

ZOMBIE NIGHTS

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Zero

Dave Connor was only thirty two years old when he unexpectedly passed away. He was still only thirty two when he even more unexpectedly undied. At first he couldn't remember how he'd ended up in that shallow grave; he just knew it was hell to claw his way out, and that the taste of its dirt would remain in his mouth for the rest of his time on this earth.

He felt the cold more than anything. That and the darkness and the worms crawling across his face. There wasn't exactly the thought of "I've got to get out of here". There was the action, a sudden panic surged within him and the struggle to move his arms which were pinned by his side. He could only wiggle them at first; pushing out as hard as he could he felt his elbows grab a little space, and his fingers stretch until he could curl them just a bit. It was all he needed. Bit by bit he cleared enough room to clear a little more. Now kicking and punching and scratching the wet clammy dirt, feeling every instant as if he would choke on the grains that poured into his mouth and into his nose, filling his eyes and his ears until suddenly, air breaking free; the cold night air with a sprinkle of rain coming down. He was out.

It was almost as dark above ground as it had been below. Foggy drizzle dripped from the trees and he had no idea where he was. A forest it seemed. He sat on wet grass by the remains of his tomb and spat out the dirt and wiped futilely at the clothes which would never get clean. There was mud in his hair and blood on his face and his hands. On his side was a hole in his shirt that led to a hole in his stomach. The bleeding had stopped and the mess was congealed, gooey with puss. He didn't feel pain.

He decided to get up and walk. He didn't care which way he went. He was lost anyway. If there was a path, he didn't notice. He just walked, through the trees, over rocks, by a stream, over a small wooden bridge. There were trail signs posted at random, but he didn't bother to read them or follow. It registered vaguely that he must be in some kind of park. That meant there were people somewhere. That meant he ought to get out before it got light. None of that made any sense, but it is what he thought. It was instinct.

But he didn't make it out right away. He could sense that the dawn was arriving, so he looked for a cave, or some bushes in which he could hide. He found an old half burned out tree that would do. He hunkered down in it, and waited. Day came. Day lasted awhile. He kept his eyes open and noticed some things. He noticed he never got hungry. He never got thirsty. He never got tired, or bored. He had

no desires. No physical urging. It was all very new and he felt that it was and there was a certain satisfaction, as if patience was something he'd never achieved until now.

He had leftover instincts as well. He put a thumb to his wrist and could feel a faint pulse. He noticed his lungs weren't filling with air. He was breathing but not with his mouth or his nose. It seemed his whole body was breath, that each pore in his skin absorbed air and ejected it too. This soaking in of the atmosphere was pushing the blood through his veins, and into his brain. He knew what things were. Trees, for example, and sky. He watched animals go through their motions, birds in their frenzy at daybreak. The squirrels, racing and chasing. Insects buzzing. Bees humming. The rain stopped and the sky became blue, with some clouds. He waited and watched for the sun to go down, and followed its direction to find out where he was. When it grew dark again he followed it west.

He journeyed as straight as he could, ever west. To not go in circles was his most basic plan. He thought that at least he would get somewhere else, out of the woods, and then ... and then, next. He traveled for hours, occasionally stumbling over rocks and roots but for the most time getting along fine and taking it slow, and sometime, late at night, he arrived at the edge of the woods. There he stood on a hill, looking down at the lights of a town he knew well. He even remembered its name, Spring Hill Lake.

One

He was standing at the edge of Fulsom Park, a semi-public woodlands situated on a bluff above the city, which lay in a valley and lined the banks of the meandering Wetford river. In the distance he could make out the lights of Sea Dragons stadium, a brand new structure which was rumored to be mysteriously haunted. It marked the northern end of the city. Closer to him, the half dozen or so tallish buildings which boasted downtown. Even closer, the old abandoned waterfront, relic of the city's early trading days.

Dave turned his attention to that neighborhood. He felt drawn toward it and began to walk down the hillside, keeping off the main park road, cutting through the rocky ridge instead, remembering vaguely the stories about wolves and their secret caves thereabouts. He felt nothing. No fear. No fatigue. No cold. He just kept walking and soon he was entering the city through the narrow alleys and side streets that surrounded the old harbor. He saw no one and was pretty sure that no one saw him either.

Along the edge of the river he came across a narrow road and turned into it. At the end he stopped before an old bungalow and considered it. It was dark inside, but as it was still before dawn, that was no surprise. He studied its peeling white paint and the concrete steps that led to the front door. As if by magnet he felt himself pulled into the lawn and up those stairs, and then he heard his hand on the door, pounding on it steadily in a slow persistent rhythm. After a few minutes, the door swung open, and a grumpy old man stood before him, rubbing his eyes.

The man looked very familiar, with his buzz cut, his long brown face, that pencil mustache, the ubiquitous Hawaiian shirt. He felt he had come to this house and knocked on its door for a good reason, though he didn't know more than that. He tried to make a smile in greeting but his face was frozen, its features wouldn't move. For the first time, he felt a little troubled. He was unable to do what he wanted to do.

The man yawned and scratched his head a bit, then said,

"Davey. What are you doing here?"

He found he couldn't speak. He had no breath to push the sounds through his mouth. It was puzzling. He had some words in his mind but they wouldn't come out.

"And so damn early too," the man said. "Well, come on in if you're coming," and he turned away and Dave saw the man's slippers carry him into the house. He followed. The man's path led into the kitchen,

where he began to fumble around with a coffee maker, while gesturing for Dave to sit down. He did. "Nothing to say?" the man asked. "Or maybe you're in one of your moods?" he chuckled to himself. When he turned to look to see the effect of these words on his visitor, he saw Dave's head suddenly lurch to the left, and then, with great effort, slowly pull back to the right. It was the best he could do. The man didn't seem to notice his difficulty, but turned back towards his preparations. For the next few minutes, Dave sat there motionless while the old man made the coffee.

It wasn't until he'd poured the cups and came to sit down that the man seemed to really be aware of Dave. What he noticed was the smell.

"Phew!" he blurted out and, gagging, backed away, spilling some of the hot liquid on his arm and cursing about that.

"You stink, man!" he continued. "I mean, really. Ever take a bath or anything? Where've you been?"

Again, there was no answer from his guest, who tried to shrug or make any expression with his face to indicate some kind of communication. The fact was, he didn't know that he smelled bad. He wasn't smelling anything, even the drink in front of him.

"Got to clean you up," the man said. "Your old Uncle Ray can't deal with that stench, not this early at least". He tried to laugh it off, then he sat himself down at the far end of the table, and looked more intently at his nephew.

"Blood," he murmured. "You've been hurt, eh? I'll take a closer look in a minute, but first, the java," and he raised his cup and drank some.

"Can't do anything without my coffee," he muttered.

"Still got nothing to say?" he said a minute or two later. "It's not like you, Davey boy. Used to always have something to say. Couldn't shut you up half the time."

He gave a wink and a smile at this, but his visitor was still unable to respond. He was certainly trying. He was concentrating as hard as he could, attempting to move any facial muscle at all but it just wasn't happening. Eyebrows? Nope. Mouth? Wouldn't budge. Nose? Couldn't even crinkle it. Maybe if I could write something down, he thought, and turned his head towards the kitchen counter, while at the same time his hand jerked outward and his knuckles cracked against the side of the table.

"Looking for something, eh?" said Ray. "I wonder what. Hungry?"

Dave managed to swing his head to the left and the right again, this time a bit more controlled. He was shaking his head. Definitely. This could work.

"That's a no, I take it," Ray said, and this time Dave lifted his chin and lowered it to signal a 'yes'.

"And that's a yes," said Ray. "Now we're getting somewhere. More like twenty questions but better than nothing I guess."

After a pause he asked,

"Thirsty?"

Again Dave shook his head 'no'.

"Tired?"

Another 'no'. He jerked his hand up again and tried to make a writing motion. It was clumsy, awkward, but Uncle Ray figured it out after the third or fourth pantomimed attempt, and brought him a pencil and a piece of paper. He sat back again and watched as Dave struggled to make sensible markings. It was not coming easily and several times he had to cross out whatever he'd scribbled. He shook his head and would have sighed deeply if only he could breathe. Eventually he managed to write one word - wounded.

"Wounded?" Ray stood up. "Where? How? Let me take a look at you."

He came closer again, holding his breath this time so he wouldn't have to smell the guy. He took hold of Dave by the shoulders and turned him out from the table so he could see him entirely. Dave stretched up a bit and tried to glance down at his side to give Ray a hint, but Ray saw the gaping hole in front and was already ripping away the shirt. When he'd exposed the wound to air he gasped and had to turn away and exhale deeply.

"Holy mother of pearl," he exclaimed. "That's some wound, and hardly fresh, by the look of it. Man oh man! We've got to get you cleaned up, son. And I won't be taking any more of those shaken heads for an answer. I'm getting the tub started up right now," and he left to do what he said.

Dave followed willingly to the bathroom and tried his best to cooperate as Ray removed his clothing and helped him into a heaping hot bubble bath. Dave didn't feel it, not the water, not the heat, not the soap. He felt he'd lost all sense of all his senses except for sight and hearing. Couldn't smell, couldn't taste anything but dirt. Couldn't feel any touch. Couldn't speak. It was strange. It occurred to him that maybe he was in a coma, that all of this was just a dream. How would he know? How could he tell for sure?

Uncle Ray, the man said. My uncle? How is that? He didn't really remember him but something was very familiar; everything was. He felt at ease, without anxiety or worry. Uncle Ray was scrubbing his body, his face, his hands, his hair, the hole in his side.

"This ain't normal," Ray was saying. "Some of this junk just won't come off and that bloody wound. It won't be cleaned. I ought to know a thing or two. Haven't I been a barber now fifty years? You'd think I'd be having some idea but no. Ain't never seen nothing like this before. Wish you were talking, son. Well, maybe you're writing will get better and you can tell me what the heck is going on."

"Criminy. Look at that!" he nearly shouted and jumped back. While scrubbing Dave's face a patch of skin came clean off with the sponge, exposing the rawness beneath. Dave looked up at him with an attempt at a questioning look.

"Where you been?" Ray shook his head, as he helped Dave out of the tub, got him dried off and wrapped him up in an old worn robe.

"Still smells pretty bad," he muttered to himself, "and that wound, won't clean up at all, hardly. If I didn't know any better ..."

He paused to consider the implications of his thought. He tried to laugh it off but kept looking back at his nephew and with each glance the notion seemed less and less strange - less strange than the appearance of the young man, and the stink, and the blood, and the skin.

