

Queen of  
Blood



*Headline from the May 1 edition of the Chattanooga Herald:*

*“HOUSE OF BLOOD” CONTINUES TO MYSTIFY*

CHATTANOOGA, TN—Nearly a year has passed since the revelation that an old mansion high in the east Tennessee mountains for years doubled as a house of horrors and a prison for luckless travelers. In that time, remarkably few survivors of the so-called “House of Blood” have been willing to speak to the press.

The known facts are few. Authorities have been as unforthcoming with details as the survivors. The cloak of silence has fueled wild Internet speculation, including persistent rumors of a strange, perhaps supernatural element to the mystery. Many have claimed the house was ruled over by a centuries-old entity, a vampire, perhaps, or an alien creature masquerading as a human man, a man known only as “The Master.” And while it may be safe to dismiss these notions as obvious hoaxes and flights of fancy, the truth is they will continue to flourish so long as the public is kept in the dark about what really happened.

A month ago, this reporter set out to learn that truth, only to be foiled at every turn by a seemingly impenetrable wall of lies, misdirections, and general obfuscation. Each of the top law officers in the county refused to talk to the *Herald* for this story, citing the “sensitive nature of the ongoing investigation.” Authorities at the state and federal level also refused comment.

Repeated attempts to contact the handful of survivors who spoke with the media in the immediate aftermath of the “liberation” (as they called it) invariably met with the same stony silence. Dream Weaver, 31, is perhaps the best-known survivor. The stunning blonde was a media darling in those first weeks, but she has become as reclusive and elusive as Howard Hughes was in the latter stages of his life. She appeared on magazine covers and was featured extensively in television interviews. Late night talk hosts famously made fun of her colorful name. She eventually married Chad Robbins, 31, another survivor of the House of Blood.

Neither Ms. Weaver nor Mr. Robbins could be reached for this story. One source reports that Weaver and Robbins have separated, though the *Herald* has been unable to confirm this prior to going to press.

We also attempted to contact the man known as “Lazarus,” who functioned as a sort of guru to those imprisoned in the cavernous region beneath the infamous house, a place known simply as “Below.” He has been described as “charasmatic” and “almost godlike.” He appears in only a minimal amount of news footage from that time, and even then only in fleeting glimpses, behaving, some say, like a man deliberately avoiding the spotlight. The blurry images of “Lazarus” have been analyzed and picked apart by legions of amateur online sleuths. One investigator claims to have identified him as a Virginia businessman missing since the early 1990s. Others insist the man is one of a handful of

long-believed-to-be-dead rock stars, with the majority of theories centering around Jim Morrison and Elvis Presley. Though these theories are clearly absurd, they will continue to proliferate in the continued absence of any real answers. No one the *Herald* has talked to has seen or heard from “Lazarus” since shortly after the revolt at the House of Blood.

Most of the Master’s accomplices died in that revolt. However, two have remained missing and unaccounted for, Giselle Burkhardt and a woman identified only as “Ms. Wickman.” Though both women are regarded as highly dangerous (both have been on the FBI’s 10 Most Wanted List for several months), the *Herald* has learned that authorities are particularly keen to find Ms. Wickman, whose role at the House of Blood has been likened to that of an SS commandant at a concentration camp. . . .



PART I:  
BLOOD RISING

# CHAPTER ONE

*Five months later*

Blood was everywhere.

Sticky gore was on his face and in his hair, hot little rivulets of it trickling down from the gash behind his ear and the larger wound at the crown of his skull. The salty tang of it stung his mouth. Dean wiped more blood from his eyes with a shaking hand and saw bright red splotches on the dirty hardwood floor of the old farmhouse. He lifted his head and saw yet more blood on the nearest wall, huge crimson smears. It looked as if a crazed housepainter had splashed several cans of dark red paint all over the fucking place. Here, in the foyer, all over the goddamned floor. On the front door. And over there, the staircase bannister, it was covered with a slick film of red.

*. . . blood everywhere . . .*

His blood. Some of it. More blood entered his mouth. Check that. A *lot* of it. Lisa's blood. A fuck of a lot of Lisa's blood. John's blood. And don't forget Debbie. Some of the biggest splashes had erupted from the stump of the poor dimwit's neck when the crazy woman with the axe lopped her head off.

