

In a quiet place

Prologue

They slept peacefully, their spirits finally free from the chaos and pain they had known for so long. She cradled them, as only a nurse can, in her gentle arms. For so long she had kept them, held and shielded them, giving them a haven among the trees. Through the summers they slumbered to the gentle melody of warm breezes around her boarded-up windows and the buzzing trill of wasps building their nests under her eaves and the soft patter of warm raindrops. When the cold winds of winter whistled through the bare branches in the trees surrounding her, and the snows formed a fluffy blanket over her roof, they slept in quiet repose. The nearby stream bubbled and chuckled to itself; the birds came, built their nests and raised their chicks, and left again; flowers bloomed and died, and the nearby highway witnessed the Edsel, the Volkswagen, the GTO, the Toyota, and the SUV in their turn; and still under the leaves and shade, she watched over her children as they slumbered in their distant corner of the estate. Unwilling to leave her sheltering cradle, they rested there among her beams and rafters, seeped into her bricks and fixtures. Forgotten by all but a few at the estate, their physical existence was now little more than dusty, yellowed folders in the basement of the Great Hall. A few doctors remembered some of them and in the clouded minds of those in the Hospital dim remnants of image and perceptions of them lingered. Aside from that, all that they had been was gone, except for that wrinkled, gnarled knot of flesh that now floated in formaldehyde in large, glass jars. That...and the unseen, unsolid energy that had given the flesh movement and thought but which now slept...the madness at rest, the screaming ceased, the laughter quieted, the pain soothed, the violence finally, thankfully, at peace. They slept securely in her arms behind the boarded windows and locked door and brick walls. But sleep is forever only temporary...

One

“So anyway, when Klap tells me about this place, I just about shit. I mean, how more perfect could it be?”

“Well, it would be more perfect without the guards,” Rue admitted.

“Don’t be a wuss, Rue. This is gonna be so radical. Man, the stuff they’ve got in there is gonna be perfect for the party.” Cackle’s eyes were glittering with glee at the thought of this grand coup. He was excited at the prospect of pulling the raid off and it showed. He always made Rue uncomfortable when he got like this. This time, for the first time, Rue realized Cackle also made him just a bit afraid.

“It’s gonna be great, Rue. Man, I’m telling ya, the stuff they’ve got in there has just GOT to be incredible. I saw this documentary once, about how they used to mistreat loonies in the nuthouse? It was like a prison, man. They’d beat ‘em, starve ‘em, lock ‘em in cages...and I bet they stored a lot of that equipment in that old building. Hey, maybe they’ve got some coffins or something in there. Good stuff for the party, man. Hey, get your girlfriend spooked enough and

she might even let you grab her boobs or something in the dark.” Rue frowned. Klap had been yanking his chain about not having sex with his girlfriend for weeks, and it was well past “getting old” by now. “We need your help. So...ya in or not?”

“Tell me again about the guards,” was Rue’s response. He was wavering.

“Awww man...” Klap whined. “I told ya twice, the old morgue is off in one corner of the grounds, surrounded by trees. I checked when I got this idea; the guards only drive past the place twice each night: at 9:30 p.m. and again at 3:30 a.m. That gives us 5 hours to get in, get whatever we can carry, and get out. More than enough time. It’s gonna be easy. Now I know the grounds and how we can get in through the fence, Cackle’s got the truck to haul the shit we take, Nick’s in and he’s the expert on B&E...we need you, now. You’re the bodybuilder... anything too heavy for us, you can carry out. But hey, if you don’t wanna do it...that’s cool. But then you’re out of the party, too.” He wasn’t smiling now.

“What do you think you’re gonna find in there?” asked Rue.

“Hey, man...when Judge Butthole sentenced me to 300 hours of public service working at the State Hospital for busting that store I learned a lot about that place. Been there for more than 100 years, and they stopped using the Morgue when the County Hospital opened in 1958. Since then, it’s been boarded up and neglected. The records I saw were kinda vague, but they did say that the morgue has lots of stuff left in it...junk that nobody quite knew what to do with when they shut it down. The rumors say that it’s full of surgical stuff, cheap coffins, shrouds, and...” he grimaced like a B-movie ‘mad doctor’ and chuckled, “...anatomical specimens.”

“You mean, like legs and bodies and guts and shit?”

“Maybe. But I had a couple people tell me they got brains in there.” Rue’s expression betrayed his surprise, so Klap went for the sale. “See, for years, doctors thought that people were nuts because their brains weren’t put together right. So when a loony would croak, they’d cut his head open and save his brain to compare it with brains from a normal guy. Well, all those brains are in big jars fulla preservatives, just sitting in that place and waiting for us to come for a visit and take ‘em for a drive.”

“I don’t know, Klap. I mean...brains? That’s somebody’s BRAIN, man.”

“Oh gawd, Rue,” exclaimed Cackle, “they’re DEAD. It’s not like they’re still in those brains, thinking and waiting for us or nothin’.”

“Well...okay. I’m in” Rue said. Rue had known Klap for more than 3 years and figured him for a smart guy. He’d never known Cackle to be wrong about anything. And he’d never known him to be this wrong before.

