocket.

Where am I supposed to get money if you won't cash in my damned cans?"

"I'm going to have to ask you right now to leave the premises, sir."

"Well, I ain't going to do it. I'm going to dump this whole goddamned bag out on the counter and wait right here till I get paid."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. I've already notified the police and an officer is on his way."

Alexandra had been thinking of eating another Snickers bar free, then grabbing a third one to take through the line and pay for. But she decided to leave well enough alone, now that things were winding down. She dropped the crumpled wrapper to the floor.

The bum shouldered his huge bag of cans and maneuvered it clanking through the exit. "Goddamn communists," he shouted before the automatic door hissed shut behind him.

"Did you really call Chief Kregger?" the clerk asked the manager.

"No, but I would have if he hadn't seen the light of day. You can't fool with these people. Sorry he kept you waiting, young lady."

"That's all right," Alexandra said. "I've just got a Pepsi and a Snickers bar anyway."

Outside, she sat on the parking lot fence and ate her Snickers between swallows of Pepsi. When she was done she headed toward the rear of the store to have a look around. Supermarkets were always tossing out perfectly good stuff.

“Excuse me, missy,” a voice behind her said. She turned and saw the bum, half hidden by a dumpster. He was a big man with a slight stoop, wearing a gray sweatshirt with a hood, and a blue nylon jacket over that. His beard was mostly gray but his hair was still brunette, what there was of it. He wore it in a ponytail, fastened with a rubber band. His hands were big, with fingers the size of hot dogs. The index finger on his left hand had two joints missing. Gross, she thought. The pink nub looked like a fat, stubby penis.

“What do you want?” she said.

“You seen the way they done me in there?”

“I seen it.”

“You know how much is in this sack?”

“How much?”

“Pretty near ten dollars worth. You turn ’em in for me, I’ll give you two bucks.”

“Well, I’d like to help you out, but I got to go home now.”

“Three bucks. I can’t go no higher than three.”

“They’d know it was your cans.”

“They wouldn’t care. They’d do it for a pretty little thing like you.”

“I couldn’t anyway. My mom’s waiting for me.”

“Bet your mamma’d like to know what you got under your shirt.”

The bum was smiling in a nasty way.

“I bet that little prick of a manager would like to know, too,” he said. “I might just tell him, too, unless you help a man out here.”

“I wish I could,” Alexandra said. “But like I say, my mom. I hope you find someone, I really do.”

She shot him a smile without thinking about it. A smile was just what her face naturally fell into.

“Tell you what,” he said. “We’ll just forget about the cans and you give me that stuff you stole.”

He had moved out from behind the dumpster so that he was between her and the public area in front of the store. Alexandra tried to duck past him but he was too quick for her. She was boxed in by the dumpster and the wall. She felt like a little girl again, with the quiet footsteps in the hall outside and then the bedroom door opening.

Too fast for human eyes to see, she plunged her hands into the silver bowl that held her dennon. The magical liquid in the bowl was no color and all colors, pale gray that gleamed like an opal, the same enamel that kept pearls safe from the slime around them. Her hummingbird hands trailed sparks like Tinker Bell’s wand as they flickered here and there, smoothing dennon onto every surface and into every secret crevice. When nothing could touch her, she calmly considered the dirty man.

“Give it up,” he said. “Let’s see what you got in that pack, too.”

She handed him the sandwiches, and hunched the pack off her shoulders. The pack was her chance. The instant his free hand took the weight of it, she ran.

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Chapter three

He wouldn't stay behind the store long, Alexandra figured, for fear of the store manager or the police. So she stayed put in her hiding place across the street, and looked out through one of the low rhododendrons planted on both sides of the church sign. In a minute, sure enough, the man appeared with her pack slung over one shoulder. He didn't bother to look around for her. He just hurried out of the parking lot and turned right, heading out of town.

Alexandra followed, a couple of street lights behind, the shops giving way to houses as she retraced the route she had taken into town. Eventually the sidewalk and the streetlights would end, so that she wouldn't dare follow him anymore. Wherever he decided to stop, she would risk walking right into his hands. Men could do anything they wanted to in the dark. Men had their needs.

Alexandra lost her concentration, thinking of that, and when she came back into focus the shadowy figure of the man was gone. She stopped, afraid to make any movement that might catch his eye. He had passed the next street light a minute or so ago, and he wouldn't have had time to reach the one after that. She stood stock still. Was that him, that shape just off the sidewalk? It didn't look quite right to be a person, though. The little park was in that block, and the shape resolved itself into the sign for it. Alexandra remembered the empty malt liquor bottles she had found behind the hedge. Somebody had been making themselves at home.

THE BLACK CRUISER was still parked beside the tiny municipal building when Alexandra got back downtown. Light still showed from the second-floor windows. She thought of the policeman up

there, relaxing. His tie loosened, maybe his belt, too. He could probably get her pack back, but then that would be a whole other hassle. What's your name? Where do you live, Alexandra? What's your date of birth? What's a girl your age —

Alexandra kept on walking. In the next block was a vacant store with plywood nailed over the windows. A poster on the plywood said, "Wear fluorescent orange. Be sure of your target. Wear ear and eye protection. Wear warm clothing—An unprotected human will die overnight of hypothermia at temperatures as high as 45. Respect landowners rights. A message from Police Chief Harold Kregger. For information call 221-2121." Harold Kregger, that was his name. Harold sounded kind of nerdy. Hap would be okay. Or Hal.

The Great American was halfway down the block on the other side, the only store still lit up. She crossed over and looked in, thinking about making more sandwiches if the stuff she had hidden was still there. But the store was almost deserted. The night manager up in his cage wouldn't have anything better to do but spy on her.

Well. Two two one two one two one. She wondered how much you had to pay to get one of those numbers that everybody could remember. Maybe the company gave them to cops for free. A pay phone was mounted on the wall outside the Great American.

She got a flashback, sitting there safe at last on the bench next to the pay phone with people around. "You're all the same," the bearded man was saying. "Playing hard to get."

His pants were open and his thing was poking out, pink and fat like the stub of his finger. The pink thing started to grow. It was amazing how big it got, how fast.

The more she remembered about what the bum did to her, the madder she got. She couldn't let him get away with that. She was going to tell.

"HOW OLD ARE YOU, MISS?" Chief Harold Kregger asked. He sounded gruff over the phone, but kindly, too.

"I'm fifteen, sir."

“What school do you go to?”
“I’m not from here. I’m just visiting.”
“From where?”
“From Hawaii. My dad’s in the service.”
“Who are you visiting with?”
“Just friends.”
“What’s their name?”
“I don’t want them to know about this.”
“Listen, miss, what do you expect me to do if you won’t even tell me your name?”
“You could arrest him for having my pack, couldn’t you?”
“How would I know it was your pack? I need somebody to sign a complaint, or at least a witness.”
“I’m a witness. I told you exactly what he did.”
“Are you sure you told me everything?”
“Yeah. He stole my pack in that little park going out of town.”
“Just now?”
“Well, maybe twenty minutes ago.”
“So you’re a fifteen-year-old girl out there alone in the dark with this guy. How would you describe yourself, miss?”
“Blonde. Sort of petite, you know.”
“Would you call yourself pretty?”
“I don’t know, I guess so.”
“A pretty girl in that sort of a situation, it’s a hundred to one there’s going to be trouble.”
“There was. He stole my pack.”
“That’s all he did?”
“That was enough.”
“He must have done more than that.”
“Like what?”
“Inappropriate touching, for instance.”
“Like sexual harassment?”
“Well, yeah. Like that.”
“No, not really.”
“So maybe he did?”
“No.”

“You said not really.”
“Well, he really didn’t.”
“Look, miss, it’s nothing to be ashamed of if he done something.”
“I’d tell you if he did.”
“If you remembered.”
“It was only like half an hour ago.”
“Don’t matter if it was five minutes. In these types of sexual assaults you get these recovered memories where the victim completely forgets everything that happened to her. To get it back somebody has to help you. Now I’m just going to sit here and not say a word while you try to remember what this creep done to you. It’s there if you dig deep enough.”
Alexandra dug deep, and almost right away bits and pieces of it started to come back to her. How could she have forgotten something like that? Even weirder, how could the policeman have known it was there?
“You were right,” she said into the receiver, once she had recovered the whole memory. “It was horrible.”
“Tell me the whole thing in your own words,” Chief Kregger said. “Don’t leave nothing out.”
“It’s kind of hard to talk about, but okay. I had to like, tinkle, you know? So I went behind this hedge in the park, and when I was done my business I saw this huge man through the bushes. I thought he was maybe doing the same as me because he had his thing out and I stayed real still so he wouldn’t see me. But then he started to like wave it at me, you know, and I could tell he must have seen me because of the way it was, you know?”
“How was it?”
“Well, like, you know. The way they get.”
“You mean he had an erection?”
“Yeah, like that.”
“Then what happened?”
“He ran at me and grabbed me.”
“Grabbed you where?”
“By the arm.”

“He didn’t touch you anywhere else?”
“Not yet, no. Well, maybe he touched me on the chest a little, you know?”
“He put his hand on your breasts. Then what?”
“He made me lie down and he put it in me.”
“Put what in you?”
“You know. His thing.”
“You got to say the word. What thing?”
“Penis.”
“All right, he put his penis in you. Where?”
“You know.”
“I don’t know unless you tell me. Did he put it in your mouth?”
“No.”
“Where, then?”
“In me. You know.”
“You got to be exact. Where in you?”
“Down there.”
“Where down there? You got to say the word.”
“My pussy.”
“Your vagina?”
“Yes.”
“All right, the guy sinks it in. Then what happens?”
“What do you mean?”
“Does he ejaculate?”
“Well, yes. Sure.”
“How do you know?”
His voice sounded thick. She thought of him sitting up there behind the lighted windows, getting hot. She was getting the same feeling.
“You just know,” she said.
“You done this before?”
“No, of course not. I’m just a kid.”
“Kid fifteen. That’s old enough to do it.”
“Well, I never did.”
“So did you bleed or what?”

“I told you. It was the first time.”
“So you did bleed?”
“Yes.”
“Because if there’s blood or semen on your clothing, that’s evidence.”
“He made me take everything off.”
“There could still be stains. You got your clothes on now, don’t you?”
“Well, yes, sure. I’m outside at a pay phone.”
“So maybe there’s seepage.”
“Seepage?”
“On your underwear. Things seep.”
“Oh.”
“So do you feel seepage?”
“I guess.”
“Now we’re getting somewhere. What did this guy look like?”
“I told you already. He was a bum. He collects cans.”
“What did he have on?”
“Bum clothes. I don’t know. Dirty.”
“Height?”
“Tall. Maybe six feet.”
“Fat? Thin?”
“In between.”
“Hair?”
“Kind of dark brown.”
“How about his beard?”
“More like black. Black with white in it.”
“Age?”
“I don’t know. Forty, maybe? Not real old, but old.”
“Any distinguishing marks? Tattoos? Scars?”
“One finger was cut off. Most of it. He just had this like pink stub.”
“Right or left hand?”
“Left, I think. Yeah, left.”
“Which finger?”
“I don’t know what you call it. The one next to the thumb.”

“Index finger. All right, we’re making progress here. We got a good description, we got physical evidence. What we don’t got is a victim.”

“I’m the victim.”

“Not till you sign an official complaint. Listen, you got my word your parents may not even have to know, all right? Tell me what pay phone you’re calling from, I’ll be there in five minutes —”

Alexandra hung up on him, suddenly scared. Shit, shit, shit, why did she tell him that about a pay phone? What if there were only two or three pay phones in town? She ducked around the corner toward the rear of the Great American and took off, half-running, till she came to an unlighted back street that ran parallel to Main Street. She headed west toward the river, and the countryside beyond.

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Chapter four

Alexandra didn't want to expose herself to Chief Kregger by crossing the bridge, so she stayed downstream from it, in the shadows. The water was low. In the moonlight the river was a silver ribbon wandering down the center of wide, shadowy mud flats. Open country was on the other side, with lights from farm-houses showing here and there.

Alexandra thought of wading across and walking to one of the farms. She might find a place to sleep in an outbuilding. But she was cold already, and wading would make it even worse. What about hypothermia? Was it 45 degrees? Besides, even the nearest farm was a good hike on top of all the walking she had already done, and farms had dogs. She turned north toward the bridge, ready to duck if she saw the black police cruiser heading her way from the center of town. No cars in sight. She made it safely to Main Street.

Just on the other side of the bridge Alexandra turned onto a two-lane road with a stone wall on the river front side and big white-columned houses on the other. The houses sat well back from the road, shining softly in the moonlight although most of them were dark. Maybe they were summer houses. Empty or not, though, the houses had the air of being taken care of. Maybe even patrolled. Alexandra walked on.

The stone wall ended at the last of the big houses along the river front, several hundred yards up the road. After that came smaller houses, and way beyond them, too far to read, were the signs of roadside businesses. There might be some kind of a business back from the river front, too, at the end of a side street. Colored lights showed through the trees. Businesses often had sheds, loading

docks, open garages. Places you could at least get a roof over your head.

When Alexandra got near she saw that the strange glow in the trees came from the stained glass windows in an eight-sided cupola on top of a huge old house. Each pane in the windows was a different color.

The rest of the house was dark, a three-story mass with spiked iron railings running around the roof and a weathervane on top of the cupola room. One fork of the black driveway went into and out of a portico with pillars. The other disappeared behind a large building off to one side. It had big double doors like a barn or a garage. It looked like a good bet for the night.

Alexandra looked around to be sure there were no neighbors near enough to glance out and see her. Even the lights of the houses she had passed on the way were invisible, and the house with the lighted cupola was the last one on the road. She went a few yards down the drive, her feet crunching on the grave so loud the dead could hear. She stepped onto the lawn and stood still, listening hard. In the full moonlight the house was an island towering up from a flat, featureless sea of lawn. Not a tree, not a bush, not a hedge grew anywhere on the wide lawn. The house stuck straight up out of the ground, with no vines or flower beds or shrubbery around the base. Why wouldn't there be any plantings around an old house?

Alexandra had just started toward the barn when she heard the loud creaking of rusty metal and then a clang. She froze. A tall figure appeared from around a corner, plain to see in the moonlight and the colored glow from the cupola. There was something tentative in the way he was scanning the featureless lawn, though, and she realized his eyes hadn't adjusted to the outside.

"You boys get off my property," the man called out shakily. "I've got a gun."

She could see that he didn't have a gun, and that in fact he seemed ready to run for it.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, in a little-girl voice. "I just saw your pretty lights and I was lost and cold. And hungry."

“What? What?” the man said, peering in her direction. “Is that a girl? Are you a girl?”

“Yes, sir.” She doubted he could see her yet, but she shot him a smile anyway.

“I thought you were one of those boys that come around looking for trouble,” the man said.

“I’m not looking for trouble, mister. I just figured I could sleep in your barn and not bother anybody.”

The man kept the flashlight beam on her.

“Don’t you have a place to live?” he said.

“I’m on my way home now, hitching.”

“Where’s your home?”

“Out west. I had all my money stolen from me.”

THE DRIVEWAY LOOPED through a portico supported by pillars. The pillars rested on a six-foot wall made of round stones mortared in place. Alexandra followed the man into the portico, where she saw a heavy oak door with black iron hinges and a massive iron ring for a knocker. It was the kind of ring a prisoner would be hanging from, in black and white movies about the olden times. The man unlocked the door and reached inside to turn on at light.

The walls in the entrance hall were paneled higher than her head in wood so dark it was almost black. Above that was tan wall paper with floral designs on it in darker brown. The woodwork and the wallpaper soaked up the light of the glass-shaded bulb that hung on a chain from the high ceiling. To her right, stairs went up to a landing and then turned left to disappear into the darkness upstairs. A large calico cat lay sprawled, one leg hanging down, on the newel post at the bottom of the staircase. It looked at her impassively with yellow eyes. A black mark covered the animal’s nose like a large ink blot.

“Wait here,” the man said. “I’ve got to lock the basement door.”

That was what must made the screeching and clanging noise earlier, Alexandra realized. One of those steel doors that covered basement stairs.

“What’s your name, kitty?” she said. “I’m going to call you Blot.”

The cat still stared at her, impassive, unmoving.

“Hi, Blot,” Alexandra said, reaching to pet the animal. For the first instant, when her fingertips touched the fur, she still had no idea. Then her hand touched stiffness underneath and jerked back.

“She’s dead!” Alexandra said.

“Not dead, mounted,” the man said from down the hall. “They’re all mounted.”

All? She looked around and picked the others out of the gloom. A big German Shepherd was in the corner, half rising from his haunches, about to attack. A second cat, a huge black one with a white throat, was curled up on the hall bench. A small monkey hung from a bentwood hat rack.

Alexandra made herself calm down after the awful shock of feeling papery hide where she had expected warm and supple skin.

“You mean like they’re stuffed?” she said. “Cool.”

“We say mounted, not stuffed.”

“Were they your pets?”

“I don’t keep pets. Live ones, anyway.”

“Do you buy them from a taxidermist?”

“I am a taxidermist.”

Alexandra had never known anybody who was a taxidermist. The man was not quite old but getting there, with thinning black hair that fell over his forehead. His ears and Adam’s apple were big. He was long-necked, narrow-shouldered, and as skinny as an AIDS person on TV. He wore an old tweed jacket over a gray sweatshirt, khaki pants with bicycle clips on the cuffs, brown canvas sneakers, and no socks. Like clothes a homeless person would wear almost, but not exactly.

“People bring you their pets to stuff, I guess,” Alexandra said.

“If they did, I wouldn’t do it. People are never satisfied with how their pets come out.”

“Why not?”

“Think about it. Take that calico cat. To you she looked real enough so you reached out to pet her, but she’d never fool her

owner. Most commercial taxidermists won't do pets unless the customer pays for the job in advance, because otherwise they're not likely to get paid."

"So at least you got paid, anyway."

"I'm not a commercial taxidermist. All of these I did for my own amusement."

"Wow, you should open a museum."

"I doubt if anyone would want to come to my sort of museum."

"I bet they would, too."

"They wouldn't be welcome. One who creates art for others is not an artist."

"Well, you're sure an artist," Alexandra said, looking at the little monkey on the hat rack, how cute and lifelike he was. "I don't see how you do it."

"Perspiration," he said. "Many years of practice."

"What a cool thing, though. I'd love to learn how."

"All it takes is the patience to keep at it."

"I don't have any patience at all."

"You only have that sort of patience if you really want to do a thing. If you have to do it."

"You had to be a taxidermist?"

"Nobody made me, but yes, I had to. Mother took me to a museum when I was a boy, and when I saw the dioramas I knew I had to learn how to do that."

Alexandra thought dioramas were some kind of camel, but she didn't want to show her ignorance by asking.

"My name's Alexandra Gaines," she said instead.

"Addison Tuttle," he said, making no move to shake hands.

"I bet they called you Eddie in school, huh? Or Addie? Maybe Andy?"

Tuttle shook his head.

"I like Andy best," Alexandra said. "My nickname at school is Sandy. Sandy and Andy, huh?"

Tuttle smile came just a fraction too late, like he had to think about it first.

"Where do you go to school?" he said.

"Nowhere right now. I was out sick for practically the whole year."

"What was wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. A heart murmur."

"Doesn't sound like nothing."

"No big deal. They have pills for it now."

"I hope those didn't get stolen, too."

"Stolen?"

"You said your money was stolen."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't take the pills anymore, so at least that's okay."

"How did your money come to get stolen?"

"I was in the supermarket? The Great American? There was this bum-type guy? Anyway, I saw him snitch some sandwich stuff and hide it behind the paper towels so I told him I'd tell the manager if he tries to walk out with it. So then he gets all mad and leaves."

"You took a chance," Tuttle said.

"Tell me about it. He only followed me from the store and stole my whole pack. My wallet and food and clothes and sleeping bag. Everything."

"Well, there's a bed made up in mother's old room."

"Really? You'd let me sleep here tonight? That's so totally cool of you!"

★

Chapter five

“Everything pertaining to meals is in the refrigerator,” Addison Tuttle said over his shoulder as he opened a wall cabinet. “Help yourself.”

On the top shelf of the refrigerator Alexandra saw a large plastic glass, a dark green bowl with a spoon in it, a dark green plate with a fork on it, and an empty microwave dish.

Tuttle came back from the cupboard with an identical glass, spoon, fork, bowl and plate for her. “You can use Mother’s set,” he said, tapping the bowl. “You know what this is? Melamine. Watch.”

He dropped the bowl on the floor. It bounced but didn’t break. “Can’t break it,” he said. “Can’t wear it out.”

“Wow,” Alexandra said. “I never even heard of it.”

“That’s because the idiots stopped making it before you were born,” he said. “There’s no market for quality in a throwaway culture.”

The only food Alexandra saw in the refrigerator was ketchup, sugar, an open box of corn flakes and three sealed ones, a gallon of milk in a plastic jug, and a half-gallon container of orange juice. And three cans of cream soda, which she had seen in stores but never tasted. Some of the sugar was in a nearly-empty five-pound bag closed with a large plastic clip that said, “ChipSavor.” The rest was in a glass jar with a stainless steel pouring cone for a top. Alexandra had seen them in coffee shops and diners, but never in a home.

“I store all my food in the refrigerator,” Tuttle said. “The only sure way to keep rodents and insects out of a kitchen is not to leave even a crumb of food where they can get it.”

“What a neat idea,” she said.

“People don’t realize that a cockroach can survive six months on a single bread crumb,” Addison Tuttle said. “That’s mostly breakfast stuff down there. For dinner I eat frozen burritos.”

The freezer was stacked full of half-gallon boxes of coffee ice cream and packages of burritos. The choice was cheese or chicken. She took one of each and set them on the counter.

“I’ll show you how to do them this time and then you’ll know,” he said, putting the burritos in a microwave dish. “This oven only has 450 watts of power, so for two burritos you have to set it for exactly six minutes. Be careful you’ve got the pointer right on six. The increments on the dial are fifteen seconds each, and even an extra fifteen seconds makes them too dried out.”

Alexandra had never seen a microwave that old, with a dial instead of a digital readout. Was that all he could afford? His clothes weren’t much, but he couldn’t very well be poor, living in a huge house like this. It was probably at least a five-bedroom home, maybe a lot more. It had three or four floors and you could have used the front hall for a bowling alley, in fact it was even longer than that.

While the timer on the microwave was ticking, Tuttle cleared a pile of occupant mail off one of the two chairs at the kitchen table and gestured for Alexandra to sit down. They were the kind of chairs you saw in ice cream parlors, with round seats and wire frames.

“Mother’s chair,” he said, although she couldn’t see how he knew the difference. “It’s been six years since she passed over.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“She had been ailing, so we knew her time was coming. She was eighty-four when she died. I was forty-two.”

A tiny crease appeared between Alexandra’s eyebrows as she tried to do the arithmetic.

“Mother married very late,” Tuttle said. “She had just turned 42 the day before I was born. We always celebrated our birthdays on the same day, hers one year and mine the next.”

“That’s so neat!”

“She had been bedridden and suffering for years so in that sense it was a blessing when the end finally came. She just stopped breathing one afternoon.”

It sounded nice, Mrs. Tuttle floating weightless up in a corner of the room looking down at her body lying there all peaceful and then she’d drift up into that pearly tunnel toward the golden light place that the near-death people talked about on TV. Alexandra wondered where Tuttle kept the TV, come to think of it.

The microwave bell went off.

While she ate her burritos and drank a glass of orange juice, Addison Tuttle looked down at his bony, large-veined hands where they rested on the table. Alexandra was looking down herself, busy with her food, but she could see out of the corner of her eye that he was sneaking peeks at her.

“There’s a bus at eleven and another at noon,” he said at last. “Depending on whether you’re heading east or west.”

“I’m not headed anywhere special.”

“What’s your schedule?”

“No special schedule.”

“Nowhere you have to be?”

“I’m already somewhere.”

She said it politely, trying to give a helpful answer to a question she didn’t really understand. Now she was here. Someday she’d be somewhere else. Why make plans? People were nice pretty much wherever you went, or when.

She took her dishes over to the sink and washed them while Tuttle stole glances from the table. As she was putting her plate in the dish rack he said, “You should wash the bottom.”

Alexandra turned the plate over and didn’t see anything stuck to the bottom. “Okay,” she said.

“People might think why bother,” Tuttle said. “After all, you don’t eat off the bottom. But when you stack the dishes the

bottoms come in contact with the tops so you can get a transference.”

“I guess that’s right.”

Tuttle looked at the chair where Alexandra had been sitting, and shook his head

““I shouldn’t have sat in your mom’s chair,” she said, even though he was the one who told her to sit there.

“No, it’s nice to see someone in her chair. I’ve been living alone so long.”

“Tell me about it.”

“There’s nothing special to tell.”

“That’s just something kids say, Tell me about it. It means I know what you mean.”

“You don’t live alone, do you?”

“Not alone alone, but you know. Sometimes you might as well be.”

★

Chapter six

The bearded man woke up in the light of the heavy, six-cell Maglite, stupid from sleep. "I was just on my way, sarge," he mumbled.

"Chief, asshole."

"Chief, right. I can't see you good behind that light."

"You don't need to see nothing. Let's go."

"I'm going. I'll just get my things here."

"Don't move and keep those hands where I can see them."

The index finger on the man's left hand was just a stub. The man had been using a dark green backpack for a pillow

"What's that sticking out of that backpack?" Kregger said. "Pull that thing out to where I can see it."

"That ain't nothing, chief. Just some old junk."

"You do as I say or I'll lay this goddamned flashlight up alongside your head."

The bearded man pulled a brassiere into view. "Belongs to this old gal I used to know," he said.

"Bullshit, I know where you got it. You been jacking off into it, have you?"

"I didn't do no such thing."

The man screamed when Kregger smashed the flashlight into his leg. He went to the ground, curled up and guarding his head with both hands.

"On your feet, fucker," the policeman said. "Grab your stuff and let's get going."

The man got up, favoring his hurt leg, and started to hobble around the bench. "Leave that there," Kregger said. "I don't want no sack of cans stinking up my cruiser. Bad enough I got you."

"You're the boss, chief. Where we going?"

"We're going to a dance. You know how to do the chicken, asshole?"

"No, sir, chief. I never done that one."

MRS. TUTTLE'S WHOLE BEDROOM was peach-colored. The wallpaper and the drapes, the upholstery on the sofa and chairs, the ruffled skirt on the glass-topped makeup table, the quilted headboard on the big bed, the satin bedspread, even the sheets and the pillowcases.

"I hope the shower still works," Tuttle said, opening the door to the bathroom. "Mother never took anything but baths."

The enormous tub and the sink and the toilet were peach, too. So were the tiles on the walls around the tub, and the bath mat hanging over its side, and the big, fluffy towels on the racks.

"When I get my own house someday," Alexandra said, "I'm going to have them do my bedroom and bathroom exactly like this." Tuttle nodded but didn't smile or say anything. He was one of those types of person that the cat got their tongue whenever you paid them a compliment.

"I don't know how she got the tub and everything to match," she said to him.

"Actually she didn't. She found the bathroom fixtures first and then and matched everything else to them," he said. "She knew it would be easier to match everything to the fixtures than the other way around."

"Well, duh, of course," she said. "I wouldn't have thought of that in a million years."

"There was nobody like mother," Tuttle said, and paused for a second, taking inventory of the big bathroom.

"I think that's everything, then," he went on. "Extra towels, supplies, spare toothbrushes, that kind of thing, are in the bathroom closet. I'll see you in the morning. Now I have to go down to the

studio and finish up on the specimen I was working on when you came.”

WHEN THE BEDROOM DOOR closed behind Tuttle, Alexandra put her ear to it and listened to his footsteps going back downstairs. The studio must be in the basement, since he had come out of the cellar door to catch her on the lawn. How had he known somebody was outside? He must have one of those invisible electric-eye beams for burglars.

Alexandra couldn't hear Tuttle's footsteps anymore. What sort of specimen was he working on down there? She tried to imagine what he could be doing, but no pictures came to her. You never saw taxidermy on TV. The closest thing was the TLC channel where they showed real operations. She had sat through one once because one of the Shawcross twins dared her to, but never again. This woman who used to be a model was having a facelift and it wasn't just taking a little tuck here and there the way you thought. The doctor peeled the skin back in big bloody sheets so you could see the yellow fat underneath and it was a total gross-out.

But the memory was gone in an instant. Bad thoughts flickered only briefly in Alexandra's mind, like heat lightning over the horizon. Bad to be sad, good to be glad, that was her personal motto that she lived by. For instance, here she was, from homeless robbery victim to guest in a fabulous color-coordinated rich woman's picture-book boudoir. She turned the key in the door and heard the small click the bolt made as it slid home. It was the old-fashioned kind of lock where the keyhole went all the way through. She turned the key a little so it wouldn't be pushed out if somebody tried to unlock the door from the other side. Not that anybody would, but people had been known to come into kids' bedrooms at night.

When everything was quiet, she headed for the jewelry box on the dresser. It was full of beautiful things. Alexandra picked up one piece after another, holding them in place as she looked in the dresser mirror and then trying the next one. There was a pearl necklace the same kind Jackie O. always wore with her simple little

basic black dresses. Uh-oh, one pearl was cracked or something. There was a white spot on it. Up close, the white spot looked like glass. Alexandra picked at the place, and a pearl-colored flake came off. The necklace was nothing but a fake, glass beads covered with pearl paint.

Well naturally, girl, what did you expect? Didn't you ever watch *Life Styles of the Rich and Famous*? They wear reproductions for everyday, and only get out the genuine stuff for big charity events and inaugural balls. The real jewels would be in a safe somewhere in the house, probably behind a picture on the wall. She looked, but there were no pictures on the bedroom walls. Maybe there were some downstairs, she didn't remember. You didn't notice the walls with all the stuffed animals around. Who would ever think of putting jewels inside a stuffed animal? Things like that happened, though. They had it on *Hard Copy* once, where these drug kingpins smuggled in cocaine by hiding it inside dead babies. The mothers would go like, Oh the baby is just sleeping, and walk right through customs.

Alexandra gave up on the jewelry and turned to Mrs. Tuttle's walk-in closet. Some of it was still in fashion, which surprised her. A dove-gray dress had the same wide shoulder pads you saw in the magazines, except it was too long. Still, it didn't look bad when she tried it on. Mrs. Tuttle must have been just Alexandra's size.

Between trying on dresses in the full-length mirror mounted on the inside of the closet door, Alexandra posed like a supermodel with just her panties on and her hands hiding her boobs. After Mrs. Tuttle's fine clothes her own cotton panties looked cheap to her, so she skinned them down till the little bit of fabric hung from the tip of her right foot. Carefree and sexy reckless, she kicked the panties up into the air. Brad always laughed when she did that, and then he would take her fiercely, right on the polar bear rug with the light from the fireplace flickering on their naked bodies.

She slipped on a silk nightgown in Mrs. Tuttle's favorite color and went over to the beautiful bed like a shrine with its bank of ruffled pillows piled up at the head. Peach ruffles, peach bedspread, peach sheets, peach Alexandra in her silky smooth peach

nightgown. The sheets felt smooth and cool. The pillows smelled like those pretty shops in the mall with soaps and sachets and dried flower arrangements. Wherever old Mrs. Tuttle had got to through her pearly tunnel, it couldn't be much nicer than what she was already used to when she was alive. Maybe Mrs. Tuttle was up there still, looking down at the girl who had replaced her in her old bed. The poor old thing had always dreamed of having a pretty young granddaughter and now at last.

Alexandra turned out the bedside light. After a while objects started to come out of the dark—a slight paleness where a mirror reflected the night sky outside, blackness where the bathroom door stood open, the gray of the spread. Where did colors go at night? Why wasn't the bedspread still peach-colored, only darker? Alexandra let the thought go.

Shifting position, she felt her body move smoothly inside the cool silk of her wrapper. It was like being wrapped safe in a magic cloak. She slept.

★

Chapter seven

The brassiere wasn't very big. Hal Kregger tapped one of the cups into shape with the back of a forefinger and then palmed the nylon cone. He pinched the ends of both cups and suspended the bra in the air that way while he imagined the owner, then dropped it on his desk with the other junk from the pack.

A sweater. A ratty green parka, rolled up tight and tied with old shoelaces so it would take up less room. Three shirts or blouses, whatever you wanted to call them, all clean but wrinkled. Three pairs of panties, not new but fairly clean. A pair of red plaid sneakers. Two pairs of wool hiking socks. Two pairs of low cotton socks, pale blue. A clean, folded handkerchief. A green John Deere giveaway cap.

A small bag with a drawstring held a toothbrush and a half-empty tube of Crest, four little shampoo bottles, three from Holiday Inns and one from Best Western. Lady Arrid. Tampax. Chief Kregger dropped the contents of the bag into the wastepaper basket beside his desk.

No letters or cards. No notebook. No address book. No pencil or pen. No checkbook or credit card slips. No ticket stubs and no cash register receipts. No name tags sewn in anything. No money.

Kregger unstrapped the rolled-up sleeping bag from the bottom of the pack. Stuffed into the foot of the bag he found a Ziploc bag with papers in it. He glanced through them. Still no money. There were snapshots of a half dozen or so teenage boys, which Kregger

hardly bothered to look at. He paid more attention to a folded-up program from last spring's graduation ceremonies at something called Aspetuck Middle School in Dover Plains, New York. He wasn't sure where Dover Plains was, but thought it might be somewhere to the south. The program was written all over with notes from classmates. "To Alexandra, the Kooolest of the Kool Kids, have a really great summer, love and xxxx, Kim." "You go girl, your friend forever, Tiffany." "See you next year in HIGH SCHOOL, can you believe it! —Kevin." The only Alexandra in the list of graduates was an Alexandra Gaines.

Kregger unfolded a newspaper clipping that was inside the program and glanced at it. The owner of a video store, Robert W. Gaines, and his wife, Adelaide, had been killed when their house on Rocky Glen Drive burned down sometime or other. There was no date on the story, and no way to tell what paper it had run in. The fire had been discovered by their niece, Alexandra, when she returned from an evening at the movies.