"It's like you were dead," he finally blurted out.

They were back in the kitchen, seated around the table once more. Dave hadn't touched his coffee. Ray had had three cups. Dave was writing once more.

'Under ground', he wrote, passing the note over to Ray, and then seizing another piece of paper and scribbling furiously.

'Dug out night'.

'In park', came the next note.

'One day', he pushed across the table.

Uncle Ray laid the notes side by side and repeated the words, then formed a sentence.

"You were in the ground. Dug yourself out. Last night. Up in the park. Fulsom Park?"

Dave nodded as best he could.

"You mean to say you were buried up there?"

Again a round of furious head bobbing. It was making sense now. After he had clawed his way out of the grave he had forgotten all about that. He had only been concerned with moving on. He had not been piecing together one moment to the next, but each moment was its own discrete reality. Now that he was sitting there, conversing in a manner, he was recalling the sequence, stringing together the facts. It could not be denied. He was dead.

"That would make you what they call a zombie," Uncle Ray shook his head in disbelief. "Or I guess you could look on the bright side. Some people might say you've been resurrected, boy. Hallelujah to that!"

Two

"I'm going to need some bacon!" Ray declared, getting up from his seat and heading to the fridge.

"I don't know what it is about bacon, but sometimes I just need it. How about you?" he asked, and turning, saw Dave shaking his head, more adeptly this time.

"Oh that's right," Ray mumbled. "Not hungry. Don't suppose you'd be wanting any human flesh or nothing?"

He smiled a bit uneasily and was reassured to see another head shake by his nephew, who was now writing again and pushed over a note that read - 'don't need food'.

"Well, that's something," Ray said, starting to fry up his breakfast. "Guess I never gave it much thought. What it'd be like, and all. Course since it's impossible!" he snorted.

"So it's pretty clear you were murdered," he announced, turning back to Dave. "Who did it?"

Dave shook his head again.

"Don't know? How can you not know? Stabbed you right in the gut, looks like to me. Must've been standing right in front of you. Maybe caught you by surprise, eh? That it?"

"Don't remember," Dave wrote and pointed at the note.

'Anything', he added.

"Anything? Huh. Must remember something. Remember me, right? My house? You got yourself here, didn't you?"

'Don't know you', Dave wrote, and then added. 'Don't know me'.

He tapped his fingers on the table impatiently as Ray was too busy wolfing down his necessary bacon and didn't see the latest note at first. He pulled it across the table and looked at it thoughtfully for a few moments while he chewed.

"But you found your way here," he murmured, and glanced up to see Dave's version of a shrug.

"Body memory, maybe," Ray theorized. "Huh. Well, what can I tell you. Name is Ray. Already told you that, didn't I? Thought so. And you, Davey, are David Connor, my little brother's boy. Your dad, Harry, may he rest in peace. More peace than you, at least."

Dave was getting used to Ray's attempts at humor, and didn't bat an eye at this one either. In fact, he rarely blinked at all, just enough to keep the eyes moist enough to function, it seemed. His whole body seemed foreign, behaving in ways he didn't expect and didn't understand. Ray was still talking.

'Must be about thirty or so by now. That'd be about right. Your dad was about your age when you were born. Your mom, remember your mom? No? Chloe Simkatki was her name. Glad to be a Connor when she married your dad. Both of them gone now, sad to say. Taken too young. Cancer, the both of them. As for you ... got no brothers, no sisters. Used to come visit here sometimes on holidays. Or I'd go

there. Yeah, that's right. You don't live here in Spring Hill, never did. Grew up in Wetford, down the river. Worked at some kind of storage warehouse last I heard. Been a few years since I've seen you, though. Not since your mother passed. I could say 'my how you've changed', heh."

None of this information seemed especially interesting to Dave. He couldn't picture his mother or his father, but he thought if he saw a photo they would both seem vaguely familiar, like Uncle Ray. It didn't matter to him, though. The names and places brought back no concrete associations in his mind. He was aware of an increasing sense of distress, though, and realized, when he glanced up, that it was the light of the dawn peeking through the kitchen window that was causing this unease. He reached for the pencil and wrote 'light. not good'.

Uncle Ray didn't understand. It took several more notes before Dave was able to convince him to take him someplace where the light could not get in. Uncle Ray had a downstairs, a sort of converted den he'd built down there out of the garage and some storage space. There were no windows in it and Dave immediately felt better once he'd situated himself on the couch. The room had very little in it. Aside from the couch, a small table and a recliner chair, it had a television, a few books, and an old-fashioned radio kit.

Dave had brought down the pencil and paper and wrote to Ray explaining that he would like to remain in that room as long as it was daytime outside, if that was okay. Ray told him he had to go to work - he still made a regular appearance at the barbershop down by the boathouse - but he'd be back after lunch. That was all right with Dave. He had a lot to think about.

Ray did too. It wasn't every day you had a dead guy come to visit.

Three

He didn't really have to go in to work, but Ray Connor was happy to get out of that house. He was a bit worried, tell the truth. It only occurred to him now as he took the four block stroll that he might actually be in physical danger. On the one hand, he'd known Davey since the kid was a baby. On the other hand - heck, the man was a walking corpse! He'd seen enough movies to know this might not be a good thing.

Of course, he didn't have any first hand experience with such a creature, until now, and so far it seemed pretty harmless, like an outcast alien from another planet. Hardly seemed to be the same person at all and yet, in all the little ways, he was, like how he held himself when sitting, and how he still had his father's eyes. It was going to be a tough morning, he considered. By profession he was naturally a talker, and here was something he didn't know how to go about telling, or even if he should. Just before he got to the shop he decided he wouldn't say a word, but that didn't hold up five minutes under the scrutiny of his long-time business partner, Clayton Jeffries.

"Look like you seen a ghost," Clayton said, almost as soon as Ray came out of the back room with his smock on. They were known as "Ray'n'Clay" and had been for so long now they could hardly remember when it stuck. Ray'd been there first, apprenticed way back when with old man Harley when he still barely a man himself. He'd been snipping and shaving all sorts of people ever since. The neighborhood had gone through many economic and ethnic changes over those decades, each era leaving its relics behind, relics that became the regulars of the scarcely visited barbershop. Aside from all those leftovers, the only new faces were from the young rich kids who sailed their boats and yachts out onto the river.

Clay was young, by Ray's count, only in his mid-sixties thereabouts. He liked to call him 'kid', as he did now.

"Not no ghost, kid," he said. He figured now he'd tell some half-truths and see if that worked. "It's my nephew, Davey. Showed up early this morning. Been in some kind of a fight from the looks of it."

"Harry's boy?" Clay queried, knowing darn well it was. They had no secrets from each other after all that time, and knew each other's families as well or better than their own.

"That boy was always into something," Clay went on, getting up from his chair and putting the morning paper down where he'd been sitting. He paced a bit across the front door, peering out to see if any customers might show. He knew there wouldn't be any, at least not for half an hour, and then it would only be Richard, who'd come for his special ninety cent shave, as he did every Tuesday whether he needed it or not.

"He's a good boy," Ray countered, pulling out the broom and sweeping at random illusions of dust on the floor. The place was spotless. The men spoke slowly, took turns going about their incoherent and unnecessary routines. It was a living, barely. If it weren't for social security and having paid off that house a long time since, well, Ray didn't even want to think about that. Now that he did, though, he had to wonder how long Davey was going to stay, and how much it was going to cost him.

'At least the kid don't eat or drink', he said to himself. 'That'll make it cheap. All he really needs, as far as I can tell, is some clothes. Can't keep wearing that bloody outfit. Pants, shoes, jacket, shirt. Underwear, socks ought to do it', and he figured in his head how much all that might cost and when he would get around to it. Shame was that Davey was a good six inches taller and maybe fifty pounds heavier than Ray, so he couldn't wear any of his stuff.

"So's the kid sticking around?" Clay asked. "He at your place?"

"Yeah," Ray nodded. "Don't know how long. Long as he needs to, I guess. Neither me or him's got no other family, you know. Got to take care of your own."

"Got to," Clay agreed. "Like my Willa. Keeps coming back, like a wooden nickel."

He laughed and then added,

"Is that right? A wooden nickel that keeps turning up?"

"Think it's a bad penny," Ray told him, and Clay nodded and said,

"A bad penny. Should've named her Penny in the first place. Then it'd make some sense at least."

"She ain't left yet?" Ray inquired.

"Nope. Says the husband's bound to beat her up again, she shows her face. Says 'papa I can stay right?' trying to make that little face she always made when she was six and begging for another ice cream. I say course so darling, even though she's more than forty now."

"Kid will always be a kid," Ray said,

"That Davey was a wild one," Clayton reminded him. "Remember that time he showed up in that Mustang with that gang of hoodlums?"

"Wasn't no gang," Ray said. "Just joy riding is all."

"It was too a gang," Clay disagreed. "Some of them later got popped for robbing a bank. Two of them guys it was."

"Davey said he didn't even know them."

"Davey said a lot of things," Clayton replied crossly. "How about that time he needed that three hundred dollars."

"Sure," Ray snorted. "How can I forget when you remind me all the time. Sure he lied about it. Didn't want to talk about it. Girlfriend. Abortion. Kind of thing happens to people."

"If that's really what it was," Clay replied. "I never was so sure to believe either the first lie or the second."

On that note, the ever reliable Richard walked through the door and before he even took his seat, he removed his battered fedora, straightened up his old dark purple tweed jacket, studied Clayton's face with a serious look and said,

"Always believe the second lie. Second lie's the one they're gonna stick to, so you might as well accept it."

Then, after a laugh far outsizing the humor of the statement, he coughed and sputtered and sat down in the door-side barber chair. It was Ray's turn to do the shave. They liked to alternate customers, seeing as there were so few. They hardly ever had to work at the same time anymore. Ray got busy, spreading the cloak around Richard, fastening the collar, lathering the lather, soaking the towel in the warm water, picking out his razor. While he went about this business, Richard kept on talking.

"I always prefer to come up with a good lie to begin with" he informed them. "Then I never modify. Never modify. I come home late and I'll tell Becky 'I was at the circus and caught a ride on a tiger'. She won't even bother to question my integrity, not after that. A man comes up with a good enough story, he don't ever have to worry about changing it."