The moon was rising as the conspirators gathered at Nick’s house. Cackle had his old Ford pickup truck with the “Back Off” mudflaps and several coils of rope and some tarps ready in the back. He had even replaced his everyday tires with odd used ones in case the authorities were to take tire-print impressions. Klap had done his intelligence-gathering well, and had

organized the plan down to the minute. He had also bought a large padlock, identical to the one which currently secured the chain on the big iron gates at the rear of the large estate which housed the Daedalus State Hospital. His plan was to cut the old padlock, and then replace it with the new one as a red herring to confuse any investigators. Rue had brought flashlights for them all, along with his uncle's handcart. Nick, the oldest of the lot, had a long history of minor-league break-ins and robberies. His contribution to the sordid affair was his expertise as a burglar, pairs of rubber gloves, and (unbeknownst to the others) a .38 caliber revolver in his pocket.

Rue didn't like Nick. Didn't like his greasy black hair, cheesy mustache, Frito Bandito smile, or how he could lie or cheat or steal and then kiss the crucifix he wore as though it washed his evil away. It offended Rue, who was raised to be a good Catholic. But tonight, considering the place they would soon walk into, and what they'd be surrounded by, Rue would have been happy to have even Jack the Ripper for company. He was so nervous about it all that his stomach had butterflies. Occasionally, he would allow his concentration to slip and they'd instantly start to morph into bats.

"It's gonna be simple and easy," Nick was telling them. "In and out and gone with the goods; like picking up an ugly chick in a bar...get her, got her, gone and forgot her." The others sniggered at the juvenile joke. "The guards make their evening cruise shortly after nine, so we wait until about 10 to open the gate. Klap says it's just a 5 minute drive from the gate to the morgue, in the daylight and takin' your time. We'll be in the dark, drifting along at about 5 miles an hour so we don't make noise, so make it 15 minutes. He says the basement windows are barred, but the delivery door...hey, bet that's where they get the pizza, huh?" More snickers. "The delivery door is pretty worn. Should be able to get that up easy. So, by 10:30, we're in. The windows are all boarded so don't be afraid to use your flashlights. Be careful. If you fall down and get hurt and can't walk, we'll have to leave you behind if things get hot."

"I thought this was foolproof?"

"Rue, anything foolproof just hasn't met the right fools yet," said Klap. The brainy one of the outfit, he had a flare with words -- a hood with an IQ to excel in college but no desire to try. Not so long as petty theft was easier, anyway.

"It's gonna be OK, Rue," said Nick. "The guards won't be a problem. So, we watch our feet, right? No falls down the stairs into the cellar, OK?"

Cackle was sitting hunched-over like a baseball catcher. "What ya think we'll find in there, Nick? Good shit?" Nick was a sort of hero to Cackle. The kinda thug the blond boy wanted to grow up to be.

"If what Klap said is true, we might score big on this one. Dig...I even got an undertaker willin' to buy any coffins we get when we're done with 'em...if they're in good shape, I mean."

"Does he wanta buy the brains too?" muttered Rue.

Klap bugged his eyes out and did his best Igor impression. “*Da brains, Master...da brains...da brains are going to GET you, Rue...da BRAAAAAIIINSSSS.....*” The others were laughing so hard that they didn’t hear Rue’s sullen, profane reply.

Two

The bolt cutters that Nick wielded were old and scratched from too many excursions into somebody else’s property. But their sharp, hard-forged blades bit through the shackle of the big Yale padlock, allowing the chain to fall back and the big gates to swing open. The pickup turned slowly off the access road and into the gravel path between the gateposts. Klap and Rue closed the gate behind it, securing it with the new padlock in case the police would drive past. No sense arousing their suspicions. Then they hopped into the back of the truck and the robbers continued into the estate.

They drove slowly, almost silently, among the trees. Under the heavy, leafy branches, even the night was darker. It was like driving through ink in spots. They didn’t use their headlights, so Cackle had to wait until his eyes could make out what was ahead of them before proceeding. Usually talkative and smiling when together, the men were silent as they slid along. They were too busy to talk, their eyes searching the shadows. Each knew he was doing it, and each tried to tell himself he was just making sure there was nothing in the dark they could wreck into. Each one was lying.

A large, black shape loomed up on the right. Nick saw it first. “Is that the place,” he gestured?

“Nah, that’s the old wall” was Klap’s reply. “Long ago, they had lots of really dangerous nuts here. Freddie Krueger kinda guys. So they had a containment wall in the woods to keep the loonies away from the metal fence. But when they started keeping those guys in prisons, the wall was allowed to crumble and fall. Hey, stop the truck.” Cackle put the brakes on and the truck stopped. “Look at this, guys.” Klap was shining his light on a large piece of the broken wall that had fallen to the ground. The wall had been smooth cement on both sides, and the top of it glittered like jewels. Closer inspection revealed the reason; when it was built, the top of the wall was slathered with cement, and big chunks of broken bottles were stood up in it. They formed jagged, razor-edged teeth on the top of the wall...to slice anyone who sought to crawl across them into bloody ribbons.

“Holy fuck,” was all Cackle could say.

“Madre de Dios,” whispered Nick, and crossed himself.

“What kinda crazies did they have IN this place.?” wondered Rue.