Another time it would have been interesting to track down this Alexandra, with her wet panties and oh, so innocent on the phone. She had been around the block a few times, you could tell. But with things being the way they were, it was best to stay as far away from her as possible, forget she ever even called.

Kregger carried the girl's collection of papers to the toilet, ripped them into tiny pieces, and flushed. He watched until the last scrap disappeared.

Carrying the pack, he went down the outside stairs and paused at the bottom to be sure no one was in sight. He drove the few blocks to the parking lot of the Great American, where he pulled up next to the Goodwill donation box. The digital clock on the bank next door read twelve after three. Still no one was in sight. He carried the back pack over to the donation box and shoved its contents piece by piece through the door and then followed them with the back pack itself. That way the Goodwill people wouldn't wonder why somebody had thrown away a full pack.

"Might as well get it over with," he murmured out loud. He headed for the pay phone outside the market.

ALEXANDRA ALMOST ANSWERED the thing before she came out of her sleep enough to realize she had no business answering it. She just lay there while the phone rang and rang on the bedside table. At last it stopped.

Either the caller had gotten tired, or Tuttle had finally woken up. Alexandra herself was completely awake by then. The hands of a big, old-fashioned alarm clock glowed green at her from the bedside table, showing eleven something. But the clock was stopped and Alexandra hadn't known what time to set it to. Besides, it was the kind you had to wind up so probably it would have kept her awake all night with its ticking. She didn't know how people ever got any sleep back in the old days.

It felt like the small end of the night—three or four in the morning. She had gone to bed so early that now she might not be able to get back to sleep anymore. But what would she do if she got up, all by herself in a strange house full of stuffed pets? So she closed her eyes, and had almost drifted off when she heard a car crunching gravel as it turned into the driveway. She got up and went to the window she had left open.

The black police car was just disappearing from sight under the portico. Alexandra heard a car door open, and then the boom of the iron knocker. Light from the entrance hall spilled out from under the portico. Voices came, too low for her to make out.

So Tuttle had turned her in, or Chief Kregger had somehow found her on his own. Now he would want to go nosing into her whole life.

If she could find a rear staircase in a house, she could be safe in the dark outside before the policeman came up after her. She groped for her clothes and fumbled them on, thinking in a distracted way about Andy Tuttle. He hadn't seem to be frightened of her—shy but not frightened. Who would be frightened of a girl? But why else would he have called the cops on her? Because he must have. How else would Chief Kregger know where she was?

Alexandra was dressed and had her hand on the door when she thought of the peach-colored silk night gown. A night gown was

no use to that weirdo Tuttle and if he didn't want her to take it he never should have turned her in and besides he would never miss it anyway. She went back for it and tucked it, folded square, down the front of her jeans.

Alexandra was still at the bed when she heard the slam of a car trunk. The policeman must have gone outside where he would see her if she tried to run across the lawn. She went to the window and looked out into the moonlit night, her knuckles white as she gripped the sill to stop trembling.

The cruiser nosed out from under the portico with its lights off, but instead of staying on the drive it turned without hesitation onto the lawn and disappeared around the corner of the house. Maybe it was some maneuver to trap her inside, but Alexandra was beginning to suspect that the whole business had nothing to do with her. If Kregger was after her, wouldn't he have headed straight up the stairs to her room?

The sound of the car's engine stopped. Alexandra faint noises, but nothing recognizable until a minute or two had passed. Then came the loud screeching and clanging of the steel basement doors opening. She leaned out the window, straining to make sense out of indistinct bumps and thuds, and the murmuring of voices.

At last came more screeching and clanging as the steel doors closed, and then the slamming of a trunk lid again, and then the sound of the cruiser starting up. She watched the black car reappear from around the corner, drive across the lawn to the driveway, and finally turn onto the street. Its lights were off the whole time, even on the public street. Alexandra was hiding from Kregger because he was the police. Who was Kregger hiding from?

In any event he was gone. What was that creepy taxidermist up to, though? She left the window and was about to unlock the bedroom door when she heard steps on the stairs. They weren't heavy, but they weren't the steps of somebody sneaking around, either. She let go of the key.

The steps stopped in front of her door. The man was only a few inches from her, just the wood panels separating them.

“Alexandra,” he said in voice not much more than a whisper. “Are you awake?”

She stood holding her breath, her pulse beating so loud in her ears that she was afraid he would hear it. The doorknob made a tiny noise as it turned. She felt the door move slightly as he tried it and found it was locked. His footsteps went down the hall and then down the stairs, and at last she breathed.

SHE LAY ON TOP of the bed, calming down as she thought over what had happened. It could be that Chief Kregger had a report of prowlers on the property. Or maybe that some type of alarm rang at police headquarters back when she first showed up, and the chief was out on patrol and only saw it when he came back.

“Must have been a false alarm, chief,” she could practically hear Tuttle saying, protecting her from the police. All that business where the chief drove over the lawn to the cellar door, it could have been anything. Maybe they were buddies and the chief was just dropping off something for his friend.

She saw Tuttle and the cute policeman back when they were in high school. Hap Kregger, star halfback, letting the geeky rich kid hang around with him and the rich kid never forgot. They became buddies for life, the tough policeman and the poor little rich boy. When Hap was patrolling at night, if he was feeling lonely he might drop by to chew the fat with old Andy Tuttle, the only other soul he could really relate to. She saw them sitting at the kitchen table, Hap telling his old sidekick how awful his life was with that bitchy wife of his. Back when Jennifer was prom queen, who could have guessed she’d turn into such an ugly old witch? Alexandra felt sorry for poor Hap, always acting so stern but that wasn’t really him. It was just to cover up his broken heart.

Hap turned into Brad Pitt as Alexandra fell asleep.

★

Chapter eight

Hal Kregger was too wound up to go home, even if it was past three in the morning. Good things could still happen. He was parked out of sight above the state road, facing east out of town. Luxor's last street light was nearby, giving him a glimpse at whoever was the cars that passed. At this hour, hardly any did.

In his angled side mirror he saw headlights approaching. A late model Honda Accord went by maybe five miles over the 35-mile limit. A woman alone with Connecticut plates, so probably a student from SUNY Albany, daddy gave her a little red twenty-thousand-dollar toy so she could drive home on weekends.

Kregger drifted smoothly down onto the state road a couple of hundred yards behind her with his lights off. He didn't want her to spot him till they were past the last houses, alone in the valley. She was doing fifty-five now, in a forty-five-mile zone. You can do better than that, bitch, he said aloud. Want to see how? Just as the Honda was disappearing around a curve, Kregger put the pedal to the metal. Like those animal snuff flicks where the king lion breaks from cover onto the plain, but the gazelle still doesn't have a clue. Fifty-five, sixty. He was doing nearly seventy, lights out, when he powered into the curve. She was too busy with the next curve to see the blacked-out Crown Victoria coming up in the mirror, almost on her bumper. He tapped his brakes to put a little space between them. Then he hit the lights.

Sometimes when you blasted them with the high beams out of nowhere they hit the brakes, which was why he had dropped back a little just in case. But this one kept the same speed, her shoulders

rigid. Beautiful. She was scared shitless. Kregger let a few yards open up between them so she'd get the full glare in her rearview, and waited for the moment when she'd finally get the point that he wasn't going to pass her. Generally then they'd all of a sudden speed up to get away. It seemed like this little bitch was scared to drive fast, though. She only kicked it to a little over seventy on the straight stretches. Kregger played her for a couple of miles, hanging right on her bumper, before he decided the hell with it and stopped her with the flashers and a touch of the siren.

The girl was trembling like a baby rabbit when he approached her window. Blonde, not much in the tit department. Probably okay with a little makeup on, but a mess right now, with her face gone white and her eyes big.

"License and registration, please."

She fumbled around in the glove compartment, dropping the registration on the floor first, and then dropping the envelope, before she got everything together. Kregger looked at the documents. Amber Fineberg, nineteen years old, Fairfield, Connecticut. Hazel eyes, 112 pounds, et cetera, et cetera. Amber Fineberg reached for the door handle. Kregger reached for his gun, and kept his handle on the butt.

"Please remain in your vehicle and keep your hands where I can see them at all times," Kregger said. She put her hands on the wheel.

"You have any idea how fast you were going?"

"I'm sorry. I thought somebody was trying to run me down."

"Do you know what the penalty is in New York State for failure to obey a lawful order from a police officer?"

"I didn't know you were a police officer."

"You didn't see my flashers?"

"All I saw was headlights right behind me, till right at the end. I stopped as soon as I saw the blue lights."

"Blue lights, that's a laugh. Don't you read the papers? Anybody can use blue lights to impersonate a police officer."

She had been looking up at his face, but now he stepped a little closer so his hips were right at eye-level. She couldn't miss the bulge she was making in his pants, frightened little rich bitch.

"You have to be careful on these lonely roads, especially at night," he said. "You don't want to stop for nobody."

"But I didn't —"

"You're just lucky it was a police officer." Kregger moved back a little so he could watch her chin tremble. "Could have been some big buck from Albany looking for a little white meat."

She nodded, not daring to look his way again. Little Miss Amber, pretending she didn't see what she was doing to him, when she had her damned face right in it. She fumbled a Kleenex out of her shirt pocket and tried to get away with wiping her nose like a lady. But then she gave up and had to just honk into it.

"Let me give you some advice, miss. A girl alone, don't stop for nothing or nobody at night. Go direct for the nearest police station."

She snuffled and nodded her head. She looked down at the steering wheel, not at him.

"You wouldn't believe what kind of animals are out there."

A thought struck him.

"Did you stop in Luxor?" he asked.

It was worth asking even if she had that New York Jew accent, not like the little girl on the phone earlier.

"Was that the last town?"

"That's right."

"No, I drove straight through."

"You're lucky. We had a rape just today, a little fifteen-year-old girl sodomized front and back, you know what I mean? We'll get him sooner or later, don't worry about that, but right now he's still out there somewhere. You understand what I'm telling you?"

Amber Fineberg kept nodding and snuffling. Her knuckles were white from strangling the steering wheel.

Kregger rapped his small aluminum clipboard on the door right beside her. "Look at me, I'm talking to you," he said. "Clean

yourself up and go on back home to your boyfriend now, tell him this time you got a break."

Which she did. Normally he would have written her up for seventy-five in a fifty-five and seen what she'd do to get out of it, but this particular night he didn't want to try anything that could come back and bite him later. As far as anybody would be able to prove, the lion king never even climbed down out of his tree all night.

AT HIS WORKBENCH ADDISON TUTTLE had passed into a state outside of time. The scalpel sailed along by itself, a razor-sharp prow lifting and slitting the skin as a pink wake of naked flesh opened behind. While the bright blade went about its work in his hand Tuttle hummed a little tune over and over again, unaware that he was making any sound at all.

It sometimes happened that when Tuttle came out of one of these states the whole day had passed and it was dark out. This time, though, it was eight-thirty in the morning. The job had only a few hours. Practice made perfect. Tuttle decided to flense the hide later. It would stay hydrated perfectly well in the refrigerated room down the hall, and the carcass would remain fresh. He unlocked the studio door and listened for a moment. No sound came from the girl upstairs.

He thought without pleasure of the job that remained to be done, making the mold. It would be hot, heavy, and dull work, manhandling the bags of plaster and mixing it with water. And yet success depended on the mold. The execution was as important as the concept; they were inextricable parts of the whole.

Tuttle examined the flayed specimen, pink and red and white, which rested on the stainless steel table. He moved the limbs around in his mind, arranging them in different poses. It was a funny thing, reality. You could look at reference photos of living creatures caught in action and reproduce the pose exactly, and yet the finished job might look stiff or unbalanced. To make a static object come fluidly alive demanded not the literal reproduction of

truth but a manipulation of reality in order to seem true. Art was not reproduction, but the creation of truth from lies.

Tuttle went back to work.

He tugged a couple of 55-gallon drum liner bags up over the carcass and maneuvered it without too much trouble from the steel table into a large two-wheeled garden cart. For specimens of this size he didn't have to bother with the systems of ramps, ropes, hoists, and pulleys that he had installed both in the studio and in the workshop back in the woods where he made large molds. In theory the equipment would allow him to handle even an adult moose without help, although his biggest jobs so far had been cattle.

Tuttle folded the damp, rubbery hide to fit inside a second plastic bag, which he closed with a plastic tie to keep the skin hydrated overnight. He wheeled the cart down the hall to the cool room that his great-grandfather had built in the 1920s to age the beef from one of the family's long-sold farms.

He had never before felt any need to lock the cool room with the padlock that hung unused on the staple screwed into the frame the heavy, insulated wooden door. Now, though, there was somebody else in the house. He clicked the padlock shut and thought about locking the studio, too. But there was nothing in the studio that could horrify Alexandra if she should go exploring.

This was new, having to worry about what a person from the outside might discover in his house. He had arranged his whole life to avoid the very thing which had now come to pass and yet to his surprise the situation didn't seem completely unacceptable. The girl was up. He heard her in the kitchen, making noise where for so long the only noise had been his own. There wasn't much for her to eat for breakfast. What did girls eat for breakfast? He headed up the stairs.

★

Chapter nine

Alexandra was at the kitchen table eating corn flakes from one of the green Melamine bowls.

"I see you found something to eat," Tuttle said.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

"Sleep well?"

"I slept great."

"I was afraid maybe the phone in the middle of the night woke you up."

"Phone?"

"It rang for a long time before I was able to pick up. You didn't hear it?"

"Oh, wow. I must have been dead to the world. Who was it?"

"Just a wrong number."

Tuttle got a bowl from himself out of the refrigerator, and reached for the corn flakes.

"I thought you would have eaten breakfast already," Alexandra said. "I'm usually the last one up. Lazy bones."

"When the phone woke me up, I figured I might as well spend the rest of the night in the studio."

"Rush job?"

"In a sense."

"Who's it for?"

"For my personal collection. I don't do commercial work."

"What's the rush, then?"

"There's always a time element in the art of taxidermy. Your canvas, as you might say, deteriorates even when refrigerated."

"What canvas?"

"I was speaking metaphorically. By canvas I meant skin."

"Oh," Alexandra said. "Skin. I was wondering, you got a toaster?"

"A toaster?"

"You know, for bread?"

"There's one around somewhere, but I'm afraid there's no bread. I don't eat bread."

"Me neither. I'm not a big bread eater."

"What do you need a toaster for, then?"

"I thought you might like some Eggo waffles."

"I'm not familiar with Eggo waffles."

"They're on all the TV."

"I haven't got a TV."

"You mean it's like broken?"

"I don't own one. How can you make waffles with a toaster?"

"Just stick them in. They're frozen."

"Really?"

"There's lots of stuff you can make with a toaster. Corn muffins, pizza, pop-tarts."

"Pop-tarts?"

"You never even heard of pop-tarts?"

"I'm afraid not," Tuttle said. "Since Mother died, I got into a nutritional rut. All I eat is what you see in the icebox, burritos and juice and ice cream."

"And corn flakes."

"Yes, corn flakes too."

"If a person was to make other stuff for you, would you eat it?"

"Certainly. I eat other things when I travel to conventions."

"You just don't want to be bothered with cooking, is that it?"

"Living alone, I try to strip life down to its essentials."

"We could go shopping and I could show you stuff," Alexandra said.

"I'm afraid I can't today," Tuttle said. "I have a lot more work to do after breakfast. There's no reason you couldn't go by yourself, though."

"The robber got all my money."

"I'll give you some."

"Would I take a cab or what? Because he got my license, too."

"I have a bike I use for running errands rather than waste gasoline unnecessarily. It's an old Schwinn with a good-sized basket."

"Okay."

"That won't do, though, now that I think of it," Tuttle said. "Everybody in town knows that bike is mine."

"They'd think I stole it, huh?"

"It isn't that. The problem is that I wouldn't want people to know I had a young girl staying with me. People in small towns can be very cruel."

"No problem," Alexandra said. "I'll pretend to be a boy. I do it lots of times anyway. All you do is pull your shirt out to hide your hips and stuff your hair under your cap. Except my cap was in the pack that got stolen."

"I've got caps that would fit you."

She looked at his head, which was much larger than hers.

"Mother saved every stitch of clothing I ever wore," he said. "Every year on the first sunny day in May, she used to air them on the back lawn."

Alexandra thought of the end of term at Aspetuck, when the teachers would spread out all the lost and found junk on the playground. Sometimes you could get really cool things if you got there early enough.

"Do you still do that?" she asked Tuttle.

"I'm afraid I have a tendency to let things slide, ever since I lost Mother. I should have found myself another Mrs. Milton."

"Who's Mrs. Milton?"

"She used to be our housekeeper. One day when I was little she just disappeared and I never saw her again."

"How come?"

"All Mother ever said was that Mrs. Milton was a good worker and a good Christian soul, but she had old-fashioned ideas on child-rearing. After she left, Mother took care of me herself. She

just had the Rudenback sisters come in two afternoons a week to do the heavy cleaning."

"Do they still come?" It didn't look like they did, and Alexandra was hoping they didn't. Possibilities were occurring to her.

"They died years ago, one a week after the other" Tuttle said.

"Who does for you now?"

"Nobody. I used to think I ought to get a housekeeper, but I don't know who'd put up with me and vice versa. I always thought I'd be uncomfortable with another person in the house."

"I'd be the entire opposite way," she said. "I'm a people person."

"Oddly enough, though, I find that I'm not," Tuttle said, as if Alexandra hadn't spoken.

"Not a people person?" she asked.

"Not uncomfortable. Well, I mean, here you are in the house. Only for one night, it's true, but still— I mean, well, I always assumed it would be a great irritation to have someone else around. But it's not."

"I don't know why it would be."

"Well, it isn't. I find myself surprisingly comfortable. Perhaps it's uncomfortable for you?"

"Are you kidding? I never slept in a bed like that in my life."

"I meant finding yourself under a strange roof with a strange man."

"I don't feel like you're a stranger. I was the stranger, showing up at your door out of nowhere."

"Perhaps you'd care to try an experiment for a few days, if you felt like it."

"What kind of experiment?"

"Would you be interested in becoming the new Mrs. Milton? A kind of housekeeper?"

Alexandra saw herself as Emma Thompson walking around the big house and making notes about everything that the staff needed to do. Alexandra couldn't remember the name of the movie, only that Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson wound up not

getting married when they both obviously wanted to. It was kind of dumb, actually. Bobby Hurley dragged her to it because with Anthony Hopkins being the butler he thought it would be like *Silence of the Lambs*. All the way through Bobby kept fake-biting her on the shoulder like he was Hannibal Lecter.

"I'd pay you, of course," Tuttle said. "We'll work out something fair. Would you like to try it?"

Of course she'd like to try it. It was her idea in the first place. People were always having the same ideas she had, like they could read her mind.

"Sure," she said. "It'll be fun."

"You'll have to dress like a boy when you're outside the house, though. Would you mind that?"

"I mostly hang out with boys anyway. The guys kid me that I'm a tomboy."

"Nobody would believe a boy housekeeper, though," Tuttle said. "In fact nobody would believe a housekeeper your age, anyway."

"We could say I was your nephew."

"Except that mother was an only child, like me. On the other hand, my esteemed father was originally from St. Louis and nobody here would know whether he had siblings or not. I certainly don't. I suppose you could be my nephew from St. Louis."

"Sure," Alexandra said. "I can get a boy's haircut when I do the shopping."

"That might not be such a good idea. The hairdresser would know you were a girl and then the whole town would know before long. It would be better if I cut your hair."

"Do you know how?"

"I have books on it."

TUTTLE WORKED SLOWLY, none of the quick snip-snip they did in the beauty parlor. His touch felt different, too, hesitant as if he were afraid of breaking her. As he went along he kept checking the hair-cutting book that was open beside him to the Layered Look. When Tuttle was done he made her stay in the kitchen chair

while he got an old gray vacuum cleaner from a closet under the steps. First he sucked up the hair on the floor, and then he vacuumed her head.

"That's a good idea," Alexandra said when the noise stopped.

"It's the easiest way to keep all the little bits of hair from sticking to the neck," Tuttle said, handing her a mirror. Her hair wasn't too much shorter than she usually wore it, actually, but it was trimmed differently on the sides and around the ears. It looked like a boy's haircut, all right.

"Do you cut your own hair?" she asked.

"No, I can't see to do the top and the back. I have it done at the barber's."

"Who did you practice on, then?"

"Animals, for the most part. Comb and scissors are standard tools in taxidermy, and of course blow dryers. The blow dryer has been a godsend to taxidermists."

"Boy, there's more to it than just stuffing the animal, huh?"

"Stuffing doesn't even remotely describe the process. In taxidermy you reconstruct the specimen's body exactly the same way a sculptor does. Then you apply the skin to that sculpture just as an artist applies paint to a canvas. The word taxidermy comes from the ancient Greek roots, *taxis* and *derma*. *Derma* means skin. *Taxis* means to arrange, or to bring order to. That's what the word taxidermy literally means. To bring order to skin."

"Oh, yeah?" Alexandra said. "I never knew that."

"Most taxidermists don't know it, either," Tuttle said. "Most of them are fools without pride or dignity. One idiot in Michigan runs ads that say, 'You snuff 'em, we stuff 'em.'"

Alexandra thought that was pretty funny actually, but she didn't smile.

"Trophy heads on an assembly line basis," Tuttle went on. "That's the height of most taxidermists' ambition."

"What kind of things do you do?"

"I specialize in dioramas, large and small. Do you know what dioramas are?"

"Not really."

“Animal groups mounted in their own habitat, like the exhibits in museums. Sometimes known as the dead zoo.”

“You make those things they have in museums? Wow, that’s cool.”

“Years ago I did a certain number of museum exhibits, but these days I work mostly for myself. Money not being a consideration for me, I am under no obligation to crank out hack work either for museums or for so-called sportsmen.”

THE SHIRTS TUTTLE brought downstairs were old-fashioned like clothes from the Goodwill, but they were hardly worn.

“I didn’t even know Mother had saved my things until I found them when I was clearing one of the third floor bedrooms to make more space,” Tuttle said.

“Space for what?”

“Just a certain project I was working on at the time.”

Alexandra plucked at the sleeve of her own shirt, the one she had been wearing yesterday and the only one she had left. “This is a boy’s shirt, actually,” she said. “But it makes me look like a girl because it’s too big.”

“How does that make you look like a girl?”

“Because it looks like your boyfriend gave it to you.”

“So if you want to look like a boy your shirt has to fit?” Tuttle asked.

“Well, lots of guys wear shirts that are too big for them, too. But the thing is that a girl would never wear boy’s shirt that fit. Unless you count those little tailored shirts that you wear with a jacket or a sweater. The ones that are supposed to look like copies of men’s shirts, you know?”

“It’s too much for me,” Tuttle said.

“It’s just the style.”

Alexandra went upstairs to try on shirts in front of the full-length mirror in Mrs. Tuttle’s bedroom. The least dorky shirt was a light blue short-sleeved one that was sort of cool in a way because of the button-down collar. She put it on, tails out, and went back downstairs.

“You do look more like a boy now,” Tuttle said. “The only problem, well—I mean, your own shirt, the boy’s shirt, I mean—”

“I know,” Alexandra said. “This one is more form-fitting, isn’t it? I was thinking, if you had like a scarf or something? Maybe an old Ace bandage?”

Tuttle’s long, pale face got all red like a kid’s. She had never in her life seen a grown man blush. It was kind of cute, when you thought about it.

★

Chapter ten

The movie theater was on Main Street, just up from the river. Letters were missing from the marquee, so that it read “A MAL HOUSE,” like something on the *Jeopardy* big board. A Male House? Animal House, that was it. A real old movie on TV, John Belushi was this really gross fat guy who blew mashed potatoes all over everybody. It was about college.

Plywood was nailed over the ticket window. Alexandra leaned Tuttle’s big old Schwinn against it and went to look inside the abandoned movie house. The veneer was lifting off the padlocked double doors to the lobby. Each door had a window the shape of a half moon, mottled with tan-colored dried dirt left by years of wind-driven rains. Alexandra read the decals on the inside of the windows: *POW/MIA You Are Not Forgotten*, *Whitetails Unlimited donor*, *American Federation of Police*. Alexandra wondered what the kids in this stupid town did for movies.

She began walking the bike slowly along the sidewalk. The next shop was empty, too, with a sign saying that *Luxor Video, VCRs Repaired*, had moved two blocks east. The store after that was called, “*Your Hearts Desire —New + Used Merchandise.*” A hand-lettered sign taped to the inside of the window read, “Do Not Take Check from Toni Millard Gellhorn till she makes good.” A picture probably cut out of a high school yearbook was taped under the sign. Toni Gellhorn was a loser who could stand to lose about thirty pounds, you could tell it just from her face.

The store owner must be a loser, too. Anyone who would put a sign like that in his window was practically begging to have his crummy store burned down some night. Her own picture took the

place of Toni’s in the window, and an orange tongue of flame seared it to nothing, poof. The window blackened and cracked, the outside air roared in to feed the fire, the fiery sparkles swirled up into the dark sky as the roof fell in. That was it for the stupid Hearts Desire person. The whole town would burn, stupid town. No movie, no mall.

Alexandra turned away from the ruins and pushed her bike across the street to the only halfway decent store in sight, the Luxor Clothing Depot. At least it had a regular sign out front, not something painted on the inside of a window that looked like some kid did it.

The aisles were so narrow that you practically brushed against the clothes on both sides. More clothes were hung on the walls, and above them, too high to reach without a ladder, were stacks of boxes. There were plenty of famous brand names like Lee and Levis and Nordica. Alexandra reached in her pocket and fingered the four fifties that Tuttle had given her to buy clothes. It was the first time she had ever had a fifty, let alone four of them.

A thin boy about her own age came up to her. He wore dark pants, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a maroon tie. The shirt was tucked in, the way they made you do it if you worked in stores. He had skin the color of cinnamon and caramel-colored eyes and thick black hair combed neatly back. Alexandra couldn’t decide if he was good-looking or not. With the foreign look he had, you couldn’t really tell.

“Hi,” the boy said. “Can I help you find something?”

Alexandra was surprised that he didn’t have any accent. “Just looking,” she said.

“Well, just let me know if I can help,” he said.

“Okay, thanks.”

“You visiting?”

Alexandra nodded.

“I thought so. I haven’t seen you around school.”

“I study at home. My mom used to be this big professor.”

“Really? I wish I could do home-schooling.”

“How come? Don’t you like school?”

“School’s okay, I guess. But the kids around here aren’t too friendly if you weren’t like born here.”

“Where were you born?”

“Just in Binghamton, but you know. Anybody new.”

“How come you’re not in school today?”

“It’s a teacher-training day. Look, my name’s Ravi.”

“Ravi?”

“Like ravioli. That’s what the kids call me at school. I don’t mind.”

“I’m Alexander. Everybody calls me Sandy.” They had decided she would be Tuttle’s nephew, Alexander Gaines, here for a visit.

“Well, just let me know if you need help,” he said again, and went back to the register.

Alexandra picked out a pair of loose-fit stone washed jeans, a pair of baggy khakis, and a couple of denim shirts. Ravi talked while he was ringing it all up, taking his time about it since there were no other customers waiting. It turned out he helped out sometimes at the store, which belonged to his mother’s cousin. He entered Luxor High as a freshman two years ago when his parents bought a motel just a quarter of a mile or so up the road from Addison Tuttle’s house.

“Maybe you could come out and we could hang around sometime,” Ravi said as he bagged the clothes. “I have keys for all the rooms. It’s kind of cool. You know, if you haven’t got anything else to do.”

ADDISON TUTTLE WAITED in the gloom of the shed. Most of the interior was taken up by a sawdust pit with sides made of heavy planks. A lumpy white object of no recognizable shape was half buried in the sawdust. Tuttle leaned over and tapped a fingernail on the plaster. Not quite hard enough yet. He sat back down into a folding lawn chair and waited. The plaster shouldn’t take too much longer to set, with the sun on the tin roof making the shed almost uncomfortably hot. The he could crack he could open the mold and dispose of the carcass. No more need to hurry and worry over decomposition. He could take his time, do the job right. That was

the best part of it, fussing and fooling until you got the specimen looking just the way you wanted it. Tuttle closed his eyes.

At this very moment, he thought, she might be in the fitting room at the Luxor Clothing Depot. The room had swinging doors that closed with a hook. From outside you could sometimes see women’s arms reaching up above the door, as they pulled clothing over their heads. You could see underneath the slatted doors, too. Once, when Mother had taken him in for school clothes, he had seen a slip settle around a woman’s bare feet, and she had stepped out of it. He hadn’t seen any more, because Mother had called him to come over so Mr. Rothstein could measure his new pants for cuffs. It was still Rothstein’s then.

What if they measured the girl Alexandra, Sandy, for cuffs? The clerk would have to do that business with the tape measure, one end held up to the crotch. Very little risk of discovery, though. The clerks were careful never to actually touch you up there. As for shirts, she could just try them on in the privacy of the fitting room, even change into a new one and wear it home if she wanted to. Nobody in the store would notice a thing, not with the Ace bandage binding her.

Did it hurt a girl to have her breasts flattened out like that? At the very least, the Ace bandage must feel rough on her tender swollen little buds. Silk would have been better. Tuttle thought of his father’s rack of neckties. The Infamous and Despicable Fortune Hunter, mother had always called him, as if it were one long word. She had resumed her maiden name after he did his Ignominious Midnight Flit, also one word. But for some reason she kept the clothes he left behind, Addison grew into them eventually, but of course he never wore them. Unthinkable to wear the clothes of a man who had abandoned his wife and infant son. He should have thrown them out after mother died, but like everything else he never got around to it.

The Infamous and Despicable Fortune Hunter's neckties wouldn't have met Alexandra's particular needs anyway. They were in the style of the Fifties, not even as wide as an Ace bandage. And too short to wrap around and around until the whole area was

snugly covered. It occurred to Tuttle that he should have offered Alexandra the burgundy cummerbund hanging with the ties in the closet of his father's old bedroom. It was wide and soft and adjustable. He thought of her warm pink rosebuds against cool silk.

You're disgusting, Tuttle said to himself. You truly are.

★

Chapter eleven

The house was dim when Alexandra, hot from riding the bicycle in the sun, let herself back in. It was cooler than outside.

“Andy?” she called, but nobody answered.

“Hi, doggy,” she said to the German Shepherd, frozen forever on the brink of attack. “Hi, Blot,” she said to the calico cat with the splotched face.

The dog, the monkey on the hat rack, and the two cats were all she had noticed last night in the gloom. Today, with daylight coming through the narrow windows on both sides of the front door, she could see that the exhibit went on and on. She found a switch and lit up the whole length of the shadowy hall.

Beyond the dog a large red and green parrot was chained to his perch on a stand of polished dark wood, his black eyes on a level with Alexandra’s. Beside him was a shelf holding a dish of sunflower seeds. Newspapers spread out on the floor around the stand were scattered with the striped hulls. She knelt down to inspect the papers. They were from years ago, when she was just a kid. She thought about that, the parrot looking alive on his perch but never moving once the whole time she had been alive.

Down at floor level, she saw a stuffed ferret under a big cast-iron radiator, in the act of chasing a rat. A mouse was hiding in the shadows where the radiator pipe came through the floor. Once she started to look, she began to see mice everywhere. They were running along the walls, hiding behind table legs, exploring the rungs on chairs. She even saw one overhead, where the wall met the ceiling, but when she stood up she saw it was a bat resting upside down. Two more bats, with their wings spread, hung

overhead as if they were flying. Alexandra couldn’t see the threads that must have held them up.

Further on a large birdcage sat on a long, heavy table. A dozen or more canaries filled the cage. One little yellow bird was fluttering against the bars, one was grooming its feathers with its beak, several were scratching for seeds on the floor or clinging to the sides of the cage, two were pecking at each other, two more had their heads together like lovebirds. It was like a freeze-frame and if you hit play the canaries would all start moving again.

Past the cage was a large, heavy door. Alexandra tried it, expecting that it would be locked like most of the rooms on the second floor. But the knob turned and the door opened.

Alexandra stood in the doorway but didn’t go in for fear of leaving footprints. The dust was so thick it dulled the colors and softened the edges of everything in the room like gray snow. Motes moved slowly in the bars of sunlight that slanted between the floor-length drapes on the windows.

It had been a room for reading. A rack full of antique magazines sat beside one of the armchairs, and more magazines were piled on a large, low table with a black mirrored top. Shelves of books covered one whole wall. The top shelves were filled with rows of National Geographics and stacks of other magazines. A book still lay face-down on an end table, beside a large glass ashtray and an open red pack of Pall Mall cigarettes. Alexandra had heard of Palls Malls, but none of the kids ever smoked them.

Nobody would ever smoke these, either. They had been sitting there for ages, judging by the dust and cobwebs all over everything. Some of the cobwebs on the ceiling hung down in filmy veils that swayed in the draft when she opened the door. Cobwebs seemed like they lasted forever. You saw in movies where they opened up these old treasure tombs from thousands of years ago and there they were, cobwebs.

Alexandra closed the door to the reading room and tried the door across the hall. It opened onto a dining room with valuable antique dining room suite that was heavy like something in a castle and so dark brown it was almost black. The silver candlesticks on

the table were almost black, too. They would polish up nice, though, if somebody wanted to spend the next ten years working at it. Luckily it wouldn't be her, since the only thing Andy seemed to care what it looked like was his stuffed animals.

Twelve chairs went with the dining room suite, but ten of them were sitting along the walls. The other two were at same end of the table, facing each other across the width of the table. They matched the other ten chairs, except for having arms. Why would only two of the chairs have arms?

Andy and his mom were having Christmas dinner together, alone but not lonely because after all they had each other. Andy would cut a tiny slice off the breast and reach across the table with his antique silver fork to place it lovingly on her fine china plate and she would help herself to cranberry sauce from the little silver thing beside her. The giant Yule log crackled in the fireplace. Carolers from the village were outside singing Jingle Bells and when they were finished caroling the family servant would take hot toddies out to them.

Sarah closed the door on the cobwebbed dining room. Maybe after a while she could hire a maid to clean things up for them. If she was going to be the housekeeper, she needed a maid. Well actually, no she didn't. No way. She could take care of Andy all by herself.

Where was he anyway?