"Something outrageous, huh," muttered Ray, and it occurred to him that maybe all that stuff Davey said about digging his way out of the grave, but then he remembered the wound, and the smell, and the way that part of his cheek rubbed off. It gave him shivers to think of it, but also brought in the idea that he'd have to do something about the boy's appearance. He was going to need some kind of make-up if he was ever to go out in the world again. You couldn't go around like that, with the skin falling off your face in strips. And some kind of bandage to go around the waist. Yep, he was going to have to do a little shopping.

"Crazier the better," Richard declared. "Why I'd tell my wife I was dead if I thought it would get me off the hook!"

"She might even make it so," Clay chimed in with a chuckle.

"She might at that," Richard agreed. It was all a bunch of talk, and everybody knew it. Becky, his wife, had once been Becky Jeffries - Clay's big sister - and they'd had one of the happiest and most easy-going marriages anyone had ever known. Three kids, all grown by now, and two of them with kids of their own, happy little squatters, every one.

"Davey Connor showed up last night," Clay told Richard, who glanced up at Ray. Ray was about to commence with the blade and merely nodded, casually.

"Been awhile, ain't it?" Richard asked.

"Few years," Ray said, and hushed the customer by bringing the razor to his face. Ray really didn't want to talk about it much. He wanted to get things straight in his mind first. There was too much to think about and he wasn't getting any good thinking done yet that morning. He kept up the small talk as best he could, assuring his friends that Davey was fine, nothing was wrong, that he'd come around to see them anytime now, that Ray was glad to have him, had given him the spare room for his own.

Topics soon turned to other matters, and after Richard had gone a few other customers appeared at sporadic intervals. The morning went by fairly quickly, and Ray knocked off at noon. By then he had already planned out his shopping expedition - the pharmacy, the thrift store, that should be enough. He moved slowly and considered his purchases carefully. Luckily it didn't amount to much, less than twenty dollars for a used but not too shabby wardrobe, as well as the make-up and bandages. It was going to take a few meals out of his week but he figured that was unavoidable. The kid didn't seem to have anybody else.

Four

Dave spent the day in the basement. For a long time he simply sat on the couch, staring at the small old

television perched on its rickety plant stand. The room seemed fit for nothing; the dreariness of its darkness was matched by the ugliness of the furniture and the absence of anything of interest to look at. Above the couch there had been a ground level window at one time, but it had long since been filled in with cinder blocks and roughly painted over. The front wall was a garage door that would no longer open.

He could not clearly remember this room, although he must have seen it before. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the notion that there had been family gatherings here, dull holidays perhaps, with trays and paper plates and plastic cups. Now and then he heard the echoes of voices in his mind, which he linked to the idea of his mother and his father, whose names were Ray had just told him but now he couldn't recall them. He tried harder, closing his eyes as if that would help, but only shadows came.

There was a flash of a scene with a bicycle and a man with a narrow brown tie. The face of the man was a blur but his voice was harsh and bitter. Another image came along with that, of long grass freshly cut and smelling like heaven. He concentrated but the memories were vague and came rarely. It was troubling. After awhile he stood up, approached the tv and pushed enough buttons until the thing came alive. The screen was small, perhaps eleven inches, and the display was very fuzzy but there were people on it, and voices, and Dave sat back to observe.

The people were sitting around a table and chatting, two men and three women discussing anonymous personal problems. Someone was too fat and didn't like herself. Someone was afraid to tell somebody something. Another person had trouble with her teenage daughter. Now and then the audience was shown, a chorus of random people sitting in happy judgment. The stories were obscure to Dave, and he couldn't follow the details. He noted that every one had something to complain about and was looking for reassurance. They relaxed when they got that.

The act of speaking drew his attention, and now that he was alone he felt more confident to give it a try. He wanted to say to the people on the television, 'everything is going to be all right', but all he could manage, at first, was to push out a sound.

'Uh'.

That was progress. He had made the noise through his mouth, up from his throat. He repeated the steps he had taken until he could produce, as short bursts of exhalations a series of sounds. His body was struggling and the effort was intense. He felt, for the first time since awakening, some weariness, but that faded when he made the discovery of closing his lips while forcing out the noise, making the "p" sound.

He sounded like an infant babbling but as he sat observing the people on the tv he noticed the different sounds they were making and watched their lips move and after an hour or so was able to make words come out that sounded close to what they should, and this gave him a good feeling. The exercise of speaking was also teaching the muscles around his mouth how to move again. He could change the expression on his face a little bit more. Not much, but it was something. When he saw Ray again, he would be able to communicate better.

Ray came home in the middle of the afternoon, bearing his bundles, which he proudly unpacked in the downstairs room, handing each item over to Dave while explaining its purpose and his reasoning. He helped bandage up the wound, and showed Dave how to put the clothes on. He applied a little of the make-up to Dave's cheek and all the while Dave managed to grunt and make sounds and even a few words, such as "k" for okay, "ga" for "got it," and "no" for "no" in response to Ray's questions about food and water and whether he wanted any.

Soon Dave was looking almost human. The hand-me-down clothes from the thrift store suited him well enough. His face and hands were free of blood and dirt. The patches where his skin flaked off were covered up. Ray'd even thought to pick up an old fedora hat which didn't really go with anything Dave

was wearing but covered up the spots on his head where a few clumps of hair had fallen out. Dave sat back on the couch and turned his head towards Ray and thought he wanted to say something but didn't know what that was. Ray just stood there nodding.

"I don't know what it's all about" Ray said. "You being here, coming back like you say and all. Must be for some reason but darned if I know. You got any notion?"

"No," Dave replied in a rough exhalation. He shook his head and repeated the word.

"None of my business, I suppose," Ray went on. "You're a full grown man and all. I was thinking maybe you should see a doctor. What do you think?"

"No. Doc," Dave pushed out.

"No. Poy," he continued. Ray took that to mean "no point" and agreed.

"Not much they could do for you I guess. I mean, what could they do? Check your pulse? Wait, that gives me an idea," he said, and came back closer to Dave, grabbed his wrist and held his thumb over the artery there.

"Very weak," he said after a time, "Maybe twenty pulses a minute. Hardly a thing."

"Should've got some deodorant," he continued. "I forgot how bad you smell. Almost getting used to it, though. Still, you're going to need some if you ever go anywhere. You can use mine for now. Remind me."

He let go of Dave's hand and took a step back.

"Holy mackerel!," he declared. "You ain't hardly breathing are you? I mean, are you breathing?"

He came closer again and put his face up to Dave's.

"No, I guess you're not."

He clucked his tongue and backed away again.

"Not hardly human," he concluded. "Something else again. Like you were once a man, but now you're something else, the way a caterpillar become a moth."

Ray took a seat on the other chair in the room. The television was still on, but now it was showing some news program. A man was sitting behind a desk telling incomprehensible tales about far off places where events were ostensibly occurring.

"Never had a child of my own," Ray told him. "Of course you know that, or at least you did. Married. Long time. But no kids. Now it seems I got me a grown up alien baby to look after."

Dave glanced up from the tv and tried to force his face into a smile.

"Da," he said.

Five

Over the next few days, Clayton Jeffries kept pestering Ray about when Davey'd come around to visit. He was uneasy, worried that Ray's nephew was up to no good, and might bring trouble around his old friend. Partly this was Ray's fault, for he had a history of hinting about his nephew and the sort of people he ran around with. A lot of gossip concerning the boy had rattled about the barbershop for a number of years already.

There was the matter of whether young Dave would finish high school, and after that, whether he would ever go on to college. There were stories about girlfriends and parental disapproval of same. There were a few scrapes with the law that got mentioned, and re-mentioned, even though they generally concerned people Dave had known, and not the kid himself. There were general concerns about his limited career choices, given his basic lack of smarts and qualifications. It didn't help how his

parents had passed on, medical bills chewing up what little savings they'd ever scraped together, leaving nothing at all for their son after both of them had gone. Dave had been removed from his childhood by the bank upon foreclosure.

And yet, he survived. He had stuff, even a car, and the old men in the shop spared no pains in gossiping as to how that was even possible. He had to be mixed up in something. There had to be unsavory characters. The truth was, they knew nothing about his circumstances. Even before his parents had died, his contact with his Uncle Ray and Aunt Melba had been sparse, sporadic and superficial. When Melba had gone on, Dave hadn't even bothered to come to the funeral, which had hurt Ray's feelings. The two of them were now all that was left of the family. Dave's life became a mystery to Ray, and maybe it would always remain that way.

Dave was spending his days in front of the television, practicing speech and trying to sort out the images and sounds it fed him. He made rapid improvement and by the weekend was able to talk in brief sentences, but he still didn't have much to say. As he told his uncle, it seemed to him that his very existence had only begun with that awakening underground. As to his seeking out Ray's house, it was as if his body had held on to certain memories, but these were disconnected, haphazard, and made no sense to him. He could not explain anything. He only knew that here he was, and that he was what he was, whatever that was.

At night he felt compelled to go out. As soon as the sunset completed, he felt it throughout his body, like an alarm had gone off, and his attention turned to the external world. He rose, moved up the stairs, through the front room and out the front door, down the steps and into the street. He did not feel the weather; warm or cold made no impression on him. He wore the jacket Ray had brought him, but he wore it all day and all night, without distinction. The same was true for the old felt hat. He sprayed on enough of Ray's barbershop cologne to cover up his scent, mostly.

Out in the world he followed rules he didn't think about. To avoid being seen. To stay away from light, whether streetlights or houselights. To avoid staring at things. To keep moving, to move at an even pace. To show no hesitation, no uncertainty. To walk upright, steady and calm. At any sudden movement, he would slide into the most darkness at hand, as smooth as a paranoid cat.

The first nights he stayed close to the waterfront, wandering around the abandoned warehouses, the old train depot, the empty shipyard. This area felt familiar, but the occasional truck roaring through startled him with its beams of light and clouds of exhaust. His instincts pushed him towards the hill, back up and into the park. He spent most of those times in the woods, getting to know his way around them, but for all of that exploring it didn't interest him to return to the place he'd arisen, nor would he have recognized it if he happened to stumble across it. That night was already gone. He was alert in the moment, and sometimes only the moment. In the middle of those zombie nights he was only aware of the dark and the noises around him and it felt as if nothing else had ever existed or ever would again.

The nights contrasted completely with the days; the utter lack of humanity versus the glut of it on the television screen. There he witnessed an appalling and endless scene of hustle and nerves, intensity and alarm, shrill self-importance and earnest pushiness. Perhaps if he had watched another channel, but he didn't know there was one; he saw the morning gossip shows, the local news and then the live afternoon talk shows, eight hours filled with random people and their problems.