“Some bad muthers,” answered Klap. “But they’re all gone now. Just friendly nuts here nowadays. But hey...” he turned to Rue, “...you’ll get to meet some of their *BRAAAAAIIINSSSS.*” Nervous laughter filled the truck, but Rue didn’t laugh. If looks could kill, Klap would have fallen dead on the spot.

Three

The morgue was a two-story brick block with its back end snuggled close to the side of a hill. Old trees surrounded it, and the ivy that had begun to climb its side had died long ago but still hadn't fallen away entirely. Brown traces of it, like diseased veins in the skin, were dusted on its front and Western sides. The building had six boarded windows on each side, three per level. The front door, painted black, was securely fastened by a huge hasp with a massive padlock. At the Eastern side of the building was a cement ramp for trucks and ambulances and hearses to ascend, all with their respective cargoes and purposes. At the head of the ramp was a metal roll-up door. This was where the men backed their truck in and climbed out. For a few seconds the foursome stood on the cement deck, staring out into the dark woods and listening. Only the gentle summer wind in the leaves could be heard, except for the occasional semi on the highway. The woods smelled clean and alive and welcoming. Klap had stopped noticing how picturesque the estate was while doing his forced servitude here, so it didn't mean anything to him. Cackle was a city kid all his life, so it was on him that the greatest impact occurred. "Man...ain't it quiet out here," he whispered. "Just as quiet as shit."

Rue was looking into the night shadows too. He was trying to keep his imagination under control. But every puddle of moonlight through the trees was the white face of Bela Lugosi purring "Good Evening" and every shadow was the shapeless horror of "The Blob." and the wind in the leaves was the raspy, labored breathing of the demon-possessed Regan in "The Exorcist." Inside he began to wonder if he should try watching things like "Fried Green Tomatoes" instead of the movies he had selected in the past.

Nick bent to his task with his prybar, and in moments the old mechanism gave up the ghost. With slight, grinding protestations, the door slid upwards. Turning on their flashlights, the men entered. The room they found was unremarkable and nearly empty. An old stretcher, its canvas slightly rotted and nibbled by mice, stood leaning against one wall. A large firehose hung from its hook, one end still attached to its spigot. The room had two tables, each one just the right size to lay a body on. Other than that the only thing they found was a thin layer of dust and the heavy smell of mold. With each step through the room their feet raised puffs of powder as they progressed towards a door. "Charming," commented Cackle.

What was that? No, not the wasps, or the birds, or the mice in the floorboards. Something else...something almost alien and forgotten. Listen.

The door opened into a larger room, apparently used for records. Old steel filing cabinets lay scattered on the floor. Drawers hanging open and empty, they lay like a child's discarded blocks. Whatever documents they had held had been gone for years. Two doors, one to the left and one ahead, stood stark in the flash beams. The one on the left was closed, but the other was open. Nick nudged Klap and said "Well, Homes, you're the expert on this place. Where do we go first?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find any plans on this place. We'll split up. Nick, you and I will go there, and you guys take that one." The bright spot of his flash pointed the way to the left door.

When Nick and Klap entered the next room they found that it was the front of the building and had been used as an office. A wooden desk sat to one side, its polished veneer ruined by the years of dust. Two wooden office chairs rested before the desk, one on its feet and one on its back. A closed door was set in the right-hand wall. A framed painting hung on a wall, its colors muted and frosted with dust. A broken coffee mug lay on the floor. Spiderwebs hung from the corners and the overhead light fixture, hanging crazily on its chain. Klap went to check the painting while Nick began to rifle the desk. The drawers were mostly empty...stubs of pencils, a few pennies, an old rubber stamp. When he opened the center drawer he uncovered a nest of mice who scattered into the shadows. Nick started at the surprise, and hurled the rubber stamp after one of the fleeing rodents with an oath in Spanish.

Again...not mistaken. Check the Children... Must protect the Children. Violence. Fear. Anger. They bring harm and pain. They bring the Straps and the Needles. They carry the Electrodes and the Jacket to hurt and sting and control. Hide, Children...don't let them see you.

Cackle and Rue pushed the door open, which was not so easy. The hinges had rusted badly and it took Rue's strength to open it wide enough to pass. Cold, damp air floated out of the opened portal, stinking and fetid with moisture and old dirt. Behind the door was a set of wooden stairs, which led downwards into a dark cellar. "I guess we're expected to go down there, huh?" asked Rue. He didn't realize it, but he was whispering as though he were in a church.

"No, stupid, we're supposed to just stand here acting like scared little girls until we take fuckin' root" replied Cackle. His voice dripped with sarcasm, but it was hard to tell. He was whispering too. He played his light beam down the stairs to the gray cement floor. "C'mon, wuss...watch your step." Cackle grabbed Rue's shoulder and nudged him forward through the door.

No...NO. HIDE. THEY ARE COMING TO HURT YOU!

"Did you hear something?" asked Nick. "Like somebody whispering?"

"Shut up, man. You'll give us both the weards."

"No, I'm not fooling around, Klap. I thought I heard somebody say something."

"It's just your imagination. Either that, or Frankenstein's in the other room asking to borrow a wrench to tighten his neck."

"Yeah, guess you're right" Nick agreed. He patted the metal bulge in his pocket for reassurance. The weight of the pistol didn't make him feel better. "There's nothing in here. Let's check the rest of the rooms." They moved to the door, only to find it locked.