FIRST SHE TRIED the barn or garage, whatever it was, out back. One of the big double doors was open enough so that she could slip through. A sudden explosion of sound made her jump. She was terrified for an instant, till she realized it was just pigeons. The two birds were resettling themselves on a rafter high above. Her heart slowed down.

A van was parked off to the left of the big open interior. A piece of junk, like something a kid in high school might have. You'd think Tuttle would have a shiny new one, with chrome ladders going up to the roof and the spare tire mounted on the back with a special silver cover, and a hand-rubbed three-color paint job with striping, and lots of oversize windows with venetian blinds.

But this one didn't have any windows except in the front doors and of course the windshield. The whole van was covered with dust and pigeon droppings. It needed a paint job. Two hub caps were missing. One corner of the front bumper had been caved in and never repaired. The bottoms of the rear doors were rusting out.

Alexandra looked inside. Heavy iron rings were mounted to the walls, and hidden in the shadows at the far end she made out a couple of huge red and white plastic coolers, almost big enough to crawl inside of. On top of them was a pile of the quilted blankets that movers use to wrap furniture. A tangle of ropes and bungee cords lay on the blankets. There was always junk in the back of vans and trucks. It was the way men were. She closed the rusty door.

A line of three open stalls ran down one side of the carriage house. A shiny green and yellow riding mower was in the first one. The next was empty. The last one was full of saddles and harnesses and various tools and equipment that probably had something to do with horses. There was still a faint horse smell in the hot, heavy air.

She went back outside.

Alexandra saw a path that went into the woods beyond the carriage house. It would be nice if it went to the pool, although if the pool was anything like the rest of the place it would turn out to be empty with dead leaves all over the bottom. There was a pool like that in some old movie, she couldn't remember the name.

The path was really a dirt road barely wide enough for a vehicle. Weeds were growing in it, but there were fresh tire tracks in the dirt. After forty or fifty yards the path opened out into a clearing. Alexandra heard a motor starting up and stopped where she was, in the cover of the trees.

A corrugated steel building stood off to one side of a small field in the woods. It was big enough to be a garage, but why put a garage back here in the woods? The engine noise got louder as a small back hoe came out from behind the building. Tuttle driving. The back hoe was painted the same green and yellow the riding mower in the carriage house. It wasn't exactly a toy, but a back hoe that size would look pretty dinky on a construction site.

Andy headed the back hoe for the path leading to the house. Alexandra didn't want it to look like she was spying on him, so she stayed hidden in the woods. She listened to the sound of the motor, farther and farther away till it stopped. Then she crossed the clearing to the mysterious building.

The double doors were unlocked. Once her eyes got used to the darkness she saw a standpipe off to one side, with a hose coiled next to it. Plastic tubs and what looked like bags of cement were piled on wooden pallets to keep them out of the dirt. There wasn't any real floor, just packed earth. In the middle of the building was a giant sandbox made out of railroad ties. The sand inside the big box was raked smooth. An overhead trolley ran down the length of the building, centered over the sandbox. A rubberized canvas sling hung from it, on an arrangement of heavy-duty ropes and pulleys. It looked to Alexandra like that rig could hoist a horse, easy. She wondered if Andy ever stuffed a horse. You never heard about stuffed horses.

A hornet zoomed over her head and she stood very still. When the hornet finally lost interest and landed on the dangling sling she moved slowly to the door and shut it behind her. Around the corner of the building, where the back hoe had come from, the ground was scraped and scarred. One patch was still dark and moist from being freshly disturbed. Others were dried out and tan-colored, with grass and weeds in various stages of growing back over them.

This had to be where he put the dead bodies. It was a funny feeling, to know you were standing on top of the skeletons of maybe hundreds of animals. She thought of the ones in the halls, dogs and cats. The parrot and the eagle. Tiny little canaries, bats, mice. It would be cool to see a bat skeleton.

The hornet had followed her out, but it wasn't interested in her. Instead it settled on a small rock in the freshly-dug dirt. Alexandra knelt down and saw that the hornet's antennae were inspecting a dark-red glob, no bigger than the nail on her pinkie, was stuck to the top of the rock. It reminded her of those gross little bits that were sometimes stuck to the bottom of chicken

pieces from the supermarket. Glands or vessels, something like that. A fly lit on the little red glob while she watched. And then another fly.

Alexandra stood up and kicked dirt over the glob. Tough shit, flies.

★

Chapter twelve

Tuttle, in the basement, heard Alexandra's footsteps upstairs. "Hi, Andy, I'm home," she called down to him. "Come on up and meet your new nephew."

"Where have you been?" he called back. "I saw the bike out front but you weren't anywhere around."

"I took a little walk," she said. "Come up and look what I got."

She twirled for him when he came into the kitchen, showing off her new clothes.

"What do you think?" she said. "Do I look like a boy or what?"

She was smiling, and he felt the unfamiliar beginnings of a smile on his own face. "I'm not the one to ask," he said. "Since I know you're in fact a girl, that's what I have a tendency to see. I suspect that you'd look like a boy to an outsider, though."

He had just, in a sense, called himself an insider. Insider when he was an outsider, even his art concerned with the outside? He had never thought of himself as an insider before. Yes he had, too. When Mother was alive they were both insiders, looking out at the world together.

"Well, the kid in the store thought I was a boy even before I put on the new stuff," Alexandra said. "The haircut you gave me totally fooled him."

"What kid?"

"Oh, just this kid that helps out there. His uncle or something owns the place. Actually they've got some pretty cool stuff."

"What's his name?" Tuttle asked, immediately wondering why he had. What difference did it make what some kid's name was?

"Ravi or something like that. I told him my real name, because Sandy can be a boy's name, too. I said it was short for Alexander. Don't you think it's neat that our nicknames rhyme? Sandy and Andy could be a TV show. This really serious but nice grownup brother and his goofy kid sister. You should get a TV, you know it?"

"Should I? Mother wouldn't have one in the house, so I never got in the habit."

"You can get a twenty-five-inch Sony for like three hundred dollars now. A lot of people buy the twenty-seven inch, but you can't tell the difference, not really. And it's like a hundred and fifty cheaper."

"It is, is it?"

"Oh, yeah. It's crazy there'd be so much difference for two inches, huh? Do you get cable here?"

"I don't know."

"You could get Albany with a roof antenna, easy."

"I don't want an antenna on my roof."

"A dish. They've got these eighteen-inch dishes now, you hardly see them."

"I don't want anybody poking around on the roof. It's too dangerous."

Alexandra was pretty sure you could put those little dishes on the ground, too, but she let it go for now.

"I got us some frozen pizza for supper," she said. "You like mushrooms and pepperoni, Andy?"

"That's fine," he said. "Anything's fine."

"I only got a few things from the supermarket," she said. "There wasn't room in the bike basket, with the new clothes and everything. I was going to go back this afternoon and get more stuff. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay. I'm in the middle of a major project, though, so I'll be tied up in the studio probably all afternoon and evening."

“You want me to bring you down a pizza?”

“No,” he said too quickly. She had been right not to ask him about the policeman’s visit in the middle of the night, or the peculiar shed off in the woods. He didn’t like people poking around in his business.

“I mean, no, that’s all right,” Tuttle said. “You just tell me a time and I’ll come up for dinner.”

“I don’t know. Six?”

“That’s fine. I’m afraid there isn’t much for you to do. Will you be all right?”

“Oh, sure. I never get bored.”

“There’s some magazines and books in my bedroom you might find interesting. Help yourself to anything in there.”

He looked at her as she put the pizza into the freezer, imagining the girl’s body hidden by the loose-fitting men’s clothing. Dressed as a boy she looked younger. Twelve or thirteen at the most, although he guessed she was two or three years older than that. He could have asked, but didn’t. For all her chatter, she was a private person, like him.

Besides, he didn’t really want to think of her as an everyday commonplace person, with a birthday and a hometown and a family and a school, possibly even a driver’s license and a social security number.

You walked into my dream. It seemed to him there was an old song that went like that. Mother knew all the old songs, and used to sing them around the house. You came along from out nowhere. That was an old song, definitely. Sandy had come along from out of nowhere, to stand there lost and hungry and homeless on his moonlit lawn. Now she was safe with him behind the perimeter of his alarm system and his moat of grass, the field of fire that protected him and now her against the world. What did it matter how old she was? She had been delivered to him without baggage, without history.

Still, he couldn’t help but wonder.

ANDY’S ROOM WAS AT THE REAR of the house on the ground floor. Probably it hadn’t been a bedroom originally, since Alexandra couldn’t see any closet. He used antlers to keep his clothes on, a forest of antlers that looked like they grew right out of the wall. It was pretty neat. There all his clothes were, hanging off the antler branches—a blue denim jacket, a yellow raincoat, two tweed sports jackets, a dark blue parka, a red-and-black plaid cap with earflaps, an army poncho, an old brown bathrobe, a gray sweatshirt with a hood, a green down vest, scarves, gloves, even shoes.

His bed was a heavy old thing that must have weighed a ton, made out of carved brown wood. A bedside lamp sat on a small table covered with books and paper. A couple of magazines, one of them open, lay on the unmade bed. Four pillows were piled against the high headboard, creased and dented from being used as a backrest while he read. Alexandra thought of making the bed for him, but then figured she better not. She was a housekeeper, not a maid.

Alexandra couldn’t imagine that old Mrs. Tuttle would have allowed her pride and joy live in a room with no closet. Back then he must have had a real bedroom upstairs.

She went over to look at his books. There must have been thousands of them, on shelves he had made by setting boards on tops of cinder blocks. That didn’t make much sense, either, when he had a perfectly good reading room just down the hall. Just vacuum up about two tons of dust and cobwebs, and there you were.

A beat-up old recliner near the bookshelves was surrounded by books and magazines, a few on a side table with a reading lamp on it but most of them just scattered on the bare wooden floor. More books were piled on a table made from a wooden door set up on iron legs. A fluorescent floor lamp leaned over it, the kind with a big magnifying glass set into it so you could see better if you were sewing.

Alexandra picked up a book called *Practical Taxidermy*. The pictures in the book weren’t as gross as she thought they’d be.

Some of them showed the artificial bodies before the skin was put back on. It was like you had X-ray eyes, and could see what animals looked like without their fur and feathers. Alexandra sat down in the recliner and began to leaf through the books Andy had been reading.

One was on how they made fake wounds and wrinkles and monster faces in the movies. It wasn't too gross because you always knew there was a real face underneath. But the really gross one was a book for undertakers. They showed pictures of real people who had died in accidents or from horrible diseases or murder. One of them was a person that drowned in a ditch and snapping turtles ate his face off, and then you saw him lying in a coffin with the new face they made for him. The people in the funeral parlor would have blown lunch if they knew what he really looked like.

There were books on anatomy that showed how you looked with your skin off. And there was a book on how to draw regular naked people with skin. It had a young guy and a young girl in various positions, both of them without a stitch on. They would be shooting a basket or throwing a ball or running and jumping, shooting arrows, turning somersaults. On one page would be the guy doing whatever it was, and on the next page the girl doing the same thing. Why didn't old Andy just buy *Playboy*? The girls were better looking.

She opened a stamp catalog and saw a picture of a stamp they said was worth twelve dollars, just a two-cent stamp. She didn't know there was such a thing as a two-cent stamp. You couldn't even mail a postcard with that, although maybe you could have back in the olden days. Alexandra went back to the beginning of the book, which turned out to be where they had the antique stamps. Some of them were worth hundreds of dollars, even thousands. A few of the stamps had dates written in the margin beside them in neat, tiny characters, and sometimes two or three letters written below the dates. Maybe the letters meant something to Andy, but Alexandra was clueless.

A few pages further along she was stopped by a listing for a "1869 Shield, eagle and flags inverted. \$80,000." Eighty thousand dollars for a little thirty-cent stamp? It was totally unbelievable.

Andy written "8/17/78," and under it "FA" What was "FA?" Did the numbers mean he bought one of the eagle stamps on that date? It didn't seem possible that he could own a stamp worth eighty thousand dollars. She'd like to see what one of those looked liked. Where did Andy keep his collection, anyway? Maybe it was in a hidden safe somewhere, along with his mother's real jewelry. He was just full of secrets, Andy was.

ALEXANDRA HAD NO IDEA what a stamp collection looked like, whether it would be in albums or picture frames or what. Anyway, apart from the books about stamps on the concrete-block bookshelves, there was no sign of the actual stamps in Andy's bedroom. And they couldn't very well be in the other rooms off the first-floor hall, because you could tell from the dust that he never set foot in them. They couldn't be in her own bedroom, either, because she had looked all over for Mrs. Tuttle's real jewels. The basement was a possibility, but Andy might step out of his studio and catch her poking around. So that left the rooms upstairs.

All the rooms on the second floor, turned out to be locked except for her own. The doors on the third floor were locked, too. One of them had to go up to the cupola on the roof. She remembered the colored light from the stained-glass windows in the cupola that had led her to Andy's house in the first place. Like a church. Maybe he had a chapel up there.

Alexandra was beginning to sweat in the hot, stuffy air of the third-floor hallway, so she went back down to her bedroom. The closed drapes still held in the night's coolness. She stretched out on the bed and imagined she was a pearl suspended in the dimness, safe in her own peach-colored shell.

What was there to do in this place, anyway? No TV, no music. Clothes. She went over to the big walk-in closet and took down an armload of Mrs. Tuttle's clothes. She picked out a beige pleated skirt and a cashmere cardigan from the bureau. In the bathroom she

discovered that she could angle mirrors on the medicine cabinet and the closet door so as to get a profile view of herself. With her new short haircut she could be a model in one of those Calvin Klein ads where all the boys and girls looked the same. But she didn't want to look sad like them. Glad was better.

"All right, Miss Gaines," the Playboy photographer said, "let's try it topless."

Alexandra hated to unbutton the cardigan because the cashmere felt so wonderful on her bare skin but she did it and all the time the photographer was jumping around like a crazy man looking for angles and saying that's fantastic, just fantastic, darling, now take everything off. No, no, darling, not the high heels. She saw in the mirror what the cameraman saw. Firm slender figure, round, tight bottom, high little pink-tipped boobs. Brad didn't want everybody to see her naked at first but then she reminded him about Demi Moore, how posing nude didn't hurt her career any and if Bruce Willis didn't mind, why should Brad?

The damned phone rang.

Alexandra didn't know if she was supposed to answer or not. Andy might not appreciate it. The thing rang six times before the person gave up. What would they think if they knew there was somebody at the other end without a stitch on?

What if the Indian boy had been the one calling? She had been thinking of calling him, and great minds think alike. She dialed the number he had given her.

"Luxor Motel," a woman's voice said.

"Hi," Alexandra said. "Is Ravi back from work yet?"

"Who shall I say is calling, please?" The woman's neutral voice had changed to brittle, artificial politeness. She had a funny accent, sort of English but not quite.

"Sandy."

"I will have to fetch him. One moment please."

Alexandra heard weird foreign music in the background, and after a couple of minutes Ravi came on.

"Hey, Sandy."

"Hey, Ravi. What are you doing?"

"Just hanging out. How about you?"

"Nothing. We don't even have TV."

"Really? No TV?"

"Can you believe it?"

"We've got cable."

Alexandra took it easy biking over, so she wouldn't get all sweaty in the sun. Even so it took her less than ten minutes. The Luxor Motel was on the far side of the small commercial strip she had seen in the distance the night she came across the Tuttle mansion. The motel was a single-story building made of concrete blocks painted light green, with the office in the middle. No one was inside, but weird music was coming from an open door behind the counter. Ravi's mother appeared when Alexandra dinged the service bell.

"You must be young Mister Tuttle, isn't it?" Mrs. Patel said. She was a heavy-set woman with a smooth, brown face and one of those beauty marks on her forehead that looked like a big mole. She wore an orange dress, sort of a robe that wrapped around her.

"No, ma'am, I'm Sandy Gaines. Mr. Tuttle is my uncle."

"Well, you are welcome in our home, young Master Gaines. You may be assured of that."

"Sandy, Mrs. Patel."

"Just so. Will you wait a moment, Sandy, while I fetch Ravi?"

When Ravi showed up, Mrs. Patel said, "You boys may run along now and watch your TV. Make sure you don't mess up the room, Ravi."

Mrs. Patel stood there with her hands clasped as they left, a warm smile on her face.

"Come on," Ravi said. "We'll go to the back wing. I turned the AC on right after you called."

"Your mom is really nice," Alexandra said.

"That's what you think. Normally she hates all my friends, particularly if they happen to be of the feminine sex."

"How come?"

"Oh, she wants me to marry some stupid Hindi girl she can push around, except for the little fact that there aren't any Hindi girls in Luxor. Sort of cramps my style, wouldn't you say?"

Alexandra nodded.

“Actually she thought you were a girl when you called. Even when I told her you weren’t she still hated you.”

“Why? She didn’t even know me.”

“Just on general principles. You’re not Hindi, plus she figured you were trailer trash like everybody else in Luxor. According to her.”

“She acted real nice, though.”

“Oh, she loves you now. Ever since I told her you were Addison Tuttle’s nephew. She thinks he’s god.”

“She does? How come?”

“Because he’s the richest man in Humboldt County.”

“He is?”

“Who’s any richer?”

“I don’t know. The only people I know here are you and him.”

“There’s Tuttle Corners and Tuttle Mountain and Tuttle Road. Tuttle Pond east of town. The Tuttles used to own half the county, for god’s sake. Didn’t you know that about your own uncle?”

“We live a long ways away so we never saw much of him.”

“Where are you from?”

“Oh, pretty much everywhere. My dad’s a pilot in the air force.”

“Wow. Did he ever take you up?”

“Oh, yeah, lots of times. It’s pretty cool.”

The motel was laid out like a T, with a six-unit wing out back. Ravi took them to the second unit from the end, and opened it with a key from his pocket.

“See this?” Ravi said. “This is a master key. We could go in any of the units, but the set in this one gets the best picture.”

★

Chapter thirteen

When Alexandra came downstairs the next morning, Andy was already down in the basement working on his big project, whatever it was. Andy had been down there when she went to bed, too, so probably he had pulled his second straight all-nighter. He showed up at last while Alexandra was eating her breakfast. His pale face needed a shave and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"Hi, Andy," she said. "You worked straight through, huh?"

"Yes, I did. I lose track when I'm busy."

"When are you ever going to get finished?"

"The worst is over now, so I can get some sleep at last."

"What are you doing, anyway?"

"Just a project for my personal collection."

"Like the ones in the hall?"

"That general idea."

"Will it go in the hall?"

"My personal environments are upstairs."

"What are environments?"

"Just my name for dioramas that make me comfortable."

"You mean you like live in them?"

"Not exactly. One day I may show you."

So okay, he didn't want to talk. Alexandra could relate to that.

"How about some breakfast?" she said. "We've got waffles and pop-tarts and corn flakes."

"I'm all right with just corn flakes."

"At least let me toast up some waffles, Andy. They're real good even without butter."

She had bought maple syrup to go with them, but she never thought to pick up butter, too. She'd get it next time, along with all the other everyday things he didn't keep on hand. Ketchup, Spaghetti-O's, chocolate syrup, tuna fish, peanut butter and jelly, mayonnaise. Things were going to change around here. They didn't have to eat like POWs.

"Those were quite good," Andy said when he had finished breakfast. "I never heard of frozen waffles before."

"They're on TV all the time."

"I wouldn't know about that."

Dumb her, she knew perfectly well he didn't have a TV. It was just a hard idea to get used to, like when you were talking to somebody that was blind. No matter how hard you tried, you kept saying "see", and "look."

"If you want I could ask around downtown," she said. "I saw this sign where they sell the new little satellite dishes. They don't have to be on the roof. The picture in the window had one on the ground."

"We'll see."

"Okay, I'll ask," she said. "Want to try a pop-tart? They're blueberry."

She couldn't believe he know about pop-tarts, either. It was like the poor man was on another planet, the burrito planet, and suddenly Sigourney Weaver lands with a spaceship full of groceries from Earth.

ADDISON TUTTLE LAY naked on his unmade bed after breakfast. The night's work had left him exhausted and his stomach was full, and yet he still couldn't fall asleep. Even though the drawn curtains let in a certain amount of sun, it was his habit to keep a night light plugged into a floor socket whenever he went to bed. The tiny bulb across the room gave off a friendly orange glow like a campfire in the distance.

It made him think of the two of them, Sandy and "Andy," wrapped in fur robes by their fire in the center of a vast expanse of snow that glistened in the moonlight. From the woods beyond

came the low noises of wild things prowling, and she shuddered. But no enemy dared cross the untracked snow and his arms held her safe as she nestled in them trusting and tender.

The time turned to autumn and the snow to leaves that crunched underfoot on the sidewalk outside Luxor Regional High. Sandy was head cheerleader, trim and bouncing with energy. The boys in school were too dumb for her, just kids. Sandy was the top student and when he told her he was sending her through college she cried with happiness and threw herself into his arms and kissed him. The kiss lasted until it wasn't just gratitude anymore, her tongue was —

Ah, Jesus. They were back here on his bed, her white and gold cheerleader uniform on the floor and her tiny hand awkwardly milking him. After the spastic surgings, ashamed, he dropped a Kleenex to the floor beside his bed. My God how sickening. He got up and took the crumpled thing by a dry corner and flushed it down the toilet.

Back in bed his mind was still on his small deposit, surging down the porcelain goosenecks, down the cast iron waste pipes, out of the house, into the septic tank and then what, fertilizing what swollen deformed egg? What resulting monster?

Half animal, half vegetable like the Heap in his childhood comic books still stored in an upstairs closet. The Heap somewhere in the piles, an evil Luftwaffe pilot who crashed into the semitropical muck of some semitropical Florida swamp and lay there unalive and undead until at length he grew into the tangled vegetation and it into him.

Last weak tendril of a cursèd race— Tuttle's thoughts finally came loose from each other and dropped him into the dooms of sleep.

THAT AFTERNOON ALEXANDRA rode the bike into town to load up on staples that she hadn't thought to get on her first shopping trip because they were things most people had already. So when Andy got up, which he finally did around seven-thirty, all she had to do was pop stuff in the microwave. She zapped

pepperoni pizza and French fries for him, both of which were big hits. Diet Coke wasn't. He said it was nothing but dyed water.

"You've got those cream sodas in the frig," she said. "How about one of those?"

"I'm fine with just milk."

After supper Alexandra brought up the subject of stamps casually, no big deal.

"I was looking for something to read in your room yesterday, you know, like you told me I could? You got a lot of stamp books, huh?"

"Are you a collector?"

"I've thought about it. A kid in school had a collection."

Tuttle went off to get some stamps to show her. He headed upstairs, so that answered the question of where he kept his collection. One of the locked rooms. He came back down with an armful of folders and ring binders.

"This was my first theme collection," Andy said. "Mother called them that, although the proper name is topical collections. I had the idea of finding stamps from countries starting with each letter of the alphabet. Of course I was doomed to fail."

"How come?"

"No Q. This was back in the Fifties, before Qatar began to issue its own stamps."

The collection was in one of the ring binders, a single stamp to each page. The name of the countries were written in crayon, in a child's hand, at the tops of the pages. Underneath each stamp was a clumsy drawing of the country's flag.

"My next theme collection was alphabet animals," Andy said. "That time I succeeded in getting all twenty-six letters, thanks to the fact that there are a lot more animals than countries."

He picked another ring binder from a pile he had brought down from upstairs and opened to the first page. The stamp and the hand-drawn kid's picture showed an anteater.

"Animal stamps are what got me interested in taxidermy, actually," Tuttle said. "I got the idea of mounting animals instead of drawing them, and I found an ad for a mail order taxidermy

course in the back of a comic book. The first lesson was a squirrel and of course how do you get a squirrel? Mother, God bless her, found one dead on the road and brought it back to me wrapped in one of her good scarves. You can't imagine what it must have cost her, to touch a dead animal."

Alexandra shook her head in sympathy over the costly scarf, ruined.

Tuttle closed the animal alphabet book and put it aside. "By the time I was twelve I was a reasonably competent taxidermist," he said. "And I had a fairly extensive collection of animal stamps, too. Mother always said that what your hobbies were at twelve, that was what you would always be interested in for the rest of your life. Mother was right, wasn't she? I mean, here I am."

Alexandra couldn't remember being interested in anything particular when she was twelve. She couldn't remember much about being twelve at all, even though it was only three years ago. Pictures floated up out of her past, but they were patchy like memories of a dream. They didn't begin or end. No story connected all of them up, just a feeling. It was a good feeling, because they were happy pictures. Lots of kids sat around feeling sorry for themselves about all this bad stuff that was always supposed to be happening to them but Alexandra didn't see the point in that. Sad was bad, glad was good, that was her little secret, personal poem that she had made up herself. And so far no really bad stuff had ever happened to her, as far as she could recall. Knock on wood.

"Is that what your whole collection is?" Alexandra said. "Animal stamps?"

"Mostly, yes. At one point, when I was collecting more actively, I believe I had every stamp ever issued that depicted an animal of any sort."

"I saw you had an eagle stamp checked in your catalog. Does the check mean you have one?"

"There are lots of eagle stamps."

"The book said it was worth eighty thousand dollars."

"Oh, the 1869 invert. Yes, I have it."

"Is it really worth that much?"

"Not when I acquired it, but it's probably worth a good deal more than that now."

"Wow. You must keep it in the bank, huh?"

"No, it's with the others."

"It is? Would it be okay if I looked at it?"

Alexandra was hoping he would take her upstairs with him, but he went alone. When he came back he had a glassine envelope in one hand and a pair of small tongs in the other. "Let's go where the light is good," he said. She followed him into his bedroom, where he cleared a place on the table and slid a stamp out of the envelope onto a blank sheet of paper, arranging the table lamp to shine on it.

"Take a close look, but don't touch it," he said.

She leaned forward. The stamp showed a red eagle perched on a red shield. The eagle was caught in some sort of blue net.

"I thought the eagle was supposed to be upside down," Alexandra said.

"It's the flags that are upside down."

"What flags?"

"Take a closer look. The blue things hanging down like drapes are really inverted American flags."

"Oh, yeah, I see what you mean. You have to know what you're looking for."

"You do, yes. These were the last of the 1869 inverts to be discovered, and by far the most valuable."

"Just a little tiny piece of paper, huh?" she said. "And you could buy a Ferrari with it, I bet."

"I wouldn't know what a Ferrari costs," he said. "You could certainly buy a house with it, though. At least around here you could."

"Wow."

"It's not a very attractive stamp, though, is it? I'll show you some of my others."

A lot of them were really pretty, parrots and butterflies and beetles that looked like jewelry, but she kept thinking of the red,

white and blue thirty-cent stamp with the eagle perched on his shield.

“See this one?” Andy said, sliding over a Canadian stamp showing a squirrel holding an acorn. “That’s what I was trying to copy in my first experiment with taxidermy. The botched squirrel.”

“I bet it looked good,” Alexandra said.

“Believe me, it didn’t. It looked like it was stuffed with gravel.”

“I bet you’re just being hard on yourself. Do you still have it?”

“Certainly not. I wouldn’t even let Mother see it.”

“I bet it was better than I could do.”

“I bet it wasn’t. Were you serious before, when you said you’d like to learn?”

“Sure,” she said, because what else could she say?

★

Chapter fourteen

"There's something," Alexandra said. "See it?"

"Snapping turtle," Tuttle said. The van didn't slow down. "You don't want your first experience to be with a creature that ugly. That's what drove me out of medicine."

"Did you use to be a doctor?"

"Just a medical student for a semester."

"What was ugly about that?"

"In anatomy they assign you a cadaver. Mine was an enormously obese man in his eighties."

"Yuck," Alexandra said. "Sometimes you see old people like that on the beach and you wonder why they don't just kill themselves."

"This one did."

"Oh, wow. How?"

"That was part of the problem. He cut his throat and the constant sight of his wound was very unnerving. To me, anyway. The student with whom I shared the cadaver called him Tommy Tubbo. A little thing like a cut throat through two inches of subcutaneous fat didn't bother him a bit."

"You'd think at least they'd stitch it up."

"They did, but very incompetently. Huge, sloppy stitches as if they had been sewing up a feed sack. It was an expression of contempt for the poor man, like the Tommy Tubbo business. Like our own dissection of his remains. We had no intention of handling him with respect by restoring him once we were finished. At the

end his butchered remains would be cremated like so much garbage.

Alexandra nodded, hiding a yawn. They had passed up half a dozen animals on the road, some of them so squashed that there wasn't enough left to mount. Or they were too ugly like the turtle. This could take all day.

"Can you mount a turtle?" she asked.

"Actually they're very easy," Andy said. "You simply remove the internal organs through a small incision in front of one of the rear legs, and then freeze-dry the animal."

"Just put it in with the burritos?"

"A special sort of freezer. I'll show you tomorrow."

Oh, great. Tomorrow. Her very first lesson. It never occurred to her that he'd take her seriously when she said she'd like to learn taxidermy. Couldn't he tell when a person was just saying something to be polite? And now there was no way out of it without hurting his feelings.

Glad thoughts, not bad thoughts. What if you had never discovered dennon back when you were practically a little kid, Alexandra? What if you never figured out how to make the silver bowl appear out of thin air with its pearly dennon that kept anything from really touching you? Including worse things than dead animals.

They started into a sharp curve and she grabbed the door handle. The big red and black cooler in the back clattered across the ridges on van's floor and crashed into the side. When the van came out of the curve the cooler stayed where it was but the ice cubes in it rattled back the other way.

"Have you ever been to Disney World?" Andy asked

"No, but one of my girlfriends went. She just died when they had to leave."

"Maybe we could go someday," Tuttle said. "They've done fascinating work there, animating the historical figures. There's a shop up in western Massachusetts, too, where they produce special effects for movies."

"You mean it? We're going to Disney World?"

“We’ll see.”

Alexandra practically had to climb up on top of the motor cover to do it, but she planted a quick kiss on Tuttle’s cheek. The van swerved, but luckily no one was coming.

“There,” she said. “S.W.A.K.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sealed with a kiss.”

Tuttle didn’t even glance her way, just kept his eyes on the road he was so shy. Her shy prince in disguise. Alexandra was a simple peasant girl wearing a red bonnet and the prince got thirsty and by her cottage for a drink of water. A prince, you’d think he’d have all the moves. Wrong. It turns out the poor prince had this totally sheltered life in the palace, hardly ever been around real girls. Now she had kissed him he would wake up tomorrow and not be a geek anymore.

The van slowed so suddenly that she had to grab the dashboard to keep from going through the window.

“Sorry,” Andy said. They were off the road, bumping along the shoulder, wheels skidding on the gravel as he braked to a stop.

“Do we have a flat?”

“Nothing like that. A woodchuck back there, that’s all.”

He reached under his seat for a black plastic bag and climbed out. She followed him back to the dead animal on the shoulder of the road. Andy rolled the chunky body over with the toe of his shoe. He knelt down and manipulated one of the animal’s legs. Then he tugged at the fur on its belly.

“Fur’s tight,” he said. “I doubt if she’s been dead more than a few minutes.”

“What does that mean, tight fur?”

“Means there’s no slippage. If tufts come out, the hide’s too far gone to mount.”

He stowed the woodchuck away as neat and quick as a bagger in the supermarket, then knotted the bag and handed it to her.

“She’s yours now,” he said. “Your first specimen. Into the cooler with her.”

The bag was surprisingly heavy. Maybe that’s what people meant when they talked about dead weight. Did things get heavier when they died?

ON THE WAY BACK through Pratt City they stopped for lunch at the Burger King. Alexandra ordered a double whopper with cheese, a large vanilla shake and a Hershey’s sundae pie for dessert. The food was gone before Tuttle had finished his own hamburger.

“You want anything else?” he asked, loving her appetite. It was part of the general health with which she bounced and glowed.

Still working at her vanilla milkshake, Sandy shook her head. She never seemed to comb her light brown hair—sandy, sure enough. Now and then she would run her fingers through it, that was all, and it sprang back up into the same crisp curls as before. It was as if her hair belonged to a different species than his, which was as limp as thread.

Tuttle watched Sandy’s cheeks hollow as she drew the thick stuff through the straw.

“Those aren’t real milkshakes, you know,” he said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“That’s why they just call them shakes on the menu. There’s no milk in them at all.”

“What do they use then?”

“Carrageen.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a thickening agent made from moss.”

“Yuck. I’m drinking moss?”

“Well, it’s derived from that.”

“I’ll have a vanilla moss, please. That’s what I’ll tell them next time.”

SHE THOUGHT HIS STUDIO in the basement would be like a mad scientist’s laboratory, but it looked more like a restaurant kitchen. There were no stoves or ovens, but along one wall was a large, deep double sink and long counters, all of stainless steel. A

new-looking chest-type freezer, a good six feet long and waist-high, sat against another wall. Beside it was a work table covered with dozens of small tools. Against the other walls were tall wooden tables cluttered with tools and materials and animal models. You could tell what most of the animals were supposed to be, but none of them looked quite right. The way aliens looked sort of like humans, but not quite.

Alexandra had expected gloominess, too, but the basement studio was as brightly lit as a movie set. "Those are Vita-Lite lamps," Andy said. "The kind of bulbs they use in pet shops to keep the animals healthy. They're full spectrum, like natural sunlight."

"What do you need them for?" Alexandra asked, seeing as all his animals were dead, weren't they?

"For me. Before I learned about full-spectrum bulbs, I used to get winter depression even in the summer."

"You must spend a lot of time down here," she said.

"When I'm on a major project, I sometimes spend weeks without seeing the sun."

Against the wall was what looked like a huge blue drain pipe attached to the top of a fake-wood box on wheels. The steel pipe had a Plexiglas door, with dials and switches on the box under it. She could have crawled inside and laid down with plenty of room to spare. She could even have walked into it, by ducking a little.

"What the heck is that thing?" she said.

"Basically it's a freezer with a vacuum chamber and an exhaust fan."

"I thought that thing by the door was the freezer."

"It is. That one is used for the storage of specimens until I can get to them, whereas the freeze-dryer is an entirely different machine. It's not used for the actual preparation of the specimen. Did you see that ferret upstairs in the hallway? All I did was remove his brain and internal organs and freeze-dry him, and after nearly ten years he's still in perfect shape."