The air was pungent with the combined stench of spilt blood and recent, violent death, with underlying aromas of piss and shit, the ripest of the latter emanating from the seat of his own soiled britches.

So much blood.

So much motherfucking blood.

Here.

There.

Blood . . . everywhere.

Then, the absurd capper to it all, the guitar riff from AC/DC's "If You Want Blood, You've Got It" began to echo in his head. He closed his eyes again and gritted his teeth, trying to will the old song away—but it just kept playing on an endless loop, that maddening, relentless riff and the dead singer's voice on the chorus.

Over and over and over. Holy hell, how incredibly fucked up was *that*?

His eyes fluttered open again. Drank in the carnage again.

He heard voices. Muffled. He strained his ears and realized the sound was coming from outside. Then came an abrupt burst of mad laughter. The sound made him shake with fear and anger. How could anyone do the things these people had done and laugh about it?

But the answer was obvious. These weren't just people. They were monsters.

And any moment now they'd be back inside, back to finish the night's grisly work. Because he was the only one still alive. He sniffled, the hard reality hitting him again. His friends were all dead. And they had died horribly. After hours of torture and unspeakable violations.

Suffering beyond quantifying.

The memory of the awful things he'd seen taunted him, a dark promise of the shape of his own near future. For some reason he couldn't fathom, they'd saved him for last. He had been beaten. Tortured. Mutilated. Two

fingers were gone from his left hand, the stumps a charred mass of blackened flesh where they'd cauterized the wounds with an acetylene torch. But they'd spared him the worst of it, measuring the pain and trauma, keeping him alive and forcing him to watch helplessly as his girlfriend was flayed alive.

He sniffled again, wiped more tears from his eyes.

Something glinted in the periphery of his vision. He turned his head slowly to the left, wincing as fresh jolts of agony sizzled through his body. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of the axe propped against a side of a broken down old sofa in the living room. Lantern light flickered in the room. The old house had no electricity. The old Sutton place had been abandoned for decades. Once in a while kids from town would come here to party and fuck, but even that was a rare occurrence these days. The creaky, termite-infested farmhouse was just too creepy and gross a place to take girls. But tonight had been different, of course. What better night to visit the old Sutton place than Halloween, right?

It hadn't taken much to convince the girls to come out here. The mood of the evening was just right. A clear night sky with a bright moon hanging overhead. A cool fall breeze rolling in. That and a few Corona Lights did the trick. How promising the evening had seemed at the outset. A creepy, fun Halloween with his best friend and their girls. There'd be more beers to drink. Some weed to smoke. Thighs and breasts to grope in the quiet rural darkness. Ghost stories to tell as the evening lengthened toward dawn. Just like last year at the lake.

Only not like last year, as it turned out. Not even a little bit.

He should have known something was wrong upon reaching the end of the old house's long dirt driveway.

For one thing, another car was already there, a gleaming black Bentley parked alongside the long front porch. The old car was no abandoned relic. Its windows were tinted. A silver hood ornament sparkled in the brilliant moonlight, as did the chrome hubcaps. The vehicle was immaculate in every way, and its sleek lines made it look vaguely predatory. The beautiful antique looked as out of place parked outside the old Sutton place as a supermodel in a room full of crack whores.

An argument ensued. They had come so close to turning around and leaving.

*My fault*, Dean thought, bitterness consuming him as he stared at the blood-smeared blade of the axe. *I had to have it my way. Had to show them all what a big man I am. How fearless . . .*

He'd argued more forcefully than anyone, bordering on belligerence. In the end the others gave in. They always did. They did it to shut him up, not because they'd been swayed by the strength of his arguments. If only they'd stood up to him for once. If only . . .

No.

He couldn't let himself off that easy. Not now. And never again. They were all dead and it was all his fault.