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to make of it all. He grasped the concept of the weather forecast foremost; when they said it would rain and it rained, he took note. Nothing else seemed to be the least bit relevant to who or where he was. He figured they were talking to the wrong guy, and didn't know it. Ray had to explain to him one evening that the tv shows could be seen by anyone anywhere, not just him, and not just in that house and on that box. He lost interest after learning that, and kept the box turned off. Ray had brought home a magazine, and Dave found that more engaging. He had retained the

language but lost all context. He would have to rebuild the meanings of the world for himself.

He was becoming more at ease in the nights. He began to venture further from the home base into the city, one block at a time, and carefully. Further north from the river were more residential areas, where it was quiet and mostly dark at night. In some of the neighborhoods, many of the street lamps were broken or faint, and there were no people out on the sidewalks. Traffic was scarce as well. Then suddenly he would come upon a wider street, with shops and many cars. He shied away from those, retreating back into the quieter roads. He suspected there was some sort of a plan guiding the arrangement of things in the town, and if he only knew it he could better arrange his outings. He asked Uncle Ray about it one day, and that led to his discovery of one of the most dangerous items he had yet encountered; Ray gave him a city bus map.

Six

Dave Connor wasn't the only one wandering those streets late at night, but while his excursions were largely aimless and meandering, Cookie Marquette was on a mission. It was a mission of a lifetime. Known by various names - the Dark Hunter, the Queen of the Night Brigade, the Force - Cookie was out there almost every night, seeking and invariably finding what she sought. She was a small person, short and slight but her lean build was strong and there was no one who would sensibly mess with her. From her fresh face, sparkling black eyes, and quick movements you could place her age anywhere from fifteen to forty-five, and your highest guess would still be ten years short.

She had never been uneasy about her essential transgender nature. Born Julie, and later known as Jim, it was easier to go by Cookie, a name she'd picked up on a ship's mess hall in the Navy, than to try and determine which of her aspects you were talking to. She was fluent in both female and male as needed. She kept her black hair short, always dressed in turtleneck, jeans and boots, and sometimes wore a railway engineer's cap for hoots. Her great-grandmother had stoked a steam engine in her day, and Cookie was ever proud of it.

She was legend in Spring Hill Lake, single-handedly establishing the Homegrown Mission soup kitchen that operated out of St. Filbert's Cathedral in the heart of the old waterfront neighborhood that once had been the center of the city, but now was mostly blighted and bereft of business. From there she squeezed out pennies from the powerful, and made the most of the little she had to work with. A firm, even staunch, non-believer, her decision to ally herself with the Church stemmed from the knowledge that while politicians come and go, the Church at least abides. She could count on its commitment more than that of any other institution or individual.

She had established a small staff of professionals and a cadre of volunteers to run the day-to-day operations of the kitchen and adjacent shelter, leaving her mostly free to pursue her real calling, hunting and gathering the lost and the needy. She patrolled at night since the hidden were more active then, and were easier to locate amid the sparser background field. She knew where they were apt to go, and when, and carried a large sack across her back, stuffed with fresh-baked loaves, containers of hot soup, newly knitted scarves, socks and sweaters, pencils and paper, items she knew from practice to be likely to come in handy in her task.

She rose from an early evening nap around midnight, put together her kit, and struck out into the dark, equipped also with a flashlight she kept taped to her wrist, and a switchblade tucked inside her belt. She carried no cash but lately had been convinced by friends to lug a cellphone around in case of emergency. She had rarely come across a situation she could not handle alone, but she didn't meddle where she didn't belong. She was not the law and would intervene only to protect an innocent.

Some called her Saint Cookie; they said it with derision and she knew it. She was no angel, only doing her job, according to her calling. Other people seemed to feel compelled to climb up corporate ladders. Still others had no idea at all but worked wherever they could. Some had a passion, for teaching, for

medicine, for law. Cookie had a passion for concrete, immediate aid. It was the only thing that satisfied her. Some called her limited; she called herself 'practical'.

Cookie Marquette was something of a bloodhound at her work. When she caught the scent of her kind of prey, she hunted it down, and when she found it, she helped it if she could. It was very late one night when she first picked up a hint of Dave. It was the smell, of course, quite literally, the mixture of decaying flesh and eau de toilette. It was something entirely new to her nose and she detected it in a cold and blowsy wind. She could not tell the direction of its origin but she stopped in her tracks and sniffed, and sniffed again. It was out there, it was different, and it was on the move.

Seven

Lately he had begun to think, not just process information but to reflect on it, sift through it, put some things together. He had experienced enough of what he called 'the human world' to make some general conclusions. There was a lot of activity among them. They were very busy creatures. There was an energy, part excitement, part fear, a mixed-up sense of danger and caution, a lot of noise and lights. He was ultra-sensitive to both and tried to stay away from their sources. As he'd ventured further into the city, he'd found fewer safe places, fewer bushes, trees, empty spaces. He was more exposed out there, and found himself moving and reacting more quickly, as cars and trucks and buses roared by, as people emerged from buildings and vehicles and rushed along their way, as planes appeared overhead from nowhere, as dogs rushed out from yards and barked, baring their teeth and charging him.

The dogs were the only ones who seemed to take any notice of his presence. The pedestrians did not. They streamed past him, not more than glancing in his direction. The drivers of cars did not even do that. More than once he'd barely escaped collision. He separated out the objects in his line of sight between those that challenged and those that didn't. He had an instinct for self-preservation, but it was only instinct. There was no emotion to it. The only things he felt were ease and unease, and both only mildly.

The best thing he had found was to stand along the riverbank and watch the water slowly flow. This was something he could do for hours. It was where he was when Cookie Marquette decided to approach him. She had been keeping an eye on him the past few nights, always at a distance, always out of sight. She liked to keep track of all the people in her domain, and whenever new ones arrived, she scoped them out, sized them up, and either made her move or let them be.

This one was too intriguing. He was out there every night, all night it seemed, wandering about, doing nothing, going nowhere, never in a hurry, never with a pattern. What caught her attention was the way he'd vanish at the slightest disturbance, like a feral cat in the woods, keeping safe, and then, slowly, re-emerging when the flash and bang had passed. He reminded her of a wild horse. She had to tread lightly. She quietly crept to a spot upwind and downlight from where he stood, about twenty feet further on the path. She stood there quietly, without moving, for several minutes, until she was certain he hadn't noticed her. If he had, he would have fled. When she spoke, it was gently.

"They say the fishing's not like it used to be," she said. Dave was startled by her voice, and flinched, quickly glanced around for a tree or a bench to slip behind, but there was none. She went on right away, with the same even tone.

"Of course, nothing's like it used to be, am I right, or am I right, or am I right?," and she chuckled softly. She paused for only a few moments before continuing.

"I like to watch it go. You wonder how it never ends. Where's all the water come from anyway? Seems to go on forever, and why?"

"It's what it does," Dave spoke up. "It's what it is."

"You said a mouthful there," Cookie nodded. "I am what I am, I know that much for sure. Name's

Cookie."

Dave did not reply. He had turned to look at her, as she had turned to face him too. They were both in the dark - the other was barely more than a shadow - but there was a calmness each sensed in the other. The night felt good and slow. After a long pause, Cookie asked him what his name was. Dave paused before replying.

"Ed," he told her. "Eddie."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Eddie". She turned toward the river again for fear of scaring him off. Getting a name out of someone was often a nervous event. They might feel they had given away too much. The people she came across, all too often, had little else they possessed besides their identity. It became even more precious to them.

"I carry this big old sack around," Cookie said. "Inside it there's all sorts of things a person might need. You be needing anything, Eddie? Clothes? Food? Anything at all?"

"I'm okay," Dave replied. "I don't need".

"There's two kinds of people," Cookie went on, as if used to that kind of answer. "Them that take and them that give. I'm the kind that gives. Are you?"

"Maybe," Eddie said after thinking it over a bit. "I don't know."

"Maybe you've got a family?," she asked. "Maybe you've got a job, a place to stay? You got somewhere? Some people?"

"I have a place," he said. "I'm okay," he repeated. Cookie nodded and considered for a while. She could only take a person at their word. She could offer, but she couldn't force. At the same time, she was always on the look out for the other side, people who could help as well as people who needed help. Those were the two kinds of people she had in mind.

"If you'd like," she said, "you could find out. What kind you are, I mean. We can always use a hand."

"I don't understand," Dave told her. She was confusing him. He didn't think she was dangerous but he didn't know what she wanted, and she seemed to want something. Like all the humans, he thought, needing and wanting all the time.

"I like to go around at night," she explained, "I look for people out here, people who are hungry, people who are cold. People who need a place to go or someone to talk to. I carry all this stuff just in case. I've got sweaters, coats, shoes. I've got bread and soup. You name it, I've probably got it. You could come around with me sometime if you wanted. I could show you. Then if you wanted to could help."

"Oh," Dave said. He didn't know there were people who did that. He had seen the others and wondered. Why were they not inside their homes? Why were they huddled beneath the bridges? Why were they looking in the trash cans? He had thought that they were doing what they wanted to do. Maybe it wasn't like that.

"I don't know," Dave said, and then added, to be polite, "I will think about it."

"Do that," Cookie said. "I've got to be on my way now. It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope to see you again soon."

"You too," said Dave, and he watched as Cookie heaved up her giant sack and flung it across her back, then made her way across the grass, back onto the boulevard and down towards the city lights. He felt relieved to be alone again. The effort to talk that much had been tiring, but he also felt a longing to talk some more to that person, that she was like a path that he would like to follow.

Eight

He followed her at a distance, and she knew he was there but didn't let on. She led him to the

waterfront, where small groups gathered in makeshift shelters beneath the old abandoned docks. He watched as she pulled item after item out of her sack, and saw the smiles on the weary faces that greeted her. She had even brought little chew toys for the dogs of the homeless. She led him into the heart of the city, where she had talks with the girls on the corners, and with the boys outside the bars. She found people where he'd thought there were only bundles and rags in the alleys and the lots behind the high-rises. He became so engrossed in his pursuit that he lost all caution, he forgot to jump and hide at sudden movements, at lights and noises.

Her trail led them back to her headquarters, where he peered down inside the basement windows after she had entered, and saw the vast kitchen and the dining room in the dim light of nearly dawn. Then he returned to his uncle's house, pondering over everything he had seen. The whole day he sat in his room and thought. He had many questions. He had seen nothing like that, read about nothing like that, knew nothing about it at all. It was as if he had discovered another planet, wrapped inside of this one and only visible in the dark.