"How come he doesn't thaw out and go bad?"

"Because our little ferret has been sublimed. Do you know how ice cubes shrink if you leave them in the freezer long enough? The ice has undergone sublimation, which means that it has bypassed the liquid state and slowly evaporated directly into its gaseous form, water vapor. When sublimation" occurs at extremely low temperatures in a near-vacuum, the molecule in the water vapor drawn out of the specimen are smaller than they would be at room temperature. When the dehydrated specimen is removed from the chamber, water molecules in the atmosphere are too large to reenter. Hence there is no rehydration."

Alexandra nodded as if she understood.

"Consequently, since most of any animal's weight is water, a freeze-dried specimen is incredibly light. Our ferret friend upstairs weighs no more than three or four ounces."

"Be a good way to lose a few pounds," she said.

"Except for the fact," he said, "that you'd have to die first."

Alexandra smiled, even though it was a pretty lame joke.

"Well," Andy said, "we might as well get started."

No problem. No matter how gross it was going to be, nothing could get through the dennon that protected her hands. She wouldn't even be involved, not the real Alexandra.

★

Chapter fifteen

The woodchuck lay on its back on the stainless steel counter with its stubby legs poking up. Alexandra looked at the scalpel waiting for her on the counter. At school once they made everybody watch a movie of a lung cancer operation so they wouldn't smoke. There was one big gasp from all the kids in the auditorium when the surgeon made the first cut.

He was standing behind her, close enough so she could smell him. It was the first time she had noticed his body odor. She hoped it didn't mean he was getting excited to be so near to her, them all alone in the house and the door maybe locked for all she knew. Get a grip, girl, she thought. He's just sweating because he's frightened of girls. The glad thought calmed her down right away, and she picked up the knife..

The world-famous surgeon Addison Tuttle was right behind her, guiding her through this emergency operation on Princess Di because his own poor hands were burned from pulling her out of the burning car.

"Make your opening incision from here to here," he said, leaning past her to point. Dr. Tuttle had done this operation hundreds of times. He had been valedictorian of his medical school class and now he was the top surgeon in America. All she had to do was listen.

A pink slit opened behind the bright scalpel.

AT THE END there were two animals joined at the nose as if they were kissing. One was a collapsed, gray animal, made of the

woodchuck's empty skin turned inside out. The other animal had a solid, powerful body with each muscle standing out like the body builders on ESPN. The body was sheathed with a bluish membrane. The red of the muscles underneath showed in a couple of place where she had nicked the membrane by mistake. The red part was what meat really was, Dr. Tuttle had explained to the interns crowding around to watch. When you eat a Big Mac, gentlemen, you're really eating ground muscles.

The network TV lights were so hot the whole operating room was sweating except the great Siamese twin surgeon Alexandra Gaines, cool as a cucumber while Tom Brokaw broadcasted the operation live. This is it, the final cut that means life or death for these cute little babies.

The glittering blade flashed.

"Uh-oh," Andy said. "My fault, I should have warned you."

"What did I do wrong?" Alexandra asked.

"You have to cut real close to the bone or the nostrils don't stay on the skin. See?"

"Uh-oh," Alexandra repeated, seeing what she had done. Part of the nose had been left behind, a little black button on the tip of the skull.

"It's easy to fix," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm really sorry."

"You should have seen the first animal I skinned. You couldn't even tell it had been a squirrel by the time I was through."

"Really?" How many times was he going to tell her about that stupid squirrel?

"Really. You have wonderful hands. For taxidermy, I mean. Not that there's anything wrong with your hands otherwise, I didn't mean it that way—"

Tuttle escaped to the other side of the room, where he took a wide-mouthed glass jar from a shelf and brought it back to the sink. "Next step is to wash the skin thoroughly," he said. He rinsed the fleshy side first under the faucet, and then turned the pelt rightside out to wash the fur. "Three nicks in the skin," he said. "You don't know how amazing that is for a first effort."

“Well, you were telling me what to do.”

“Most beginners couldn’t have done it, though. I expected you to butcher the job.”

“Hey, I had a good teacher. What’s the next lesson?”

“We set the hide by immersing it in grain alcohol overnight. Hand me that big red can under the sink.”

He poured alcohol from the can into a bucket and pushed the hide under. It bobbed back up, a formless mass of floating hair.

“You couldn’t even tell what it was unless you already knew,” Alexandra said.

“To simulate reality,” he said, “all creatures need both an interior and an exterior.”

“I guess,” she said.

“At this stage the object in the jar is an exterior without an interior, and therefore it presents no meaningful identity to the eye. If it had only its interior, it would appear to be identifiable. But appearances might be deceptive. For instance, take that white form at the far end of the table over there. What is it?”

“A dog.”

“A police dog?”

“I guess.”

“Couldn’t it be a Dalmatian?”

“Maybe.”

“In fact it isn’t even for a dog at all. It’s for a coyote.”

“Oh, yeah? Really?”

“So you see, the interior of the animal is roughly recognizable, but only roughly. Look at the tail on that coyote form, for instance.”

“Like a rat tail,” Alexandra said.

“Exactly. To look like a true coyote, that form would have to represent the fur and not just the foundation under it. Then we would have an instantly recognizable statue, wouldn’t we?”

“Sure.”

“Recognizable as a statue of a coyote, though. Not as an actual coyote.”

“Of course not,” Alexandra said.

“Why not?”

She tried to think of something. “Because it’s white?” she finally said.

“Exactly!” he said, sounding like she had just come up with the right answer on *Jeopardy*. “Coyotes aren’t white, are they? And statues are.”

“That’s what I meant, yeah.”

“Why are statues white?”

“I guess the stone is white.”

“Right again. Marble, anyway, is white. But if you took an ancient Greek or Roman to one of our museums, he’d think those white statues were intended to represent ghosts. Originally all those Greek and Roman statues were painted in life-like colors that wore off over the centuries. What the ancients would take to be real statues, and very good ones, would be the mounted specimens in the natural history section.”

Alexandra nodded as if she cared. But what she had been thinking about was why he had that coyote thing around anyway.

“I thought coyotes were out west,” she said.

“They’re reestablishing themselves all over the country,” he said. “I have a coyote skin that I’m keeping rehydrated in the cool room right now. I’ll show you.”

ALEXANDRA WAS THINKING something the size of a closet, but the cool room was pretty big. The walls were made of wide planks slotted into each other like pine paneling. Unpainted wooden shelves covered one wall. A steel rail was bolted to the ceiling, the length of the room. Iron meat hooks hung from it. She thought of the shed hidden in the woods out back, with its overhead trolley to handle dead horses. There was a sling hanging from the trolley in the shed, though, not meat hooks like here.

“The hooks are for deer and stuff, huh?” she asked.

“Actually not. Those hooks haven’t been used in three-quarters of a century. My great grandfather built this to cure beef in, but he gave up his Angus operation during the Depression. The room was

just used to store junk until I cleaned it out after Mother passed on and had the refrigerating unit replaced .”

The air was chilly and damp, like a raw fall day. The only furniture was a long folding table at the back of the room. Plastic boxes and buckets were piled under the table and on the shelves, along with cans and bottles of various supplies. Tuttle took a skin out of one of the plastic boxes, and unfolded it onto the table. “Beautiful specimen,” he said. “Young female, never had a litter.”

“How can you tell?”

“Look here.”

He indicated the light-colored fur on the animal’s belly.

“Look at what?”

“Here. See.” He had been fingering through the hair as if he were searching for ticks. “Feel here where my finger is.”

Alexandra, still protected by the dennon, separated the fur and put her finger where his had been. The teat felt like a small wart.

“That’s where the mother nurses her young,” Tuttle said. “If she had had a litter, those—well, the mammaries—they’d be more prominent.”

“Like people,” Alexandra said. “If I ever have babies, forget about it. I’m never going to nurse them.”

Andy looked away embarrassed, poor man. Alexandra hurried to change the subject.

“Where’d you get the coyote from, anyway?” she asked.

“The town policeman found her along the road. He thought she was a dog.”

So did Alexandra, but she didn’t feel like telling Andy she had watched the whole thing from the woods. No sense letting the whole world know her business.

“What do you want dogs for?” she asked. “You’ve already got the one in the hall.”

“I don’t, but Kregger tends to bring me whatever he finds. It’s a waste of breath to tell him that I’m only interested in certain scarce specimens.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, a river otter. Owls. Ravens. I’d love to get my hands on a raven.””

“What do you want a raven for?”

“So that I could recreate Poe’s bedroom,” he said. “There would be a good deal of latitude for invention. All the poem tells us is that there’s a fireplace and a window with purple curtains and a violet velvet chair. And of course the raven on the bust of Pallas.”

Alexandra nodded agreeably. Raven on a busted palace?

“Not that I have any room in the house for a major new environment. I’d have to totally rebuild the tack room in the carriage house. But of course you haven’t got the slightest idea what I’m talking about, do you? Do you know what I mean by an environment?”

“Not really,” she said, smiling.

“No reason you should. I haven’t shown you any of my important work yet.”

He looked down at the floor, like a shy kid. “Do you think you might be interested?” he said. “Would you like to see some of my environments upstairs?”

“Sure,” Alexandra said, not really knowing what he was talking about except that they had to be in the locked rooms. She had been everywhere else up there, looking for his stamps.

He put the coyote skin back in its box and she followed him out of the cool room. When he slammed the heavy door it made a noise like a refrigerator and a car door both closing at once.

“I’d hate to be locked inside that thing,” she said.

“No danger of that,” Tuttle said. “If you’re shut in, there’s a steel bar inside you can push to unlatch the door.”

“What if somebody came along and shut that padlock when you were inside?” she asked. A rusty padlock was hanging open from a ring on the door frame.

“You’d be in trouble,” he said.

★

Chapter sixteen

The walls and the ceiling in the second-floor room next to Alexandra's were painted sky-blue, with hand-painted puffy white clouds. The bright green floor was scattered with hundreds of pink daisies, the kind of paper flowers that kids in kindergarten paste onto their drawings. Alexandra had been nervous that there might be gross things in the room, but there weren't. So she squinched her eyes shut, swallowed hard, and tightened her muscles for a second, so the demon would go away. She felt the magic lotion lifting off her. Andy had told her the word for things disappearing into the air, what had he called it? Sublime.

"It's all right to walk on the flowers," Andy said. "They're protected by two coats of clear urethane."

Not that you could do much walking. Most of the room was taken up with the huge forms of three black and white cows. She felt like she was part of the herd herself.

Two of the cows were resting on the ground. The third was standing in the corner made by a split rail fence that had been built along two of the walls, with rocks and dead leaves jumbled on the floor underneath. A calf was freeze-framed in the act of nuzzling at the udder of the standing cow. The fence and the cattle themselves looked real, but the flowers and the painted sky and pasture were totally bogus. It was like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* only the other way around, with real things stuck into a cartoon movie.

"Including the cows, there are fourteen different species of animal represented in this room," Tuttle said.

Alexandra spotted a chipmunk on a fence rail and a wren's head sticking out of a hole in a fence post. "Keep looking,"

Andy said. "Some of them are hard to see." The others, half-hidden or camouflaged, were mice, a tiny green snake out in full sight on the fake green meadow, a nesting ruffed grouse, and a box turtle among the rocks. The others were so well hidden she had to ask Andy for help.

"Neat," she said when he had pointed them all out. "It's like the forest animals in *Bambi*."

"You know which ones were the most difficult to do?"

"I don't know. The little tiny snake?"

"No, he's just freeze-dried. The cows on the ground were what gave me fits. Cows are difficult anyway, but when they're lying down the legs and the hipbones make especially odd angles and bumps. If one of those bumps is an inch or two out of place, you'd sense something was wrong even though you might not know exactly what it was."

Next he took her across the hall to another environment—a room made up to look like the inside of a barn. A wooden pen took up most of the space. Bright yellow straw covered the plank floor of the pen. An enormous sow lay on her side in the straw, nursing a half dozen piglets.

"It's neat the way the baby pigs look like they're squirming around even though they're not moving," Alexandra said.

"I spent hours at the county fair taking dozens of Polaroids," Andy said. "Polaroids of the living animals are crucial if you want your dead zoo to look exactly right."

In this room nothing was fake. Real horse collars and bridles and tools hung on nails in the gray, weathered planks of the barn walls. A pitchfork and an old push broom leaned against the wall next to a pail and bags of feed. Pigeons nested in the rafters and a tiny bat hung in one corner, although she wouldn't have noticed if Andy hadn't pointed it out, gray in the shadows. A black cat with white paws perched on a work table. Its ears were laid back and its yellow eyes were narrow as it watched a barn rat climbing up one of the feed bags. A white rooster was pecking in the straw outside the pig pen.

"It's like a family," she said. "The farm family."

"A family that lives forever," Andy said. "That's the gift I give them."

"You ought to charge admission." Alexandra said. "I mean it. The Andy Tuttle Museum."

He smiled and shook his head.

"I'm not kidding, Andy. You should put up signs. You could make money on this."

"I doubt it. Besides which, money has always been the least of the Tuttle's problems."

Tell me about it, Alexandra thought. Where could his stamp collection be hiding?

"Do you have more environments on the third floor?" she asked.

"One or two things."

"Can we go look?"

"They're still works in progress. One of these days perhaps they'll be ready. And you will."

"Will what?"

"Be ready to appreciate them. You've only just skinned out your first specimen, you know."

SHE THOUGHT THE SMALLER of his two beams looked like a toy ironing board, which had never before occurred to Tuttle. But she was right. It had never before occurred to him to wonder why they were called beams, for that matter, when they looked more like boards. Maybe in the early tanneries they used actual beams, with men on each end of the hide.

"See how I'm doing," Tuttle said to the girl as he worked the woodchuck's skin up and over the beam like a shoeshine rag. "The idea is to break down the tiny fibers in the hide in order to make it supple. Go ahead, you try it."

Alexandra took his place at the workbench and he moved back so that he could observe her without making her self-conscious. He smiled to himself. He knew well enough that she wasn't the one who would feel self-conscious.

Tuttle examined her shirt, tight across her small back as she leaned forward over her work. She wasn't wearing anything under it, as far as he could tell. When she left the house she did something or other with an old scarf of Mother's to hide them, but at home she didn't seem to bother.

"Do you mind pretending to be a boy?" Tuttle asked.

"No, it's kind of cool fooling everybody," she said. "Except sometimes I forget. Like once I almost bought the Lady Speed Stick, you know?"

"I'm sorry if it's uncomfortable for you."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean it was any big deal or anything."

"I just can't afford to give the town anything to talk about. People can be very cruel."

"Tell me about it," Alexandra said. She wasn't looking at him. Her hands were going up and down, working the skin over the beam.

Tuttle thoughts went off into how it might be to have someone that he really could tell about it. He saw the girl, Sandy, sitting on Mother's bed with her knees drawn up to her chin, not bright and bouncy this time but gravely listening.

You have to understand that Mother and I were alone after my father did his midnight flit, by which I mean that week in and week out the only other living soul we saw to talk to was the delivery boy from Hodgman's Market it was then, the Great American now. Nobody in town ever said a word, at least not to us, when I supposedly took ill the second week of school and never came back. Tuttle's did what they wanted.

So there we were the two of us, Sandy, a world sufficient onto ourselves, her teaching me to read so we could read to each other, laughing together, and that's the way it went on until the age of ten when I went away to Penzey Hall which in those days took sixth grade boarders. Penzey Hall prepped for Yale, a feeder school they call them, and four generations of Tuttle's went to Yale.

No girls at Penzey Hall in those days. Serious business being a Yale feeder. No girls at home either, just Mother and me and no one makes three. So at eighteen I was a Yale-bound youth with a summer before me to spend with my stamps and my taxidermy and my mother. A rising

freshman without a single female cousin, sister, niece, neighbor, classmate, to his name. Strange but true. When I went to Buffalo that summer there was not a little girl on the face of the earth who could call me by name. I knew more about penguins than I knew about little girls. Quite literally.

Buffalo had the Eastern States Taxidermy Convention that year and I had high hopes in the Dead Zoo category, which means a tableau of animals. A grouping, you might say. Like we saw upstairs, those would be in the Dead Zoo category. My entry was a beaver family, two adults and three juveniles. I rented a truck to drive it out there, not that it was so big. But it was too big to fit in a car without taking it apart and reassembling it, which I didn't want to do because I thought it was perfect and you don't take chances on perfection.

Time and distance pass and I'm out there and my chances of winning the grand prize look very promising. And then what happens but I meet my very first and last little girl, the daughter of another exhibitor. She was somewhere in the three range, because that's how many fingers she held up when I asked her how old she was. She thought it was pretty funny that my name was Addison, because her name was Alison. She was full of pep and had curly blond hair, probably looked a lot like you when you were little. She could have been your mother, Sandy. It's biologically and chronologically possible. Is your father by any chance a very large and bearded and leather-vest-wearing totally untalented taxidermist from Illinois? Not that you'd tell me if he was, Sandy. Ask you a question about the past, present or future of Miss Alexandra Gaines and all you do is smile and squirt out a pretty little cloud of pink ink while you swim out of range.

Let us assume, however, that it wasn't your mother but some other precious little blonde girl who wandered in and watched me putting the finishing touches on my masterpiece the day before the exhibit room was opened to the public. And who ate a few bites of the pizza I had ordered in for lunch while I told her about the mama and papa beavers and the little baby beavers and how they spend the winter snug and dry inside their lodge on a platform above water level.

By now she had climbed up on my lap and she was wriggling and squirming around like a puppy, just couldn't sit still, the little vixen, and I

felt it happening, I couldn't help it, the innocent ignorant blind worm was coming to life.

What's that, Addison? Nothing. Is that your pee-pee? Oh, no it's just a jackknife in my pocket, Alison. I bet it is your pee-pee. Okay, off you go, Alison. Upsy-daisy. Run along, now.

Hi, daddy. I felt Addison's pee-pee.

It was just a jackknife in my pocket, that's all it was.

Stand up and come over here, boy. Let's have a look at that jackknife.

So there you have it, Sandy. The true and complete story. The girl didn't believe me, the father didn't believe me, the sex crimes detectives didn't believe me, the lawyer my mother hired to get me off didn't believe me. Why should they believe me? I was lying, wasn't I? That was no knife.

Besides, the true question ran deeper anyway. After all, why did the blind worm come to life at the approach of a three-year-old girl? What sort of a monstrous freak was I? What would I do next?

★

Chapter seventeen

It was starting out to be a hot June. The way Alexandra's summer was turning out, she would go in and out of dreams for what seemed like hours before the sun finally pushed her out of bed at eight or eight-thirty. Unless Andy had worked late at night down in the basement, he would have already finished breakfast. She had kicked him out of the corn flakes rut by first getting him into Cocoa Frosted Flakes, and then Froot-Loops and Apple Jacks. Along with either toasted blueberry waffles or Sara Lee corn muffins.

After she had her own breakfast, she'd pull down the window shades in her bedroom, the upstairs hall, and the rooms that were in use on the ground floor. With no air conditioning, you had to do what you could to keep the heat out. Then she might go down to the studio and let Andy show her how to do stuff. A lot of it was kind of gross, but the dennon made that all right. And it was worth it, because he had as much as promised that if she learned enough he would show her the dead zoos on the third floor.

Normally she didn't stay down there too long. He would start out explaining what he was doing, and letting her take a turn. But soon he'd get so caught up in the job that he'd go into some kind of like coma, where he hummed to himself and didn't hear a word you said. Talking to yourself got old pretty fast.

Back upstairs, she might do the dishes if there was a big enough pile of them or maybe run a load of wash. She started out sweeping

the kitchen floor every day, but he didn't seem to notice so now she did it every three or four days, whenever it looked like it needed it. Most days she didn't bother with her own bed, but every morning she made his. He never asked her to, but once he mentioned his mother used to do it.

That wrapped it up as far as the housework went. All there was to do after that was hang out with not even a TV to watch. Maybe read Andy's old comic books from when he was a kid. There were hundreds of them in an upstairs closet. Some of the heroes from back then had the same names, but they didn't look like the real Batman and Superman. Besides, by now Alexandra had looked through most of them.

This is your life, Alexandra. Sitting in a big old house full of stuffed animals and no TV and not even anything decent to read. She picked up the color-coordinated peach Princess phone beside her bed and dialed the number of the Luxor Motel. It turned out Ravi was up to nothing particular, and he said come on over, he had something cool to show her. All right. At least they had cable.

Alexandra got out Mrs. Tuttle's scarf to hide her breasts. Small but choice, as Brad would say as he covered them with passionate kisses. In you go. Alexandra wound the scarf around twice and fastened it with two small safety pins. Then she tugged the whole rig around so that the fastening would be under her arm so it wouldn't show. Shazam and suddenly she was transformed into Sandy, faithful young sidekick of millionaire crime fighter Addison Tuttle.

Back downstairs. Andy wasn't in the kitchen or in his bedroom, either, and so he was still downstairs working. It didn't mean anything that she couldn't hear him. Most of what he did down there didn't make any noise. She left him a note on the kitchen table: "Dear Andy, I have gone down town for a while." She thought about drawing a little heart but signed it with a smiley face instead.

At the river road she turned north toward the motel instead of south toward Main Street the way the note had said. Andy might not like it if she hung out with Ravi, even though Ravi thought

she was a boy. It was better not to mention Ravi. Who knows?, Andy could very possibly get weird and jealous like he was a real uncle

When Alexandra rang the bell on the motel counter, Ravi's mother was the one who came out from the back room. She was smiling all over her plump brown face. Having one of those dots on your forehead might be kind of cool if it didn't mean you were an Indian.

"Young Master Gaines," she said. "A pleasure to see you again. I will tell Ravi you are here."

She called out something in Indian, and in a minute Ravi appeared from the rear.

"Hey," he said. "How goes it, Sandy?"

"Not too bad."

Ravi's mother smiled at Sandy and disappeared into the back. He bent down below the counter and did something that made a small click. "Let's go watch the boob," he said. "They've got this real good show on." He grinned as if he knew some funny secret.

Alexandra smiled back and said, "Oh, yeah? What?"

"You'll see. Come on."

He took her to the next-to-last room in the rear wing and opened it with his master key. Once they were inside he put the chain on the door and jumped onto one of the queen-sized twin beds. "Make yourself comfortable," he said. "Don't worry about musing it up. I've made about a million beds in my life."

She did like he did, building herself a backrest out of the pillows on the other bed. "Go ahead," he said, gesturing at the remote that was bolted to the table between the beds.

"What channel?"

"Just turn it on."

At first her mind couldn't sort out what her eyes were seeing, but then all the shapes and colors dropped into place and made up a picture. A woman with her back to the camera was squatting over a man, one foot on either side of him and her hips moving up and down on his thing, not even touching any other part of him. She was shaved down there and she had a Playboy rabbit tattooed on

the right side of her butt. All you could see was her butt going up and down on his thing, all red and shiny and slick. She was moaning "Oh, Oh, Oh," as if she was the one having all the fun, but it seemed to Alexandra like it would be the other way around. The woman was doing all the work while the man was just lying there not lifting a finger.

"I didn't know they had stuff like this on cable," Alexandra said.

"They don't," Ravi said. "The X-rated stuff on cable sucks. You never even see the guys with a hard on."

"So what are we watching? A tape?" She couldn't figure it out. There wasn't any VCR that she could see.

"It's closed circuit TV."

The woman had got up off the man and was giving him a B.J., her head bobbing.

"She looks like a robin after a worm," Alexandra said to Ravi on the next bed. Uh, oh. Ravi had his own thing out. He was holding the end of it between his thumb and his forefinger.

Alexandra would have put him in his place, except that she was supposed to be a boy. Maybe this was the kind of stuff boys did when they were alone. Guys sometimes had contests to see who could shoot the farthest, she had heard of that.

Ravi's thing was the same pretty cinnamon color as the rest of him. The head of it was covered up, which was something else she had heard of but never seen. How could the stuff get out of there?

"Want to touch it?" Ravi said.

"I don't know, Ravi. We better not."

"Come on, I'll touch yours, too. It's twice as good when somebody else does it to you."

"Why?"

"It's a surprise. You can't tell when you're going to come."

"Really?" She couldn't see how that could be. Could it just creep up on boys without them knowing it? Maybe it did. Sometimes a boy could just be sitting there like nothing was happening and all of a sudden the stuff was all over your hand.

"Really," Ravi said. "You'll see."

“Maybe next time, okay?”

The girl in the movie was still bobbing away and the man was hollering, “I’m coming, Oh, God, I’m coming,” which of course made Ravi’s idea about not knowing look pretty stupid. The girl took it out of her mouth just in time, and Ravi was coming too, only into his handkerchief instead of all over the place like the guy in the movie. There was a really lot, from both of them.

The screen went black for a second and then there were two naked guys sitting on the edge of a swimming pool with their legs in the water and a girl just surfacing in front of them. Ravi wasn’t so interested anymore, surprise, surprise. He had zipped up in a hurry and was trying to look like nothing had happened.

“Hey, I’m really sorry for being a party pooper,” Alexandra said.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind.”

“The thing is, though, I had this like problem at home a while ago, you know? My uncle?”

Ravi nodded.

“My dad’s brother. Actually they’re identical twins.”

“He looks just like your dad? Man, that’s *so* weird!”

“Well, he didn’t really do anything. He just tried, you know?”

“Still, though.”

“Anyway, that totally weirded me out so that’s why, you know—”

“Yeah, sure,” Ravi said. “Something like that, I can understand—”

“Boy, you’re really—,” Alexandra said. I mean, most guys you can’t even talk to, you know? Stuff like this?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, thanks, Ravi. Really.”

“Did you tell your dad about it?”

“Oh, wow, I couldn’t tell my dad. He would have killed me.”

“Killed *you*? What for?”

“They’re real close. Twins have this special thing, you know. He would have never believed me.”

“Is that why you’re visiting here? Wait a minute. Mr. Tuttle isn’t—”

“No, he’s my mom’s brother. He’d never— Gee, that would be going from the frying pan into the fire, huh?”

★

Chapter eighteen

For once Alexandra was out of some hick town like Luxor and going to a place where they had real stores. Highgate Mall had all the regular mall stores, plus which all around it they had superstores like Home Depot and The Sports Authority and Borders and Staples and Costco. And Circuit City, which was the point of the whole trip to Albany supposedly, but Andy had said they could hit the mall, too.

Circuit City had a whole huge wall of TVs tuned to *Days of Our Lives*. A bald salesman in a short-sleeve shirt and a tie was trying to sell Andy on a thirty-two inch Sony, but he wasn't buying. "Didn't you say the twenty-seven inch was just as good?" he whispered to her. Alexandra nodded her head. Actually she had said the twenty-five inch, but she might as well let him go for the twenty-seven. God knows, he had the money.

"Now listen," Andy said to the salesman, "I want you to call me before you deliver, so I can be sure to be there."

"Absolutely," said the salesman. "I'll write it right on the order."

"Because if they show up when I'm not there they won't be able to get on the property, you understand."

"No problem."

"In case there is, what's the name of your supervisor?"

"Ralph."

"Ralph what?"

"Glickman."

The salesman kept smiling while Andy wrote it down. He must have thought Andy was a total paranoid, which he was about anybody on the property. Before he would sign the contract last week with the satellite dish guy in Luxor, he made a huge big deal about exactly what time the installer guy was going to show up, and then when he did Andy stood right behind him the whole time.

The Circuit City salesman gave Andy a slip to take the desk, where they made him sign a bunch of other papers before the warehouse guys would bring out the TV and load it aboard the van. She helped Andy set it on top of a pile of quilted moving blankets and tie the box down so it wouldn't slide around.

"You want to get that other thing?" Andy said when they were done. He couldn't say the word, but Alexandra knew he meant the Jogbra. Of course back in Hicktown, USA, they didn't have any Jogbras. Andy never even heard of them, till she told him wrapping that scarf around her was a big pain in the you-know-what. So they went to the Sports Authority next door to Circuit City and Andy pretended he was someplace else while she pretended she was buying the sports bra for her sister. Since she was dressed as a boy she couldn't very well try it on, but it certainly ought to do the job. The whole idea of a sports bra was to squeeze your boobs flat.

"What are you looking for at the mall?" Andy asked when they were back outside.

"Nothing special. Just shopping."

They wandered around for an hour, her picking up a cute Tommy Hilfiger knit shirt and a pair of yellow ceramic earrings shaped like zigzag thunderbolts, supposedly for her sister. Andy was sweet in his weird way, just tagging along and not complaining. The only thing that got his interest was a B. Dalton's. He headed straight for the animal section and wound up with a big book of animal pictures. Reference photos, he called them.

Back home they set up the TV or rather she did, since he was totally hopeless at it. He couldn't even get the hang of the remote, although there was nothing to it. Hit the TV button and the DSS

button to turn it on, then TV again to get to Channel 3, then Power for off.

"I'll let you do it," he said. "I'm a Luddite." Whatever that was.

For supper Alexandra nuked them a Hungry Man country-fried beefsteak dinner, which was a balanced meal with corn and mashed potatoes and cherry-apple crumb dessert. She was seeing to it that Andy ate a better diet than just frozen burritos. Probably he just ate them to save himself the work of making a regular meal. At least he never said a word about wanting to go back to the burritos. He just ate everything she set in front of him except when it came to ice cream. He stuck with coffee flavor. Personally she liked Rocky Road better, so she bought both.

Since they each ate out of their own ice cream container, the only real cleanup after supper was rinsing the silverware and glasses. As far as the dinner itself went, all you had to do was throw out the aluminum trays they came on. Which was another advantage over the burritos. They came in big boxes, not disposable microwave trays.

"Have you ever been to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City?" Tuttle asked while she was at the sink.

"I wish," she said. "I've never even been to New York City."

"They have an interesting exhibit there. Did you ever hear of a sculptor named George Segal?"

"I don't think so."

"He does life-sized statues of people with their clothes on. I don't mean he puts clothes on the statues. He sculpts them clothed."

"Sure. Like Star Trek."

"Star Trek?"

"They have this Star Trek collection of dolls, Princess Leia and all of them? You don't dress them like Barbie, their clothes are like part of them. Is that what you mean?"

"It sounds like it, yes. Except the clothes are probably painted."

"I guess. Or maybe the plastic is different colors."

"The sculptures in the Port Authority aren't painted. They're standing in line waiting to buy tickets from an imaginary ticket booth, like a line of ghost commuters."

"Ghosts?" she asked. He was back on statues that looked like ghosts again, like the old Roman ones in the museums.

"They're completely white — clothing, skin, hair, everything. Segal starts by making a plaster cast of a fully clothed model. Then he makes a bronze cast of that, and then he paints the bronze white to look like the original plaster. It's similar to the process we sometimes use in taxidermy, except for the bronze casting. We use the animal's actual skin instead of bronze."

"I'd be pretty funny if this Segal guy used the people's actual skin, wouldn't it?" Alexandra said. "There'd be these real people standing there in the bus station like mummies and everybody would think they were only statues."

"They'd look taller, too," Tuttle said.

"How come?"

"Being white makes you think of them as plaster objects, not people. You're struck by what small objects they are. Then you look around at the real people passing by, and you realize that Segal's people are actually average size. Most people are smaller than you think. Your eye unconsciously gives them stature because they're human like you. When the eye sees them as inanimate objects, though, it sees them at their real size. That may be part of what Segal is getting at in his work, the disjunction between real size and perceived size. In fact each of us can indeed add a cubit to our stature just by being alive."

Adding a Cupid to your statue? What was he talking about now?

"Technically *and* artistically," Andy went on, "there's very little difference between what I do as a taxidermist and what Segal does as a sculptor. The truth is that taxidermists *are* sculptors. For instance, look at you standing there at the sink, Alexandra."

"Sandy," she said. "You keep forgetting."

“Sandy,” he said, uncomfortable with it but trying. “You’d make a work of art, right there, in that pose. I could sculpt you as well as Segal could.”

“You mean put plaster all over me?”

“Not all over. For your body and limbs, I’d construct what we call an armature—a sort of substructure or form made out of wire.”

“What about the face?”

“The best method would be a silicone rubber cast. As long as you put a little petroleum jelly on the eyelashes and eyebrows, it’s perfectly painless.”

ALEXANDRA WAS STILL HOLDING THE POSE, head bent forward and most of her weight on the left leg. She heard Andy pulling another picture, the sixth, out of his Polaroid.

“That should do it,” he said, as he set the photograph down with the others on the kitchen table. “No, stay put for just a second, will you? I need a few measurements.”

He handed her a measuring tape and told her to start with the waist.

“I already know it,” Alexandra said. “It’s twenty-two.”

Andy write it down in his notebook.

“The other ones I know are hips thirty-three and bust thirty-two B.”

“B?” he said. “What’s the B for?”

“You know, cup size.”

“Cup size? —Oh.” Andy did his blushing thing. It was kind of cute, but when you thought about it, it was kind of peculiar, too.

He took the rest of the measurements himself—hipbone to knee, knee to heel, shoulder to elbow, elbow to wrist, and a half dozen others. He did it without ever actually touching her, by holding the tape next to her and eyeballing it. Maybe he had never touched a woman before, aside from his mom.

“Did you study sculpture at school or something?” Alexandra asked.

“Very briefly. I took two extension courses in the art school at SUNY.”

“It’d be cool to be an artist.”

“There’s no reason why you couldn’t take courses. I imagine they’re still being offered.”

Tuttle was looking at his notes, but what he saw was Alexandra in the cupola on top of the house, working at her easel. The afternoon light fell on her through the stained-glass windows, blues and greens and reds all running together. Flecks of paint were on her hands, and on her loose smock. The nape of her neck was damp in the heat. He was looking over her shoulder at her work, gently reaching out to guide her tiny hand. She turned, trusting.

★

Chapter nineteen

“He’ll be busy all day down in his studio, probably won’t even come up for supper,” Alexandra said to Ravi.

“What’s he, like stuffing something?”

“No, he’s working on my armature.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s what goes inside a statue. Steel rods and stuff.”

“A statue of what?”

“We’re working on a statue of me.”

“I thought he was a taxidermist.”

“Mostly he is, but he makes statues, too. He studied it at Harvard.”