And soon he'd be dead, too. He held out no hope of divine deliverance, harbored no illusion of the cavalry (police) riding up to his rescue at the last minute. Violent, painful death awaited him, and probably at some point within the next few minutes. It was a strange and horrible thing, the idea of the remainder of your life being down to a handful of torturous minutes. Thinking about it elicited another helpless whimper. He didn't want to die. Quite the contrary. He wanted to be around for many decades to come, even if that meant living with the guilt of being responsible for the deaths of his friends all that time. Yes, even then.

All he had to do was get to that axe.

Somehow haul his battered body upright.

And then be ready for the bastards when they came for him.

So he drew in a deep breath and began to crawl toward the axe. *I can do this*, he thought. *I have to do this*.

His hands trembled as the fingernails of his right hand dug into the rotting hardwood floor. He bit down hard on his lower lip and suppressed another whimper. He willed his hand to be still and pulled himself forward another few inches. Then he extended his left hand and gained another few inches. That was harder. The mangled flesh there throbbed horribly. He bit down harder on his lip to stifle a scream. Teeth penetrated flesh and drew blood. The scream stayed inside him, a fire burning in his chest, aching to explode. He extended his right hand again. Then the ruined left hand. He repeated the process several more times, progressing with great deliberation but seemingly infinite slowness. It was maddening. The sheer frustration almost caused him to give up. Then he heard more muffled laughter and anger engulfed him again.

Ignoring the pain as best he could, Dean began to move faster, wriggling forward on bloodied elbows and slightly upraised knees. He began to make serious progress, passing through the archway separating the foyer from the living room. He focused on the bloody axe with a single-mindedness that allowed no awareness of anything else.

He began to grin as he neared the blade. Just a few feet away, now. And then he was there, an electric burst of triumph sparking within him as his right hand closed around the axe handle. He had it, his coveted weapon. Now he just had to tap one last reservoir of strength, somehow get to his feet and prepare to make his last

stand. And he would do it. By God, he would. He hadn't come this far to punk out now.

He drew in another deep breath, steeling himself.

His grip tightened around the axe handle.

Then something flashed through his field of vision, a dark blur. He was aware of pressure on his wrist before his eyes could process the image of a woman's high-heeled black shoe pinning his hand to the floor. Then the image crystalized, searing itself into his mind with blazing intensity. The polished black shoe was as elegant as the woman's finely turned ankle. Black was her whole motif. Black shoes, black stockings, and black dress—a fitting wardrobe reflecting the darkness dwelling within the one the others referred to alternately as “Mistress” and “Ms. Wickman.”

She applied more pressure to Dean's wrist, eliciting another sob.

Her laughter was soft and mocking. “Such a naughty boy. I suppose you imagined you might use this on me.” She wrenched the axe from Dean's grip and tossed it across the room. It struck the far wall and clattered to the floor. “I hope you realize it was intentionally left where you might see it upon regaining consciousness.”

Dean wanted to scream, but he didn't have the strength for it. His spirits dipped to their lowest ebb yet. There had never really been any chance for revenge. The hope he'd felt moments ago had only been an illusion. This whole exercise nothing but another sadistic mindfuck. A game.

Anger flickered within him again. He wrapped the remaining three fingers of his left hand around her ankle and attempted to twist her foot off his wrist. He burned inside with the need to topple her, get on top of her, rip her flesh with his fingers and tear her leering eyes out. But he failed to budge her even one millimeter, her leg as unyielding as an iron girder.

Her strength was unnatural. She was a slender woman, about forty, average weight and height. Not unattractive. High cheekbones, but a gaunt, almost ghostly pallor. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a bun, lending her features a slightly pinched, severe sexuality. A shade of lipstick so dark red it was almost black painted the thin lines of her lips, which were curled now in a disdainful sneer. So she was spooky looking, yes, but at first glance she had not appeared to be some kind of evil superwoman. Not someone capable of lifting a teenage girl above her head and throwing her clear across a room. But he'd seen it with his own eyes, Debbie flying through the air, then striking the wall and bouncing off it like a rubber ball.

It defied logic. It was crazy. Impossible.

But . . .

"You've underestimated me again, haven't you, Dean?" She knelt down, pried his fingers from her ankle. "I'm going to hurt you again, child."

An anguished, keening wail issued from Dean's pulped lips. "Noooooo. Please . . . please don't. I'll do anything . . ."

