

“No one writes like Laymon, and you’re going to have a good time with anything he writes.” —DEAN KOONTZ

RICHARD LAYMON

Internationally Bestselling
Author of *Flesh* and
The Cellar



FRIDAY NIGHT IN BEAST HOUSE

Also includes the bonus novella, *The Wilds!*

Friday Night in Beast House

Richard Laymon

Includes the bonus novella
The Wilds

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Friday Night in Beast House

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CHAPTER ONE

Mark sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the telephone.

Do it! Don't be such a wuss! Just pick it up and dial.

He'd been telling himself that very thing for more than half an hour. Still, there he sat, sweating and gazing at the phone.

Come on, man! The worst that can happen is she says no.

No, he thought. That isn't the worst. The worst is if she laughs and says, "You must be out of your mind. What on earth would ever possess you to think I might consider going out with a complete loser like you?"

She won't say that, he told himself. Why would she? Only a real bitch would say a thing like that and she's...

...wonderful...

To Mark, everything about Alison was wonderful. Her hair that smelled like an autumn wind. Her face, so fresh and sweet and cute that the very thought of it made Mark ache. The mischief and fire in her eyes. Her wide and friendly smile. The crooked upper tooth in front. Her rich voice and laugh. Her slender body. The jaunty bounce in her step.

He sighed.

She'll never go out with me.

But jeez, he thought, why not *ask*? It won't kill me to ask.

Before today, he never would've seriously considered it. She belonged to another realm. Though they'd been in a few classes together since starting high school, they'd rarely spoken. She'd given him a smile from time to time. A nod. A brief hello. She never had an inkling, he was sure, of how he felt about her. And he'd intended it to remain that way.

But today at the start of lunch period Bigelow had called out, "Beep beep!" in his usual fashion. Alison hadn't dodged him fast enough, so he'd crashed into her with his wheelchair. Down she'd gone on the hallway floor at Mark's feet, her books flying.

"Jerk!" she yelled at the fleeing Bigelow.

Mark knelt beside her. "Creep thinks he owns the hallways," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Guess I'll live."

And the way she smiled.

"Can you give me a hand?"

Taking hold of her arm, he helped her up. It was the first time he'd ever touched her. He let go quickly so she wouldn't get the idea he liked how her arm felt.

"Thanks, Mark."

She knows my name!

"You're welcome, Alison."

When she stood up, she winced. She bent over, lifted the left leg of her big, loose shorts and looked at her knee. It had a reddish hue, but Mark found his eyes drawn upward to the soft tan of her thigh.

She fingered her kneecap, prodded it gently.

“Guess it’s okay,” she muttered.

“You’ll probably have a nice bruise.”

She made a move to pick up one of her books, but Mark said, “Wait. I’ll get ’em.” Then he gathered her scattered books and binders.

When he was done, he handed them to her and she said, “Thanks, Mark. You’re a real gentleman.”

“Glad I could help.”

He stared at the telephone.

I’ve got to call her today while it’s fresh in her mind.

He wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans, reached out and picked up the phone. He heard a dial tone. His other hand trembled as he tapped in her number. Each touch made a musical note in his ear.

Before pushing the last key, he hung up fast.

I can’t! I can’t! God, I’m such a chickenshit yellow bastard!

This is nuts, he told himself. Calm down and do it. Hell, I’ll probably just get a busy signal. Or her mom’ll pick up the phone and say she isn’t home. Or I’ll get the answering machine. Ten to one I won’t even get to talk to Alison.

He wiped his hands again, then picked up the phone and dialed...dialed *all* the numbers.

His arm ached to slam down the phone.

He kept it to his ear.

It’s ringing!

Yeah, but nobody’ll pick it up. I’ll get the answering machine.

If I get the answering machine, he thought, I’ll hang up.

Hang up now!

“Hello?”

Oh my God oh my God!

“Hi,” he said. “Alison?”