Ravi had brought a bag of jelly doughnuts, left over from the continental breakfast his parents set out in the lobby. He had been talking with his mouth full, but now the last doughnut was gone. He went over to the sink to wash the frosting off his hands.

Alexandra put her own sticky fingers in her mouth and kept on sucking after the sweetness was gone. She tried switching back and forth, first being the tongue that licked the fingers and then being the fingers that got licked. She could be two persons, sucking or being sucked, whichever she wanted. It was like she could play on both teams in the same game. It was funny when you thought about it that way. She almost said it out loud, but she was afraid Ravi might get the wrong idea if she talked about personal stuff. Not that she didn’t think she could handle him if he hit on her again, or she wouldn’t have come over to watch more dirty movies.

The movies were stupid, but they were fun in a way. You could see what you must look like when you were doing it

yourself. Plus they had lesbian stuff, which she had heard of naturally, but never actually seen it.

When Ravi turned the movie on, a man on the screen was doing it to a woman on her hands and knees. She was making these totally fake moans, and then the man pulled out and went all over the girl’s back.

“Oh, gross,” Alexandra said. “Now he’s like finger-painting her.”

“I wouldn’t mind having that size of a finger,” Ravi said. “Would you?”

Before she knew what he was doing, his hand was between her legs. “Finger check,” he said.

Suddenly his smile went away and his hand jerked back as if he had touched a hot stove. “What happened to your—,” he began, and broke off as the answer came to him. He looked at her with his mouth hanging open.

“You’re a girl?” he managed at last.

Alexandra nodded, smiling so he wouldn’t be so upset.

“Oh, good lord,” Ravi said. “The other day—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I never would have—”

“Hey, it’s okay. I don’t mind, really I don’t. I’ve seen them before.”

“You have?”

“Well, you know.” She gestured toward the screen, where a naked man with his hand on himself was standing over two girls on a bed. They seemed to be in a motel room a lot like the one Alexandra and Ravi were in. Ravi didn’t look at the screen and didn’t look at her. He was looking down at the bed. Most likely, now that he knew she was a girl, he was afraid of her.

“I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t,” she said. “My uncle made me keep it a secret.”

Ravi kept his eyes on the bedspread.

“Don’t you want to know why?” Alexandra asked.

He nodded, still not looking at her.

“Because nobody’s supposed to know I’m visiting my uncle. On account of the stalker.”

Now Ravi looked up.

“It was this guy back home that had been in jail and everybody was afraid of him. He would be waiting when I got out of school and follow me everywhere.”

“A guy you knew?” Ravi asked.

“I didn’t actually *know* him. I knew *of* him. He was this real creep that hung around in the bushes outside the girls gym. He’d make these creepy phone calls?”

“Like he would just breathe?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes he would say all the things he was going to do to me.”

“How did you know it was him?”

“The police listened in and they knew his voice.”

“Why didn’t they arrest him?”

“Because of the lawyers. The police have their hands tied by the courts.”

“Couldn’t your folks hire a lawyer, too?”

“They did, but he couldn’t do anything because nowadays everything is the criminal.”

“So what did you do?”

“The lawyer said the best thing was to go someplace where the stalker could never find me. The only place was with my uncle Andy, but if a girl showed up to visit, people would talk about how it must be his niece and the stalker would know.”

“How would he know?”

“I guess he must have relatives around here or something.”

“Wow, I never thought you would be a girl.”

“It’s just the haircut and boys’ clothes.”

“Oh, yeah, I can see it now I know. But before.”

“And no boobs. I mean I have them but they’re not real big.”
Alexandra glanced at the screen. “Do you like big boobs like hers?”

“Nah, they look stupid.”

“A lot of boys do.”

“Not me.”

“A lot of times girls with big boobs walk all hunched over to hide them.”

“Yeah, Jennifer Kirby does that.”

“Who’s she?”

“Just some girl at school.”

“Do you like her?”

“Not really. I just see her around in the halls.”

“She should do like me. Whenever I leave the house I wear a loose shirt and this really tight running bra under it.”

“You can’t even see,” Ravi said, trying to see.

“One of these days, maybe,” Alexandra said, and smiled. “Hey, why not? You showed me yours, didn’t you?”

Ravi sat there saying nothing, but she knew what he had to be thinking. Herself, she was wondering about that sort of hood over the end of his thing, how that worked anyway. She hadn’t really got a good look, the other day.

On the screen, a girl wearing a post office uniform was peeking in a window, gesturing at another girl letter carrier to be quiet and come take a look.

Alexandra heard a metallic click from outside the room. Whatever it was, it scared Ravi. He put a finger to his lips just like the post office girl and got to his knees on the bed. He was reaching behind a picture on the wall with one hand and making some kind of a gesture with the other. At first Alexandra couldn’t figure it out, and then she realized he wanted her to turn down the TV. She hit the mute button and the music on the sound track stopped. Vague noises were coming through the wall.

“Lift this picture off the hook for me, okay?” he whispered. Once she had the picture down, she saw that Ravi had his thumb on the wall as if he were pushing in a tack.

“It’s Chief Kregger,” Ravi whispered. “Keep your voice down.”

“He lives next door?” Alexandra whispered back.

“No, but he brings his women here in the afternoons sometimes.”

“So is that a peephole there or what?”

“It was here when we bought the place. It comes out under this like wall decoration next door, so you can’t see it unless you really look. You want to? Look?”

“Maybe after a while. You go ahead.”

“We’ve got to keep really quiet, though.”

She nodded, and Ravi took his thumb off the peephole.

IN THE MOVIE, a man had come to the door and let the two post office women come in. He must have been in the shower because all he had on was a towel. With the sound off you couldn’t hear what he was saying. Anyway the blonde woman said something back and then snatched his towel right off him. The man’s thing was much bigger, but uncircumcised just like Ravi’s. Alexandra glanced over at Ravi, up on his knees with his eye screwed to the peephole. The front of his pants was like a tent. She smiled, thinking what would happen if she gave his woodie a teeny little poke. He’d probably freak.

Alexandra turned back to the movie. It wasn’t quite as stupid with the sound off, actually, but it still wasn’t too interesting. The blonde had big boobs but they were floppy. The skinny little brunette had a better bod, in Alexandra’s humble opinion.

“Want to take a turn?” Ravi whispered after a while, his thumb back over the peephole.

“That’s all right, you go ahead.”

“Check it out for at least a second.”

Alexandra took his place at the peephole. A woman was lying on her back on the bed. She was a mess, all cellulite and stretch marks, with stringy brown hair and a flabby butt and a bush so big and black it looked like some kind of animal down there. Her head hung over the edge with Chief Kregger crouching over and his thing in her upside-down mouth. He could have stood to lose a pound or two himself, but nothing like her.

“Jesus, Edna, you’re about as much fun as a corpse,” Kregger said. “Turn over so as I can wear out your other end for a while.”

“Please don’t do me that way, Hal,” she said. “It really hurts.”

“It hurts, huh? Well, we wouldn’t want to hurt you, would we?”

“Don’t, Hal.” She had turned over while he was talking, and was on all fours.

“Hey, no problem,” he said. “I can always make you do the chicken instead.”

“Honey, I was just kidding,” she said quickly. “You can do me any way you want.”

He had his hand on her neck, squeezing like he was checking for ripeness. “Sure you wouldn’t rather do the chicken?”

“Please, honey,” she said. “Oh, please, please, please don’t.”

Her fat rear was already sticking up in the air but she raised it higher. Kregger let go of her neck and grabbed a handful of her hips on both sides and rammed and crammed until he finally got all the way in. Her groans and tears got him hot, so it was over fast. Kregger wouldn’t even let her wash up afterwards, just told her to get dressed and go home, the sight of her made him sick. Then he closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep until he heard the door close behind the woman Edna. A few minutes later he was dressed and out of there himself. He hadn’t washed either.

★

Chapter twenty

“He told her he’d make her play the chicken and she got all scared,” Alexandra said. “What does that mean, play the chicken?”

“He gets her in some kind of special hold around her neck and squeezes until her feet start to jerk.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“Just once. It was really scary. She passed out and I thought he had killed her.”

“Why does she let him do it to her, anyway?”

“She’s got to, otherwise he gives her speeding tickets and her husband gets all mad and beats her up.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Yeah, I heard them talking about it once. She was saying she wasn’t going to come any more and he told her she better or next time her husband really would kill her.”

“The chief might kill her, too. I’d be afraid to rent him the room.”

“He doesn’t rent it. He makes us keep it empty so he can bring his women here whenever he wants.”

“Can’t you complain?”

“Yeah, right. He’s the police.”

“Isn’t there a mayor or somebody?”

“We’re supposed to keep our head down and don’t make waves. We’re ragheads. Wogs.”

“You’ve got rights like anybody else.”

“I wish. You know what happened when we first bought this place? The second night we were here they wrote stuff on the front of the building with spray paint.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Buy American, Death to Dotheads, like that.”

“What does it mean, Dotheads?”

“Those dumb dots on your forehead.”

“I think they look cool.”

“Not when they’re on your own mom.”

“Yeah, I guess not.”

Pink bodies were still moving in silence on the screen, but Alexandra wasn’t paying any attention. She hadn’t known about this side of Ravi before, that he was the hero of a real-life racial discrimination episode.

“Anyway, so Chief Kregger came out and told my folks he’d get right to work on it. A few days later he came around and said, I put a stop to it and you won’t have no more trouble. Then he talked about how the last owner used to let him use a room to meet friends in and it was a good thing for a business to have a police presence around, it kept trouble from happening. So my dad knew.”

“Knew what?”

“The chief was the one who wrote the stuff on the wall.”

“Wow, you think?”

“He didn’t arrest anybody for it, did he? Then how come it stopped?”

“I see what you mean.”

“Listen, can I say something to you, Sandy? Is it really Sandy?”

“Yeah, it is. For Alexandra.”

“Well, anyway, I’m really sorry about the other time. You know, the first time we watched the movies. What I did. I mean, I just want you to know that I never, ever would have — If I’d had any idea that you were actually a girl —”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. It might have been fun to even do it. Of course now it’s never going to happen.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Now that you know I’m a girl.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you liked boys.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Well, when you wanted me to do it, you thought I was a boy.”

“I did and I didn’t.”

“What does that mean?”

“I must have suspected you were a girl or I never would have asked you.”

“You don’t do it with boys?”

“No, I never did. That’s why I say I must have had some idea you were really a girl.”

“Like you sensed it?”

“Like that, yeah. Don’t you think people sometimes sense things about other people. I sensed something about you the first time you came into the shop, but I didn’t know what it was yet.”

“Sometimes you’re kind of sweet, Ravi, you know it? Did you ever do it with a girl?”

“Well, not all the way.”

“Was it fun?”

“Sure it was fun.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if I was to say yes this time?”

“Yes, I’d do it for you.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you wouldn’t mind.”

“You wouldn’t mind? Wow, that’s pretty romantic.”

“Well, would you mind?”

“It would depend on how nice you asked me,” Alexandra said. You could tell from his voice how excited he was getting. She was a little bit excited herself, but more curious, really.

“Please would you?” Ravi said.

“Nicer.”

“Pretty please?”

“Nicer.”

“Pretty please with sugar on it?”

“All right, then,” Alexandra said. “But you’ve got to promise not to look.”

“Okay.”

He’d probably peek anyway, and that would be like she was acting in one of those movies. She moved so that her back blocked him from seeing. That way he’d be putting on the show, not her.

ALEXANDRA WAS WASHING HER HANDS when all the commotion started. She shut off the water and the pounding was so loud it felt like she was inside of a drum.

“Open up or I’ll break the goddamn door down,” the person was shouting. Alexandra looked out and saw Ravi sitting on the bed, zipped up at least but paralyzed like he was freeze-framed. “Ask him who it is,” Alexandra said, even though she had a pretty good idea.

Ravi got enough of a grip to holler out, “Who is it?”

“Police,” Kregger hollered back. “Open this door, you little faggot.”

Ravi wasn’t getting up to open the door, which was just plain dumb. If a man had to break a person’s door down it just made him even madder at that person and he would hurt her. So Alexandra went and unlocked the door herself.

Kregger went right past her straight to Ravi and hauled him up off the bed by his shirtfront. “How long you been spying on me, you little faggot shit?” he said.

“I wasn’t spying on you, sir. Honest.”

“Oh, yeah? How come I know you’re a faggot, then?”

Ravi looked confused. Alexandra couldn’t figure it out either.

“Peepholes go both ways, asshole,” Kregger said. He had switched over from being mad. Now he was grinning, enjoying Ravi’s confusion.

“I thought I heard a couple little faggots talking soon as I walked in next door,” he said. “Where was those voices coming from? Maybe a hole in the wall? Well, what the hell, let’s give the faggots a ”””show since we’re here. Do ’em good to see how a man does it. Then once the show is over I sneak back and sure

enough, I find the peephole. How about that, huh? Now the faggots are putting on a show for me.”

Kregger let go of Ravi, and he half sat, half collapsed, back onto the bed.

“You’re in deep shit, you little homo. You know who’s the only friend you got right now? Me. Unless I say different, your tender young ass goes straight to prison. They know what to do with it there.”

Kregger looked at Alexandra, who was still standing by the door.

“You look like you’re about twelve,” he said. “How old are you, boy?”

“Fifteen.”

“I bet. What’s your name, boy?”

“Sandy.”

“Where do you live?”

“With my uncle, Mr. Tuttle.”

“Don’t you lie to me. There’s only one Tuttle in town, and he lives alone.”

Alexandra nodded. “That’s my uncle,” she said. “I’m spending the summer with him.”

“You’re Addison Tuttle’s nephew?”

She nodded.

“He’s got a faggot nephew,” Kregger said. “Well, well, well, isn’t that something?”

Chief Kregger smiled at Alexandra, a bully’s smile, and seemed to forget about Ravi.

“What’s your name, faggot?” he said to her.

“Sandy.”

“You’ll enjoy jail, Sandy. Till you catch AIDS.”

Smiling bigger than ever, he let himself out of the room.

Ravi had been right on the edge of crying all along, and as soon as the door closed behind the policeman he let it all loose. Alexandra sat down next to him on the bed and put her arm around his narrow shoulders. She kept saying it was all right, which

of course was a lie and they both knew it. After a while Ravi stopped crying enough to say, “It’s not all right at all.”

“It’s not as bad as he said, though,” Alexandra said. “I don’t think they send kids to the regular jail.”

“Well, they send them somewhere. Besides I don’t care about that anyway. It’s my dad.”

“What will he do?”

“Probably kill me, that’s all. He hates gays. I’ve got to tell him, Sandy.”

“I thought you said he’d kill you.”

“Tell him you’re a girl.”

“What difference would that make?”

“A girl and a boy fooling around is all right.”

“Yeah, but it’s the same as if I was a boy. You *thought* that’s what I was.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Right up till you touched me, you did.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t do anything before that.”

“You wanted to, though.”

“Wanting to isn’t the same as doing.”

“I don’t know. On TV they’re always talking about intent to kill and stuff. You’re guilty even if you don’t actually kill them.”

“Yeah, but even if I wanted to, nobody knows it.”

“We do.”

“We don’t have to tell.”

“You have to tell if the police ask you. Besides, Ravi, what about me?”

“What about you?”

“My uncle Andy isn’t going to be too happy about what you made me do to you.”

“I didn’t make you.”

“You told me to.”

“I didn’t tell you, I asked you. You didn’t have to do it.”

“Ask, tell, who cares? The thing is, my uncle is going to be pissed as it is. But he’s going to be really pissed if everybody finds out I’m a girl. Nobody’s supposed to know, because of the stalker.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“So you’ve got to promise you won’t tell about it, okay.”

“I don’t know.”

“The other thing is, if everybody knew I was a girl, then your parents wouldn’t let us hang out together anymore. Not alone like this anyway, would they?”

“Are you kidding? My dad wouldn’t let me go out with any girl, except for a Hindu girl.”

“My uncle won’t let me go out, either,” Alexandra said. “That’s why I never told him we were kind of going around together. He’s real strict.”

“Tell me about it. My dad hardly lets me breathe.”

“So look, Ravi, whatever happens?”

“Yeah?”

“It won’t happen right away. We can still see each other, can’t we?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Because I really think you’re neat, you know. I think we really have a thing going, don’t you?”

Ravi nodded and looked down at the floor. Poor boy, he was as shy as Andy.

“Because when we were—you know—doing that? Anyway, it was like we were in our own movie, you know? I wish we could try some of that stuff they were doing, don’t you?”

Ravi was too frightened to manage much of a smile, but he made an effort.

“Next time you can look,” she said. “Only you’ve got to promise not to tell anybody I’m a girl. Okay?”

★

Chapter twenty-one

Alexandra was lying on plastic sheeting that crackled with every small movement she made. She remembered the last thing she saw before the mask closed down over her, heavy and cold. It was a short chain with nothing on the end of it, hanging down from a ceiling fixture above Tuttle's bed. She had never noticed the fixture before. What was the point of the empty chain? Did a light hang on it once? She couldn't ask because her mouth was stopped. All she could do was wait for whatever the next thing might be.

"Can you breathe through the straws all right?" came Tuttle's voice. She couldn't see him but she knew he was sitting in a chair beside the bed. "Well, of course you can't very well answer, can you?"

Alexandra gave the thumbs-up sign. She was comfortable except for the unpleasant feel of the plastic sheeting that protected the bed. Two red and white striped straws ran through the silicon mask and into her nostrils. It had only been scary at the very beginning, when the heavy blobs of silicon plaster blocked her eyes and mouth. She could breathe, but at first she felt there wasn't enough air coming through the straws, that she would slowly suffocate. Then she found that as long as she relaxed and breathed slowly she was fine. She might even fall asleep. That would be something.

"I hope this works," Tuttle went on. "This is the first time I've attempted such an elaborate synthesis between the traditions of sculpture and taxidermy."

Alexandra lay still, giving no sign that she was listening. She might have fallen asleep. For once Tuttle could look at the girl as long and as hard as he wanted to. His gaze tried to discover the

body under her light, loose clothing. Her small breasts, unbound, barely showed through her boy's shirt. Tuttle bent over and looked through the gap between two buttons. He couldn't see the nipple but he imagined it small and pink, almost too tiny for a baby to fix on. The soft swell of the breasts would be covered with blonde hairs so fine as to be invisible except against the sun. And then they would outline the silhouetted breast in glowing gold. It must be that they would, because her cheeks—the sweetly curving cheeks of Alexandra—had that same golden-bordered glow when the sun caught them just so.

The thought struck him that when the hardened cast came off her face, it might take with it the thousands of microscopic hairs. Would it hurt? He had had her grease her eyebrows and eyelids with Vaseline. But he had forgotten the nearly invisible golden pelt that covered her. What if her sweet peach-fuzz cheeks turned shiny and hairless like a scar? Don't be ridiculous, he told himself. Women have their faces depilated all the time and they don't look like burn victims afterward.

From naked faces his mind jumped to Paris. He had never told a soul about his visit to Honoré Fragonard's dead zoo at Maisons-Alfort, not even other taxidermists at conventions. Especially not other taxidermists, most of whom were morons in bolo ties and sheepskin vests, with greasy beards and dirty fingernails. Some taxidermists, particularly the museum people, were technically competent and worth talking to on that level. But none of them was remotely capable of appreciating the awful beauty of Fragonard's art.

"After mother died I went to Paris for a working vacation," Tuttle found himself saying to the girl in the white mask he had plastered thickly on her face. "I missed her horribly, and I thought a trip might do me some good, get my mind off things. Paris was an absolute nightmare."

He was surprised to find himself on the brink of telling this girl about how afraid he had been on his only trip abroad. Was it because he couldn't see her face? Or because she couldn't see his?

Was it easier to talk when the other person was, like a statue, unable to respond?

“The French pretend not to understand you,” he said, “and then they take you all over the city and overcharge you for the cab and start screaming if you dare to complain. It was all like that in Paris, every minute. Being cheated and shouted at, and of course they make it a point to talk so fast that no one can understand a word they say.

“And in the middle of all that clamor and rudeness and greed is hidden this secret place of absolute peace and beauty and blessed solitude. The only person there is an old man wearing a smock who lets you in and then leaves you completely alone to wander around and drink everything in to your heart’s content.

“Fragonard was trained as a surgeon, you know, not an artist. He was the first director of the veterinary school at Alfort, but his true passion was for anatomy, which led him into preservation. Which of course led him into art. He did thousands of preparations, dissected two cadavers a week for his entire working life. He never wrote about his work, never bothered to reveal his techniques to his colleagues. They whispered behind his back that he was mad, which is of course the universal reaction of morons to creative genius.

“Above his old dissection chambers there’s a three-room museum now, with case after case full of his creations. *Écorchés*, he called them. It means flayed, the flayed ones. Everyone thinks flayed means whipped or beaten. It doesn’t. It means skinned. When you were done with that woodchuck you had turned him into an *écorché*.”

Alexandra lay there unmoving, as if dead. Tuttle’s words passed by without catching at her attention. She didn’t even have to nod politely, because she wasn’t supposed to move till the plaster dried.

“That would have been just the beginning for Fragonard,” Tuttle said. “For him, the flaying would have been merely the equivalent of a great painter’s preparation of his canvas. The final work would have been a three-dimensional statue of a woodchuck created out of the woodchuck’s actual body. No doubt sitting up

on full alert with red arteries, brown ligaments, and yellow tendons. A previously worthless and unmemorable animal, doomed to death like every other creature, would have been transmuted into art that lives forever.

“Fragonard is eternal, too, even though his physical carcass rotted away almost two hundred years ago. In his *écorchés* he lives forever.”

That Ravi, Alexandra was thinking meanwhile. For sure he’s going to tell everybody I’m a girl. His father will get it out of him somehow, or Kregger will. Naturally the policeman had to be Andy’s only friend in school, so of course the first thing he’ll do is run right to his old buddy about it. Even though it was nothing but a stupid hand job Andy will get all weird about it like it was some big. Men always think they own you.

Tuttle tapped on her mask with a fingernail. “Sounds like it’s hard,” he said. “Hold still and I’ll try not to hurt you.”

She felt the mask lifting, coming free easily. It wasn’t even as bad as pulling off a Band-Aid. “Let’s see,” Alexandra said, and he handed it to her. It didn’t look like anything at all, let alone like her.

“That’s me?” she said.

“Well, the opposite of you, you might say. A cast is nothing but a hole where your face used to be. It’s what artists call negative space.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“The space that surrounds or borders your subject, the space which your subject does not occupy.”

“Neat,” she said. Whatever.

Tuttle was working on the cast with a small knife, scraping carefully at something or other. Alexandra yawned hugely.

“It must be boring for you here,” Tuttle said.

“I’m just sleepy from lying down, that’s all.”

“Still, you must miss your friends.”

“What friends?” Did he know about Ravi?

“You must have had friends your own age back home.”

“Not really. My dad was this big executive, so we moved around a lot. Whenever I’d get to know kids, the company would send him someplace else.”

“Where is he now, your father?”

“One day he just up and left.”

Andy raised his eyes from the mask and looked at her. “Like mine,” he said.

“He had these like really major problems with commitment. He was a Vietnam vet.”

“Your poor mother.”

“She had problems with relationships, too. I really don’t think about either one of them anymore. My motto is to think glad thoughts.”

He looked away again. After a minute he said, “What about school? It’ll be starting up before too long. Is that a glad thought?”

“Except for gym class.”

“Gym class?”

“The boys’ showers.”

“Of course. I never thought of that.”

“I’d have to register as a girl.”

“That’s out of the question.”

“Plenty of girls live with their uncles.”

“It isn’t that. Special circumstances obtain, take my word for it. Innocent people have wound up in jail over simple misunderstandings. I wish I could explain it to you, but you’ll just have to take my word for it. I can’t be known to have a young girl living with me.”

“Maybe it would be better if I just left, Andy.”

“Do you want to leave?”

“Of course not. You’re the only— Well, never mind, I shouldn’t say that.”

“If you really want to stay, we’ll think of something. Home schooling, maybe.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Well, yes, of course I do. We have the sculpture to finish — ”

The sculpture was getting to be a big drag. Almost every morning he would pose her in the studio while he sketched or checked various measurements against the armature he was making or took Polaroids from different angles. The worst part was she had to stand there and not move, which got old pretty fast.

“ — as well as which, I’m planning a very intricate competition piece for the Midstates Taxidermy Convention in Michigan. You might find it instructive to help me with it.”

“What kind of a piece?”

“A family grouping. A reasonably tricky job.”

“Sure I’ll help.”

Right. If she was even around after all this Ravi business. For some mysterious reason Andy seemed to think he would go to jail if people found out she was a girl. And Ravi thought *he’d* go to jail unless he told the whole world she was a girl. Then Andy would probably fire her from her housekeeper job for no fault of her own and all she’d have was the few measly dollars she had saved from her salary and the grocery money.

Maybe the best answer would be if the two of them, Sandy and Andy, just went to Mexico where nobody would care if she was a girl. Andy could open a museum in Acapulco for his statues, like Dragonheart did in Paris. Every evening they would enjoy deliciously-prepared gourmet meals on the terrace of the museum while they checked out all the luxury yachts in the harbor down below.

★

Chapter twenty-two

"I thought I heard a click or something," Ravi said. "Is there somebody else on the line?"

"Me and Uncle Andy are the only ones ever here. It's not exactly Fun City."

"Maybe he picked up."

"No way. He's down in the workshop."

"Maybe he has a phone there," Ravi said, being difficult.

"He purposely doesn't have a phone in the basement so nobody will interrupt him. The workshop is like soundproofed so he can't even hear the phone when it rings up here. Maybe somebody picked up on your end, your mom or somebody."

"I didn't dare call from home. I'm at the Mini-Mart down the road. Listen, I've got to tell them you're a girl."

"Ravi, you promised."

"I know, but I've got to. My dad knows what we did and he's gone totally ballistic."

"What did you tell him for?"

"I didn't. Chief Kregger came back after you left. Now he wants my dad to pay him a hundred dollars a week to keep an eye on the place. So it won't turn into a gay hangout."

"Why would it turn into a gay hangout?"

"That's just what he says. All it is, is blackmail."

"Is your dad going to pay it?"

"No, that's the thing. He called me in after Chief Kregger left. Sandy, it was awful. He gets mad all the time but I never saw him like this."

"What did he do?"

"He says he won't pay Chief Kregger a dime to keep a dirty little poof out of jail."

"What's a poof?"

"Somebody that's gay. He says jail is where I belong."

"Your own dad said that?"

"He thinks now I'll never marry the nice Hindu girl they've got all picked out. Her parents operate two motels outside Omaha."

"What about us?"

"Us?"

"You and me. The thing we've got going. You don't want to marry this girl in Omaha, do you?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Listen, we've got to talk right now."

"We are talking."

"Really talk. Where can we meet?"

"We can't. I'm forbidden to see you."

"So don't tell them."

"They'd find out. Chief Kregger might see us."

"Nobody knows where you are now, do they?"

"No, I sneaked out."

"So keep sneaking. There must be someplace we could go."

The line was silent while he thought.

"Maybe Morahan's Hollow," Ravi said. "Nobody will be there on a day like this."

Alexandra hadn't noticed, but now she looked out the window and saw the weather coming in. "What's Morahan's Hollow?" she asked.

"It's this place where Morahan's Creek comes into the river. It's like this swimming hole."

Ravi told her how to get there, but he still wasn't happy about the whole thing. "What if Chief Kregger sees you on your bike?" he said.

"What if he does? It's a free country, isn't it? A person can ride a bike."

"I don't know about this whole thing. I'm scared."

"Come on, Ravi. We've got to talk and we might as well go swimming, too."

"It's going to rain."

"Didn't you ever swim in the rain?"

"My suit's back at the motel."

"So what? I don't even own a suit. Besides, why should you care? I've already seen you."

Ravi was quiet a minute. She knew what he had to be thinking. He hadn't seen her.

"Okay, then," Alexandra said. "I'm out of here." She hung up and didn't answer the phone when he rang back after a minute. She was practically out the door anyway.

THE STREAM FLOWED FAST over a smooth lip of waterworn rock and plunged into a bubbling, churning pool. No one else was there but the two of them, and no wonder. The skies were getting grayer all the time. There was the feel of a thunderstorm in the air.

Alexandra imagined how it would be on a sunny summer afternoon, all the kids hanging out and the boys showing off by diving into the pool from the rocks at the top of the falls, higher than the big board at a pool. The girls would be sitting on the boulders over at the sides of the pool, pretending not to pay any attention. The boys would fake-scream as they jumped, pretending to be scared so the girls wouldn't guess that they really were.

"You ever jump from up there, Ravi?" she said.

"Are you kidding? A guy got paralyzed once. Besides, I'm not so hot of a swimmer."

Ravi was a funny kid sometimes. Most boys would rather die than show that they had any sense, let alone admit that they weren't so great at sports. Chief Kregger probably jumped from the cliffs all the time when he was a kid. Did Chief Kregger and Andy ever come out here together back then when they were in school together? Andy wouldn't have jumped. Chief Kregger might have pushed him and Andy would have been mad for a minute and then

glad he did, because now he knew there was nothing to be afraid of. Being that they were that kind of buddies, it was just going to be a matter of time before Kregger told him that his so-called nephew was running around giving hand jobs to kids. Then the truth would come out and she'd be on the next bus.

"Want to go in?" Alexandra asked. "It looks like we're going to get wet anyway in a few minutes."

"Do you want to?" Ravi said.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't. Do you want me to?"

"If you want to."

"I will if you will," Alexandra said. "You first."

"I'm scared. What if there's lightning?"

She was losing him, so she undid the top button on her shirt. "Oh, come on," she said. "If we hear any thunder we'll get out."

Alexandra faced away from him while she took off her clothes. Once she was out of her jogging bra and panties, completely naked, she ran quickly for the water so he wouldn't get a good look just yet. She dove deep and came up in the middle of the pool. The noise of the waterfall filled her and drew her closer. There was a space behind the falling water. She grabbed the slick, round rocks on the shallow bottom and pulled herself over them until she came to an opening that led to the secret chamber. Inside she pulled herself onto a mossy rock and gave herself up to the roar of the water. Alexandra rose to a crouch, took a deep breath and launched herself through the pearly curtain of falling water.

"Come on in," she called out when she had surfaced safe and untouchable, the invisible armor clinging to every inch of her. "The water's fine."

Ravi taking his clothes off looked like a big brown bird, standing first on one leg and then the other. His shoulders were narrow and his arms and legs were thin, but he wasn't all angles the way a white kid that skinny would be. No knobs on his spine, no ribs sticking out, no sharp elbows or shoulders. He was smooth and rounded all over.

"Come on," she said again.

It took Ravi a minute to work up his nerve, and then he ran for the water and jumped in feet first like a kid. He came up blowing as if he had been underwater a long time instead of just a few seconds. Then he stood there like a dummy in water up to his chest, not knowing what to do, so Alexandra splashed him. At least he knew what a water fight was, and they splashed back and forth a few times. The last time, accidentally on purpose, she lost her footing and fell against him. She caught her balance with a hand on his shoulder, but stayed near him, almost touching.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go in deeper.”

“I don’t know. It gets over your head.”

“Big deal. You can swim, can’t you?”

The bottom was covered with big round rocks, so slippery that Alexandra could barely keep her balance in the swirling water. If she were the Little Mermaid, she’d let the churning water take her to the bottom of the pool, where the fizzy bubbles and the little minnows would tickle her skin. She would breathe water, like tiny babies did before they were born.

“Let’s fool around,” Alexandra said. “Time for a package check.”

She balanced herself with one hand on his shoulder and took hold of him underwater. His thing was soft but the bag underneath was all drawn up hard and tight from the cold water. Ravi just stood there like an idiot too shy to even look at her while she was feeling him up.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s see how long we can stay under.”

They both took a big breath and down they went.

All she could see of him was blurs, but she could feel him grabbing at her and his hand was on one of her boobs, and with his skinny brown other arm going around her, he was trying to drown her! She squeezed his balls as hard as she could and felt big bubbles from his mouth against her own face and he was still grabbing her to drown her and rape her, but she had plenty of breath left herself so she kept squeezing to make him stop attacking her. By then she had popped to the surface and he was still trying to come after her so her only chance was to keep pushing his head under. Finally he

gave up trying to get her and she made it safe back to shore. She looked at the bubbling, swirling surface of the pool waiting for him to come up until it was so long he must have had an accident down there, got his foot caught on something maybe.

He should have known better than to try to rape a person in deep water when he wasn’t a very good swimmer. He should have known he could have an accident easy, the moron. Now she would undoubtedly have flashbacks her whole life, like those poor women with repressed memories on Ricki Lake. Fat as she was, how did Ricki ever get on TV? Rosie O’Donnell, there was another one.

The sky was getting darker and she heard the rumble of thunder far away. The light had that funny greenish look that came right before a storm, and the first drops began to land. Alexandra pulled her clothes on in a hurry and went to her bike. She hated to leave Ravi’s bike behind. It was a much better one than Andy’s old piece of junk, but there you go. Someday she could buy any bike she wanted. Or car, for that matter.

Alexandra started to walk her bike along the path that led back to the road. The wind rose and the rain started to hammer down but she didn’t bother to hurry. In a minute she’d be wet to the skin anyway, so what was the use? The rain was coming down so hard that their bike tracks coming in had already disappeared.

★

Chapter twenty-three

The accident was on Monday. There was nothing about it on the TV news from Albany the next day or the day after, so maybe nobody found Ravi yet. Or maybe they did and the TV news didn't think he was worth doing a story about. The *Luxor Gleaner* would think it was news, though. The *Gleaner* came out on Thursday, which was Alexandra's regular shopping day anyway. And it was on her list to pick up a copy for Andy every week.

They had it on the front page about poor Ravi's possible suicide. She hadn't thought about it being suicide, but now she saw that it very well could have been. He could have drowned himself for trying to rape her, or for being a fruit. They said he didn't leave any note, but Chief Kregger told them that lots of suicides try to make it look like an accident. Alexandra could see how that would be. Ravi would want to spare his parents the heartbreak of teen suicide. Poor Mr. and Mrs. Patel would always wonder whether their son might be alive today if only they had done something different.