Ms. Wickman snapped his index finger.

Dean screamed. His body convulsed as the pain arced through him, his feet beating a jittery rhythm on the hardwood floor. Through the pain, he was only dimly aware of the front door creaking open. Then there were voices. Those young people. Her followers. They were coming inside, no doubt drawn by the scream.

Ms. Wickman snapped the middle finger of his left hand. The scream this time filled the dust-laden living room like an explosion. He tried to get up. Pure pain instinct was driving him. But Ms. Wickman planted a knee between his shoulder blades and that was that.

She was too strong. Stronger than any human woman should be.

“One finger left, one stubby little thumb,” she said, leaning close, her voice an insinuating, malicious purr. “I do enjoy your begging, Dean. Would you like me to spare this one?”

Dean thought about the way this sort of thing usually went in the movies. Your typical cinema hero, facing yet another round of torture, would spit in his tormentor’s face and say, “Fuck you.” Or some witty alternative.

What Dean said was, “Please don’t do it. I’ll do anything. I swear.”

A brief pause.

“Thank you, Dean.”

She snapped his thumb.

Dean’s next scream mingled with the laughter of Ms. Wickman’s apprentices. Some of the laughter died off as their Mistress gathered his broken fingers in her hand and . . . squeezed.

Then squeezed harder. And harder still.

Tidal waves of pain slammed through Dean. His body bucked. The long, continuous scream that ripped out of him felt as though it might tear his body apart. Dean blacked out for a moment, only to be reawakened almost instantly by the agony blazing in every nerve ending in his body. At some point, Ms. Wickman relinquished her grip on his broken fingers, stood up, and moved away from him.

He heard her talking to her followers. There were four of them, ranging in age from mid-teens to early twenties. The oldest, a thin but tall boy of about twenty or twenty-one, hauled Dean off the floor and deposited him on the old sofa. The sofa reeked of mildew and rot, and it creaked beneath his weight.

Then Ms. Wickman loomed over him again. A long, thin cigarette was pinched between two fingers of her right hand. She took a draw on the cigarette, then blew a thin stream of smoke at the sagging ceiling.

She met Dean's gaze and smiled. "Do you smoke, Dean?"

Dean coughed. "No."

That strange, wicked smile again. Insinuating. Malicious to the core. "Well, you're about to start."

Dean felt terror again, sure, but now another feeling rose to the surface, a weariness he felt from the depths of his soul. "I don't care anymore. Please kill me now. Get it over with."

The woman's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Oh, Dean, honey, I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding between you and me."

Dean drew in another sharp breath as she sat next to him on the sofa and draped an arm around his shoulders. He trembled beneath her touch, tried to cringe away from her, but of course was unable to move.

She leaned into him, her breath hot on his ear as she spoke. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot here, Dean. You see, we're not going to kill you."

Dean's gaze swept over the mad woman's followers, cataloguing a variety of minor injuries and mutilations. A missing finger here, a livid scar there . . . and the tall, thin boy was missing an ear.

Dean shook his head as more tears filled his eyes. "No. No, no, no. You can't make me. I won't . . . won't be like . . . them."

A dark-haired girl in a raggedy black dress and black Doc Martens laughed. "Where have I heard that before?"

More deranged laughter.

Ms. Wickman leaned closer still, her lips moving softly against his ear as she said, "You'll be whatever I want you to be. You belong to me now."

Then she put out her cigarette on the back of his mangled hand.

Dean screamed yet again.

And watched aghast as smoke rose from the seared pucker of flesh.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Two years later*

Dream Weaver was a drink or two shy of being truly drunk. She had every intention of addressing that deficiency within the next few minutes. But first things first. She needed to get her game face on before wading back into the action. So she extracted a tube of lipstick from her Prada knockoff purse, uncapped it, and leaned over the sink as she applied a fresh coat to her full lips. She capped the tube and dropped it in her purse, dabbed away the excess with a square of toilet paper, then teased out her hair a bit with her fingers.

The image looking back at her from the bar bathroom's tiny, cracked mirror looked less and less like a stranger with each passing day. This was a good thing. She wanted to obliterate every trace of the woman she'd been. Erase her. Replace her with something completely different. Whether or not that "something different" was something others would consider admirable was of no consequence.