Klap chuckled. Pointing to a sign on the door he smiled at Nick. "No Admittance," he read aloud. "Guess they mean it."

Nick stepped back and growled “Fuck this shit,” raised his booted foot and kicked the door in. It crashed against its backwall with a booming thud that echoed through the old building.

*NO. NO. CHILDREN, YOU ARE IN DANGER. THEY HAVE RETURNED.
HIDE. DON'T LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE HERE.*

Klap and Nick stepped through the door, their lights searching through the darkness. Silvery things glittered dully in the shadows. Stainless steel gurneys and tables met their eyes. Shelves of surgical instruments lined one wall. The two men glanced at each other and grinned.

In the cellar, Rue and Cackle were examining a collection of cheap caskets. Designed to be used to transport the indigent dead to whatever potter's field awaited them, they were unpolished, coarse things. The hospital had not seen the need to spend good money on a box to hold penniless madmen as they got the first peace they'd known in so long. The boxes were very old and the wood was moldy and rotting from the dampness of the cellar. “Don't think Nick's undertaker friend is going to be interested in these, man” complained Cackle. “But might be cool to get one for the party. Help me find the best one so...where'd ya go?”

Rue was standing at the far end of the cellar. This area was separated by drawn curtains, and he had opened the mouldering material enough to look inside. Now, he just stood there, silently staring at what he had found.

Cackle stepped up to him. “What'd ya find, man...Dracula's coffin?” Then, he too was staring.

QUIET, Children. Be quiet...and they will go away.

Behind the curtain, sturdy metal shelves were attached to the wall. Standing dusty watch on these were large glass jars full of fluid. Resting in the fluid lay grayish, convoluted blobs; human brains. The two men looked at each other and Cackle grinned. “Jackpot.”

Klap and Nick were sorting through the surgical devices on the shelves. Some scalpels were without blades, but otherwise everything seemed intact. Dusty, traces of reddish rust in some spots, but still might be of value to unscrupulous persons. So they gathered handfuls of the instruments and began to dump them into metal trays they had found in cupboards. “Man, this stuff is gonna be worth bucks,” Klap chortled. “Wonder if any of it was used at the end,” he mused as he picked up a small bone saw.

“Some of these might be antiques,” Nick said. “Have to check 'em out before we sell. Might get more from 'em if we go to a collector or something.”

“People collect weird shit like this?”

“You wouldn't believe what can be in a collection. Things get shoved into attics and basements and closets and boxes and shit for years, then one day somebody opens the box and

says ‘wow, look at what’s in here’ and the stuff is brought out again. Some things folks collect are really weird, man...really, really weird.” Considering this, Klap secretly slid a large, rusty scalpel into his inner jacket pocket, reminding himself to be careful of the sharp blade.

Shhhhh...they don’t know. Be still, be still and quiet like little mice. Shhhh...

“Holy shit,” Rue breathed. He was still staring at the large glass jars. Cackle moved past him towards the containers, dusting their shiny surfaces off and reading the labels. “Don’t touch ‘em, Cack.”

“Don’t be such a baby, asswad.” He turned to look at Rue, gesturing in exasperation. “They are dead, dummy...D-E-A-D, DEAD! They can’t hear us, see us, or kick us in the nuts. Now will you get OFF this shit before I have to smack ya one?”

“But it’s like dissin’ the dead, man? You wouldn’t want somebody messin’ with your brain after you’re dead, would ya?”

“IF I’M DEAD, I WOULDN’T GIVE A FUCK, MORON!” Cackle was losing his temper very rapidly. “All these are good for now is our party. Now shut your yap and gimme a hand with ‘em.” So saying, he turned back to the jars and grabbed one in his arms. Looking down at it, he could make out the hand-lettered label stuck on the side of the container. “Rudolph C. Haynes; born January 4, 1870; died August 10, 1921. Diagnosis: lunacy with violence. Wow, Rue...this guy was a winner. Bet he was one of the guys they built that wall out there for. Wonder if he ever killed anybody.” He handed that jar to Rue, then grabbed two more. He glanced at the labels, noting that one identified the brain’s former owner as a woman. “Shit, man...says here that this crazy bitch killed her husband and kids with an ax. Now that is ONE woman you do NOT cheat on.” He grinned.

“Shut up, Cack. C’mon, let’s take these to Klap and Nick. I wanta get the hell out of here.” The two men moved towards the stairway.

NO. NO. STOP. NOT MY CHILDREN!

Nick was using a surgical instrument in an effort to pry open the rusted-shut door that they believed led upstairs. It was not going well. The instrument was too short for much leverage, and the hinges had rusted pretty much solid. Klap wasn’t watching the dark-eyed man’s efforts, being too busy searching the drawers of a cabinet against one wall. So, he was startled when he heard Nick suddenly spit, “Aaah, Jesus, Mary and Joseph and a goddam donkey! That hurts!” He turned to find Nick clutching his hand tightly, crimson starting to ooze between the fingers.

“You all right, man?” Klap asked.

“No, I’m not all right, stupid. Damned thing snapped and cut my fuckin’ finger open. Probably got looney germs all over it. Gonna need a goddamn tetanus shot now. Fuck!” He threw the piece of retractor he still held into the gloom. “Fuck,” he repeated.