“Hi.”

“It’s Mark Matthews.”

“Ah. Hi, Mark.”

“I, uh, just thought I’d call and see if you’re okay. How’s your knee?”

“Well, I’ve got a bruise. But I guess I’m fine. That was really nice of you to stop and help me.”

“Oh, well...”

“I don’t know where Bigelow gets off, going around crashing into everybody. I mean, jeez, I’m sorry he’s messed up and everything, but I hardly think that’s any excuse for running people over, for godsake.”

“Yeah. It’s not right.”

“Oh, well.”

There was a silence. A long silence. The sort of silence that soon leads to, “Well, thanks for calling.”

Before that could happen, Mark said, “So what’re you doing?”

“You mean now?”

“I guess so.”

“Talking on the phone, Einstein.”

~~He laughed. And he pictured Alison’s smile and her crooked tooth and the glint in her eyes.~~

“What’re you doing?” she asked.

“The same, I guess.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Yeah.”

“You sound nervous. Your voice is shaking.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“The answer is yes.”

“Uh...”

“Yes, I’ll go out with you.”

I can’t believe this is happening!

“That’s why you called, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. Mostly. And just to see how you’re doing.”

“Doing okay. So...I’ll go out with you.”

OH MY GOD!!!

“How about tomorrow night?” she suggested.

Tomorrow?

“Sure. Yeah. That’d be...really good.”

“On one condition,” she added.

“Sure.”

“Don’t you want to hear the condition first?”

“I guess so.”

“I want you to get me into Beast House. Tomorrow night after it closes. That’s where we’ll have our date.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Have you ever been in there at night?” she asked.

“Huh-uh. Have you?”

“No, but I’ve always wanted to. I mean, I’ve lived here in Malcasa my whole darn life and read the books and seen all the movies. I took the tour *before* they started using those tape players, and I know the whole audio tour by heart. I bet I know more about Beast House than most of the guides. But I’ve never been in there at night. It’s the one thing I really want to do. I’d go on the midnight tour, but you have to be eighteen. Anyway, it’s a hundred bucks apiece. And besides, I think it’d be a lot more cool going in by ourselves, don’t you? Who wants to do it with a dozen other people and a guide?”

“But...how can we get in?”

“That’s up to you. So what do you think?”

“Sure. Let’s do it.”

“Where have I heard *that* before?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, where?”

“From all the *other* guys who promised to get me in...and didn’t.”

He felt a strange sinking sensation.

“Oh.”

“But maybe you’ll be different.”

“I’ll sure try.”

“I’ll be at the back door at midnight.”

“Your back door?”

“The back door of Beast House. What you probably need to do is buy a ticket tomorrow afternoon and go in before it closes and find a hiding place. The thing is, they count those cassette players they give out for the tours. They can’t be short a player when they go to close up for the day. If they’re missing one, they know somebody’s trying to stay in the house and so they search the place from top to bottom.”

“You sure know a lot about it.”

“I’ve studied the situation. I *really* want to spend a night in there. I think it’d be the most exciting thing I’ve ever done. So how about it? Are you still game?”

“Yeah!”

“All right.”

“But...we’ll be staying in Beast House all night?”

“Most of the night, anyway. We’d have to get out before dawn.”

“Are you *allowed* to stay out all night?”

“Oh, sure. Every night.”

“Really?”

“I’m *kidding*. I’m sixteen, for cry-sake. Of course I’m not *allowed* to stay out all night. Are you?”

“No.”

“So we’ll both just have to use our heads and improvise.”

“Guess so.”

“Just like *you’ll* have to improvise on getting in.”

“How am I supposed to do that thing with the cassette players?”

~~“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”~~

“But...”

“Mark, this is a test. A test of your brains, imagination and commitment to a task. I think you’re a cool guy, but the world’s full of cool guys. The question is, are you *worthy* of me.”