Her flowing blonde tresses were gone, replaced by a choppy, dyed-black cut that made her look like a punk Bettie Page. Her formerly perpetual tan was also a thing

of the past. The extremely tight and skimpy black top she wore accentuated her womanly assets and displayed a lot of very pale flesh. It looked as though the sun's rays hadn't touched her in years, which wasn't too far from the truth. Ultrashort denim cutoffs hugged her still shapely ass. She turned to admire herself from a side angle, peering over her shoulder to get a glimpse of the new black rose tattoo on her lower back.

She looked good. Hot. She was a beautiful woman. None of the potential cosmetic changes available to her—short of a splash of boiling acid to the face—could change that essential aspect of her existence. But she was cool with that. It was the one thing about herself she had no desire to change. She was a much shallower human being these days, a thing she had no problem admitting to herself. Gone was the ditzzy girl who fretted so about the feelings of others and worked to avoid using her looks to unfair advantage. In her place was a cool, cold-hearted bitch who knew damn well she was prettier than just about everyone else—and didn't hesitate to make full use of the fact.

Someone pounded on the bathroom door, rattling the cheap hook-and-eye lock. "You about done in there? Other people have to piss too, you know."

"Wait your fucking turn, cunt!" Dream snarled, her face twisting in a sneer.

Dream slipped the strap of her purse over her shoulder and stared at her reflection some more. The only flaw in the otherwise perfect reflected visage was the tell-tale hint of red in her eyes. She dug a Visine bottle out of her purse, squeezed a few drops into each eye, and blinked away excess moisture until she could see clearly again.

The bathroom door rattled in its frame again.

Dream smiled. And waited. The redness was already fading from her eyes.

She waited another beat longer, until the door rattled yet again. Then she went to the door, popped the lock out of the hook, and opened the door. The girl waiting to use the bathroom was a scrawny thing, almost waifish. Flat-chested and curveless. She wore thick glasses and her short hair was dark with streaks of blonde.

Dream smirked. "There she is . . . Miss America."

The girl rolled her eyes and tried to push past her into the bathroom. Dream stepped aside, allowing her entry. Then she shut the door and locked it again.

The girl's face twisted in a scowl. "What are you doing? Are you a dyke or something? I don't swing that way."

Dream adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder and stepped forward. "I don't care."

She slammed the girl against the wall and punched her hard in the stomach. The girl's eyes went wide with shock and pain. Her legs gave out, but Dream held her up and punched her again. Then one more time.

She stepped away and the girl dropped to her knees. A sheen of sweat broke out over her face and she lunged toward the toilet, flipping the lid open an instant before her stomach voided its contents. When she was done heaving, she looked at Dream, her lower lip trembling as she said, "Why . . . why . . ."

She lifted her glasses and swiped at a sudden flood of tears, unable to comprehend the outburst of violence.

"Because I'm a bad person." Dream knelt next to the trembling girl, lifted her chin with a finger. "And you don't fuck with bad people."

The girl twisted away from Dream and cried some more.

Dream stood up. "Get yourself together. When you're done here, pay your bill and leave. Don't say a word about this to anyone, ever."

Dream watched her a moment longer, then turned and left the bathroom.

The Villager Pub was a tiny place, with a short bar just inside the front entrance. There were two tables opposite the bar, a jukebox (silent now), and an old Galaga tabletop video game. Between the bar and the bathrooms was an open area for dart players. Dream waited for a pause in the in-progress dart games, smiled her thanks to the waiting players, and made her way to the bar. She felt the gazes of the male dart players on her every step of the way. The lust they felt as they drank in her long, long legs and abundant curves was a palpable thing. It made her feel good.

And powerful.

She took a seat at the end of the bar, a good place for watching the dart games. The players were all college-age boys. A look through their wallets would reveal more than one fake ID. Maybe tonight the mark would be one of them. These young guys, bursting with hormones and fueled by too many beers, would be easy. She would lure one of them to a motel room. Dope his drink. Maybe even fuck him before he lost consciousness. Then rob him blind and light out of town before sunrise. It was the way she lived now. Town to town. Mark after mark. Sometimes, when she'd dosed them just right, they were delirious enough to share credit card PIN numbers. There was an art to timing everything just right. She was getting better at it all the time.