Cackle and Rue made their way through the dusty rooms, seeking to rejoin their comrades. Cackle was full of excitement as he carried two brain jars in his arms. He was thinking about the fun he was going to have spooking the girls at their party with the cold, dead blobs. Rue was much less jovial. He was so nervous that he felt sick in his stomach. Where the cold jar was touching his bare skin he felt like it was crawling against the glass. The heavy, sloshing mass he held repulsed him terribly, and if he hadn't been afraid of being a coward before his peers he'd have just chucked the whole hideous mess and run for the outside world where people were sane and kept their brains in their skulls where they belonged. But he wasn't going to give in and break, not in front of his friends. So he followed Cackle through the rooms, past the cobwebs and boarded windows and dust, as they sought the others.

Cackle stepped towards Klap, carrying his macabre booty like a proud papa with his new twin sons in his arms. "Hey, looka what WE found," he chuckled.

"Good job," replied Nick. "Now put 'em down and come here and help me with this door." He had pulled a kerchief from his pocket and was wrapping it around his injured hand. Cackle placed his jars on one of the wheeled tables in the center of the small room and signaled to Rue.

"Hey, muscles...see can ya get that door open." He took the jars from Rue's hands and stepped aside so the big man could get to the closed door.

"Can't we just go," Rue asked. "We got some stuff already, so let's get out of here."

"Check it out...he's scared," jeered Klap. "Man, Rue, you are such a fuckin' pussy. How the fuck did I ever get hooked up with a wimp-ass shit like you?"

Rue's face grew darker in the shadowed room. His jaw set hard, and his fingers curled into fists. "Shut up, Klap. Just shut the fuck up."

Most people, faced with a big, heavily muscled man like Rue being mad at them, would comply with his demands. But Klap had known Rue for a long time. He knew the big man was not the violent sort. "Fuck you, asshole. You AND your mama. If you're gonna be a big scared shitbag then you can just get the hell out and go, okay? But stop bullshitting us. Now are you gonna open that door or not?"

But Rue didn't calm down. His nerves were stretched so tightly that he was teetering on a dangerous edge. He'd had enough of Klap. There would be no backdown tonight. His eyes were narrowing and he raised one fist in threat. "I'm gonna enjoy busting you up, Klap." He took a step towards the smaller man with determined anger, but was stopped by Nick aiming his pistol at the two of them.

"Enough, you two. We got work to do and you're not fucking this up for me. You wanna fight, you wait until we're outta here and safe at home. Then you can bite each other's cocks off for all I care. But now, we only got a few hours and there's more to see of this place.

Now, c'mon and help me with this fuckin' door." So saying, he lowered the pistol, noting how the combatant's eyes followed its short barrel. Cackle's eyes were wide with admiration.

Rue was silent, glaring at Klap with undisguised venom, but his hands uncurled and he stepped to the big door. Nick got out of his way, and the larger man grasped the doorknob and turned. It went a bit, then stopped. Rust and age had frozen its gearworks. Using both hands, Rue gripped the knob and twisted, gradually increasing the torque. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the old lock groaned and broke. As he pulled, the hinges ground and small clouds of rust puffed out, but the door slowly opened. Revealed was a flight of stairs leading upwards from a landing, and on the other side of the landing was another door. Nick stepped in and tried the other door. It was unlocked and only resisted slightly when he pushed. His flashlight brightened the room, chasing the shadows away. The room was empty except for a small pile of rubbish and an old pushbroom lying on the floor. "C'mon," he said, motioning to the others, "let's go up and look around." Then he started up the stairs.

Cackle grinned and chased upstairs after his hero, making the characteristic giggle which had earned him his name (actually, his given name was Vivien Wastlestein, but anybody who dared utter it aloud tended to find their tires slashed later on), looking forward to more treasures. Rue was about to follow them, but Klap brusquely shouldered him out of the way and started through the door. That was all that was required for their disagreement to flare-up again.

Klap never saw the punch coming. The big fist shot up out of the shadows and caught him just under the breastbone. His breath blew out in a rush, taking his ability to react with it. He doubled over and Rue brought his knee up under the smaller man's face hard, smashing the nose and splitting the lips. Klap staggered backwards, stumbling and crashing into one of the tables. It rocked dangerously, threatening to dump its precariously placed jars. Klap stumbled and fell, knocking the table over as well. Four glass jars

NO.

met the dusty wooden floor

NO.

and shattered.

MY CHILDREN!

From upstairs, Nick was shouting down "What the hell was that noise" and Rue was advancing on Klap rumbling "Get up you fucking cunt so I can knock you down again," when the building shook. Not a big swaying motion like an earthquake would cause, but the same vibrations that run down the back of a dog when it wakes, or the slight tremble of a wasp's wings just before it takes flight.

Waken, my children. You are in great danger. Rise and rally and defend yourselves. Protect yourselves from the Masters of Pain. The Monsters are upon us again! Devils! Demons!