In fact probably that was exactly what they were thinking anyway, because Ravi hadn't fooled Chief Kregger with his plan to make his suicide look like an accident. "Nobody goes swimming in the middle of a thunderstorm," the paper had the chief saying. Not that the chief had to be a rocket scientist to figure out it was suicide. After all the chief knew about Ravi's secret life. Alexandra folded the paper up carefully so Andy wouldn't know she had read it. She didn't want to act different from her normal patter and that was her normal pattern, not reading the paper. She put it in the bike's basket with the groceries and headed home.

Andy was working day and night on his competition piece for the Michigan taxidermy convention. At first she was supposed to be helping, which mostly amounted to standing by, listening to him whistle the same tune over and over. But after a while he said she was disturbing his concentration, which was all right with Alexandra. Who wanted to spend all day watching somebody build a habitat for a family of stuffed raccoons?

Anyway, he didn't get to the paper till after supper. "Did you read about this boy who drowned?" he said.

"What boy?"

"Ravi something. It says he worked part time at the Luxor Clothing Depot. You shopped there once, didn't you?"

"I might have bought a few things there, I think it was there."

"Another boy was paralyzed diving from the rocks at Morahan's Hollow a few years ago," Andy said. "I don't want you going near that place."

"I don't even know how to swim," Alexandra said.

"All the more reason. They ought to fence that place and post it."

Alexandra saw a fence, stone posts with those rails made of big black pipes and vines with big purple flowers growing all over everything. Here lies Ravi Patel, beloved son of Mr. and Mrs. Patel dead by suicide, this plaque paid for by his friend Mrs. Brad Pitt. Brad holding her hand as they read the tasteful plaque together. Oh, Brad, I tried to work with him to make him not be gay but he wouldn't let me. You did all that any person could, sweetheart. The handsome young couple looked at the dangerous hazard behind the fence, each having their own private thoughts.

"Suicide," Andy said, looking up from the paper. "It's got to be terrible for the poor parents."

Brought back, Alexandra thought about Mr. Patel. Would he blame her even though Ravi was the one who made her do it? Would he tell on her to Andy? Would Chief Kregger? Well, there was nothing she could do about it except stop worrying. With Ravi dead, probably the whole thing would blow over.

IT HAD BEEN A MAJOR PAIN in the butt, packing each part of the mini-diorama separately for the trip to the Michigan convention plus carrying everything out to the van and tying the packages to the ringbolts in the floor so things wouldn't slide around and get hurt, as if you could hurt something that was already dead.

"I'd never have gotten everything ready without you helping, Sandy," Andy said. He was pretty good these days about calling her Sandy instead of Alexandra, so that was some progress anyway. She'd get him out of his hermit shell yet.

"Sure you would," Alexandra said. "Without me around you'd have been ready long ago."

"I beg to differ, young lady. I wouldn't be nearly done."

"You would, too. You wouldn't have wasted all that time on my statue."

"That's not a waste of time," he said. "Far from it. The raccoons are the waste of time. Unfortunately I had already committed to the Michigan show."

He had three other entries besides the raccoon family. All of them were packed in plastic peanuts and tied down so well that you could drive the van off a cliff without hurting anything. Andy checked the cords anyway, not once but twice. Then he checked the motor oil and the transmission fluid and the water level in the battery and the coolant and the windshield wiper liquid. Then he checked the pressure in all four tires and even the spare. He got behind the wheel and had her look to be sure that the high beams and low beams and brake lights and turn signals all worked. When he couldn't think of anything more to do, he opened the door and climbed down. "Well," he said. "All shipshape."

Alexandra smiled encouragingly. She was looking forward to having the house to herself.

"Anyway," he said, "time to go I guess." He stood there with his hands at his side, held awkwardly a little out from his body. She didn't think he'd kiss her or hug her or pat her on the shoulder or even shake her hand, and he didn't.

"Sure you'll be all right?" he said. "All alone here?"

She nodded, smiling.

"I'll only be four days," he said. "Sure you have enough money?"

She nodded again. He had given her three hundred dollars, which along with the money she had already saved was more than she ever had at one time in her whole life.

"If you lose the number, just call information for the Radisson Hotel in Flint. Flint, Michigan. Well, you know where Flint is."

She nodded again, still smiling. Actually she didn't know. Geography was nothing but stupid memorization. "I've got it right here," she said, patting her shirt pocket. He had written out a list of emergency numbers for her. Plumber, electrician, locksmith, hospital, fire department, power company, insurance man.

If she had to call any of the numbers, she was supposed to not let them out of her sight for a minute, whoever came. As if she didn't know that already. First there was the business with the guy who put in the TV, Andy following the poor man around like he was going to steal the silver. Then he did the exact same thing with the two furniture store guys after she got him to buy the sofa to watch TV on. It was worse than when Jodie Foster went to see Hannibal Lecter in jail. At least the prison guard finally left Jodie alone for a few seconds, which was more than Andy did with the sofa guys. You could tell they were pissed.

Andy's hand was on the door of the van, but he wouldn't get into the damned thing. "Don't hesitate to call if anything comes up," he said. "Or if you just feel like talking."

She flashed a big smile, full power, and at last he smiled back. A little one, but not bad for a beginner. He finally got into the van and started the engine. It was only when he was letting the clutch out and the van was starting to roll that he took the big plunge and waved to her.

BEFORE WHEN ALEXANDRA HAD BEEN ALONE in the house there was always the chance that Andy might come walking through the door at any moment. Now the entire house

was up for grabs. She could go anywhere, do anything. For instance, play music as loud as she wanted.

She plopped down on her pretty orange sectional sofa and put feet up on the low table they sometimes ate on. Alexandra had mentioned that maybe they should get a coffee table, and Andy said there was already a good one in the library. Since the library was one of the downstairs rooms full of cobwebs and dust, she was afraid he might get the idea of having her clean the whole room up. But he just went down the hall and came back with it himself. All she had to do was vacuum the dust off with that pathetic Electrolux he had, probably as old as he was. It was funny. He kept a piece of junk like that around, and yet he didn't blink an eye at paying a small fortune for the sofa and the big Sony and the DirecTV setup with the little satellite dish on the lawn out behind the house.

The satellite didn't get MTV, but it had a music channel that was basically the same thing. She clicked her way to it with the remote and ran the volume all the way to the right till she could feel the music's beat in the timbers of the old house.

The singer had Julia Roberts lips, swollen as if she had been kissing for days on end, as if all she ever did with them was kiss. "I am the bat in my belfry," she sang in a high, small voice. "Nobody up here but me. Totally lone in my belfry, where no one can see me be me."

She was sitting on a rumpled bed with somebody else lying down in it, just a form under the covers. Behind her were two bow-shaped dormer windows that looked out on a park. A giant head showed through one of the windows, and rushed forward until nothing but an eye filled the window, looking in. Me, me, me, the girl repeating, dragging out the last "me" into a long wail of melody. Not seeming to see the huge eye, filling the window and disappearing. Shadowy forms, out of focus and distorted, moving outside the twin windows. Twisted branches? Twisted people? Shopping mall, a little girl in a party dress dropping her ice cream cone. Mother dragging her away. A farm pond, grandpa in a rowboat fishing. A cemetery, monuments and gravestones colored

salmon, dark green, white. A red-and-white checked tablecloth spread on a grave, in front of a headstone, a family having a picnic. The voice of the girl in the belfry still singing. Band blinking in and out of the picture, spastics in white painter's overalls, no shirts on, shaved heads.

Back to the attic room, the girl with the kissing lips, tearing the covers off to show not a man but an inflatable doll the size of a man, brown hair and blue eyes painted on. Lips lipsticked-on the same color as the girl's. Effortlessly taking up the empty man pumped stiff with air, dancing with him, his dead feet dragging. Deer startled alert, then bolting away white flags bouncing. Trainees slamming bayonets into enemy dummies. Pigtailed girl on a stool in the straw, milking a cow into a pail. The lead guitarist whacking at his guitar, jerking all over the place. Depot on the plains, school marm alone on the platform. Luggage, parasol, bonnet, gloves. White steeple, village green speckled with red and orange and yellow fallen leaves. Gray green gloomy aquarium, octopus floating weightless. Firemen's parade, drums, horns, flags, flags, flags.

Belfry. Twirling Resusci-Al to the unmade bed and flopping on top of him, her crooning to him almost lip-to-lip, Totally lone in belfry, but totally, nobody see me be me, and in for the kiss, turning vampire, teeth clamping and ripping and suddenly Pop, all gone, and empty suit of skin. Holding it to her, rising, raising the dead, singing to the collapsed face. I am the bat in my belfry, nobody up here but me.

Fade.

My Belfry. The Bad Attitudes. Sherri Brandy, vocalist. Virgin/EMI.

Awesome. Alexandra thought of ordering the CD, except naturally there was no CD player around this dead hole. Maybe Andy would buy her one when he got back. Maybe she'd mention a VCR, too, while she was at it.

SOMETIMES ANDY WORKED with the door locked, like the studio was some big secret even though she had been in there

plenty of times. Alexandra hoped he hadn't locked up before he left, and her hopes were answered. It opened right up.

The woodchuck she had mounted weeks ago was shoved aside, along with a jumble of forms and tools, to make room on one of the long counters for Andy's sketches of his main entry in the Michigan competition. They showed a big hollow stump with one side cut away so you could see the raccoon family that lived inside. The stump in the actual exhibit was papier-mâché, otherwise they never could have carried it out to the van. But the dead leaves and grass and rocks all around it were real, and so was the crumbly rotted wood floor inside it.

Andy had got lucky with that raccoon. He didn't realize it when he was out trolling for roadkill and picked her up. He only found out later that she was just about to have babies. So he mounted them, too, like they had gone ahead and been born. They were all mixed up in a pile, nursing like the baby pigs in one of the big dead zoos on the second floor. That must be his thing, nursing. Sometimes when Alexandra was bored to death posing for her statue, she wondered what would happen if she flashed a boob at poor Andy. He'd probably have a cow.

She remembered the first time Andy showed her the finished exhibit, with the hairless baby raccoons all piled up together in a pink heap. "The Manson family used to call that a squirmy," Andy had said.

"They did?" It seemed like she had heard of *The Manson Family* somewhere, but she had never actually seen it.

"Apparently so, yes. Charles Manson would have all the members of the family would coat themselves with grease and squirm around in a big pile while he watched."

"You mean like naked?"

"Oh, yes."

"Oh wow, I can't believe they showed that on TV."

"They didn't. It only came out later."

"All the guys on *Friends* should have a squirmy," Alexandra said, and it turned out he had never heard of *Friends*. Sometimes he was just unbelievable.

Friends would be on tonight, it occurred to her. A re-run, but Andy wouldn't know any better since he hadn't even had a TV during the regular season. Maybe he'd watch it in his hotel room, or maybe they had banquets and stuff in the evenings.

Alexandra began to search the studio, starting with the shelves piled with books and magazines and catalogs. That was the most logical place. Stamps came in catalogs.

Suddenly a buzzer went off, practically giving Alexandra a heart attack right on the spot. It rang twice more before she remembered Andy saying once that the front doorbell was fixed so it rang in the studio, too. Whoever it was up there, he had to be a complete jerk. The buzzer kept going on and on. The noise followed her out the workshop door and up the basement stairs, where it started to change into the different sound that the doorbell itself made. The person started hammering on the door with something heavy.

"Open this door, goddamnit," he shouted. "This is the police."

★

Chapter twenty-four

Alexandra thought wildly about hiding or escaping out the back door, but what good would that do? She opened up and there was Chief Kregger, still holding the nightstick he had been banging on the door with. He was looking sharp in a freshly pressed open-necked khaki shirt with short sleeves that showed off his muscled arms.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "I was upstairs running the vacuum."

"What the hell are *you* looking so happy about?" Chief Kregger said. "Your little buddy is dead."

Alexandra stopped smiling, because of course he was right, it was a sad time. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've just got the cheerful habit. It doesn't mean I'm not sad underneath."

"You're sad all right." He was already in, and had closed the door behind him.

"Andy isn't here," she said.

"Andy? Who the hell is Andy?"

"It's short for Addison. I always call him Uncle Andy."

"*Andy*, for Christ's sake."

"It's just a family nickname. Can I get you a Pepsi? Orange juice?"

"No, you can't get me no Pepsi or no orange juice."

They were down the hall and into the kitchen by now. "Jesus Christ, where'd he find that sofa?" he said. "A French whorehouse?"

Alexandra was at the refrigerator, getting herself a Pepsi. Maybe that would help to make this into a normal social occasion, which it certainly wasn't starting out to be.

"Get the fuck over here," he said, sitting down on the pretty orange sofa she had picked out herself. "We got things to talk about."

"Okay." She set her Pepsi down in the drink holder at the other end of the sofa from where he was sitting. Special armrests came down out of the back between each person's place so they didn't have to worry about where to put their drink.

"Find yourself a new boyfriend yet?" Kregger asked.

"Ravi wasn't my boyfriend."

"Don't yank my chain, kid. I saw you jerk him off."

"It wasn't like you think."

"Now that your raghead died, maybe you'd like to try a regular nigger. I could give you a couple names."

What was she supposed to say to that? She just sat and waited.

"Him dead don't mean you're off the hook," the chief said. "It was a class A homosexual felony committed in the presence of an officer of the law. I'm the only friend you got, kid."

"Yes, sir."

Actually Andy was the only friend she had, but he might not be if he knew about her and poor Ravi. What would happen then to the thing they had going?

"Your little buddy, Ravi the needledick? Don't give me that dumb look. You know what a needledick is. Was that the first time you done a homosexual act?"

Alexandra nodded.

"Well, everybody ain't a needledick. But you already know that, don't you? From spying on me through your peephole."

"I didn't look," she said. "Just Ravi did."

"Yeah, right. Go get me one of those Pepsis after all, I changed my mind."

Alexandra went and got him a Pepsi out of the refrigerator and pushed the door shut with her right hand as she turned toward him

with the can of soda in her left hand. When she sat back down with him, he slid over nearer to her.

“Well, well, well, maybe you ain’t a faggot after all,” he said. “You got a cigarette for your local police?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“You sure you don’t? That looks like a pack of cigarettes to me.”

He shot his hand out before she knew what he was up to, and grabbed the breast under her empty shirt pocket. Alexandra shrank away.

“Damn, those ain’t cigarettes at all,” he said. “Feels just like a little titty.”

Naturally she wasn’t wearing her running bra, alone in the house. He must have seen the outline of her boob when she turned her body away from the refrigerator.

“My uncle’s coming back any minute,” she said.

“Yeah, right.”

“He is.”

“What the hell is he trying to pull, anyway? Does he get off by dressing you up like a boy?”

“Andy didn’t want folks to get the wrong idea, that’s all.”

“The right idea, you mean. The son of a bitch is poking jail bait again.”

“Doing what?”

“Didn’t tell you, huh? Yeah, I bet he didn’t. Your so-called Uncle Andy there, he’s a sick puppy. He’s in the computer.”

“In what computer?”

“The sicko computer. Known sex offenders.”

How could she have been so stupid? Andy had been practically telling her straight out why she had to pretend to be a boy. ‘People could misunderstand if I had a young girl in the house.’ ‘People can go to jail for misunderstandings and lies.’ The man was in the sicko computer!

“He’s not your uncle, is he?” Kregger asked.

“No, I was hitchhiking through town and he said I could stay at his place.”

“From now on you’re going to be staying at the juvenile facility at Harpersburg. Them big bull dykes they got for guards, they won’t even let you up for air.”

“Couldn’t you just me drop me off outside of town?” Alexandra said, putting her hand on his arm. “I always get rides real fast. You’ll never see me again.”

“Maybe I could do that if you’re a real good girl. You understand what I’m saying to you?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so or you know so?”

“I guess I know.”

“So what am I saying?”

“That maybe we could mess around a little.”

“You were looking through that peephole, weren’t you?”

“No, I told you. Just Ravi was.”

“The more you lie, the more I’m going to wear you out.”

“I might have peeked a little.”

“Sure you did. So you know where the Old Avenger likes to go, don’t you?”

She nodded, trying not to look afraid.

“So how about *Uncle Andy*? How long is he going to be gone?”

“He’s not gone.”

“Don’t lie to me, you little whore. I seen him driving out of town earlier.”

“He just went on some errands.”

“When’s he coming back?”

“He already came back.”

“Don’t bullshit me, bitch. If he’s here, where is he?”

“He had an accident. He’s hurt.”

“What do you mean, hurt?” He was leaning so close his face was blurry.

Alexandra threw her arms around him. “Oh, please,” she said. “You’ve got to help me.” She was crying and talking at the same time, her voice muffled by his chest.

“What the hell are you blubbering about?”

“He’s in the basement. I think maybe he’s dead.”

“Hell you talking about, dead?”

“It was like you said. Always before he was like a real uncle or big brother to me, never got fresh or nothing, then this morning we were in the cool room and—”

The memory of Andy pretending to want something out of her shirt pocket then grabbing her boob instead made her sob harder into Chief Kregger’s broad, comforting chest.

“Get a goddamned grip,” the chief said, gruff as an old bear but kindly underneath. “What happened?”

“All of a sudden he was like some sex fiend, tearing at my clothes and stuff. He tried to get me to put my hand on him, but I wouldn’t and then he came after me but he tripped and fell and hit his head.”

“Hit his head on what?”

“I don’t know, I was too scared. There was blood all over. He wasn’t breathing, I don’t think. Just laying there in the cool room. I didn’t know what to do.”

“How long ago was this?”

“An hour ago? I don’t know.”

“What the hell is the cool room?”

“For specimens. It’s like this big walk-in refrigerator.”

“Show me.”

Alexandra led Kregger downstairs to show him where she had left that sicko Andy, lying behind the steel table on wheels that he used for big game. She remembered his head lying in this big puddle of blood, it was totally gross. She yanked up the handle on the big insulated door and tugged it open.

“I don’t see nobody,” Chief Kregger said.

“You’ve got to go inside,” Alexandra said. “He’s behind that big table.”

★

Chapter twenty-five

“Can’t *hear* you! Can’t *hear* you!” Alexandra called out, making a chant of it like a small girl being stubborn. Actually she heard him just fine through the cool room door.

“You’ll never get away with this, you little bitch,” Chief Kregger shouted. What was he hollering about, anyway? He was the one who was trying to get away with something. He wouldn’t be locked in there in the first place if he had kept his dirty hands where they belonged.

There was no use listening to somebody who wasn’t making any sense, so she got up from the folding chair she had pulled over by the door to listen in case the chief had anything interesting to say. She stretched, feeling the fabric of her shirt tighten the same way it had when she turned away from the refrigerator earlier. People had been pawing her boobs a lot lately, but now they knew better. She headed upstairs.

In the kitchen it came to her that she hadn’t seen his cruiser when she let him in the house. Did he walk? Cops never walked. Alexandra went to the front door and looked out. The car wasn’t in the driveway, or in what she could see of the road. He had been known to drive over the lawn before, though, so she went outside to look.

The cruiser was parked on the lawn behind the house. It didn’t make sense that he would have hidden the car unless he had come over on purpose to rape her. But when he came over he thought she was a boy. Maybe he liked boys and girls both. Anyway, he was

asking for it or he wouldn’t have got himself locked up in the cool room.

Alexandra looked through the window at the radio and the heavy screen between the front seat and the back seat where the prisoners went. A clipboard and a long black flashlight sat on the passenger seat. The keys were in the ignition. Little bits of grass stuck to the tires, from when Andy had mowed the lawn with his little tractor and a gang mower the day before he left. Alexandra thought about getting in the car and poking around, but it was probably better not to touch anything. She went back inside to see what was on TV.

A WOMAN WAS SITTING IN A CHAIR with giant spikes sticking up all over, but the spikes went back inside the cushion the minute she took some kind of pill for hemorrhoids. Even with the noise of the commercial Alexandra could hear a series of thumps from downstairs. The chief must be rolling the steel table into the door, trying to knock it down. Lots of luck, Chief.

The thumps stopped while she was going down the stairs to see what he was up to, and next came five or six sharper noises. It took her a moment to realize that they were shots. What did that moron think, that he could shoot the lock out? Lots of luck with that one, too. The insulated door was practically a foot thick, easy, with metal on the inside and wood on the outside. Besides there wasn’t any real lock to shoot away, just the loose padlock hanging from the heavy steel hasps on the door and the wall. The only way that door would budge would be if she took that padlock off.

She sat back down on her chair to see what he would do next, except he didn’t do anything. So after a while she rapped on the door to let him know she was around. Wake up in there, Chiefie.

“Listen,” he said, “we ought to be working together. Both of us could be rich.”

His voice came from where the steel bar ran through the door, the bar that would have let him open the door from inside if it wasn’t for the padlock. Alexandra kept quiet. There was nothing he could do in there but talk, so let him do it.

“Can you hear me?” he said. “Knock if you can hear me.”

She knocked.

“You got any idea how much land goes with this house? A hundred and ten acres, that’s all. Back toward Dingman’s Ridge. Maybe ten acres of rocks going up the ridge, but the rest of it all buildable. Even woodland goes for ten thousand an acre this near to town. That means he can get hold of more than a million dollars. That’s just for the land, forget about what he’s got in the bank.”

Alexandra waited.

“You and me can clean him out if we work together. Go to Paris, Las Vegas, anywhere you want. You want to know how?”

She couldn’t believe he wanted to steal money from his old school friend. She waited.

“Nothing to it,” Kregger said. “We squeeze the fruit, that’s all. Son of a bitch is asking for it. Look what he done to you, made you dress like a boy and molested you. What’s your name? Is it really Sandy?”

“Don’t matter, I’ll call you Sandy. Look, let me tell you a story about your friend Andy. Out of college he went to medical school and ran right back home to momma the middle of the first year. Decided he didn’t want to be a doctor, he’d rather be a taxidermist. Right. You believe that shit? Yeah, me neither. Probably they caught him humping corpses. Little girl corpses.

“Why I say that, let me tell you the story how he wound up in the sex computer. Years ago when he was still a teenaged kid, Tuttle is at one of those weird taxidermy shows he goes to. It’s up in Buffalo, okay? Where nobody knows him?”

“So he sexually assaults this little three-year-old girl and she tells her father. The father’s rip-shit, you can imagine. He calls the cops. Tuttle’s mother, old Mrs. Tuttle, she was still alive then, she has to hire a fancy lawyer to pay everybody off and keep it out of the paper. But the court still got the records and later on when everything gets computerized, in it goes. I never knew myself until I was up in Albany for this state police seminar on computer records and I got to poking around.

“You see what I’m telling you here? Anything you was to say about what Tuttle did to you, it would just be your word against his. But if that old record happened to get found by accident on purpose, then the jury is going to believe you. Everybody knows a pedophile is just like AIDS, there’s no cure. You follow what I’m saying?”

Alexandra didn’t answer.

“Listen, Sandy, you let me out now and we’re partners, okay? No hard feelings, okay? You still out there?”

She rapped on the door to show she was.

“You’re a smart girl,” Chief Kregger said. “You understand where I’m coming from. Already I forgot about all this business with the faggot at the motel, that’s ancient history. Now we’re talking about now. A minor female subject comes to me with a complaint about a career pedophile, okay? I go to Chester the Molester and explain to him what happens to perverts in jail. Tell you what, though, Chester, I got a better idea. How about you just pay a fine to me and my pretty little partner here instead? Fifty-fifty partners, right down the middle.”

Alexandra waited to see what else he would come up with.

“Not just fifty-fifty on the child abuse, neither,” the chief said. “Half on what I already got him paying me, too. Now we’re in this together, I’ll tell you how it works.

“In a little town, the chief of police does everything himself. You got a cat up a tree, you call me. I’m the animal control officer, it’s in my job description. You know that dog he’s got stuffed in the hallway? That was a rabid dog I had to put down, and so there I am with a dead dog on my hands. Who do I know that can use a dead dog? How about that rich freak Tuttle?”

“So from then on road kill, rabies, any dead animal I come across I bring it to Tuttle. He gives me a few bucks for my trouble, everybody’s happy. It goes on like that.

“Then one night a citizen calls in a hit and run and it’s a false report, nothing there. Only next day I go back to take a look around in the daylight. I find the guy sixty feet off the highway, in

the weeds. Looks like it's just a bum lying there asleep, not a mark on him.

"What am I supposed to do now? No license plate number, all the witness saw was the truck's taillights. She thought it might have hit somebody, but she wasn't real sure. Nobody but me knows this guy exists. I think about it. Don't I know this freak that likes roadkill? What's the harm if I mention it to him?? I'm just saving the town the cost of a burial."

Alexandra didn't see any particular harm in it either, even if some people might think it was pretty gross. That was because they didn't know anything about the true art of taxidermy, though, or they would realize it was the poor man's only chance to be remembered in the afterlife.

"Over the years there's been three more," Chief Kregger said. "Two men and a woman. Hit and runs. Each time naturally the price goes up, why not? I'm the one running the real risk, you understand. I could lose my job, health insurance, pension rights. So I make him contribute to my retirement plan, what I call it. Our plan now. Yours and mine."

Chief Kregger paused. Alexandra sat there to see what else he might come up with.

"What about it, Sandy?" came his voice through the door. "Half of what I already got from him, not just half of from now on. You want me to put it in writing? Come on, I'm freezing my ass off in here. Let me out."

As if I'd let him out, Alexandra said to herself. Who knows how many bullets he's got left? He might rape me and then he'd have to kill me so I wouldn't talk. It would be suicide to open that door.

"You don't believe me?" Chief Kregger said after she didn't answer. "I'll prove it. You never been in the special rooms on the third floor, have you? I know you haven't, or you wouldn't be living in the same house with the freak. That's where he's got all the people he stuffed. Go take a look, you'll see I'm telling the truth. You still there? Answer me, for Christ's sake."

Alexandra leaned close to the steel bar that went through the door and said, "Those rooms are locked."

"He keeps the keys inside the lining of his yellow raincoat," Kregger said back. "It's hanging in his bedroom."

Chief Kregger was still talking while she was climbing the basement stairs, but she had better things to do than hang around and listen to some policeman complain.

★

Chapter twenty-six

The room was pitch dark even though it was a sunny day. Weren't there any windows? Alexandra reached in cautiously and felt around till she located a wall switch. When the lights went on she pushed the door part way open and had to stop herself from slamming it shut again. She knew in her mind that there was nothing to run from, but she still needed a moment for the message to get to her heart.

Alexandra pushed the door all the way open and made herself look at the baby floating in the air and the horrible gray man underneath it with his horrible hands raised up. After all the baby wasn't really flying through the air, it was only hanging from fishing line that you could see if you looked hard enough. And naturally it wasn't a real baby, not even a stuffed one, but just a life-sized doll. The daddy had tossed the baby boy practically to the ceiling and his gray hands were ready to catch his doll baby. The daddy wasn't any life-sized doll, though. He had on a gray suit with a vest and a shirt and tie in different shades of gray. You would have thought he was real except that his skin was light gray, even his lips. And he didn't have any pupils. His were as white as boiled eggs and so were his teeth—too white, like false teeth. The daddy was trying to smile at his flying baby, but he had a mean, crazy grin like that mayor of New York you always saw on TV.

Andy had done a cute job putting together rest of his little dead zoo, though. The window panes were painted midnight blue with stars and moons on them, which was why the room had been dark. The room was made to be like a nursery, with wallpaper that had clowns and elephants and circus horses and dogs wearing little hats.

The old-fashioned wooden crib had all the letters of the alphabet painted on the headboard, each letter walking around on little legs. In the crib there was a glass baby bottle just lying there, waiting for the baby. Alexandra didn't know they used to make them out of glass. Nowadays they were all plastic. Alexandra picked up a silver thing beside the bottle. Cute. A silver rattle. She put it back exactly where it came from, so Andy wouldn't know she had been poking around while he was away. He was the type that would notice if anything was the least little bit out of place.

Baby scales with a big dial sat on top of a blue chest of drawers next to a pile of cloth diapers and other old-time baby supplies. The olden days labels were different, but some of the brand names were the same as now—Ivory, Johnson & Johnson, Talcum Powder.

She took a final look around before leaving. Except for the awful gray man with the boiled eyes, it was all kind of neat.

THE OTHER DEAD ZOO FOR PEOPLE was down the hall in a much bigger corner room. These windows didn't let any light in, either, only this time Andy hadn't painted them over. Instead he had mounted color photos on the other side of the panes so you thought you were looking out at snowy fields shining in the moonlight and dark woods in the distance.

The room was a big kitchen. The enamel-topped table near the sink looked the same as the kitchen table downstairs, and the refrigerator was the color of pea-soup color like the old one downstairs. But this kitchen was much nicer than the real one. Andy had put down pretty hooked rugs all over the floor up here, and the shape of the room was different, and the sink was in a different place, and there was a fireplace with ashes and logs in it and an empty rocker over by the door. Across the room from the fireplace was a big old black and white gas stove next to a tall sideboard painted mustard color with green trim.

In one corner was a Christmas tree so loaded with lights and tinsel and shiny ornaments that you could barely see the branches.

It stood to reason that the tree had to be artificial, but under all those beautiful decorations you couldn't really tell.

An old woman with gray hair in a bun stood at an ironing board, pressing a khaki Boy Scout shirt. Merit badges almost covered a sleeve hanging down, and a patch on the shoulder said, "Luxor, Troop Nine." The old woman wore a brown granny dress with an apron, flesh-colored cotton stockings, and low, boxy black shoes. A gray-haired man in a red-and-black checked flannel shirt sat in a recliner, with an old newspaper face-down in his lap. The headline said something about "**PRESIDENT -ELECT KENNEDY.**"

The old man and the old woman were both looking at a tall man standing beside a big, low trestle table in the middle of the room. The man was dressed neatly in brown loafers, gray flannel trousers and a wool cardigan over a button-down blue shirt stood at the trestle table. He was looking down at a model train on the table.

The tall man's right arm was sticking out in the air for some reason, like it was resting on an invisible shelf. The other arm was at his side, with the knuckles of the left hand resting on the table. Something was wrong about that hand. Instead of a real knuckle, the index finger ended in a smooth, shiny nub. Alexandra looked again at the man's face. The clean-shaven face and the neat haircut had fooled her, but now she recognized the nasty bum who raped her in the park. It was right around then that Andy had cut her own hair, probably with the very same scissors. Just thinking about it made her feel all creepy. So did the memory of the phone call in the middle of the night that first night, then the voices talking downstairs and the cruiser driving on the lawn to reach the basement entrance and Andy's big secret project the next few days.

Now she knew what had been going on! The chief had solved her rape with street justice. Of course the man deserved it for what he did to her. But still, if he hadn't had such a horrible time in Vietnam he probably never would have turned into a rapist. On the bright side, though, it all wound up with him getting reborned forever as a good father.

Because that's who the man at the train table had to be, the father. The old couple in Andy's dead zoo were the grandma and grandpa, and here was the dad standing with his arm around an empty space where his son would go someday if Chief Kregger ever came across a hit-and-run kid the right size.

Or maybe Andy planned the diorama this way on purpose, with an invisible kid that he could imagine was him. The dad in the dead zoo could be some stranger like the bearded man, and that was okay because Andy never knew his real dad. And the same thing with the old couple, if Andy had never known his real grandparents. But how could Andy pretend that some other kid was him, standing there at his own train table that he supposedly just got for Christmas? Andy could never enjoy his new train set if some other kid was playing with it.

It occurred to Alexandra that Andy's mom was missing from the Christmas scene, too. Maybe Andy's mother was just too painful a memory to be in the dead zoo. Alexandra gave it up, and turned her attention to the model train again.

The tracks made a figure-eight on the long table, passing over bridges and through tunnels. There were crossing gates and a station with baggage trucks and a water tower and little people waiting on the platform. The village had a post office, a church, a town hall, a firehouse, a hospital, a school, a hotel, a feed store, a drug store, and a garage.

Alexandra had made Brad promise they would move to one exactly like it when Beverly Hills got too boring. They weren't going to just buy a house there, either. They were going to buy the entire town the way Kim Basinger did that time, and move all the people out so their friends could move in, hers and Brad's. Then wherever they went in the whole town, their friends would be out on the front porch waving from their rockers. Hey, Brad, hey, Alexandra, don't be such strangers! Come on up and sit a while.

Alexandra went over to the empty rocker near the door. A small side table held a reading lamp made from a duck decoy. Old-looking magazines were piled on the table. One was a copy of *Life*, only much bigger than the real *Life*. It had a picture of Jackie on

the cover, young and wearing a little round hat. Alexandra sat down and picked it up. This is where Andy sits, she thought. Looking at his warm, loving family and reading magazines from when he was a kid. Pretty soon they'd open the presents.

Alexandra put the magazine back and went over to check out the presents under the tree. She expected them to be empty boxes, wrapped for show. But they turned out to be full, some heavy and some light like clothing, but definitely with presents inside. She was afraid to open them. Klutzy wrapper that she was, anybody that looked at them would know they had been opened.

It was funny to think of Andy knowing what was inside but never opening them up. To buy something for yourself and then wrap something up and let it sit there forever, that was weird.

His stamp collection was probably like that. She would bet anything he hadn't looked at it in years, before he dug it out to show her the eagle stamp. It was a crime to lock all those pretty stamps up out of sight. They ought to be in a museum or something, where people could enjoy them. That's what she'd do with them if they were hers.

She opened the drawer in the table next to the rocker, but all she found was an eraser, a couple of paper clips, and an old ball-point pen. No stamps. No luck with the sideboard, either. Nothing but bowls and glasses on the shelves, and nothing but junky old kitchen utensils in the drawers.

Unless Andy's collection was in some hidden compartment, the only place left was up in the cupola. Alexandra went to the door, then looked around the Christmas room to make sure she hadn't left anything out of place. She turned off the light and locked the door behind her. She went down the hall and climbed the stairs to the cupola door. None of them fit. Bummer.

She headed downstairs and got herself a bowl of ice cream to eat while she watched TV. Once settled down on the big sofa, she pointed the remote like a magic wand and met the screen come to life. A woman was passing through a crystal sheet of falling shampoo. When she came out the other side she tossed her head to make slow-mo waves in her beautiful shining hair. Alexandra

thought of the clear sheet of water running over the falls at Morahan's Hollow, the day that she tried to keep poor Ravi from committing suicide.