One of the players elbowed his buddy—a square-jawed, bushy-haired frat type—and nodded in her direction. Frat Boy saw her looking at him and grinned.

Dream smiled and lit a cigarette.

The barmaid—a thin woman of about forty with long, dishwater hair—approached her and said, “What’ll you have?”

“Shiner Bock.”

The barmaid removed a frosty pint glass from a cooler behind the bar and began to fill it from the tap.

Dream licked her lips as she watched the amber liquid fill the frost-rimmed glass. She loved the taste of the stuff, but more than that she craved the fuzziness of mind it would bring, that added buffer between her present life and the painful memories of her past. The barmaid placed a napkin in front of Dream and set the nearly overflowing mug on it. Dream waited for the head to settle before taking a first sip of the deliciously cold, cold brew.

The skinny girl emerged from the bathroom and wobbled through the game area, oblivious to the men with their darts. She bumped into one, eliciting a startled yelp.

Frat Boy sneered. "Watch where you're going, bitch."

One of his friends snickered and said, "Yeah, skank."

The girl didn't say anything. Dream watched her from the corner of her eye as she continued toward the bar. She experienced a flash of sense-memory, a vivid moment in which she again felt the girl's soft flesh yield beneath her hard fist.

The girl gave her a wide berth, continuing down to the far end of the bar, where she paused long enough to dig into her purse and extract several crumpled bills. She tossed these on the bar and left in a hurry, the bell over the door jangling behind her. An untouched pint of Bud Light gleamed in the light of the neon Miller sign mounted behind the bar.

The barmaid frowned. "Well, shit, girl didn't even drink her beer."

A middle-aged man in a cowboy hat rose from his seat at one of the tables. "Hell, I'll drink that, darlin'."

The barmaid shrugged. "What the hell, it's paid for. Today's your lucky day."

Cowboy Hat gripped the mug's handle with a beefy hand and winked at Dream. Dream kept her expression blank and returned her attention to the young boys playing darts. Frat Boy caught her eye again and

grinned. Dream flashed another smile, hoping to encourage the kid to make a move. He'd better get the hint soon, because she had a feeling Cowboy Hat would lumber over any moment and hit on her. But Frat Boy's attention was again on the dartboard. He was squinting, a dart pinched between thumb and forefinger held at about shoulder level.

It was then she heard the slightly labored breath behind her and knew the time had come to shoot down another dirty old man. The bar stool to her left creaked as a weight settled onto it. Dream set her mug down with a sigh. She looked longingly at Frat Boy a moment longer, but he was still too focused on his damnable game. Vowing to make him pay for that later, she swiveled around on her stool to tell Cowboy Hat off . . .

But the smackdown went undelivered, the words dying on the tip of her tongue as a paralyzing numbness swept rapidly through her body.

There was someone on the bar stool next to her, but it wasn't Cowboy Hat.

The apparition smiled hideously through rotting lips. "Hello, Dream."

A ghost. A fucking ghost. Or a hallucination. That was more likely, she supposed, but how could anyone tell the difference?

It was Alicia Jackson, her one-time best friend in the world. Alicia had been dead for more than three and a half years. She didn't look like an old-time movie ghost, though. She wasn't flickering or floating in mid-air. She looked as solid and three-dimensional as the bar stool under Dream's ass. She was a walking corpse, her flesh bloated and rotting. The back of her head was a pulped, sticky mess—the exit wound from the self-inflicted gunshot wound that had ended her life. She wore a slinky little black dress, which meant a lot of visible putrescent flesh. The tortures she'd endured prior to her suicide

were much in evidence, including the uncountable razor-blade cuts the demonic Ms. Wickman had inflicted on her. Each wound weeped blood.

Alicia's gruesome smile widened, exposing rows of teeth that protruded alarmingly from her blackened, shrunken gums. Maggots trickled from one corner of her mouth. "It's been a while, girl." She laughed and more maggots tumbled from her mouth. "Oh, I know what you're thinking—I'm not real. But you're wrong. I'm not a ghost. Not exactly. And I'm sure as shit no hallucination."