Nick and Cackle clattered down the stairs and found a strange sight. Klap was doing a crazed pantomime on the floor. He was sitting up and swatting at the air with one arm and trying to cover his face with the other, like a man who has stumbled into a swarm of wasps. Rue stood, staring at him in stunned, open-mouthed amazement, wondering if his attack had unhinged the man's mind. Klap's seizures became more frenzied, now he was swatting the air with both hands and grunting with the exertion. He fell on his side, his knees drawn up to his chest. His bladder let go and his bowels emptied. He screamed...a long, shrill, agonized wail of pain and fear.

Cackle was the first to move. He grabbed Rue by one heavy arm and shouted, "What'd you do to him, man...what'd you fuckin' do!"

MINE.

Rue's eyes were locked on the writhing figure on the floor. "I...I just hit him," he croaked. "I didn't...he..." but the rest was lost in Klap's voice as it broke into squeaky, gibbering laughter. Cold fingers skittered up the spines of the three men as he giggled. The sound was distinctly unlike Klap's normal laughter...in fact, it was highly feminine.

MINE.

Nick had never crossed himself quite so earnestly as he did when Klap began to bark like a dog. But it wasn't until the crazed thief tore bloody gouges down his own cheeks with his scraping fingernails that the dark man began to pray aloud, his brown eyes still staring at the horror before him.

MINE.

"He's wackin', man," Cackle shouted. "Grab him and hold him down!"

MINE.

"Fuck that shit, man...fuck ALL this shit!" gasped Rue. He then turned and bolted for the door. But Nick stopped him before he could leave the room.

MINE.

"No," said Nick. "We gotta get him to the truck, and you're the guy that throws barbells around. C'mon, help us with him." Rue was scared white, but he allowed Nick's calm to influence him to turn back.

MINE.

As they approached the gibbering man the trio moved as carefully as if they were approaching a live bomb. By now, Klap was sitting on his rear, arms wrapped around his drawn-up knees, head buried in the basket his limbs were forming. He was rocking forward and talking to himself in gibberish. They were just within arm's reach when Klap's head snapped erect.

They stopped, startled and horrified, at the face they beheld. Lips pulled back in a rictus of hatred and fear, the eyes wild and haunted, pink-streaked ivory bone showing through the ragged tears in the boy's skin, streamers of blood running down onto his throat, and the whole visage constantly changing...twisting and writhing like snakes. Almost too fast to see, the face ran through emotions, one after the other. First it was afraid, with stark staring eyes and slack, trembling lips. Then in a flash it would become jubilant, smiling and laughing maniacally. Then it was suddenly sullen, with downcast eyes and a frown like a petulant child, before breaking into hysterical sobbing, and then afraid once more. The images flashed past like frames in a movie, one breaking into another with lightning rapidity.

Then the voices began. Each face had a voice, and they appeared long enough to make a quick sound, and then receded again as the torn and bloody face changed once more. The sounds were occasionally intelligible, and they were all different. The sullen face had a deep, baritone voice and the sadly sobbing one spoke with a definite southern accent. The fearful face whispered like a child, and the laughing voice spoke in the high clear tone of a young woman.

The three conspirators stood, huddled together in fear and shock, staring at their compatriot who crouched on the wooden floor, surrounded by spots of blood. They were immobile for several seconds, until the female voice addressed them. It gasped, "Keep back," and then collapsed into its wild laughter.

Rue gained his voice first. "Klap," he croaked, "I'm sorry, man...I didn't mean to..." but the southern voice cut him off with a low, gurgling moan of heart-wrenching despair that chilled their blood. Then the fearful face reappeared and its terrified eyes focused on the three in fragile recognition.

Klap's arms crossed over his head, as though he were trying to ward off a club, and the southern voice wept, "no...no hurt Perry...Perry be good...no hurt Perry," and then the sad face with the deep voice resurfaced. Klap's arms fell to his sides, and he climbed to his feet. His head was bowed and he stood loosely, like a man whose spirit has been broken.

"Gone. He's gone and gone and gone and gone..." he gabbled. Then, for just a moment, the face cleared, and they were staring at the man they knew as Klap.

"Help...me," he rasped, and then the torn face broke into that lunatic giggling grin again.

Cackle's brow wrinkled as the thought hit him. It wasn't clear for a moment, then he dashed around the flipped table and headed towards the shards of glass and puddle of preservative fluid and still, cold brains lying on the wooden floor. He began searching through the busted, silvery glass while Klap raved on.

"What the fuck are you DOIN', man?" shouted Nick. "Get back here and help us get him to the truck." But Cackle wasn't listening.

"Wait a minute, man...I think I can find it...YEAH!" He stood up, holding a shiny shard before his flashlight. "Look here, man...he said 'Perry be good.' Perry is the name of the guy this brain was in."

“What the fuck you mean, man? Why is Klap talking like a dead guy’s brain?”

“Sweet Jesus,” Nick whispered as the truth dawned on him. “Klap...he’s possessed or somethin’. That what you mean?”

“Fuckin’ A, man,” Cackle answered.

“Oh, come on, Cackle...that’s bullshit.” Rue said it, almost believing it himself.

Then a new voice asserted itself from their stricken friend. It was a horrid voice, not like a voice at all. It sounded like a cold, damp wind blowing across a frozen lake; it echoed like a whisper in a mineshaft; and though it was a woman’s voice, it was deep and strong like a man’s. “You will leave my children alone,” it rumbled. “You will not hurt them again. Now, get out. Go away or you will die.” And, as if to punctuate the threat, the old morgue shivered around them.