He was prepared to renew his explorations that evening, but Ray brought home an unexpected visitor. Clayton had been put off long enough. He was bound to see for himself what his partner's guest was up to, and if the price of his curiosity was a large mushroom pizza to go and a bottle of cheap chianti, it was worth it. Ray held him back until at least it was nearly night, otherwise he would have to explain why Dave would refuse to come upstairs. He was already nervous enough as it was. His nephew had been "living" with him for about two weeks, and they'd had perhaps a total of two hours conversation during all that time. At least Dave's ability to talk had improved tremendously. Ray was hoping Clayton would notice nothing too unusual, aside from the smell.

When they arrived at the house, Ray hurried ahead and hustled downstairs to prepare Dave for the intrusion and push him upstairs, while Clay served out the food they'd carried over from the joint down the street. Ray didn't need to worry about Dave's attitude, as it turned out. He was willing, even perhaps mildly positive about the unexpected event. He followed Ray back up the steps and held out his hand to Clay as he entered the kitchen.

"Glad to meet you," Dave volunteered. "Ray has told me many things about you."

"Most of them lies," Clay replied, shaking the young man's hand. "Hope you like pizza," he said. "We brought a lot."

Dave was about to reply that he actually wasn't hungry but Ray intervened and declared that he should've called because Dave had already had dinner.

"It smells good, though," Dave offered, and Ray winced at that suggestion coming from the dead man. Clay didn't even notice Dave's confluence of odors. He was an old man who was used to smelly things, and the last one to complain about anybody's personal issues. He merely passed around the pizza and filled three glasses of wine. Dave accepted his and set it in front of him as they sat around the small kitchen table. At intervals he pretended to take sips although he still hadn't re-learned - or even tried - to swallow. Clay was all questions. He wanted to know what Dave was doing with his time. What his plans were. Ray stuffed his face with pizza and tried hard not to become upset with his partner, or his nephew, but again it turned out his anxiety was needless. Dave had an answer for everything. Ray was frankly startled.

"I'm working nights," Dave told them. "With the people from the shelter. Cookie Marquette."

They had heard of her, of course. When Clay pressed him about the kind of work he was doing and how much it paid, Dave didn't have a complete answer ready.

"Helping people," he said. "With their needs". He paused, uncertain about the question of pay. Ray came in to the rescue.

"It's apprenticeship for now," he said. "Meaning it don't pay, not yet."

"Oh, like volunteer work," Clay said and Dave nodded. Ray went on to add that everybody knew that Cookie's outfit had full-time people too and Dave was on that track. Clayton was impressed.

"They do good work down there" he nodded. "Must be rough, though, working nights. I never liked to do that myself."

"I like it," Dave said quickly. "I like the night. Daytime not so much."

"He's a regular night owl," Ray put in. "Hardly ever seem him when the sun's up. Some people are like that. You remember old Dennis? Wouldn't pull back his curtains long as there was daylight."

"Sure," said Ray. "It's what you get used to. I did a graveyard shift myself one time, way back in the day when I was a kid. Over at the rail yards, doing guard work. Just me and the dogs, all night long. Didn't care for it much."

"A lot of dogs out there," Dave said thoughtfully.

"Mean ones these buggers were," Clay said. "Ready as not to rip your neck out. Kept 'em on these long-ass chains. Vicious brutes."

Ray relaxed as the conversation turned away from Dave for awhile, until suddenly Clay was back at it.

"So what do you do for fun? You got a girl? What's your long term plans, anyhow? Gonna stay living here? I know it's none of my business and all, but, heck, well it is, seeing as how your uncle's my business partner and my oldest friend. I'm kind of like your uncle too, you see."

Dave nodded throughout the interrogation and finally, when Clay sat back to listen for an answer to any one or more of those questions, he said one word.

"Movies?"

"Movies?," Clay repeated. "What about 'em? Oh, you like 'em?"

"Like to go to the movies," Dave said simply, nodding. The thought had only just occurred to him. He had read in some magazine about movies, where people went and paid money to sit in the dark and watch a big TV together.

"What kind of movies you like?," Clay wanted to know.

"Any kind," Dave told him.

"Well, we oughta go some time," Ray suggested. Every one agreed.

Later, when Clay had talked and eaten his fill, he leaned back and said,

"Well, it's time I shoved off. The old lady's bound to be waiting up for me."

Dave stood and along with Ray walked him to the door, shook his hand again, said good night. As they watched him depart, Ray shook his head.

"You're a quick study, boy," he said. "I don't know how you pulled that off."

"Watch and learn," Dave said, and forced a meager smile to appear on his face.

Nine

Dave went out soon after Clay had left. Ray had muttered something about movies costing a lot of money these days, but Dave paid no attention. He hadn't meant anything but small talk. He had heard about small talk on a tv show and how it could come in handy in awkward situations. He understood that money was important, and that Ray had little or none of it, but he hadn't made all the connections yet, wasn't quite sure what it was or where it came from. He only knew that if he came across some, he would give it all to Ray. It was, like so many other things in this world, utterly useless to him now.

His intention was to retrace Cookie's steps of the previous night, but to go in closer and get a better look at the recipients of her donations. Much of his sense of caution and fear had been dispersed, merely by the recent conversations both with Cookie and with Clay. Even the issue of dogs was cleared up for him. He now knew what they were for, and what their limitations were. He decided to ignore them.

He headed straight down the riverbank, along the edges, behind the houses that bordered on it. He had found a secret path, hidden behind rushes and sometimes covered by the tide. Wet and muddy shoes were no matter. Concealment was more important. He strode along, confident in his invisibility, and neared the first encampment beneath a broken fishing pier. He could smell the charcoal smoke mingled with spicy cigarettes and heard some low murmuring punctuated occasionally with a raucous laugh. When he got close enough to hear breathing he stopped, and kept very still behind some tall stalks of wild bamboo. He tried, but couldn't make out the words being spoken. He took a step closer and as he did he stepped on a brittle piece of dry driftwood which snapped with a sound like a gunshot. The voices abruptly ceased.

Dave stepped back behind the bamboo and could hear now only the languid lapping of the river against the pebbles on the bank. He waited a few minutes, and then pushed some stalks aside and poked his head through. Standing right there in front of him was a very large, very angry looking man, who loudly called out,

"I told you it weren't no rat. It's a god damn man!"

"Who is it?" a female voice shouted back.

"Damned if I know," he replied. "It ain't talkin".

"So," he said with a little less volume, still staring right at Dave. "Who the hell are you, bud?"

Dave did not reply right away. He was considering his options and asking himself what the appropriate reaction should be. Step out and introduce himself? Run away? Both seemed equally reasonable plans.

"Say, wait a second," the man went on, now pushing the whole clump of bamboo aside and taking two steps forward, so close now to Dave he could feel the hot beer of his breath.

"I know you," he said. "Holy mother of pearl!"

"Princess!," he shouted out loud and turning in her direction. "You are not going to believe who this is. You are so not going to believe it!"

"Who is it, Rick?" the one named Princess called back.

"Come on over and see for yourself," he replied.

"Just tell me, damn it!," she yelled. "I don't want no more of your stupid games."

"This ain't no game, honeypot," Rick said. "This here is little Davey Connor. You remember Davey Connor, don't you?"

"From middle school?" she cried. "That little weasel?"

"The very weasel," Rick laughed, and turned back to Dave.

"Well I'll be damned," Rick told him. "I heard you was smoked. Sure I did. There's people up in Wetford selling tickets to your very grave. Holy smoke! What the heck?"

"My name is Eddie," Dave said, quite calmly. "I don't know you."

"Eddie! That's a laugh," Rick said and yelled out, "Says his name is Eddie! Ha!"

He turned back to Dave and challenged him.

"Eddie, huh? Eddie what?"

Dave paused for a few moments before replying.

"Barkowicki," he said, and he had no idea why he said it, or where that name had come from. He thought he just made it up.

"Eddie Barkowicki," he repeated. Rick was not amused. His jaw tightened and his big right hand curled up into a fist.

"Now you're joking with me, boy," he spat. "Here I was making nice with you and now you're making fun of me? I don't highly recommend that, you little piece of dog waste!"

"Says he's one of you!," he shouted back at Princess. "Says he's a Barkowicki".

"Get out of here!," Princess screamed back, and this time she got off her butt and came creeping over along the riverbank to see for herself. Dave did not recognize either one of them. Rick was a good six foot four, and maybe close to three hundred pounds, sported a buzz cut, sideburns, bulging biceps and a tattoo on his wrist that spelled out the word "damn" in a font resembling barbed wire. "Princess" was short but nearly as heavy as Rick, with thick, long, tangled blond hair, and wore tight clothes revealing clearly every single roll of fat that lined her body. Her face was sweaty and pale, and she curled her lip as she said,

"Little Davey Connor. Son of a gun! Saying you're a Barkowicki now? You know there ain't no Barkowicki's but me. Annie!"

"Didn't he have a thing for you at one time?," Rick asked her.

"Who didn't?," she smiled. "I was quite the thing when I was twelve" she went on.

"And you were quite the loser," she said to Dave. "Still are, from the looks of it. But hey, didn't Rags say he gutted him like a fish?"

"Yep" Rick nodded. "And nobody seen him since. That was when, last summer?"

"Six months at least," she agreed.

"And now he shows up here in Spring Hill Lake. Probably still hiding out from the Kruzel boys, eh? Is that it? Too chicken to show your face back in Wetford?"

"I don't know what you're talking about" Dave told them. "My name is Eddie."

"Barkowicki?," taunted Princess. "Go on. I want to hear you say it to my face."

"Barkowicki," he repeated. "Eddie Barkowicki".

"Wait till the boys hear about this," Rick said. "You might have thought you were safe here, weasel. Should've kept going. You're in for it now." His face gleamed cruelly as he smacked his fist into his other palm.

"Goodbye," Dave said, and turned to walk away.

"Oh just like that?" Rick yelled. "Just like that? You think it's so easy? Nobody fools around with Rick Fripperone. You ought to know that, weasel boy! I beat the crap out of you in the seventh grade and I'm going to beat the crap out of you again right here right now".

But Dave was gone. He had slipped behind the rushes and up into a neighboring yard, vaulted over the fence and disappeared. Rick and Princess stumbled after him, but only fell over each other and down along the river's edge. They pushed each other out of the way and stumbled back to their camp, shouting and saying "damn" a lot.

"I'm going to find that doofus," Rick declared. "And when I do ..."

He let the thought hang in the air as Princess nodded and said.

"Yeah".