Though she sounded serious, Mark imagined her on the other phone, grinning, a spark of mischief in her eyes.

“See you tomorrow at midnight,” he said.

“I sure hope so.”

“I’ll be there. Don’t worry.”

“Okay. That’ll be really neat if you can do it. Thanks for calling, Mark.”

“Well...”

“Bye-bye.”

“Bye.”

After hanging up, Mark sprawled on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Stunned that Alison had agreed to go out with him. Trembling at the prospect of being with her tomorrow night...*all* night. Slightly depressed that she seemed less interested in going out with him than in getting into Beast House. And dumbfounded by the task of how to deal with the cassette player problem.

Where there’s a will, there’s a way.

Usually true, but certainly not always. He could *will* himself to flap his arms and fly to Singapore, for instance, but that wouldn’t make it happen.

He’d taken the Beast House tour often enough to understand the system. They gave you a player as you entered the grounds. You wore it by a strap around your neck and listened to the “self-guided tour” through headphones as you walked through the house. Afterward, you handed back the player and headphones at the front gate. Handed it *to* a staff member.

The crux of the problem, he thought, is the staff member.

Usually they were good-looking gals in those cute uniforms that made them all look like park rangers.

If nobody was watching, you could just walk up to the gate, return the audio equipment (slip it into the numbered cubbyhole in the storage cabinet), then turn around and go back to the house and find a hiding place. Or have an accomplice drop off *both* players on his way out while you remain in the house.

But there *is* a gal at the gate and you’ve gotta *hand* her the player. They want to make very sure nobody’s in the house when they shut it down for the night.

So how can I do it? Mark wondered. There must be a way.

It’s just a matter of *thinking* of it.

Bribe the girl at the gate?

Create a diversion?

He lay there staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, trying to come up with a plan that might work. Might work when you’re just a regular sixteen-year-old real kid, not Indiana Jones or James Bond or Batman.

He came up with ideas. His only good ideas, however, involved the use of an accomplice.

I’ve gotta do this on my own, he thought. If I drag Vick or someone into it, they might screw up the whole deal.

So he kept on thinking. The thoughts filled his head, cluttered it, whirled, bumped into each

other. They didn't make his head *hurt*, but they certainly made it feel heavy and useless.

~~Without realizing it, he fell asleep.~~

He woke up at the sound of his father's voice calling from downstairs. "Mark! You better get down here fast! Supper's on the table. Come on, man. Move it. *Arriba! Arriba! Andalé!*"

On his way down the staircase, breathing deeply of the aroma of fried chicken, he heard a gruff Mexican voice in his head. It said, "Tape players? We don't need no steenkin' tape players!"

He grinned.

CHAPTER THREE

Plans and hopes and fears swirling through his mind, Mark lay awake most of the night. But he must've fallen asleep somewhere along the line because his alarm clock woke him at seven in the morning.

Friday morning.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, trembling.

I don't *have* to go through with it, he thought.

Oh yes I do. I've gotta. If I screw up, that'll be it with me and Alison.

But what if I get caught?

What if I get killed?

What if *she* gets killed?

By now, these were old, familiar thoughts. He'd gone through them all, again and again, while trying to fall asleep. He was tired of them. Besides, they always led to the same conclusion: getting a chance to be with Alison tonight would be worth any risk.

He struggled out of bed and staggered into the bathroom. There, he took his regular morning shower. Afterward, instead of getting dressed for school, he put on his pajamas and robe and slippers. Then he headed downstairs.

By the time he entered the kitchen, his father had already left for work and his mother was sitting at the breakfast table with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper. She lowered the newspaper. And frowned. "Are you feeling all right?"

He grimaced. "I don't think so."

She looked worried. "What's the matter, honey?"

"Just...a pretty bad headache. No big deal."

"Looks like you're not planning on school."

"I *could* go, but...we never do much on Fridays anyway. Most of the teachers just show movies or give us study time. So I guess, yeah, it'd be nice to stay home. If it's okay with you."