Three pairs of eyes looked around nervously as dust sifted down from the ceiling above them. The men were all scared, but only Rue showed it. He was pale and his hands were trembling slightly. “This is crazy, man,” he murmured. “Klap...you’re sayin’ he’s possessed? No fuckin’ way.”

“Yeah, that’s it, I think,” replied Cackle. “Holy shit...”

“I said go away!” screamed Klap, and this time when the building shook panes of glass in the boarded windows cracked.

“Fuck this, man!” spat Rue. “Fuck all this goddam shit!” and then he was spinning on his heel and running for the door.

“Rue!” Nick called after the big man to stop, but Rue had had a belly-full of things that go bump in the night.

The high-pitched voice was giggling hysterically. “Gone-gone-gone-gone. Gone and goodbye.” Then another voice, the childish one, was in control and Klap began to dance an awkward jig. It was a parody of grace, like a marionette whose strings have tangled on the puppet master’s fingers. From the darkness came the faint grinding noise of Rue opening the dock door and leaping into the night.

Cackle turned to his idol, his eyes alive with fearful questions. “What do we do now, Nick? How we gonna help Klap?” It was while the two men were concentrating on each other

NOW.

KILL HIM.

KILL THE MONSTERS!

that Klap yanked from his pocket the scalpel he’d stolen earlier and charged at Cackle. The movement was completely unexpected and before Cackle or Nick could react, Klap was slamming into the skinny boy. The two went down in a heap, raising a choking cloud of dust.

Cackle's flashlight hit the floor and went out. Nick was blinded and coughing from the dust, but he waved his light frantically, trying to see. He could hear the shrill childish laughter of the possessed Klap, and the grunting exertion of Cackle trying to fight back, the sounds of struggle...and the wet, sucking sound of flesh being cut. A scream in the cloud and suddenly the musty-smelling fog was undercut with a new smell -- the hot copper smell of blood. "Christ, oh Christ, Nick...(oof)...Nick, Jesus!" More sounds of struggle and impact.

Nick pulled his gun, waving it in a short arc in the general direction of the scuffle sounds. If he could see, he might have fired, but the cloud was only starting to dissipate. "Stop it, both of you," he shouted, but his voice held as much fear as it did authority. For a man who was no stranger to street fights, Nick was scared. He couldn't see where the threat crouched, ready to spring at him, and his nerves were stretched to the limit by the uncertainty. "Mother of God," he whispered, "protect me."

By now the dust was clearing slightly, and before him a silhouette appeared in the murk. He saw Klap, crouched low with his head down, ready to leap onto him as he had done to Cackle. Before the boy could react, Nick swung the revolver up and fired. The sound was deafening in the room, and the figure's head suddenly snapped to one side. The boy collapsed dead on the floor, and as Nick's light struck the prone figure he realized the truth. The dead man was not Klap. It was Cackle, the bullet hole in his skull plainly visible, the surrounding hair spattered with gore. For a moment, Nick stared uncomprehendingly at the body. Then the primitive instinct in his gut reminded him...Klap was still out there in the shadows.

Nick's head snapped up, his eyes darting madly in the gloom. Klap was gone. There was the body, the furnishings, overturned gurney, broken jars with brains drying on the floor...but no Klap. Nick stood for a few moments, considering his options, then he decided to cut his losses and beat it. He took off for the door like the proverbial bat out of hell, and would have made it if Klap's arm hadn't shot out from behind the gurney and tripped him.

Nick sprawled onto the floor with a thud, the wind *whoofing* out of his lungs and his pistol skittering across the floor into the shadows. More choking dust billowed up around him. He only had time to turn over onto his back before Klap was on him. Klap straddled Nick like a horse, his weight compressing the man's ribs. He held the scalpel high, his eyes wide and manic and his face a hideous, gleeful grin. Giggling shrilly, he stabbed at Nick, and the blade bit into the prone man's raised forearm. Nick wrenched his arm sideways, yanking the scalpel out of Klap's hand. The shiny instrument popped free of the wound and spun away through the dark. Suddenly disarmed, the possessed Klap's personality changed again. Another voice surfaced, another face appeared. "Noooo," it wailed. "No hurt! No hurt!" Then Klap fell off Nick's body and curled into a fetal position on the dusty floor. Shaking piteously, it wept and sobbed in fear, "Perry be good. No hurt Perry. No...no..." Trembling, his nerves jangling in him, Nick climbed to his feet, staring at the terrified man lying on the floor before him in the beam of his heavy metal flashlight.

"YOU CRAZY MUTHAFUCKER!" screamed Nick. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TRYING TO DO!" Then his English left him and he continued to curse Klap in a hybrid mix of Spanish and Latin, until the prone man suddenly rolled over and faced him. The frightened Perry was gone, leaving another personality at the fore. But this one did not rant in lunacy; instead, it

glared at Nick with a cold and furious hatred. The torn face leered at him like a ruined Jack-o-Lantern, blood still dripping from the rips in the skin.