Ten

Fripperone couldn't wait to catch up his gang on the night's discovery. They all assembled by the pier for their regular midnight meeting. Here they would share whatever spoils they'd acquired from previous activities, and make plans for new ones. There was no formal agenda, but everyone got their turn. Princess was the unofficial secretary, the final arbiter of who said what and when, despite the facts that her memory was often faulty and her inclination was generally tilted towards the boss. Fripperone himself was both President and Treasurer.

The Right-Hand Man was even taller than Rick, and much more fit. He was a world class bully to be reckoned with, but as dumb as a wet rag. He was an Irishman known only as Jockstrap. The name actually referred to his odor and not his parts. Jockstrap's favorite maneuver was the fake push followed by the real push, whereby he'd pretend to knock you over, like a quarterback's pump fake, draw back slightly, then actually push you down. If you winced, you lost. If you didn't, down you went in any case.

Another two were brothers, Curly and Rags. They had the same dad, a Filipino mechanic named Manny, and different moms. Curly was thick, dark-brown-skinned and nearly bald (you get the joke) and Rags, who was lighter in every sense, wore heavy flannel shirts unbuttoned all year round, with a torn up t-shirt underneath the flashy fake gold chain around his neck. Both of them were strong as anything and fairly quiet. It was always thought they'd go their own way sooner or later, form a gang of their own, why not, but they never did. The two remained close to Fripperone for reasons nobody understood. He continually undermined them, appropriated their money, and heckled and badgered them no end. They might have been gluttons for punishment, or maybe it simply never occurred to either one that they didn't really have to put up with it.

The "Cinco Banditos," as they liked to call themselves, were among the more incompetent thugs in town. Their "mission statement" was "the big score," which they were constantly planning and never pulling off. Instead, they settled for truly small potatoes, knocking over such minor establishments as Hairpiece Hut and taco vendor vans. Curly and Rags were always suggesting hitting St. Anthony's. They believed there were vast amounts of gold buried underneath the floors of the downstairs soup kitchen and mission. They went every night (for dinner) and examined the tiles for telltale cracks.

They also tried to make and sell magic potions. This was Princess' specialty. She had devised purplish liquids that smelled like peach melba and were guaranteed to snag a real man - her own being the pudding of her proof, which may have been one reason why sales were slow. She stored her potions in small glass vials ripped off from the community college science lab, and marked them with various colored twist ties to keep them straight. All of this was more or less an elaborate ruse disguising a secondary trade in liquid euphoria (also known as L.E.), the source of most of their actual income.

"You must be crazy," was Curly's reaction to the news that Rick and Princess had just seen Davey Connor in the flesh that very evening.

"Man is dead as man can get," Rags said emphatically.

"Well then dead men can run away pretty fast," Rick told them. "Little Davey always was pretty quick."

"Died quick too," Rags snorted, and spat a good twelve feet into the fountain. "One thrust and he just plain crumpled up."

"Stone hard fact," Curly nodded.

"What I know," Jockstrap put in, "That Connor boy was delivering the wrong packages to the wrong addresses, know what I mean?"

"Point is," Rick said, "Davey Connor's walking around right now like you and me."

"If he's walking around," Rags said, "he's got to be a zombie or something. That boy is a corpse."

"Okay, okay," Rick waved his arms around. "You don't have to keep repeating it. Zombie, ghost, wounded, whatever, the point is, what are we going to do about it?"

"You know where he is?," Curly asked.

"Not right now," Princess had to admit. "But we can find him. I know it. He said something about Cookie Marquette, and she knows everything about everybody out here."

"Damn do-gooder," Rick muttered. "Probably won't help us, but it's a start. Princess will check with Cookie. Meantime we can split up. He was going along the river, probably haunting the waterfront. Huh, haunting," Rick laughed at his joke.

"Laying low," Princess added. "He better know he's a dead man if the wrong people find him."

"Guess that makes him a dead man for sure, because we are the wrong people!," Jockstrap chortled. Nobody noticed Curly and Rags were crossing themselves. They were not at all happy with the idea of going out and tracking down a living dead man.

Eleven

Rags was so freaked out, in fact, he told Curly to go home and stay home, until Rags gave him the all clear. As the older brother, he was always looking out for Curly, and tried to keep him out of the more largely illegal endeavors. Curly was fine with that. He could spend hours lifting weights and listening to tambourine music, while Rags took care of business. Rags knew right where he needed to go - Jimmy's, the floating casino out on the Wetford River. Owned by the legendary Jimmy Kruzel, the old riverboat was where every important underworld decision took place. Fripperone and his gang were, as a rule, not allowed on board due to their lightweight status, but an exception was made for Rags on account of his old man, who had performed some legendary feats in his day.

Nobody saw Mr. Jimmy Kruzel himself, not ever. The highest level you could hope to attain was an audience with his number one, a short but powerfully wide man known only as Dennis, who spoke with a voice so deep and so soft you could never be quite sure exactly what he was saying. He loved nothing more than to speak of his ancestors, who'd been dragged across the ocean against their will so many hundreds of years ago. A meeting with Dennis required at least a half hour preamble of which you could understand nothing. Rags had expressed the urgency of his visit with such visible anxiety that the crewmen who related his request were ordered by Dennis to let him in.

Dennis' cabin was down at the very bottom of the vessel, deep in the hold underwater. The room was small - barely ten by ten - and half-filled by Dennis himself on a white leather couch he had had personally built for his frame. The little den was thick with smoke from his eternal cigar, penned in by the lack of windows and having nowhere to go but settle throughout the otherwise empty space. A small aluminum folding chair was the only other furniture in the room. Rags remained standing, barely glimpsing Dennis, and hardly hearing him either. Dennis began lecturing the moment Rags had shut the door on his command. What he said sounded to Rags like this:

"Derminuh alubba bub. Forja seph, ookula pair dish! Sem arah slagis nod, ep fertie grass?"

Rags nodded and continued to listen, gradually becoming used to the rumbling murmur, and eventually determining that Dennis was probably speaking a dialect of ancient Arabic. He was an erudite man who enjoyed showing off. He had unrolled a large map of North Africa and was gesturing at it with his cigar. After a time, his monologue petered out and in the resulting quiet, Rags nervously spoke up. He told Dennis about Fripperone's encounter with Davey Connor by the riverside, and then waited for a long time in the stench and the gloom while Dennis considered the tale.

"I thought you killed that boy," he finally grumbled.

"I did kill him," Rags said. "Dead as doughnuts. Buried him too, just like you told me."

"And you sprinkled the grave site with jalapenos and lemon peel?"

"Lemon peel?," Rags stuttered. "I don't remember anything about lemon peel!"

Dennis was silent for quite some time. Rags glanced nervously about him, wishing he was anywhere but there. He realized he'd screwed up, but the whole thing was a mystery to him. He was extremely superstitious, but even his ignorance had its limits.

'Lemon peel?' He thought to himself, 'come on, that is just ridiculous'.

Dennis might have read his mind, because he spoke up in a slightly louder tone to indicate his maximum rage.

"Jalapeno to burn his soul, of course. Lemon peel to keep him in the ground!"

"Keep him ...?" Rags ventured.

"In the ground," Dennis firmly replied. "So now he's back, you tell me. Well, no wonder. Half a job is worse than none."

"How come?," Rags asked.

"Because you failed to complete your assignment," Dennis informed him.

"I know that," Rags said. "I mean, why do they come back?"

"Oh, why zombies? Lots of reasons," Dennis relaxed and sat back in his couch. He was already over his slight pique. The truth was, nothing really bothered him. He only made a show of irritation on occasion because it seemed to be what people expected. Jimmy Kruzel had told him it was important for a leader to be feared. Dennis thought it rather a bore. He would rather have a genial conversation. He motioned for Rags to sit down and offered him a cigar, which Rags politely refused.

"Sometimes," Dennis continued, when Rags had at last taken a seat. "Sometimes the dead come back to life by mistake. There's really no reason for them to do so. It just happens. Other times, they have a mission, some unfulfilled purpose they must complete before they gain their so-called eternal rest. Still others will themselves back to life. These are the ones to be reckoned with, oh my, yes. The others, pah, you merely chop off their heads and have done with it. I'm certain our friend Davey is one of those. The man had no life to speak of. His death was a relief to him, no doubt. One less lazy slob, as useless as your friend Fripperone. Good riddance, I'd say. I don't think there'd be any unfinished business on his part. Well, avenge his murder perhaps, but he should be grateful for it. It was the kindest thing anyone ever did for him."

"But what do we do now?," Rags pleaded, thinking, this guy never said anything about lemon peel, I'm sure of it. And I did the jalapeno thing so it isn't my fault.

"Nothing to it," Dennis sighed. "Find him. Chop his head off. Stick him in the ground again, and this time don't forget the orange peel."

"Lemon," Rags replied.

"Orange," Dennis insisted. "It's only lemon the first go around. Second time orange. Third time lime."

"Third time?," Rags said nervously.

"Sometimes it doesn't take," Dennis said. "You know where to find him, I presume?"

"No," Rags admitted, "but we're looking for him. He can't hide forever."

"Don't waste your time," Dennis advised. "A zombie always returns to the scene of the kill. You simply have to wait for him there."

"Wow," Rags said. "That'll be easy."

"As I said," Dennis told him. "A piece of cake. Now go."

Rags got up and hurried to the door. He was already half asphyxiated and intimidated nearly to death himself. He mumbled a hurried 'thank you, sir' and was already out the door when Dennis, speaking even more quietly than usual, uttered,

"Just watch out for Racine."

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. If it wasn't one thing it was another, and didn't he have enough to deal with already? As if on cue, the wall behind him began to shake with an insistent pounding from behind it.

"I heard that!" came a woman's voice. "You gonna let me out now?"

"Soon enough," Hobbs grumbled, not even turning around.

"It isn't right, you know," she continued, then paused, forcing him to ask the question.

"What?" he finally responded. "What isn't right?" and immediately wished he'd managed to refrain. Now he was going to get the full litany of things that weren't "right".

"Keeping me locked up, for one thing," she declared. "And using those losers. I'll never understand why you do that."

"It's like any organization," he began to explain for the hundredth time. "You have your essentials, like us, and you have your expendables, like them. You got to have 'em. Take the dead guy. He was one of their ten-percenters, just like we got ours. Set 'em on each other, nobody that matters has to get involved. When you need to shed one, you got one. Keeps it clean. Keeps it tight."

"Call that tight?" she complained. "All they ever do is mess things up. Clean is what I do."