That would be an excellent way to paint something, she thought. Pass it through a sheet of falling paint the way she had passed through the waterfall. Remembering the roaring pearly water, she couldn't believe she only now realized what it really was. Dennon to coat her so Ravi's gross, grasping hands could never reach the secret places.

★

Chapter twenty-seven

All the way home Addison Tuttle had been terrified of coming back to an empty house. He had been an idiot to leave her alone. A chattering, sunny, sociable little thing like her, why would she stay in a house like his with a sad, solitary man like him?

My motto is to be glad, wasn't that what she told him once? Tuttle half-remembered a poem from school about a pretty duchess with a heart so soon made glad. The little duchess died tragically, leaving the duke alone with her portrait. "There she stands as if alive," was the line that stuck in Tuttle's mind.

He unlocked the chain across the driveway entrance and when he raised his eyes there thank God stood Alexandra herself at the end of the driveway, waving. Inexplicably the bird had chosen not to leave her open cage. He waved and climbed back in the van.

"Did you win?" were her first words once he had parked under the portico.

Tuttle, coming around the front of the van, was confused. Did she think he had bet with himself on whether she would be there when he returned?

"Hello?" Alexandra said. "Earth to Andy? You were supposed to win the grand prize, remember?"

"Oh. Well, yes, I did. I won."

"Andy!" she said. "That's so great!"

Before he knew what was happening she was up on tiptoes and kissing his cheek. He went as stiff as a statue and drew back slightly before he could stop himself. What was the matter with him? Why couldn't he ever react to normal things the way normal people did?

"I knew you'd win," she said, as if she hadn't noticed a thing. "I *knew* it. Let me look at your prize! What is it, a big cup or something?"

"It's just a plaque."

"Let's see."

"They'll send it along once they have the name engraved."

"Oh." All the excitement went out of her face at the slight disappointment. She was such a changeable thing, emotions chasing each other across her pretty face now in fleeting despair over so small a thing.

"Andy," she said, "something terrible happened while you were away."

"Something terrible? What?"

"You know the policeman? Chief Kregger?"

Tuttle nodded. Oh, dear God. Had that piece of filth told her about Buffalo?

"He found out I was a girl."

"He did? How?"

"He came to the house and I completely forgot I didn't have my sports bra on."

"Maybe he didn't notice."

"He noticed all right. Oh, Andy!"

She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. It didn't feel to him as if she was wearing the bra now, either. His hands were hanging at his side as if they didn't belong to him. He sent them signals to rise up, and one of them started to pat her back in a jerky way.

"Oh, Andy, he took it out and he hurt my arm to make me look at it. He said dirty things."

How could he have gone off and left her in the house all alone? What had the pig Kregger done to her?

"You have to talk to him, Andy. Will you talk to him? Tell him to leave me alone?"

Tuttle didn't know what to answer, but she didn't wait for an answer.

“Thank God you’ve come,” she rushed on. “I didn’t dare let him out till you got here. He was shooting.”

“He shot at you?”

“At the door, but it was too thick.”

“What door?”

“The cool room.”

Tuttle’s body stiffened again and he stopped patting Alexandra on the back. Kregger locked in the cool room with a gun? What would the man do when he got out, half-frozen and furious? What would he say?

“How long has he been in there?” he asked.

“He came just after you left.”

“*Three days?*”

“I guess. However many days it’s been.”

“My God, he’s probably dead.”

“It’s just the cool room.”

“It’s cold enough for hypothermia.”

“What’s that?”

“The core temperature of your body drops. Year before last a hunter got lost overnight and they found him dead the next morning. The overnight low was only in the forties.”

“I never heard of that,” Alexandra said.

“You stay here,” Tuttle said.

ADDISON TUTTLE WENT DOWN the basement stairs trying to make no noise. At the bottom he stood still for a long time. He could hear his own noise—the rustle of his clothing as he breathed, the hydraulics of his body as its fluids flowed and shifted, the tiny crackling in his ears when he swallowed his saliva. But no sound at all came through the heavy door of the cool room.

“Kregger?” he finally said in a low voice. “Hal?”

And then louder: “Hal, are you okay?”

At last he was shouting, “Hal, it’s me. Addison Tuttle. If you need help, answer me.”

No answer came.

Tuttle tiptoed over and noiselessly eased the open padlock free of the two steel rings it hung from. He sneaked halfway back up the stairs before yelling at the top of his voice, “It’s open. You can come out now.”

For five minutes, by his watch, nothing. Tuttle went back down. Holding his breath, he stood to one side of the door and pulled it slightly. The door cracked open enough so that the rubber gasket was visible. Anyone inside would be able to tell that the door was unlocked.

Still nothing.

Tuttle opened the door inch by inch. The inside was dark. For an irrational moment he was afraid the policeman had turned out the light and was waiting in the dark to spring out at him. But of course that couldn’t be, because the light switch was outside the door. Ready to run at the first sound, Tuttle reached out and turned on the light.

Kregger lay curled upon the concrete floor, wrapped in the clammy hide of a roadkilled deer that he himself had dropped off a couple of weeks before. He had extorted two hundred dollars for the worthless carcass, which Tuttle normally would have buried untouched. The only reason he had skinned it out was to give Sandy a lesson in tanning.

Kregger was cradling something in his arms as if it could warm him. Bending closer, Tuttle saw that the object was the policeman’s silver revolver. He thought of Alexandra standing outside, listening terrified to the gunfire. No wonder she had run away and left him in there, poor child.

Tuttle pushed fearfully at Kregger’s back with the toe of his shoe, and then pushed a little harder. Reassured, he put his hand on the bare flesh of the policeman’s thick forearm. It was the same temperature as the air in the refrigerated room.

Tuttle’s fear left him once he was sure Kregger was dead. With a corpse he was back on safe, familiar ground. What could he do with this particular corpse, though? The detestable Kregger, no matter how shaped and modified, would never do as part of a

family scene. He would always be Kregger, the monster lurking in the black cruiser.

Where was his cruiser?

THEY STOOD LOOKING at the black police car on the green lawn.

“It’s like those commercials,” Alexandra said. “The ones where they have a piano in the middle of the desert or something.”

“He always parked out of sight,” Tuttle said. “He didn’t like anybody to know his business, probably for excellent reasons.”

Alexandra—Sandy—was about to put her hand on the car door.

“You shouldn’t touch anything,” Tuttle said. “The state police—”

“State police? Oh, Andy, we can’t tell the state police. That would ruin everything.”

“You locked him in there in self-defense. Everybody knows what he was like. They’ll understand that.”

“I meant they’d ruin us. You know, what we have together. Our home.”

“We’ll try to ride it out.”

“Andy, I’d have to tell them I’m a girl, and then they’d make me go away.”

“Maybe not. I can’t explain just yet, but it changes certain things. Kregger being dead.”

“It’s not just me being a girl, Andy. They’ll search the whole house. Upstairs too.”

“What do you mean, upstairs too?”

“Chief Kregger told me about the people upstairs.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Andy, they were just hit and run people, Andy. You took and made them so they’d live forever. Like the statue you’re making of me.”

Alexandra was registering every expression on Tuttle’s face the way his plaster of Paris had taken the impression of her face. She

was absorbing his voice, not so much the words but the way he said them.

“The statue is completely different,” he said, and she understood this to mean that he would never harm her. The others were only bums, spare people.

She took her eyes off Tuttle and looked at the patrol car, seeing Kregger behind the wheel, all cop.

“Too bad you couldn’t get a car through the door,” she said. “Let alone up the stairs.”

“What do you mean?” Tuttle asked.

“I was thinking how he’d look in his car. Like a dead zoo exhibit. He could be sitting there waiting for speeders or something.”

★

Chapter twenty-eight

As she followed Andy into the cool room, Alexandra decided to try the new method of passing through a sheet of falling dennon. It worked perfectly, just like on TV, so every inch of her was safe inside the invisible film before she went in.

Kregger had wrapped himself in the hide of a deer, like a some caveman. He was a mess, with his uniform rumped and his hair mussed and his dead eyes wide open, staring.

“We’ve got to drag him into the studio and make him presentable,” Andy said. “Would you mind giving me a hand?” She took hold of a corner of the deer hide, feeling through the dennon how slick and clammy it would be to really touch.

With both of them pulling on the hide they had no trouble skidding the body down the hall to the studio. Andy took off the chief’s trousers and short-sleeved uniform blouse to be ironed later, and they heaved him into position on a chair.

Once Andy went to work on the chief, he hardly said two words to Alexandra. As usual he hummed some old-time tune over and over until you’d think he would drive himself crazy right along with her, but of course you couldn’t blame him for doing something he didn’t even know he was doing. He was off on some different planet. She had snuck out one day and watched TV for a couple of hours and he never even knew she was gone.

On that planet he wasn’t his normal spazzy self either, always dropping things or bumping into the furniture like David on *NewsRadio*. Instead it was like one of those handyman shows where

the guy whacks a nail twice and, bang, it’s all the way in and he’s got the next one out of his mouth and ready to go. Handy Andy.

His long, bony hands fluttered around with the spray bottle and then the comb and pretty soon the chief’s hair was lying down flat instead of sticking out every which way from lying on the floor dead. Then the bony hands laid the chief’s wrinkled clothes on the steel counter and sprayed some more and handled the iron like it was weightless, and before you knew it the knife-edge creases were back in the uniform.

ANDY WAS WEARING Kregger’s police hat to fool anybody who might see him in the cruiser, which wasn’t too likely at this hour of the night. He had had to dig out the owner’s manual to figure out how the dimmers worked, but at last he was ready to go.

“You’re sure you’re going to be okay driving the van?” Andy asked her for about the tenth time.

“It’s no different from driving a pickup,” Alexandra said. “I’ve driven pickups lots of times.”

“Well, just take it easy. If we should get separated I’ll wait for you to catch up.”

Tuttle took off first in the cruiser with Alexandra following far enough back so that it wouldn’t look like they were together. It was five minutes past three by the clock in the van. The buildings downtown were dark and the sidewalks were deserted. In the mirror she saw a car come out of a side street and head the other way, toward the bridge across the river. Nothing else moved.

She kept the cruiser in sight as they went east on State 34. Several miles out of town its turn signal blinked briefly, and then the headlights went out. The moon was bright enough so that she could see the black car turn into Sam Parker’s Boulevard Inn on the right. She cut her own headlights and followed it onto the cracked and crumbling concrete of the parking lot. The van bumped over the potholes as she drove around the back of the vacant, boarded-up roadhouse and parked behind the patrol car.

With Andy pulling and her pushing, they got the chief shifted over behind the wheel. Alexandra held the big police flashlight while Andy tugged and patted at Kregger's uniform where it had got bunched up from sliding around. Then he tilted the seat back so that the chief's head would stay balanced against the head rest.

"That ought to do it," he said, and slammed the door. The chief's promptly flopped to one side and then forward so his chin was on his chest.

"Uh, oh," Andy said. He reached in through the open window and raised the head back into position. "Now it ought to stay," he said.

"Why does it matter?" Alexandra asked. "Couldn't he just be sleeping?"

"Not with his eyes open."

"Oh, yeah. Duh, Alexandra."

"Let's get out of here before somebody comes along."

They got into the van and Andy drove away, only turning the headlights on when they were safely back on the road.

"How long do you think it'll be till somebody sees him?" she asked.

"As soon as it's light, but nobody will think anything of it. This is one of the regular places he hides to catch speeders."

"Maybe he'll sit there for days. I wonder what they'll think when somebody finally finds out he's dead."

"They'll think he had a stroke or a heart attack. Hypothermia doesn't leave any traces. You shiver and shake at first, but at the end you just fall asleep peacefully."

"Cool."

"It is indeed," Andy said. "Literally cool."

Andy smiled, actually smiled. He was making progress.

"I'd like to be the fly on the wall at the post mortem," he said. "Listening to them trying to figure out where Luxor's precious police chief spent the last three or four days before showing up freshly dead."

"They'll think he just died, huh?"

"Almost certainly. His internal organs have reached ambient temperature already, and somehow I doubt if it will occur to them that he could have spent the last several days under refrigeration."

"You sound like you could be a doctor, you know it?"

"Actually I did go to medical school very briefly, but it wasn't for me. No, I'm just speaking from years of experience with rigor mortis, internal temperatures and rates of decomposition in animals of various sizes. And as it happens I've done a good deal of reading in forensic medicine."

Andy paused. He glanced over at her, and then back at the road. He was driving slowly through a patch of summer fog that reflected the headlights back at them. Suddenly they were out of the fog and the black pavement reappeared.

"Can you guess why I would have been reading in forensic medicine?" he asked.

She shook her head. She didn't know what forensic medicine was.

"When Kregger told you about my private exhibits upstairs did he tell you anything about his collection methods?"

"Just that they were poor people nobody wanted. Hit and runs."

"I think that may have been true at first. I wanted it to be true, at any rate. But by the third time I began to wonder. After all, how many hit and runs can there be in a little town like Luxor? So I sent away for books on forensic pathology.

"Just this spring, the same night you showed up here, in fact, Kregger brought me his fourth so-called hit and run victim. By then I knew enough to look under his eyelids for petechiae. They're tiny hemorrhages, quite distinctive once you know what to look for. The man had been asphyxiated."

He kept his eyes on the road, never glancing at Alexandra. She was looking at him but seeing Kregger with his hand on that poor woman's neck in the motel room. Asking if she wanted to dance the chicken.

"The first human specimen he brought me had plainly suffered massive trauma to the head," Tuttle went on. "Probably he had

indeed been hit by a vehicle traveling at high speed. But then the second one was a woman with no visible injuries at all. Kregger said it was often like that with hit and runs. The massive shock of the impact kills them instantly without leaving a mark. He said the same thing about the third specimen, which also had no visible injuries. He must have thought I was a total idiot. As I had been, up to that point.”

“How could you know?” Alexandra said. “You weren’t a doctor.”

“Anyone should have known. I just didn’t let myself see what was right in front of me, because I didn’t want to cut off my supply of specimens.”

“Who would suspect a policeman?” Alexandra said.

“I should have. Here was a man with a lifelong reputation as a violent bully, and Lo and behold he seems to keep coming across fresh cadavers that he sells to me for vast sums. I knew all along what he was doing. Deep inside I must have.”

Alexandra didn’t understand. You knew what you knew, at least she did.

“Well, it’s all over now,” she said.

“That doesn’t change the fact that I’m responsible for three deaths. He wouldn’t have killed those people if it hadn’t been for the money I gave him.”

“Maybe he didn’t even kill them,” she said. “Maybe somebody else did. There could be a serial killer and Kregger was doing a secret investigation because he didn’t want everybody to panic.”

“I wish you were right,” Andy said.

“Serial killers are just like the person next door,” Alexandra said. This was true. You heard it all the time on TV. She thought about Pappy Lowe, the person who really did live in the next house to Andy’s. He was an old man with white hair and a red face and a little, round pot belly who lived in a little house hidden in the trees at the far end of Andy’s block. He walked his dog twice a day, no doubt when he did his murders. Kregger suspected, but he couldn’t tail him too close because the dog would smell him and bark. By the time Kregger got to the crime scene the victim would

always be dead already. So the chief would load the bodies in the trunk of his police car and hide them at Andy’s until he caught Pappy Lowe in the act. Poor Andy blamed himself, but really he was just storing evidence for the police.

“Do you know something?” Tuttle said, putting Pappy Lowe out of her mind. “I was actually happy when I found Kregger was dead. It was such a relief to know that I’d never get another of those calls late in the night, and then that foul man smirking and joking as we carried the body downstairs. Well, *Mister* Tuttle, he’d say, *Mister* like he was sneering at me, how does ten thousand sound? Shipping and handling included.

“That man was pure filth. Do you know something odd? I even thought of locking him in the cool room myself. I thought of it many times, just the way it actually worked out. Isn’t that the most amazing thing?”

“Great minds think alike,” Alexandra said.

She smiled to see him sitting there so solemn.

“Well, they do,” she said. “It’s true.”

At last he smiled, too.

★

Chapter twenty-nine

Back home Addison Tuttle went straight to the refrigerator for a pint of Ben & Jerry's French bean vanilla. Alexandra had sold him off the store brand, and he had to admit this new brand was better. While they were waiting he got out a big bottle of cream soda.

"Want me to make you an ice cream soda?" he asked Sandy.

"What's that?"

"You never had an ice cream soda?"

"Not as I remember."

Tuttle searched in the pantry until he found the old soda fountain glasses his mother had bought so they could make their own sodas at home. Back then Whitbeck's still had a real soda fountain with wire stools and a mirror running the length of the marble-topped counter. The flavors were hand-written on the mirror, never-changing. Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, coffee, cherry, raspberry, butter pecan, and maple walnut. As a little boy Addison loved the store, but everything changed when he started school. The kids who hung around Whitbeck's didn't dare pinch him and hit him when mother was there, but they aimed fake, disgusting kisses at him behind her back.

"But you used to love Whitbeck's so," Mother said.

"It's dirty. Remember when they gave me that glass with lipstick on it?"

So she had Bam Whitbeck order her the right kind of glasses that bulged out at the top, and long spoons and red-and-white striped straws to go with them so the two of them could pretend they had their own soda fountain at home.

"How come it fizzes like that?" Alexandra said when Tuttle had plopped the scoop of ice cream into her soda glass.

"The carbon dioxide reacts with the ice cream. Stir it up and see what happens."

"Wow, look at it go now."

"Drink it before the head goes down."

Alexandra sipped tentatively through her straw, and then without stopping she lowered the level in the glass by a third. "Wow, that's really good," she said. "I wonder why they don't make these anymore."

"Good things never last," Tuttle said. "Want another before I put the ice cream back in the icebox?"

They each had another. It was still dark outside, but first light would come soon. Tuttle looked down and began to talk, as if he were talking to his empty glass.

"Well, now you know," he said. "I was thinking on the way back from Michigan that it was time to tell you about my human environments upstairs, but I was already too late, wasn't I? Our late police chief beat me to it, although I doubt if his description of my work was accurate. He could never have understood what I've been working toward. I think you would, though. I think you're ready. Would you like to see them?"

Alexandra nodded and smiled. Tuttle went to his room and reached in the usual pocket of his yellow raincoat for the key ring, and it wasn't there. It turned he had left it in the other pocket by mistake. He went back to the kitchen and led Alexandra upstairs.

"Oh, look!" she said when he turned on the light in the first dead zoo. "That doll looks practically like a real baby!"

"Thank God it isn't. I wouldn't have put it past Friend Kregger, but he probably figured even I wouldn't be dumb enough to believe he found a baby on the road."

Tuttle didn't keep her long in the first room. Frankly it was a disappointment to him. The technical challenge had been interesting, getting the man perfectly posed and balanced. So had been the business of rigging the almost invisible monofilament harness to make the doll seem *off* balance, as a baby tossed up into

the air would in fact be. Even then, though, there had been something wrong with the tableau. Much later it came to him that the father's hands weren't in the right place. The baby was going to fall on the floor.

He seldom visited The Nursery anymore, not that it mattered. Since Sandy's appearance on his front lawn that night in May, he had hardly visited The Kitchen either. Sitting with her in the real kitchen was far better. Sandy was such a sketch, watching her shows for hours on end while he watched her. The tip of her thumb was always caught between her teeth. As a little girl, had she sucked her thumb? As a little boy, he himself had. Years later his mother had said, "I don't know why I bothered scolding you. Your teeth grew in perfectly straight. You have lovely teeth."

Teeth were all you could see of a person's skeleton. Tuttle wondered if he had a lovely skeleton. Maybe he did, beauty inside the gangling, ugly beast.

What nonsense. Thank God she couldn't know his thoughts.

"Let's look at my other effort," he said to Alexandra. "It's a much more ambitious piece of work."

"What a pretty tree!" said Alexandra when he turned on the lights in the Christmas Kitchen. "Are those empty boxes under the tree, or real presents?"

"Real presents, oddly enough. I suppose it's silly, since no one except me would know the difference."

"Who's that big green one for?"

"The grandfather. It's one of those Scandinavian ski sweaters with snowflake patterns that people used to wear in the fifties and sixties."

"Which presents are yours?"

"None of them is. They're all for the family members."

"Why can't you have it be your family?"

"It's not about my family. It's about the idea of family."

"You're spending Christmas with them, though. I guess you are, anyway. Isn't that chair for you?"

"I'm just the unseen audience. It's like theater in the round, if you will."

"It's so neat," the girl said. "I wish I had a family like this one."

"Take it," Tuttle said. "It's yours."

THE SUN HAD BEEN RISING when they came downstairs from the dead zoos on the third floor. A long night and time for breakfast. Alexandra put two more Eggo waffles in the toaster, which would make the fourth helping for each of them. Like him, she could eat all day and never gain a pound.

"We've both got hollow legs, you know that, Andy?" she said. "Did anybody ever tell you had a hollow leg?"

"My mother used to when I was little," he said. "The first time she said it I started to cry. I had this vision of my leg all filled up with corn flakes and milk."

"Did anybody ever tell you you're really weird, Andy?"

Plenty of people had, but only this time had the words been said in fondness. Fondness had gone from his life at the death of his mother. No one stayed. Everyone passed on.

"Hey," Alexandra said, "cheer up, Gloomy Gus."

Tuttle tried to drag a smile onto his face.

"That's better," Alexandra said. "A cat walked over your grave, that's all."

So it had. Tuttle had suddenly seen his future as he knew it must soon be — locked down again forever in solitary, condemned to live out his sentence among the bleak artifacts of loss. The hideous orange sofa, the huge television, her food mummifying in the icebox, her boys' clothes yellowing in the closet, only her image left, her outer self. His golden girl gone like Mother, leaving behind only a new layer in the dusty archeology of his life.

Forget that, he thought. Straighten up and carry on with the plan for the day. Don't drag the sunny little thing down to your level. But how can you learn to act differently, poor fool? We are what we are.

"I was just thinking about my environments upstairs," he said aloud, changing the subject on himself. "I know everything about those people, inside and out. Every angle and curve and measurement. Every wrinkle and sag and scar and yet I don't even

know their names. No one missed them when they vanished. Never a word in the papers about any of them. They were just — *extra*. Unwanted, superfluous, unnecessary like those gray, dusty stick people always dying of famines in Africa. We're no different. All of us are extra people, if we only knew it. Me. Even you."

Why would anybody think they were extra? Alexandra thought. Andy just wasn't feeling good.

"Close your eyes," she said.

"What?"

"Just close them."

Tuttle did, and heard her coming near.

"My God," he shouted, his eyes popping open as she touched him. "What are you doing?"

"Didn't anybody ever tickle you before?"

"I'm not ticklish."

"Everybody's ticklish someplace. Come on, where's your secret place?"

"I don't have any secret place."

She gave it up and said, "Well, then, you'll just have to cheer up all by yourself. Come on, grouchy. Smile or I'll tickle you again."

He smiled. Well, she knew he'd have to sooner or later. Once she set her mind to it, she could make most anybody see things the glad way.

★

Chapter thirty

All the windows in the old roadhouse were boarded up except for the ladies room. They probably figured that one was too high for anyone to bother with and too small for anybody to fit through anyway. Oh yeah, Timmy said to himself, that's what you think. He had already squeezed through it once, no problem. That was just to scout things out, but this time he knew what he was after.

Timmy horsed an empty 55-gallon drum into position, climbed up on it, and slid his tire iron through the window he had busted out last time. From the clang the tire iron made it must have hit the sink or the crapper. He hoped he wouldn't have to fish it out of the pile of dried-up turds and toilet paper in the bowl. Timmy grabbed the top of the open shutter and pulled himself high enough to get his legs over the window sill. He lowered himself down till he felt the top of the toilet tank under his feet, and then he cautiously let it take his weight.

Once safe on the floor, he looked around and found the tire iron under the sink. He went out of the ladies room into the comparative darkness of the boarded up barroom, and from there into the men's room. Pretty much light came in around the edges of the warped plywood over the window. The condom machine was in a steel frame screwed to the wall, with the screws hidden behind the machine so you couldn't get to them. A locked steel bar held the machine in the frame so that you couldn't get at the box that held the money and the rubbers. How much money would be inside the box? A hundred dollars? A lot, anyway. And the Gilroy twins would probably buy all the rubbers.

Timmy wedged the sharp end of his tire tool between the machine and the bar and went to work, but all he managed to do after five minutes was dent the front of the box. He sat down on the toilet and examined the machine, and it came to him that he had been attacking the problem from the wrong end. Instead of trying to pry the bar off the frame he ought to be prying the frame off the wall. Then he could carry the whole works home and take his time opening the box. He jammed his tire tool behind the frame and pried at it. Sure enough, the frame moved a little.

It took a while but at last the frame came free, with the heavy screws sticking out of it like football spikes. He carried the whole rig back to the ladies room, got up on the toilet tank, and dropped it to the ground outside. In a minute he was outside himself. He picked up the machine and thought about what to do now that he had the heavy box to lug around instead of just a pocketful of cash and condoms. He decided to hide it some where and come back for after dark.

Timmy was looking nervously at a car on the road as he walked past the corner of the building, so he didn't see the black cruiser until he was right in front of it. He just stood there like a deer in the headlights, him looking at Chief Kregger and Chief Kregger looking at him and his box of rubbers. No use running from Freddy Krueger. The chief knew who Timmy was from the time Timmy and Ted stole the whole box of Nutrageous bars from Patco, and plenty of other times, too. Timmy was fucked. He just stood there with a shit-eating grin on his face, waiting for what was going to happen.

Nothing did. The chief just looked at him and looked at him. After a while Timmy's arms got so tired he couldn't bear it. "I got to put this thing down, Chief," he called out. "Okay if I put it down?" The chief never talked, never moved. After a while Timmy put it down.

What did Old Freddy wanted him to do? Raise his hands? He raised them and risked taking a step toward the black cruiser. He took another step. He was practically up to the car, near enough to reach out and touch the front fender.

“Chief?”

The chief's eyes weren't on Timmy anymore. They were looking a little bit past him, out at the road. A fly landed on the chief's neck, but he didn't brush it away. He acted like it wasn't even there while it crawled up onto his neck and headed toward his left eye. The fly paused for a second to figure out the tiny fence made by the chief's eyelashes, then crawled right over it and out onto his eyeball.

IT WAS THE PAPER'S MAIN STORY, with a headline saying, “Luxor Police Chief Found Dead.” Alexandra could have sat down on the bench in front of the Great American to read it, but what she felt like reading wasn't anybody's business. She shoved the *Luxor Gleaner* in with the groceries that filled the bicycle's big basket and walked the bike around behind the market. She sat down on the loading dock, in practically exactly the same place as where she saw the bearded man who had the tragic accident, and now he was immortalized in the dead zoo. It was ironic.

Alexandra read:

Luxor Police Chief Harold R. Kregger, missing since last Friday, was found dead Monday in his patrol car on State Route 34 by a boy on his way to go fishing.

Humboldt County medical examiner Dr. Arthur Medway ruled the death to be natural causes. Dr. Medway said he found no evidence of suicide or foul play.

According to Dr. Medway the death occurred Sunday night due to a heart stoppage for unknown reasons. Sgt. Donald Bracken of the Centerville Barracks said the last contact by state police dispatchers with Chief Kregger was logged in at 5:14 p.m. Friday.

They became alarmed at Kregger's whereabouts on Saturday when he failed to answer his home phone in regard to a report of violence against a Luxor female by the female's husband. After responding to the female complainant himself, Trooper Hector Velasquez visited Chief Kregger's house to advise him of the outcome of the complaint.

“He wasn't present at the residence and neither was his vehicle,” Sgt. Bracken said. “We noted his absence in our log but did not initiate further action. Plenty of times he would be out of touch, sometimes for extended periods.”

The body was discovered shortly before noon on Monday by Timothy Feeney, 10, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Feeney of Frog Hollow. Young Feeney was walking to a friend's house for a fishing expedition when he noticed Chief Kregger's patrol car parked beside Sam Parker's Boulevard Inn, formerly a well-known restaurant on Route 34.

*“I didn't think anything of it,” Timothy told *The Gleaner*. “He hides there lots of times so nobody can see him.”*

Young Feeney became concerned when Chief Kregger failed to return his wave, and went over to see if anything was wrong.

“Him and me were real good friends and I wanted to make sure he was all right,” Timothy said.

Feeney realized something was amiss when an insect crawling on the Chief's face failed to illicit any response from the dead officer.

Chief Kregger was a member of the 1972 Luxor High School football squad that went 7-2 and narrowly missed the honor of being named State Champions in Division 3.

After military service as a Marine guard at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, he returned home to work with his uncle, the late Chief Howard M. “Dutch” Hooper. When Chief Hooper retired several years later, Kregger took his place.

Chief Kregger was active in civic affairs as entertainment chairman of the Luxor Rod and Gun Club for two terms as well as serving on various committees of American Legion Joel Hamilton Post No. 42.

Chief Kregger leaves a brother William, address unknown, and an aunt, Hazel Willig of Middleburgh. Funeral arrangements by Devoe's Funeral Parlor are not yet finalized.

★

Chapter thirty-one

“Birds of a feather,” Addison Tuttle said to Alexandra when he had finished the article. “Dutch Hooper hired his dimwit nephew so he’d have somebody to drink with. I’m surprised Dutch could stand him.”

“Me too,” Alexandra said. “Chief Kregger was a really mean man. He wanted me to help him blackmail you.”

“Blackmail me?”

“Yeah, he told me some lie about Buffalo, and because of what supposedly happened in Buffalo you’d pay him not to tell people I was really a girl.”

“What did he say about Buffalo?”

“Something about some little girl. I didn’t pay any attention because I knew he was just lying to trick me into letting him out. Like I was going to let him out so he could shoot me!”

“There was a horrible misunderstanding involving a little girl, he wasn’t lying about that. She was sitting on my lap and her father jumped to a totally incorrect conclusion.”

Misunderstanding, huh? Alexandra knew about little girls sitting on laps. Half the time the stupid thing would start poking against your bottom.

“I never meant that little girl any harm,” Tuttle said. “I would have died rather than hurt her.”

Oh, sure, Alexandra thought. She had heard that one before, too.

“That’s where the blackmail started,” Tuttle went on, not looking at Alexandra. “Kregger was taking some state police seminar up in Albany and he found that old business on some

computer file. He said he really ought to notify the schools and day care centers but maybe he could give me a break since it was so long ago. Sell me a break was what he really meant.

“Before that I’d pay him ten dollars or so for anything interesting he found on the road. After that the price went up to fifty and it was mostly useless junk. A flattened possum, that kind of thing, two or three times a week. All I could do with most of his so-called specimens was bury them in a clearing out back.

“Then one night he showed up at the door with a particularly revolting grin on his face and said he had found some really prime road kill. I’ll never forget that smile or those words, or what I saw when he opened the trunk of his car.

“It was the poor old man in the Christmas Kitchen, the grandfather. Kregger extorted five thousand dollars for him. I was terrified, but what could I do? He said if I didn’t want the body, he’d just put it back on the road where he found it and report it the regular way. Then he’d smear me all over town with the old business back in Buffalo.

“God help me, I took the body. And my awful little secret was that I *wanted it*. The poor man was already dead, nothing could change that, and after all the successful preservation of a human specimen would be the ultimate challenge. It *was* the ultimate challenge, too. I made plenty of mistakes, but I think it eventually came out fairly well.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alexandra said. “He looks really real.”

“Anyway, after I paid Kregger his money for the old man, things immediately got worse. He was still bringing me animals, but now he demanded a hundred dollars apiece. Many times they were dead deer, which I had specifically told him were of no interest me. I think it amused him to know that I would just have to bury them with the back hoe.

“The real financial drain turned out to be not the humans but those worthless animals, week in and week out. Over the years he’s gotten more than two hundred thousand dollars from me.”

Alexandra couldn't get her mind around the idea of that much money. You could do anything. Travel anywhere in the world. Have your own maid. Buy clothes, cars, jewelry.

"Well, at least that's all over now," she said. "You don't have to worry about him anymore."

"No, I don't."

"You know something, Andy? I'm glad he had his accident."

"So am I, although I was worried at first. Still, it seems to have worked out quite well. I gather from the paper that the man was in the habit of disappearing mysteriously from time to time. Maybe we shouldn't have left him in his car. Maybe we should have installed him on the third floor."

"Then you'd have to look him all the time," Alexandra said.

"You're right of course," Tuttle said. "He would have contaminated everything. The dead zoo isn't about hate. It's about love."

SUNDAY NIGHT. A bunch of Indians covered with mud were digging up this hill when suddenly everybody got all excited and went running for the American scientists. An old scientist went back with the Indians to look at the weird thing they found, some kind of charm or statue. Then a witch doctor dressed in feathers stood on a hill and said they better leave the thing where it was or there was going to be big trouble.

The show was about Agent Scully and Agent Mulder, so Alexandra didn't bother to pay much attention to what the scientists and the Indians were saying. Things wouldn't really get going till the scientists got back to America where Mulder and Scully were.

Andy didn't take his eyes off the screen, though. He had really gotten into the X-Files once she made him watch it.

That commercial came on where the waiter shoves a fork with an octopus on it at this Japanese couple to show how you could get all your vitamins by eating a bowl of Total instead of the octopus and a lot of other gross stuff. Alexandra hit the mute.

"Was there ever an octopus stamp?" she said.

"Not to my knowledge, but I haven't been keeping my topical collections up to date."

"Did you ever think of doing your animal stamps?" she said.

"I don't follow you."

"Like you could do stuff that looked like your collection?"

"That's a very interesting concept," he said.

"You could take a stamp and copy it."

"I know exactly what you mean. Sandy, that's a positively brilliant idea."

Andy thought for a moment.

"Positively brilliant," he said. "A competition piece that displayed the tiny stamp itself, and alongside of it would be a life-sized rendering in three dimensions. Possibly we could have the stamp mounted behind a magnifying glass, or have a blow-up of it made. Maybe both. The real stamp mounted in a corner of the blow-up. How could we suggest the border? Put the exhibit in a light box, maybe, with the stamp's border painted or etched on the glass. Along with the lettering and any other decorative elements, too. Difficult, with all the detail in the etching, but it could be done. The effect would be as if you were looking through the surface of the stamp and into the world beyond it. Sandy, you're a genius!"