“You still hurt and kill, even your own, now. Monsters...DEVILS! For all this time I have held them safe in my heart, nursed away their pain and misery. Now you return to take them away from me, to hurt them again. This will not happen. I will not PERMIT IT!” The final words were punctuated by the old building twisting at the joints. Like a huge cat stretching after a nap, it actually flexed all over. Glass in the boarded-over windows suddenly cracked into crystalline cobwebs and small chunks of plaster fell like snowflakes from the ceiling, sticking in Nick’s wavy, black hair. His eyes widened in fearful confusion as the room around him swelled with a shudder. Seeing his reaction, the spirit that possessed Klap smiled broadly. “We were happy here. You will not ruin that for us.”

Nick was starting to back away from the wild-eyed creature that crouched on the floor before him. He brandished his flashlight like a short club, holding his left hand out defensively before him. “You keep back,” he warned. “Just keep back or I’ll split your fuckin’ head, man. By Christ, I will!” But he was scared so badly that his hands shook. His eyes tried to watch Klap while still searching the shadows for his lost pistol. The room reeked of dust and blood and shit and age, but now Nick could smell something else—the tangy, subtle odor of his own fear, oozing out of his skin with his sweat.

Klap stood up, then held out his hand parallel to the floor, and with a cracking sound, a plank from the wooden floor at his feet began to wrench itself free. One end at a time, it peeled itself from the floor as if lifted by ghostly hands, finally snapping free entirely before rising to Klap’s outstretched hand. Shiny nails glimmered eerily, looking like icicles hanging from one end of the broken board. Klap grabbed the board from the air, hoisting it to his shoulder like a ball-bat. “You are evil...you are pain...you hurt and kill and break,” Klap hissed in the female voice. “But you will not hurt us again.” With that, he took a step towards Nick and raised the board.

Nick had been in more street fights than he could recall, and his training served him well. Taking the initiative, he moved fast. Lowering his head, he charged forward like a pro linebacker. Catching Klap completely by surprise, his shoulder plowed into the lighter man’s gut like a cannonball. His charge lifted Klap off his feet and the two thudded to the floor. The impact knocked the wind out of Klap, and when they hit Klap’s grip loosened and his board bounced free. The two men struggled and wrestled until Nick got Klap by the throat. Teeth gritted, he throttled the younger man, strangling him desperately. But Klap would not die. He kept kicking and scratching at Nick, although he was weakening. In the back of the darker man’s mind a voice cheered that he was winning, was going to survive after all. But then the morgue moved again. This time the glass in the windows shattered, much of it falling from its old, leaded framework. Sparkling like diamonds, shards tinkled to the floor...except for one foot-long dagger of glass that detached from a window frame and flew like a well-aimed arrow into Nick’s left eye. The razor-edged blade punched through the back of the man’s skull, and Nick fell to one side. He twitched in his death-throes, but was silent as he died.

Klap slowly got to his feet, staring down at the cooling body before him. Then he located the pistol and pocketed that. He walked quietly among the carnage and then gathered up the brains from the floor. Cradling them lovingly in his arms, he carried them down to the cellar and

gently placed them into jars with other brains, lowering them into the watery preservative liquids as though placing infants in a bath. He gently kissed each jar, whispering sweet and calming things to the shiny glass cylinders. As he did so, the four personalities Klap held slipped slowly home into the gnarled balls of flesh they knew so well. When the last one was returned, the fifth entity still controlled Klap as he sat down on the damp floor and began to tremble in concentration. Outside the building the bricks of the walls began to shift and flow. Finally, a rift opened in the bricks and they opened like a huge mouth. The pickup truck parked beside the morgue was drawn into the newly formed maw where it came to rest in the dank cellar of the building. Then the bricks flowed again and the walls resumed their former appearance.

Klap closed his eyes, and inside his head a vision appeared. Suddenly, he was looking out the upper windows of the old building just as though he was actually standing there. In his mind he saw Rue as he stumbled through the darkened grounds seeking a way out. Still sick with fear and out of breath, the big man stopped, leaning against the old broken wall. Klap's face grimaced once, and before Rue could draw a breath to scream more of the stone wall collapsed on him, driving its jagged, glass talons into his body and crushing him beneath its lethal weight. He was dead before the thudding echoes were lost among the whispering trees.

Klap's torn face smiled contentedly. "Now, no one will come," he whispered in that cold, dead voice. "No one will be told about us, and we will be safe. Rest, my children. Sleep and dream of beautiful things again. Peace and quiet and gentle darkness will return to us now. The devils are gone. Sleep...sleep." And as her children drifted back into their long rest, she reached into Klap's pocket and drew the pistol, placed the barrel in his mouth and blew a hole through his skull.

Epilogue

The old building stood, a silent monument to the sorrowful past. In the darkness it dozed, its residents at peace once more. Even the spirit of the place...the breath and heartbeat and consciousness of the brick and stone and wood...lay in quiet repose, its many charges held lovingly to its breast like treasured children. The moon swam on its star-speckled course above, and the small night creatures that lived among the trees scampered on their rounds. All was still again. But where the moon's pale light filtered down through the leaves and shone on the old morgue's brick sides a sharp-eyed observer might have noted, if they were careful, just the slightest movement of the stone. A faint, barely-perceptible flexing...almost as though the building were breathing, like a person asleep.

End