He knew what the answer would be. He made straight A's, he'd never gotten into any trouble and he rarely missed a day of school. The few times he'd complained of illness, his mother had been perfectly happy to let him stay home.

"Sure," she told him. "I'll call the attendance office soon as I'm done with my coffee."

"Thanks. I guess I'll head on back to bed."

As he turned away, his mother said, "Will you be okay by yourself? This is my day to work at the hospital."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." He'd known full well that she worked as a volunteer at the hospital every Friday. It was perfect. Many of her regular activities kept her in town, but not this one. For the privilege of doing volunteer work in the hospital gift shop, she had to drive all the way to Bodega Bay. More than an hour away. She would have to leave very soon. And she wouldn't be getting home until about six.

By then, Mark thought, I'll be long gone.

"I'll be fine by myself," he said.

Frowning, she said, "I'll be gone all day, you know."

“It’s no problem.”

~~“Maybe I should call one of the other girls and see if I can’t find someone to fill in for me.”~~

“No, no. Don’t do that. There’s no point. I’ll be fine. Really.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Really.”

“Well...I’ll be home in time to make dinner. Or maybe I’ll pick up something on the way back. Anyway, why don’t you make yourself a sandwich for lunch? There’s plenty of lunchmeat and cheese in the fridge...”

“I know. I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.”

Upstairs, he took off his robe and slippers and climbed into bed. He lay there, gazing at the ceiling, trembling, trying to focus on his plans but mostly daydreaming about Alison.

After a while, his mother came to his room. “How are you doing, honey?”

“Not bad. I’ll be fine. I took some aspirin. I probably just need some sleep.”

“You sure you don’t want me to stay home?”

“I’m sure. Really. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay then.” She bent over, gave him a soft kiss on the cheek, then stood up. “If you start feeling worse or anything, give me a call.”

“I will.”

She nodded, smiled and said, “Be good.”

“I will. You, too.”

She walked out of his room. A few minutes later, he heard her leave the house. He climbed out of bed. Standing at his window, he watched her drive away.

Then he went to his desk, took a sheet of lined paper from one of his notebooks and wrote:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I’m very sorry to upset you, but I had to go someplace tonight. I’ll be back in the morning. Nothing is wrong. Please don’t worry too much or be too angry at me. I’m not upset or nuts or anything. This is just something I really want to do, but I know you wouldn’t approve or give permission.

Love, Mark

He folded the note in half and put it on his nightstand. After making his bed, he got dressed. He thought a lot about what to wear and what to take with him.

Down in the kitchen, he made two ham and cheese sandwiches. He put them into baggies and slipped them into his belly pack. He added a can of Pepsi from the refrigerator. Realizing its condensation would make everything else wet, he took it out, put it inside a plastic bag, then returned it to his pack.

In the kitchen “junk drawer,” he found a couple of fair-sized pink candles. He put them, along with a handful of matchbooks, into his pack. After fitting his Walkman headphones into the pack, there was no room left for the Walkman itself.

I don't need it anyway.

~~He put on his windbreaker, then glanced at the digital clock on the oven.~~

8:06

Perfect.

Patting the pockets of his jeans, he felt his wallet, comb, handkerchief and keys.

That should do it.

He looked around, wondering if he was forgetting anything.

Yeah, my brains.

He grinned.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outside the house, he took a deep breath and filled himself with the cool, moist scents of the foggy morning.

A wonderful morning, made for adventure.

He trotted down the porch stairs and headed for Front Street.

In the early stages of making plans, he'd considered trying to sneak out of the neighborhood to avoid being spotted by friends of his parents. Friends who would blab. After a while, however, he'd realized there was no point. He might be able to sneak into Beast House and keep his rendezvous with Alison, but his parents were certain to discover his absence from home tonight. Thus, the note.

And thus, no need for sneakiness. Not here and now, anyway.