Dream opened her mouth to say something, managed a single, incoherent syllable before falling silent again. Her mouth hung open in astonishment. She simply couldn't speak. What could she say to this . . . thing? The idea of holding a conversation with it was absurd.

Alicia chuckled. "You're still not believing it."

Dream nodded, a very slight downward tilt of her head. She didn't want anyone in the bar to see her interacting with this thing that looked like her old friend. She knew they'd only see a thirtysomething chick in slut gear conversing with an empty bar stool. An aging barfly with severe mental problems would be the likely perception.

She picked up her beer mug and drank deeply from it again. She looked at the television mounted on the wall behind the bar. *The Simpsons* was on, and she pretended to pay attention to Homer's shenanigans.

Alicia scooted closer and slapped a cold, clammy hand down on Dream's upper left thigh. Dream sucked in a deep breath. The hand on her leg felt rough and leathery. She glanced down, noted the contrast between Alicia's rot-brown hand and her own pale, unblemished flesh, and began to feel light-headed.

Alicia leaned closer still and Dream felt the dead woman's bony knee press against her. "There, girl. Do I *feel* like a motherfucking hallucination?"

Dream trembled. She gripped the handle of her beer mug tighter. Her eyes flicked toward the bar's front door. She could go. Just slide off the stool and hit the ground running. Bang through the door and leg it across the street to the lot where her old Honda Accord was parked. Then drive. Get the hell out of this stinking, gray, miserable New England town, find some other place to prowl for a while.

Alicia's dead hand gave her thigh a squeeze. "Don't matter where you go, baby. I'll be there. It's like I said, I'm not exactly a ghost."

Dream looked at the bar and kept her voice as low as possible. "Then what are you?"

"I'm something you created."

Dream frowned. "Bullshit."

"Oh, it's true, all right." Alicia laughed again, and Dream saw a single maggot strike the mahogany bartop and begin to squiggle across the polished wood. "You and I both know you left that fucking house of horrors a changed woman. And I don't mean just changed in the head. You got yourself some of the same supernatural mojo that Master asshole had. You always had it in you, but he woke it up. You can *do* things normal people can't. You're stronger. Smarter. And you can change the shape and substance of the world around you, just by thinking hard enough about it."

Dream shook her head. "No."

"Yes." Alicia's fingers began to stroke Dream's inner thigh. "You know it's true. And it scares the shit out of you. So you've done everything you can to hold that power back, to suppress it. But the pressure's building up inside you. Some of that psychic energy is spilling out. And me . . . well, I'm one of the consequences of that. Some of that energy mingled with the bit of my essence you've carried with you all these years. And that got all mixed in with your guilt. It was inevitable I

would manifest.” Another soft, dry laugh. “And that I would look this fucking awful, I guess. Seriously, I ought to bitchslap you for this Night of the Living Dead Black Bitch look you’ve stuck me with.”

Dream was still shaking her head, but it was just automatic, desperate denial. Another part of her—a part the booze was meant to numb—acknowledged the truth of Alicia’s words. But truth changed nothing. She would work harder to suppress it. Drink more. Drug more. Whatever it took. “I have to get out of here.”

The barmaid looked up from the glass she’d been polishing. “Whatever. Go talk to yourself somewhere else. But you owe me three bucks for that beer.”

Dream fumbled with her purse, digging for bills. “Okay. Sorry.”

Alicia continued to stroke her thigh. “I’ll tell you a secret, Dream, something I never seriously considered telling you when I was alive. I always wanted to get it on with you. You were the only chick I ever felt that way about. I was always too scared to tell you, of course. Didn’t want to risk ruining our friendship.”

Dream’s hands were shaking as she at last managed to extract her wallet from the purse and undo its snap. She withdrew three dollar bills, considered withdrawing a fourth for a tip, but decided against it when she got a look at the barmaid’s face, which was a mask of pity and disdain.