"Hardly," Hobbs stifled a laugh. "What you do ..." he trailed off.

"What?" she demanded but he didn't say anything more. After a minute or two of silence she began pounding on the wall again.

"When are you going to let me out?" she asked.

"Thinking about it," he mumbled. "Remember what happened last time?"

There was a long pause before she reluctantly admitted,

"There were stabbings."

"Multiple stabbings," he reminded her. "Unnecessary multiple stabbings."

"But not too bloody," she piped up. "I kept it pretty clean."

Hobbs shook his head. Sometimes a thing had to be done, and when it had to be done, the rest was details. He stood, waving away the smoke as he made for the door, ignoring the pounding that started up again as the woman behind the wall sensed his departure.

"Don't you leave me in here," she was shouting as he stepped out of the cabin and closed the door behind him.

"Monsters," he mumbled as he walked off. As if there weren't enough of those in the world as it was.

"It's not like there's any shortage," he said aloud and then added, to himself, "including the ones I've created myself," but he didn't want to think about the sweet little orphan girl he'd befriended all those years ago, and what had become of her since. It wasn't entirely his fault, or so he liked to think. It was the nature of the business. It was all in the details.

Twelve

For her part, Princess was wasting no energy. Literally. As with most days and nights, she sat on her pile of cushions in her tent beneath the pier and waited for her minions to serve her. Between Fripperone and Jockstrap, on the one hand, her customers on the other, and the lousy do-gooders on yet

a third hand, she had all of her needs attended to without hardly ever even getting off her ass. She kept all of her essentials nearby; snacks, more snacks, and her magic-potion-making kit. She was impervious to weather of all kind, feeling neither cold nor heat, wetness or dryness, but maintained her implacable motionlessness through it all. It had taken a massive effort to follow Fripperone's cry and now she was still recovering. Her plan was to sit and wait for Cookie to come around as she usually did. Princess approved of plans that involved nothing more than sitting and waiting.

Cookie finally showed up around four in the morning. She had promised to bring some more nice woolen socks for Princess, whose feet were swollen from all that inactivity and required extra comforting. Princess, and the whole gang for that matter, liked to pretend that they were really quite helpless victims of circumstances beyond their control, but Cookie was never fooled for a moment. Jockstrap had not lost his will to live in some far off combat mission. Fripperone was not permanently disabled due to psychic stress. Princess was not an abused and abandoned gypsy orphan. Curly and Rags were not street urchins from day one. Heck, Cookie knew their grandfather from her time in the Navy!

Her rule, however, was to never discriminate, and never judge. If they were out on the street, if they asked for help, she was there and she would give it. Maybe they didn't need it. Maybe they were hoodlums and bums but maybe someday it would all turn around. Maybe her example would pay off in the end. In any case, it was easier to live by the one simple rule - just give.

And listen. She always listened. Princess told her about Davey Connor, how they thought he was dead - who didn't? - and how they'd just seen him, only calling himself Eddie. Eddie Barkowicki? How do you like that? As if there could be another Barkowicki. Heck, her parents had even changed all their names to Barnes way back when. Did she know him? Had she seen him?

No, Cookie could truthfully answer, she had never met anyone who called himself Eddie Barkowicki. No need to mention she'd met one who merely called himself Eddie. That was not the question, so it was not a lie. She wondered what it could mean, though. The one she had met called Eddie had seemed a fairly harmless sort of fellow. He seemed lost, a bit wild. Was he hurt? Had he somehow lost his memory? She concluded that this must be it - he'd been injured in the murder attempt, had become an amnesiac who now wandered the streets at night, looking for his home but unable to recognize it if he even saw it. She decided she would help him if she could.

In the meantime, she asked aloud what Princess and the others had to do with this Davey, and was a bit alarmed to hear the history, which Princess was only too happy to share. She forgot herself a little in the joy of the memories, forgot she was supposed to be humble and meek in the presence of Saint Cookie.

"We used to tease the little rat something fierce," Princess bragged. "We stole his money, we hid his school books, we smashed his lunch. One time Rick even broke the kid's thumb. Those were the days."

She smiled happily as she remembered the details.

"Back then, my Rick was the King of the school. Even Jimmy Kruzel used to quake in his boots when Rick came around. Rick had it in for that kid more than anyone. Locked him in his gym locker one day! What a hoot! Mr. Stones had to come and pry him out with a crowbar. We always hated Davey Connor. One time Jockstrap got him when he was riding his bike. Pushed him off the bridge down the hill to the train tracks. Kid when bumpity bumpity bump, all the way down. Stupid weasel. That's what we always called him - weasel. I don't know why. Rick came up with it."

She paused, then suddenly remembered who she was talking to, and added,

"Of course that was twenty years ago. We were all different then. Bad times. It was a rough neighborhood, you know. You had to take care of yourself."

"Sounds like you did just that," Cookie calmly replied.

"Well, anyway," Princess said, "It was kind of like old times is why Rick flew off the handle just now when he saw him. Now we want to make up, tell him we're sorry, you know? We should all be friends now we're older and out on the street and all. Maybe he's down on his luck like we are. We'd help him out. It's why we're looking for him, you see."

"I see," Cookie nodded. "And I will certainly keep my eyes open. I'll let him know," she promised Princess, and she meant it. If she did come across him, she'd be sure to tell him all that she'd heard.

Thirteen

Dave Connor did not know what to do with himself. He had returned straight home after his encounter with Princess and Fripperone, and didn't stir from his couch the rest of that night or even for a moment the following day. He did nothing, thought nothing, felt nothing; it was as if his mind had gone completely blank. The shock of a single idea had gripped him, and blocked all other sensations. The idea had presented itself to him before, but he had never quite accepted it. He had been somebody. He had been someone that other people knew and recognized and remembered. Uncle Ray of course had known him. He had acknowledged this fact but treated it as no more than a story in a magazine. Clayton had known of him, as if he had read that story. To Dave that former life was barely even a shadow. It was less real to him than a planet in a far off galaxy, but now it had come right to him, stood there in front of him, and demanded an answer. Are you or are you not who you are? Who you were?

He waited until Ray had settled himself down in his favorite old chair for the evening before he came upstairs and sat nearby. Ray was used to this brief encounter, as it had become routine in the past two weeks. He would have his supper, put away his dishes, and take his seat. Then Dave would trudge up the stairs and sit, for a few minutes, before venturing outside. Sometimes Dave would have a word or two to say, but usually not. This night he lingered longer than usual, long enough for Ray to notice the difference. He put down his own magazine and turned to Dave.

"Going to work tonight?," he asked. Dave shook his head.

"I wish I had money," Dave said. "I would give it to you."

"That's a nice thought," Ray replied. "Maybe you will get some if you wind up working for that lady for real."

"I don't think so," Dave sighed. Ray did not ask further. After another long interlude of silence, Dave spoke up again.

"Who was I?," he blurted out.

"Who were you?," Ray said. "I thought you knew that. You're my nephew, Dave Connor. Is something the matter? Have you forgotten?"

"I never knew," he murmured. "I knew but I didn't know. I didn't think. I knew my name. I know my name, but who I was, I don't know. What was my life? What was I like?"

Ray took some time to think about his answer. It seemed important all of a sudden. Ray had wondered why Dave had never asked before. Now he realized it simply hadn't occurred to him, hadn't meant anything to him. He was not, in fact, Dave Connor. He was somebody else, but he wasn't even somebody else, he was something else entirely, and it was awkward for him, almost impossible, like a dog that had turned into a horse and was trying to bark.

"The Dave you were," Ray told him, "Was not the Dave you are now. I can tell you that much. That Dave, well, he was a piece of work. A nice little boy all right. Very quiet, very polite. You remind me of the little Davey, up until around ten or so. That's when your mother got sick. And then your dad. You changed completely after that. By the time you were, oh, maybe fourteen, it was a different Davey Connor. Unhappy, surly, even mean sometimes. You didn't do anything for your parents, you know. Didn't try to help. Wouldn't lift a finger as they got weaker, and sicker, and finally passed on. You took

off on your own, ran around with your friends. Your mom and dad worried about you all the time. Asked me what to do, as if I could tell them anything. I never had a kid. Heck, I was more like you when I was that age. Left home in my teens and never looked back. I could understand that, but I couldn't help."

He paused to see what effect his little talk was having on his nephew, but Dave had no expression on his face. He was listening intently, but not really hearing. He couldn't absorb this data, make it his own. It was just another human interest story. Ray continued.

"Then you got involved in some things you shouldn't have. Got caught once or twice. Spent some time in jail. I never told anyone around here about that, not even Clayton. That was all in Wetford. I figured, if you ever needed a fresh start, I'd try and keep your name all clear around here. Then you started branching out. Started doing business over here down river as well as up there. Got in with the Kruzel gang, from what I heard. No, tell you the truth, son, you really weren't much back then. Nothing to write home about, that's for sure."

"Better off dead," Dave muttered.

"I wouldn't say that," Ray hurried to say. "I wouldn't say that about anybody. As long as there's life there's hope. Never give up. That's what I say. Never lose hope."

"No, I mean it," Dave said, standing up. "It sure sounds like I'm better off now that I was before. I have no problems. Except for him. Except for who I used to be, and who I used to know."

He paused in front of Ray's chair and looking down, reached out a hand to touch his uncle on the shoulder.

"Thank you," he said, and turned away. He went out the front door and stood on the top step considering which way to turn. To the right was the waterfront and probably Cookie out there somewhere. He would like to see her again. He would like to help her. It would feel good to do that. He could stay out of the way, stay in the shadows. It could work. He hesitated for a few moments. He was not used to making choices. He would have to decide. There was Cookie, and that chance, but then there was Princess, and Fripperone. They were out there too, and he did not want to see them again.

To the right was downtown and the human world. To the left was the winding road uphill to Fulsom Park. It was dark up there, and quiet. Peaceful. He could be alone, and maybe figure out what he should do, long term. It was time to make a decision.

He turned right. He had to take a chance. Maybe there was a place for him in this world, and maybe Cookie could help him. If anybody could, anywhere, it would be her, he thought, and so he made his way in the darkness, clinging to the shadows, stepping silently behind a wall or shrub whenever he might possibly encounter someone. When he reached Cookie's kitchen he found a place outside the building where he could wait and not be seen, and from there he watched, waited and watched the bustling activity below in the large dining hall.