Alexandra was looking at him with surprise. Boy, I really pushed the right button that time, she thought. Except when he first came up with the idea of making her statue, she had never seen him so excited. Or excited at all, really. He got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" she said. "The show's back on."

"Tell me what happened later. I'm going up to look over my collection."

The young scientist was back in America with the weird thing that had the curse on it. All she could think of was Andy upstairs with his stamps. How could a little tiny piece of paper be worth eighty thousand dollars? Where was his collection hidden, anyway? She clicked the TV off and headed upstairs.

One hiding place she had thought of was in the presents under the Christmas tree, but no light came from under the door of the

Christmas Kitchen. Nor was there any under the door of the nursery where the rapist bum was playing with the baby. All that was left was the door that led to the cupola. She could open it and take a quick peek, but what if he saw her? He might think she wanted to steal his stamps or something.

She went back downstairs and clicked the TV on again. Millions of rats were running all around, chasing Agent Mulder and Agent Scully. Alexandra didn't even try to figure it out. She kept thinking of Andy up there in his secret cupola, sitting at some kind of big desk and looking through a magnifying glass at some stupid little piece of paper that you couldn't believe it was worth a fortune.

"Everything all right up there?" Alexandra said when he came down an hour later to join her in front of the TV. "Don't need any help, do you?"

"Just fine," he said, not taking the hint that it might have been polite to include her into things once in a while. "There's wonderful potential in some of the scenes, although of course a lot of the animals would be very difficult to find."

"I can imagine," Alexandra said.

"However, there *are* such things as zoos and private collections. And exotic animals *do* die."

"What do they do with them when they die?" she asked. "Like where could you put a dead elephant?"

But Andy, off on a roll, didn't seem to hear her. "You know what you may have done, Sandy?" he said. "You just may have invented a whole new artistic genre."

"Cool," she said.

"Now that you've had the conception," Andy said, "the rest is up to me. Nothing left but the actual execution."

Execution? What was the man talking about?

"Who are those people?" Andy asked, his attention finally caught by the screen.

"Siskel and Ebert. It's kind of dumb. They tell you what movies to see."

"Maybe I'll just go to bed," Andy said.

"Sleep tight," Alexandra said. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Alexandra went up to bed herself a few minutes later, but she couldn't go to sleep. She kept thinking about how to get into the cupola. At last she went to the window, standing naked in the light of the moon. Brad would go crazy if he could see her now. He would just eat her up, and of course she would eat him up, too. She was wet thinking of it. She imagined Brad standing naked beside his beloved bride, the new Mrs. Pitt. Brad would open the window for her and out they would go hand in hand onto the rooftops like Mary Poppins only with no clothes on. Actually there was supposed to be a real movie where Julie Andrews did frontal nudity. A lot of the big stars did. She wouldn't mind doing it herself in one of her pictures except Brad would probably get really pissed.

★

Chapter thirty-two

Alexandra watched from the window as Andy walked his bike out the gravel drive to make his daily post office run. He couldn't have his mail delivered like everybody else, not weird Andy. He didn't want mailmen poking around anymore than he wanted meter readers or anybody else, which she could certainly understand now that she knew about the murdered people on the third floor. Tuttle maneuvered the bike awkwardly around one of the posts that held up the driveway chain with its sign saying "Private Property." He climbed aboard and headed down the road, wobbling till he got up speed. He looked like a stork on the old Schwinn with the fat tires and coaster brakes. If he liked fat tires, you'd think he'd at least get a new mountain bike. He could probably get a thousand of them if he sold that stupid stamp. Alexandra watched him out of sight and went back up to her peach bedroom.

"You can come on out now," she said to Brad, opening the closet door. "He won't be back for at least a half hour. When the weather's nice like this he rides down the river and back before he picks up the mail."

Brad looked out from behind a row of Mrs. Tuttle's clothes and nodded. For an actor he was a man of few words, a case of still waters run deep. "Come on," she said. "We'll try the door up to the cupola just in case, not that the weirdo would ever leave it open."

Which he hadn't, so Brad opened a dormer window and they climbed out on the steep roof and up from there to an almost flat part with a low iron fence around it, and over the fence to where

they could walk right up to the stained glass windows on the eight sides of the cupola. Through a clear pane of the thick and wavy she was able to get at least a blurry look inside.

The sun through the stained glass windows made glowing patches of red and blue and green and yellow on the white walls and carpeting. Against the far side was a peach-colored chaise longue with an old woman half sitting and half lying on it. She wore a peach-colored dressing gown just like the one Alexandra had adopted as her own.

"I think that's his dead mom," Alexandra said to Brad. "Her picture's in my room."

Brad nodded calmly.

"Creepo probably stuffed her. His own mom."

Brad nodded again. Nothing upset Brad Pitt. He was cool to the max.

"He must keep his stupid stamp collection in that desk thingy there," Alexandra said. "See that special lamp? That round part is a magnifying glass for looking at them, I think. Probably the stamps are in those drawers."

Holding hands, they looked for a while through their side-by-side windows of wavy glass.

"Uh, oh," Alexandra said. "See on the road down there?"

Brad nodded.

"That's him on his bike. You'd better get out of here, Brad."

Brad disappeared. You didn't have to tell Brad twice.

Alexandra ducked down and crawled on her hands and knees behind the cupola before she made it over the low iron fence, onto the slanted roof and back through the dormer window. That was a close one, she thought. What if he had looked up and seen Brad?

She was back in her own room, sitting up on her own peach-colored bed, wearing her own peach-colored silk robe, by the time she heard Tuttle come into the house with the mail. Mostly it was catalogs and bills, practically never real letters. He was one of those quiet loners that everybody is surprised when they go postal.

Alexandra propped herself against the headboard in the same position as poor Mrs. Tuttle, up there in her dead zoo full of colors

on top of the world? Alexandra looked down at her own legs and imagined herself sitting right here forever in this same bed, immortal like the old lady. With two to choose from, would he still work on his precious stamp collection up there with his mom? Or would he bring it down here? Who would be his number one girl then?

Alexandra felt a big disappointment. All of it had been lies right from that first night straight on through, the way he acted like he was afraid of her and the way he sneaked peeks at her like some dopey high school kid. The whole thing was pretend. Andy was just like all the rest of them, just another one that wanted to do dirty things. What a liar he was, pretending to have a pure love for her when she was no more to him than some person to be used. Some spare person along the road.

“Sandy!” Tuttle called up the stairs, louder than usual, sounding funny. “Sandy, you up there? I’ve got something to show you.”

He wanted to get her helpless in his lab, that was what it was. She could tell from his voice. She could see right through him.

Alexandra got up from the bed, and stepped through the clear blue sheet of falling dannon that appeared in front of her. Safe on the other side, she tossed her head. Her curls shifted and lifted, and settled down again each in its perfect place.

★

Chapter thirty-three

The tiny owl's skin parted at the touch of his scalpel, opening a pink slit in the downy breast feathers. The freak wasn't humming his dumb tunes this time. He couldn't stop talking.

"This is just amazing, Sandy," he said. "You virtually never get your hands on a saw-whet owl, certainly not the immature brown form. The adults are completely different. They don't have this black face, like a robber's mask."

He had said all this before already, over and over in different words he was so excited. Even the dumb tunes were better than this.

"In perfect shape, too, you'd think the little fellow just lay down and died beside the road for my personal benefit."

Just like me showing up on your lawn that night, Alexandra thought.

"He looked like just a little bit of crumpled-up newspaper, but something told me to turn around and go back. Lucky for me. They die of the shock. It's the windshields these days, the way they're slanted. Birds hit them a glancing blow so you're seeing more and more perfect specimens."

And on and on. Nothing for her to do but tune out and watch, making noises now and then as if she was paying attention. Tuttle peeled the skin back from the pink slit that ran from breast to vent until the legs were exposed, took hold of one leg from outside,

pushed it in until the knee joint came into view, and then just touched it with the scalpel. The miniature drumstick came free from the rest of the leg. He did the same thing to the other leg, then severed the tail muscles and vertebrae, and then the shoulder joints and then the neck. The owl's carcass looked like a skinned chicken, only no bigger than a robin. Its flesh was pink and shiny.

Alexandra was sitting on the stool at Tuttle's shoulder. In case he tried anything, she had palmed a scalpel of her own, held flat up against her wrist where he couldn't see it.

Tuttle worked on the legs, sprinkling cornmeal to dry up the blood as he went along. "In a full-sized owl you'd have to skin down practically to the toes to dissect out the tarsus muscles," he said. "In a little fellow like this, though, I think we can risk leaving them in place."

"Uh-huh," she said. He was trying to distract her so she would let her guard down, but she wasn't going to fall for that one. Andy—what a dumb name for a grown man!—was a murderer at least three times over. He had told her that himself, flat out. He paid money for the roadkill bodies, and now he was figuring on getting hers for free. Lots of luck, loser. She felt the scalpel, lying cold and flat along the soft skin of her wrist.

"You mind taking this over to the trash bucket for me?" he said, handing her the carcass after he had traced its measurements on a sheet of newspaper. Alexandra picked it up, feeling the grit of the cornmeal and the stickiness of the membrane right through the dennon that covered her hand.

The carcass was clammy. She thought about Chief Kregger, going bad in that hot car. The way you told if road kill was fresh was by tugging at the fur and if it came out that was called slippage and the animal was too rotten to mount. She pretty nearly laughed aloud, thinking that the kid who found the body should have tugged at the chief's Ed Harris hair.

Only some sicko like Andy would think of setting the chief out to rot in his own patrol car. Actually it was Andy's idea to lock him in the cool room, too, now that she thought of it. Andy dreamed lots of times of doing that exact same thing, he told her so himself.

And finally it just happened to happen. Big surprise. Probably he put the idea in her head through mind reading so she would do his dirty work. Alexandra dumped the tiny owl carcass in the stainless steel trash and made herself go back to look over his shoulder. She had to act natural, as if she didn't suspect anything.

"Look here," Tuttle said. "Notice these patches of fat attached to the skin here? You see these in hawks as well as owls. Watch how I'm doing. You can get it off without damaging the skin if you're careful. Want to try it?"

"It's okay," Alexandra said. "I get the idea."

What if he insisted on making her scrape the disgusting stuff off, though? She would need both hands and she was holding the scalpel in one. Alexandra put the instrument on her stool and sat down carefully. She couldn't even tell she was sitting on anything, it was so thin and flat.

Tuttle's lank, black hair lay like strings over his white scalp. Alexandra could see part of one lens of his glasses from where she was sitting. It was smudged. Didn't the slob ever polish the things? It was a miracle he could see through them at all. His collar was gray. His fingernails were rimmed with dark red from the bird's blood. She thought of those long, clever, filthy fingers working on the bearded man's hide, scraping off bits of red gunk and yellow fat as he turned the man into his own father.

Tuttle cleaned the owl's skin with alcohol and turpentine while she watched and pretended to listen to his running commentary. It was like he thought he was the big star of some stupid documentary on owl-stuffing, as if anybody in their right mind would put *him* in a movie. Maybe funniest home videos, that's all.

Tuttle took the hair dryer and fluff-dried the owl's feathers, which at least meant she didn't have to listen to him for a while. When that was done the commentary started up again while he brushed arsenic water inside and outside the skin, on the feet, and inside the bill. After that he wrapped the skin in a damp cloth and stood up.

"Pretty near done for now," he said. "Before the actual mounting, it's a good idea to leave the skin in the cool room over night."

"How come?" Alexandra asked, to show she was paying attention.

"That way the arsenic has time to penetrate the base of the feathers instead of getting absorbed by the artificial body."

She got up to follow him to the cool room.

"What's that doing there?" Tuttle said, looking at the glittering scalpel on the stool.

"Huh?" Alexandra said, not faking. She had forgotten it was there. "Oh, Lord, I must have sat on it and never noticed."

"Lucky you didn't cut yourself," he said, picking it up. Tuttle tried the edge with his thumb and put the scalpel away in the case where he kept his instruments.

Now I'm at the mercy of the fiend, Alexandra thought.

"Funny it was out," he said. "I always put them away."

"I might have left it out," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry."

"No harm done," Tuttle said, "Let's put this little fellow to bed."

She followed him out of the work room and across the basement floor toward the cool room. Tuttle, carrying the owl in one hand, turned the heavy handle with the other and swung the door to the cool room open. Alexandra watched, her hands half-raised, knees bent slightly, leaning forward just a little bit. Tuttle turned on the light from the switch outside the door, and went in. One step. Two.

The door was harder to move than Alexandra remembered, and Tuttle started to push back before she could get the broken padlock in place. She pushed with all her might, but still the door kept opening back up. Her only hope was to run.

But when she took her weight off the door it came open fast and caught her heel as she turned. Tuttle was loose and she was on the ground, him towering over her lying helpless there.

"Please don't, Uncle Bob," she cried out in a little girl's voice. "It makes me hurt."

Tuttle stood there, his hands forgotten at his sides, his head making small uncontrolled movements from side to side.

“Who’s Uncle Bob?” he said at last.

“Nobody,” she said. Her voice was small, but normal.

“You called me Uncle Bob.”

“I did not. I don’t even have an uncle.”

“You poor little thing,” Tuttle said. His hands went forward of themselves, and Alexandra shrank away. His hands went back.

“The scalpel,” he finally said. “You were afraid I was going to hurt you. Don’t you know I’d never hurt you? No more than I’d hurt my own mother.”

His expression, his tone, his posture, told her that flight was no longer necessary.

“I was only kidding around,” she said, letting her voice sound a little scared, still. “I was going to let you right out.”

“Kidding around?”

She nodded. “It was a dumb joke, I know,” she said.

Tuttle didn’t answer. His head was making the small movements again, and when he did speak again his voice was sorrowful.

“It’s the dead zoo, isn’t it? You thought— you were afraid— How could you *imagine* such a thing? How could you *possibly imagine*? I swear on my mother’s memory, Sandy, I could never *ever* hurt a hair on your head. You’re like my own daughter, you’ve got to believe that.”

He started to raise his hand as if he were about to take an oath, but then another idea came to him. “I’ll prove it to you,” he said.

He turned away from her and started for the cool room. What was he up to?

Tuttle looked at her, his hand on the heavy steel-clad door. “I’m going in,” he said.

Alexandra waited.

“I’m going inside now.”

She watched, puzzled and ready to run. She couldn’t figure out the trick.

“Go ahead and lock me in,” he said. “I want you to.” He disappeared into the cool room and the door began to move. It clunked into place with a solid click as the latch caught.

Quickly, making no noise, Alexandra got to her feet and hung the broken padlock over the two steel rings. Safe at last, she let her breath out.

“See?” Tuttle called through the door. “Would I put myself in your hands if I meant you any harm?”

Now Alexandra understood. It was like in the movies when you have the drop on some guy and then hand the gun to him so he’ll think you’re his friend.

“I’d rather die myself than see any harm come to you, Sandy,” he called through the door. “Die right here and now.”

Yeah, right, Alexandra thought. How dumb did he think she was?

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Chapter thirty-four

The flat end of the crowbar wouldn't fit between the door and the jamb. Alexandra didn't want to jab the tool in hard, because then the crime lab would know that somebody broke in. Get real, she said to herself. Who ever comes to this house? She forced the bar into the crack and pried. The door didn't open, but the crack widened. On her second try, the lock gave way with a loud snap. She pushed doubtfully at the door, thinking it couldn't be that easy. But the door swung open without even a creak.

In front of her was a short flight of stairs leading up to the cupola. The sunlight passing through stained glass made soft patches of color on the wall at the top of the stairs. Alexandra stood at the bottom for a moment, ready to run. What if somebody was up there? But that was stupid. Who could it be? She made herself go up the stairs until her head cleared the landing and of course there wasn't a living soul in sight.

Just old Mrs. Tuttle propped up on her couch.

That could have been you just as easy, Alexandra thought. Your tender young bod could have wound up immortal in Mother's peach-colored bed downstairs. She put her hand up to the smooth skin of her cheek, and thought of it dried up, all stiff and shiny and horrible like some ancient Nancy Reagan face-lift face.

Now you stop that, girl! Don't look at that horrible thing on the couch. Don't even think about it. Bad to be sad, good to be glad, her personal poem that she made up herself. So Alexandra looked instead at the desk where the stamp collection had to be hidden and glad thoughts came, about how it would be to have her

own car and stay in nice hotels and wear pretty new clothes every day. She went over to the desk and tried one of the drawers. It slid open.

The drawers held a bewildering mess of plain white envelopes, glassine envelopes, and clear plastic sheets with spaces to slip the stamps in. The labels meant nothing to her, and neither did the stamps. They were in every color, all sizes and shapes. Many were from countries she had never heard of; many had foreign writing that didn't even look like letters. Alexandra couldn't see any rhyme or reason to it.

But she knew the eagle stamp was in a glassine envelope, and she kept looking till she found it in one of the ring binders stored upright in the desk's file drawer. She slid the stamp out with the blunt tweezers the same way the pervert did when he first showed it to her.

The screaming eagle on the stamp was perched on a red shield. The eagle held some kind of a branch in one claw. Alexandra bent the arm of the big desk light down so she could examine the stamp. Through the lamp's built-in magnifying glass the upside-down flags looked like a blue net thrown over the eagle's outstretched wings. Eighty thousand dollars worth of net.

Next she took an even closer look at the trapped and helpless eagle through a viewer from one of the drawers. It was like one of those things jewelers used, except it had little legs so you could set it right on top of whatever you were looking at. The crisp lines of the drawing turned into vague, wandering red, white, and blue worms with blurry edges. Alexandra set the viewer aside and the stamp turned pretty again. Nothing looked nice up close.

She glanced up. From a distance, anyway, old Mrs. Tuttle looked as if she were alive and could get up from that couch any time she wanted to. Probably she wouldn't look so real up close. She got up from the desk and went over.

Even up close she looked amazingly real, down to the hundreds of tiny wrinkles in her face. showed on Mrs. Tuttle's face. Only the eyes didn't look quite right, the whites a little too white or something. Alexandra had seen all kinds of eyes in Tuttle's

catalogs — eagle, owl, deer, the big cats, buffalo, fish, alligator — but where did he get human eyes? Of course. They made glass eyes for people who had horrible accidents.

Or maybe those were her real eyes, only freeze-dried. That couldn't be, though. You had to take out the insides and the brain to freeze-dry, he had said. Even the creep wouldn't be weird enough to dig out his mom's brains. Would he? Maybe he would.

Alexandra bent over to see how he had managed to get those wrinkles into Mrs. Tuttle's forehead. One of them wasn't a wrinkle. It was a seam at the hairline, almost invisible. The old lady was wearing a wig, which settled it. If had used her real skin, he wouldn't have needed a wig. It must be a mask, like the one he casted for Alexandra's own statue. She tapped on the wrinkled forehead with her fingernail and it clicked like the hard plastic case of a TV. That settled it. It was a mask. He had killed his own mother so he could make her into one of his painted Greek statues!

I love you like you were my own daughter, that's what he had said to her down in the basement earlier. Well, he loved his own mother, too, and here she was murdered. That's what he did to the women in his life.

You had to give him credit, though. At the last minute, he couldn't go through with it. Instead of killing her, he made her lock him away so the monster inside of him couldn't get out to kill again. So there was some good in him after all, like there was in everybody if you just looked hard enough.

GOING ON FIFTY YEARS NOW, it seemed to Addison Tuttle that he had managed to say the wrong thing on practically every occasion. One of his French professors once told the class about *pensées sur l'escalier*, thoughts on the staircase. As you were leaving some brilliant literary salon, the thought came to you of the perfect thing that you should have said instead whatever awkward stupidity you had actually stammered out.

How was it then that this time he not only come up with the absolutely perfect thing to say, and had said it at precisely the right moment? He heard himself saying the words: "I'll prove it to you,

that I'd rather die than hurt you. I'm going inside. I'm putting myself at your mercy."

Now all there was to do was wait till she worked it through herself, in her sweet, scatterbrained head. He wondered what she was doing at that very minute. Sometimes she would go up to Mother's old room when it got hot in the afternoons and he would hear the water in the pipes as she cooled off in the shower. It was well water, so cold it made your skin tighten. Shamefully, helplessly, when he heard that noise he could think of nothing but the water running down over her naked body in cool transparent sheets. The skin tightening, the tiny rosebud nipples pricking out.

Tuttle was chilly. Not exactly cold yet, but chilly the way he would be standing in the bathroom on a winter morning, waiting for the water in the shower to turn warm. After a quarter of an hour in the hot shower, the room would be warm and steamy as he toweled himself dry. Then into the clothes he had set out before getting into the shower. Long underwear, wool pants, flannel shirt.

There was no warmth in the thin short-sleeved cotton shirt he had on, and not much in his khaki pants. Tuttle remembered the sight of Kregger curled around his useless revolver, wrapped in his useless deerhide. Deer hair was hollow, which was how the animals survived the winter. Thousands of little tiny tubes of air insulated them from the cold, as if they wore sleek, tight parkas. Even then, in the worst winters they froze.

Tuttle sat down on the floor to wait for Sandy to get over her fright. She was such a sunny little soul that nothing could dampen her spirits for long. He imagined the hinges creaking as the big door swung open, and her standing all golden in the doorway saying, I don't know what got into me, Daddy Andy. Look, I brought you a hot Hungry Man boneless chicken dinner."

"Look at that, will you?" Tuttle heard himself saying. "It's so cold in here you can see the steam coming off it."

THAT COURTENEY COX had little twig arms, how did she ever get to be a big TV star? It was unbelievable that Tom Selleck would ever fall for a skinny thing like that even if he was old

enough to be her uncle. Plus it was unbelievable she wouldn't marry him because he didn't want to have kids. Right. A girl gets a chance to live in a Beverly Hills mansion with Tom Selleck and she gives it all up for poopy diapers? TV was so fake.

Alexandra slipped into sleep during an Ensure ad where some little girl was asking her grandfather to marry her. She didn't wake up till the middle of ER, when everybody started screaming loud enough to wake the dead. Apparently Carter had done something really stupid again, but the guy wasn't going to die. Alexandra knew he wasn't because it was a re-run like everything else in the summer. At least Jay Leno wasn't a re-run, so she watched that for a while and then it got stupid so she went up to bed.

The peach sheets were cool on her skin and the down pillows puffed up on both sides of her head. She felt like she was floating weightless, an astronaut. She still had the whole three hundred that Andy gave her before he left for Flint, Michigan. And she had almost all of what he had been paying her to be his housekeeper. That would be plenty to keep her going until she could find a stamp store. Doubtlessly she would get more than eighty thousand, because Tuttle's catalog was an old one.

Then her and Brad might go on Carnival Cruises for a while, and then ski at Aspen and maybe scuba dive at Cancun. Brad would be her guest for a change. It was good for a wife to have her own money. She pulled the pillow over her head so nothing would get her overnight and full of glad thoughts she floated down into sleep.

ADDISON WAS IN A VAST FIELD that gleamed white under the moon. The snow stretched unbroken all around him to a low line of black woods on the horizon. The shivering and the shaking and at last the convulsive shuddering in his limbs had stopped and he just lay there waiting for his sweet Sandy to reach him. It was so far out to where he was in the middle of the field and the snow was so deep that no wonder it took time. At first all he had been able to make out was a black speck detaching itself from the woodline and growing bigger into a human form, and

then he could see that the form was Alexandra, wrapped in a heavy cloak of fur. When she drew near enough he saw that she was smiling a gentle smile, forgiving him for making her frightened. She said no words, just the smile of forgiveness. She opened the cloak to him and closed it snugly over them both, so that it shut out the moonlight he could feel her glowing warm. She pressed her naked skin against him so her heat would pass into him and she held him tight there in the friendly dark, peaceful and pure and innocent, and she was murmuring, There, there, go to sleep, over and over until her voice turned down low and out.

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Chapter thirty-five

Edith Burgess woke up and looked out at the main street of a small town. Only one person was waiting at the bus stop, a girl of fifteen or sixteen with honey blond hair worn short the way so many of them did these days. She was about the age Edith's own granddaughter would have been by now, bless her heart. The girl was wearing sneakers, blue jeans, and a boy's shirt that showed just enough of her cute little figure. She wasn't exactly smiling, but she looked like she was about to at any moment.

Mrs. Burgess looked at the purse and the magazine she had left on the aisle seat to discourage people from sitting there. She shifted the magazine to her lap and set the purse on top of it.

The girl was paying the driver for her ticket, saying something that made him laugh. When she paused to look over the bus, Mrs. Burgess met her glance and half-smiled herself. The invitation delivered, she looked back down at her lap. She pretended not to notice when the girl stopped in the aisle beside her.

"Mind if I sit down?" she said, neither shy nor forward.

"Not at all," Mrs. Burgess said, smiling up at her. The girl had lovely golden skin, a perfectly lovely complexion. "Sit right down."

The girl managed to hoist her pack up to the edge of the overhead rack and shoved with both hands till it cleared the lip and thumped down safely. She sat down and said, "Hi, I'm Alexandra."

"Pleasure," Mrs. Burgess said. "I'm Edith Burgess."

"You know, Mrs. Burgess, when I saw you I said to myself, She looks like somebody I know. All of a sudden I realized, wow, you know who it is? That lady looks like my grandma."

"Really?"

"Well, a little, anyway. I don't mean you could be twins or anything."

"Actually I had a granddaughter who would have been about your age, but she was gathered in."

"I'm sorry. What?"

"She was deceased."

"Really? That is *so* weird."

"Why?"

"My grandma was deceased, too."

The bus driver pulled away from the curb and had only gone a few yards when he turned into a side street. "Where are we going?" Mrs. Burgess asked.

"He's going to turn around behind the town hall. They just come into town to pick up passengers and then they go back across the river to the main highway."

"Oh," Mrs. Burgess said. "I thought the poor man was lost."

The bus made a big circle in the town parking lot and got back on Main Street, headed west. "That's the police station, too," Alexandra said. "Above the town hall."

"It's a darling little building."

"They found the police chief dead in his car a while ago."

"My word. What happened to him?"

"They don't know. They think a stroke."

"Poor man."

"Nobody liked him much. He was real mean."

"Still."

"I know. Actually I thought he was pretty okay. He was always nice to me. When people would say how mean he was, I'd always tell them that."

"Have you lived here long, Alexandra?"

"Oh, no, I was just visiting my uncle. He's a famous sculptor. Andy Gaines?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about art."

"Me neither. But he's won all kinds of prizes."

"So now you're going home?"

"Yeah, I can't wait."

"Where do you call home?"

"Alaska."

"Alaska! You're going all the way to Alaska by bus?"

"Oh, no. I'm catching the plane."

"Where's that?"

"I haven't decided yet. I want to see a little bit of the country before I head home."

"Well, you're certainly an adventurous little thing!"

Alexandra had hitched around in her seat so that she was nearly facing Mrs. Burgess. She kept her blue eyes steadily on the woman's face, absorbed. Nobody had ever shown that much interest in Edith Burgess before.

THE BUS WAS ROLLING SMOOTHLY along with the light midday traffic on the interstate. The sun was high and hot. Nothing moved in the farmland on both sides. The air conditioning hummed along with the big tires and the engine. Edith Burgess had closed her eyes and was waiting for sleep to come.

What a brave little girl, she thought. The divorces, the awful fire, the deaths in her family and never a hint of complaint from her when she talked about it. The poor little thing saw the good in everything and everybody. She went her own merry way, looking for the best and finding it. You hated to tell her what an awful place the world could be. It would be like kicking a puppy. Still, somebody ought to warn her about that boyfriend of hers. That Brad.

To be in Harvard Medical School, he had to be a good ten years older than her, or pretty near anyway. Doctors were always dumping the loyal women who put them through medical school, not that Alexandra was putting him through, he was from a wealthy family. But the idea was the same. He was using her. It was child abuse, really, was what it was. Mrs. Burgess didn't believe for

a moment that he planned to marry her. Why would he want to keep their engagement secret from his parents if it was a real engagement? He was just after the same thing all the rest of them were.

Alexandra was the one who needed someone to put her through college, poor little thing. Mrs. Burgess thought about her house, practically empty now that Herman was dead and the children were out of state or married, or both in the case of Keith. She must have plenty of equity in the house. Fred Bingaman would know how much. Fred was at Herman's funeral. You could say that was nice of him, for such an important man to show up, and maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. Bankers were like politicians. They went to things because it was good for business. The people from the Grange and the Legion were different. They came because they cared. Or didn't come because they didn't. For instance Herman's so-called friend Carl, off on a fishing trip instead of at the services. Let Carl die and see if she wouldn't be off on a fishing trip, too, not that she would ever really go fishing, it was bad enough cleaning Herman's catch for thirty-seven years—

Alexandra examined Edith while she slept. Her cheeks were soft pillows covered with a network of tiny wrinkles. The backs of her hands were pudgy and smooth. Her wedding band was practically buried in her ring finger. You'd have had to cut the finger off to get it. The tops of her feet bulged up out of her shoes. She sat there like some big doll made out of cushions. When people got to where they looked like that, Alexandra wondered, why didn't they just kill themselves? She would.

Sing a glad song, not a sad song. Maybe Mrs. Burgess was a famous beauty in her day, a supermodel, but then she let herself go when her fabulously wealthy husband died and broke her heart forever. Alexandra looked at her neighbor and saw the good bones under the chubby cheeks.

Why should Mrs. Burgess care anymore what she looked like? There was only one man in the world she wanted to look good for, and he was dead and gone. All she had left of him was his fabulous stamp collection. She had dedicated her life to his memory,

roaming the world disguised as a simple housewife so nobody would cheat her because of her wealth.

Over the years she had tracked down all the famous stamps that were missing in her husband's collection except the most famous one of all, the 1869 inverted eagle. If only she could find one, it would make her husband's collection the best in the entire world, and she would open a big stamp museum in Beverly Hills so the whole world could enjoy it.

By total coincidence one day she found herself on a bus with an orphan girl that happened to have been given that very stamp by her favorite uncle so she could go to college. But the girl didn't really need the money, because she could always get a scholarship with her straight A's and extracurriculars, so when the girl heard the sad story about the museum she offered the stamp to Mrs. Burgess for free.

Alexandra eased up out of her seat carefully, so as not to wake up Mrs. Burgess. She worked the pack over the lip of the baggage rack until the weight of it dropped into her arms. She shouldn't have loaded so much into it, but there was so much neat stuff in the house.

She sat down with the pack in her lap, wishing she would have been able to cram even more in. But it was tough when you had to lug everything yourself. She forgot about what she had left behind and thought about what she had been able to fit in. The peach-colored silk robe, the silver desk set, the silver-backed brushes, the little mother-of-pearl binoculars, the tea set, the antique clock, the gold ladies' watch. It was funny there wasn't more jewelry, just the watch and a couple of necklaces and a brooch. Maybe she kept it in the bank or something.

Alexandra ran her hand inside the pack, down along the side, until she felt the envelope that held the inverted eagle stamp. She took it between her first two fingers and slid it up very carefully. A stamp that was creased even the least little bit lost practically all its value, Andy said.

The top of the envelope came into view. Oh, shit, Alexandra thought. She slid it all the way out. Mother fucker. She knew

exactly what must have happened. That goddamn motherfucking son-of-a-bitch pen from his goddamned desk set, the goddamned pervert.

The bottom part of the envelope was completely black. She squeezed the sides of the envelope so she could see inside, see if the glassine envelope inside had protected the stamp, but the ink had gotten inside that envelope, too. The whole stamp was black except for one little corner.

Cocksucker, she thought, or maybe she even said it under her breath. Mrs. Burgess stirred in her sleep and said something.

It wasn't real clear, but it sounded to Alexandra like, "Never mind, dear."

Alexandra shoved the ruined stamp back down into the pack, out of sight out of mind. Outside the window was a field with a big tree standing all alone in it. Brown and white cows stood motionless in the shade. Cows had it made, she thought. Made in the shade. Maybe that's where the expression came from, from cows. Alexandra closed her eyes on the cows and she saw Mrs. Burgess wake up.

"My heavens, you poor thing," Mrs. Burgess said. "Your stamp got all ruined. Isn't that the world-famous 1869 inverted American eagle? Where did you ever find one?"

"My uncle Andy had a tragic accident and left it to me so I could go to an Ivy League college."

THEY WOULDN'T STOP CHEERING no matter how many times Alexandra pounded the gavel. They just kept on and on it seemed like forever while the thousands of balloons went up and the confetti and streamers came down and all the men threw their hats into the air, yellow straw hats with red, white and blue bands, and the lady voters all wore huge hats in the latest styles and red, white and blue sashes. Giant flags hung from the ceiling all the way down to the floor. People were blowing whistles and swinging noisemakers around and around. Soldiers and sailors were stationed all around to protect her. They had black rifles with silver bayonets and gold braid on their sleeves and shoulders.

Finally she got everybody calmed down enough so the Pope could swear her in with her hand on the Bible and sitting behind her with all the senators and CEOs was Academy Award winner Brad Pitt, looking up at her so proud, never once taking his eyes off his beloved wife.

Even after she was sworn in and started to give her welcoming speech they kept cheering after practically every word she said until halfway through she threw away her speech, just picked up the whole pile of pages and dropped them on the ground so everybody could see this was from the heart, and then they got real quiet while she told them the story she had never told anybody before, about how a tragic accident left her homeless but luckily the finest person she ever met, Mrs. Edith Burgess, and she pointed to Mrs. Burgess in the balcony and she stood up, Mrs. Burgess met me by accident on a Greyhound Bus and she adopted me and sent me to an exclusive Ivy League college and it turned my life around so I could go to law school and become the President of the United States and give everybody a lavish lifestyle—

The old lady on the bus moved in her sleep and made a soft contented little sound not much louder than a purr. Alexandra's eyes opened and she saw Mrs. Burgess smiling in her sleep.

She was wearing her great big hat and her red, white, and blue sash. The network cameras picked her out of that whole huge crowd for the whole world to see, caught with her eyes closed, dreaming.

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