“Remember what I said. You made me. I’m not a ghost.” Alicia’s fingers ceased their stroking motion and squeezed. Hard. “I’m also not exactly the woman you remember. But I’m close, Dream, I’m real fucking close. And I am always with you.” She squeezed even harder, really bearing down. “And I was with you in the bathroom when you put the hurt on that geek. That was some fucked-up shit, baby. Nothing like the sweetheart I remember. Shit, you should change your name to

Nightmare, would suit you better these days.” She ran the coarse end of her gray tongue over her bloated lips. “Personally, I think it’s an improvement. You don’t get anywhere in this world without kicking some ass.”

Dream threw the three single bills on the bar and slid off the stool. Some instinct caused her gaze to flick toward the young dart players, and she felt something stab her heart as she saw the way they were looking at her. Frat Boy’s finger made a circle in the air around his ear, the international loony symbol.

She hurried out of the bar and stood outside on the sidewalk, watching the traffic on the two-lane street whiz by. She heard music wafting from another bar on the same side of the street, “People Are Strange,” that old Doors chestnut. Hearing it now, in these circumstances, raised gooseflesh on her arms and the back of her neck. A creeping sense of paranoia threatened to overcome her. She sensed that something important—something on the order of a seismic shift in her life—was on the cusp of occurring. The feeling scared the shit out of her.

She glanced to her right and saw Alicia standing there. The dead woman’s eyes were stained a milky white, but they remained oddly expressive, conveying a hint of amusement.

“Look, Dream, here comes a bus. I think if I were you, I’d consider stepping in front of it.”

Dream looked to her left, where a block away a traffic light was turning yellow. In another few moments, the traffic would slow to a halt and she would be able to cross to the parking lot on the opposite side. She knew she should just focus on getting out of here and ignore Alicia.

But curiosity forced her to ask the question: “Why?”

Alicia smiled. She wiped another trickle of maggots from her lips and flicked them away. “Nasty things. There’s trouble coming, baby. You’re strong. Powerful, even. But this may more trouble than you can handle.”

Dream squeezed her eyes shut. Enough. This was clearly just some especially malevolent corner of her shattered psyche fucking with her. Alicia was a hallucination, and the things she was saying were issuing from somewhere inside her, not from the mouth of some maggot-spewing ghoul. She hoped the realization would make the dead woman's voice halt in mid-sentence . . .

. . . but Alicia kept talking. "You thought it was all over when you left that evil place up in the mountains. But it ain't, girl, not by a long fucking shot. The evil is still out there. It's been dormant for a while, but it's just been restoring itself, getting strong again. That woman, the one who killed me, she's gonna come looking for you soon."

Those last words sent a deep, resonant chill through Dream. "No . . ."

Alicia didn't respond this time. Dream opened her eyes and looked to her right. The apparition was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief, but the chill invoked by the dead woman's words remained.

She shivered and began to thread her way through the stalled traffic. She unslung her purse and looked for her keys as she entered the parking lot. She cursed, not finding them at first, but then her forefinger snagged the key ring. Before she could get the keys out, though, she heard a vaguely familiar voice say, "That's her."

Dream tensed. She'd reached the far end of the lot. It was darker here, removed as it was from the main thoroughfare and the lights of the bars. She heard movement to her right and her head snapped in that direction. She gasped. The girl from the bathroom was standing there, an ugly smirk on her face. Two boys were with her. Dream's heart pounded. They stood between her and the Accord. Which meant she only had one option available—to turn and make a desperate dash back toward the street. But just as she started to turn, she sensed more movement behind her.

Something hard and metallic struck the base of her skull and she crumpled to the asphalt. Her vision wavered for a moment, went black, and when things came back into focus another girl, this one taller and somewhat prettier, was standing directly over her. There were others, now, a total of five arrayed around her. One held a tire iron that was wet with her blood.

The girl standing over her smiled.

Then she spit in Dream's face, the gob of saliva hitting her between the eyes.

Dream tried to stand, but a booted foot smashed into her side, causing her to curl into a fetal ball. Then she felt rough hands on her, dragging her upright.

And the girl said, "Get her in the van."

Dream struggled as they dragged her toward the open back of an old van. She opened her mouth to scream, but someone hit her again.

The world went black.