He recognized no one among the crowd that patiently stood in the long line, holding their trays up when their turn finally arrived, and the friendly workers behind the counters doled out plates and bowls which the hungry gathered and hurried off to the long rows of tables to find a spot. Many of them ate rapidly and furtively, as if their haste would shield them from any public knowledge of their desperation and misery. Others took joy in the gathering, and welcomed their friends to share space on their benches. Dave quietly observed and understood there were signs and symbols happening all around, a language without words, a language still beyond his grasp.

He remained concealed and watched far past the time the hungry had their meal and the workers cleaned and closed the dining room up for the night. Only then did he dare creep around to the front door of the building around the other side and slide himself in without being seen. He guessed he

would find Cookie in the back rooms, holding up the whole world from below. He guessed right.

She was sitting at a desk in a small room, barely a broom closet, barely lit, head bent over papers, scratching away with a pen. He stood for some time just outside in the hall, certain his presence had gone unnoticed while he thought of what to say, but Cookie spoke first.

"I'm glad you came," she said without looking up, respecting his shy cat nature.

"I want to help," he whispered, and took two steps into the room, still keeping his distance and one eye on escape.

"Down here is probably best," she said, and then she looked up at him.

"Paperwork," she shrugged. "There's never an end to it. No matter what you want to do in the world, there's bound to be a bunch of forms you have to fill out. But never mind that."

She stood up, slowly, and carefully stepped around the desk. Dave took a step back, but then she stopped, and so did he.

"There's a lot of work to be done in the background," she said. "Serving the public directly is probably not the best use for you," she added, "at least not right away."

Dave simply nodded, and waited for her to continue.

"We have a stock room," she said. "If you go out into the hallway, turn left and go down to the second door on the right. I'll join you there in a minute."

She watched as Dave did as she suggested. She gave him a quiet head start, and then followed. He backed away again as she approached the door and opened it. She went inside, and he went in behind her. There was someone else in the room. Dave froze.

"Oh, hi Bobby," she said. "I didn't know you were in here."

"Just shelving the beans," replied a handsome young man in his mid-teens. He was tall and lean, with bright blue eyes and short brown hair, dressed rather too nicely for the work he was doing in that dingy place.

"This is Eddie," she said, turning back to where Dave stood in the entryway. "Eddie's going to be helping out down here. Eddie, Bobby Kruzal is one of our volunteers. You've probably heard of his dad, but Bobby's one of the good ones."

"Eddie?" Bobby said, ignoring the implications of Cookie's reference to his father. "Why do you call him Eddie? That's Davey Connor."

"You know him?" Cookie asked, looking first at Bobby, then at Dave, and then at Bobby again.

"Sure I do," Bobby said. "Guy used to push me around when I was a little kid. Real tough guy. Total wad."

"Eddie?" Cookie said, looking back at him again. Dave said nothing. He stood as still as the wall he was wishing he could melt right into. He didn't recognize Bobby, but he believed him.

"And you're supposed to be dead," Bobby said. "That nut job Rags told everyone he killed you. Sure he did. This is just weird."

Bobby scratched his head and sat down on a stack of boxes. Cookie was still gazing at Dave, thinking about everything she'd seen and heard about him. It didn't make sense. She was a realist, after all. Dead people don't go walking around, so clearly he'd only been wounded, but he was still in great danger. She knew very well that the people hunting him now did not have happy intentions in mind. Could she protect him? Unlikely. He would have to go somewhere else. She had lots of connections.

"Eddie," she said, "I think I can help you, but not here. It's not safe for you here."

"I'll say," Bobby blurted out before Cookie could wave him to silence.

"I have to go," Dave said.

"I can find a place for you," Cookie said.

"There is only one place for me," Dave said. "I should have turned the other way. I'm sorry."

"Wait," Cookie said, but Dave was already gone, vanished down the hall and out the door. He had no doubts any more. Fulsom Park was where he belonged.

Fourteen

Rags was not going to go up there alone. He wanted to bring Curly along, but at the same time he wanted to keep Curly out of it. This was going to be a nasty business, and his little brother didn't need to be involved. He thought about asking Jockstrap but quickly dismissed that notion. Jockstrap was way too stupid. He couldn't be counted on for anything, not even to tie his own shoes. That left only Fripperone. It was fitting. After all, Fripperone had started all this, in ways he could not even imagine, and he owed it to him. Besides, Fripperone was eager and willing to go. He could hardly wait for Rags to gather together his jalapenos and orange peel.

"Come on," Rick said. "It's getting dark already. What if we miss him? And anyway, what do you need that crazy stuff for? It's not even edible. I'd bring pretzels if I was you."

"I know what I'm doing," Rags retorted, but did he? He doubted himself. He had been so sure, not so long ago, the night he had lured Dave Connor up to the park under similar pretenses. A certain person was going to be there. A deal was to be made. Easy money. Easy pickings. The look on the man's face when the knife twisted in his guts still haunted Rags' dreams. He could hear the sharp, rough grunt still echoing in his head on awakening in the middle of the night.

He was ready for anything, he told himself. He'd brought a flashlight, a gun, and a knife, as well as the culinary requirements, among other things. Rick kept pestering him to get with the program.

"Holy Toledo," Rick exclaimed. "It's getting late. Come on."

"Let's go," Rags declared as he packed his final bits of business. They were going to hike up the hill. This way they could keep to the shadows, not be seen and even less, be identified by some car make or model. Rick was not thrilled with the idea. He was overweight and out of shape, and already sweating heavily by the time they reached the park entrance. There they stopped as Rags took his bearings. He pulled a compass out of his bag and gauged the direction.

"Don't tell me we're lost," Rick puffed. "We're only at the damn entrance."

"I know where I'm going, boss," Rags told him. He knew that just by saying 'boss' he could get Rick to shut up for at least a minute or two. Of course he remembered exactly where he had murdered Dave Connor. How could he ever forget? He saw that site in his mind every day whether he wanted to or not. He took his leader right there, through the woods, off the path, to the very spot and when they got there, he stopped, and gaped, not believing what he saw.

The grave he had so carefully filled in was completely re-opened. Not only that, it was twice as wide, and twice as deep.

"I don't remember it being this big," he whispered to Rick.

"It wasn't," said a voice from behind them. They turned, and in the half moon light saw the figure of a woman standing there. She was tall, quite tall, and very thin. Her thick black hair fell around her face and partially covered the eye patch over her right eye. She was wearing a denim miniskirt, black stiletto boots, and a white dress shirt. She carried something long attached to her belt on one side, and what

looked like a rope coiled around her waist.

"Holy mother!," Rick nearly shouted. "Damn! Don't you look good?," he exclaimed. The woman flipped her hair and smiled, fully revealing the patch and a thick red scar slashed into her forehead above it.

"You like what you see?," she said coyly, and took a step closer. Rags took a step back. Her whole face was streaked with dirt and maybe more. He was getting a bad feeling all over, but Rick took a step toward her, raising his arms with his palms up in some sort of gesture meant to be welcoming and reassuring.

"What's your name?" he asked in his best flirtatious voice.

"Call me Racine," she replied.

"Nice name," Rick said. She came closer and he drifted in her direction too. To his amazement, Racine began unbuttoning her blouse. One button, two buttons. Rick was practically drooling already. His hands were itching; he wanted to rip that shirt right off her. Racine rapidly unbuttoned the rest of the shirt and pulled it off to reveal her naked chest, which would have been lovely were it not for the gaping wound oozing blood from the left breast.

That was enough for Rags. He screamed and ran off as fast as he could through the woods. Rick was stuck in his tracks and could only stare as she uncoiled a whip and lashed out with it. It grabbed him around his legs and toppled him like a dead tree stump and he fell, straight into the wide open grave. He could do nothing but look up, petrified and trembling, as she leaned over the side and smiled at him.

"My good friend Jimmy Kruzel says 'hi, remember me?'," she said, as she pulled a revolver from behind her back, and shot him right between the eyes.

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Racine watched the blood trickle down Rick's forehead and laughed. It had been too easy. She was already wishing she could do it all over again. She would make it last a little longer next time. It was too sudden. Where was the joy in that? When you're having fun, you want it to last. She didn't have long to wait, though, for another opportunity. Only a few moments later another park visitor arrived.

Dave Connor had come back to his grave. He didn't even see her at first. He had been walking blindly, not knowing or caring where he was going. He stopped short at the sight of Rick's body in the hole, at first not recognizing his former classmate and associate.

"You must be Dave," said Racine, tucking the gun back into her belt. He looked up. Her face didn't register either.

"Do you know me too?," he asked. It was beginning to seem like everybody knew him, and he did not know anyone.

"Only by reputation," she chuckled. They were standing near each other, Dave at the foot of the pit, Racine beside it.

"Who are you?"

"Call me Racine, she told him, and added, "It seems you and I have a few things in common," she said.

"Like what?," he asked. "Are you dead too?"

"Oh, no," she laughed, and she pulled off her fake bloody-boob suit to reveal another t-shirt she was wearing beneath. She ripped off the eye patch as well.

"Though people sometimes think so," she continued. "What's it like to be really dead, I wonder. Tell me about it, won't you Dave?"

"It's like being alive," he replied. "Only different."

“What do you do for kicks?”, she asked.

“No kicks”, he replied, shaking her head.

“What about sex?” she sneered.

He just shook his head in response.

“There’s got to be something”, she said. “Else what do you do with yourself? What makes you even want to go on?”

“Nothing, I guess”, he shrugged.

“Yeah, well, that’s what I thought,” she said. “Do you like being dead, Dave? Does it agree with you?”

“No,” he replied. “I don’t like it.”

“That’s good,” she said, and added, “well, sometimes a cat just gets hit by a car, do you know what I mean?,” and with the quickness of a tiger she snatched a machete from her side, and in one swift blow, lopped off his head. Dave, and his head, hit the ground simultaneously. She kicked the head into the grave next to Rick’s shoulder, then called out into the woods,

“Hey, come on. Give me a hand here, will you?”

“Be right there,” came a low deep voice from behind a tree. Dennis emerged, carrying a shovel and pulling on a pair of work gloves. He went right to work, dragging Dave’s body into the hole and beginning to scoop the extra dirt on top of the bodies.

“Good job,” he said.

“Of course,” she replied, looking on. She lingered to watch him complete the job. There was something about the smell of freshly dug graves that appealed to her deeply. Dennis grabbed some nearby duff to spread around and make the site look as natural as possible. When he was finally satisfied, he reached into his jacket pocket, but his hand came out empty. He sighed, and shook his head.

“Rats,” he declared. “I forgot the darn orange peel”, and his whole wide body shook with silent laughter.