They're gonna kill me, he thought.

But not till after my night with Alison.

And if something goes wrong and I can't make it into Beast House, I'll just come home and destroy the note and nobody'll ever know what I almost did.

That might not be so bad, he thought.

It'd be *awful!* I've *got* to get into the house and be there at midnight.

Walking along, he thought about how surprised Alison would be when he opened the back door for her.

"My God!" she would say, "you really *did* it!"

And then she would throw her arms around him, hug him with amazement and delight.

Would that be a good time to kiss her? he wondered.

Probably not. You don't go around kissing a girl at the *start* of a date. Especially if you've never gone out with her before. You've got to lead up to it, wait until the mood is just right.

We'll have *hours* together. Plenty of time for one thing to lead to another.

At Front Street, Mark stopped and looked both ways. Only a few cars were in sight, none near enough to worry about. He hurried to the other side and continued walking east for another block. The barbershop was already open, but he didn't glance in. The candle shop hadn't opened yet. Neither had Christiansen Real Estate or the Book Nook or most of the other businesses along both sides of the road. Generally, not much was open in Malcasa Point before 10:00 am, probably because that was when the first tour buses arrived for Beast House.

Coming to the corner, he turned right. Though bordered by businesses, the road was empty and quiet. He followed its sidewalk southward. Because of curves and low slopes, he couldn't see where it stopped. The dead end sign and the fence and rear grounds of Beast House wouldn't come into view for another couple of minutes.

Almost there.

Then the fun starts, he thought.

But the fun started early.

Two blocks ahead of Mark, a police car came around a bend in the road.

Oh, shit!

Just act normal!

Trying not to change his pace or the look on his face, he turned his head slightly to the right as i

mildly interested in a window display.

Mannequins in skimpy lingerie.

Terrific, he thought. The cop'll think I'm a pervert.

Looking forward, he started to bob his head slightly as if he had a tune going through it.

Just a normal guy out for a walk.

He glanced toward the other side of the road.

In his peripheral vision, he saw the patrol car coming closer.

He turned his gaze to the sidewalk directly in front of him.

The cop'll get suspicious if I avoid his eyes!

Trying to seem *very* casual, still bobbing his head just a bit, he glanced at the cop. He planned to cast the officer a friendly, uninterested smile then look away, but couldn't.

Holy shit!

In the driver's seat of the police car sat the most beautiful woman in town—and by far the most dangerous—Officer Eve Chaney.

I thought she worked nights!

Heart thudding, Mark gaped at her. Though he'd seen Officer Chaney a few times at night and admired her photo in the newspaper every so often, this was his first good view of her in daylight.

My God, he thought.

She turned her head and stared straight back at him as she slowly drove by.

"Hi," he mouthed, but no sound came from his mouth.

She narrowed her eyes, nodded, and kept on driving.

Face forward, Mark kept on walking. His face felt hot. He was breathing quickly, his heart thumping.

How'd you like to spend the night in Beast House with HER?

The prospect of that was frightening but incredibly exciting.

He suddenly felt guilty.

Hearing a car behind him, he looked over his shoulder.

Oh, jeez, here she comes!

She drove slowly, swung to the curb and stopped adjacent to him. Her passenger window glided down. Mark bent his knees slightly and peered in.

Beckoning him with one hand, Officer Chaney said, "Would you like to step over here for a moment?"

"Me?"

She nodded.

Heart clumping hard and fast, Mark walked up to her passenger door, bent over and looked in.

He'd never been this close to such a beautiful woman.

But she's a cop and I'm in trouble.

He could hardly breathe.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mark. Mark Matthews."

"I'm Officer Chaney, Mark."

He nodded.

Though this was October, Officer Chaney made him think of summer days at the beach. Her shoulder hair was blowing slightly in the breeze that came in through the open windows of her patrol car. Her eyes were deep blue like a cloudless July sky. Her face was lightly tanned. The scent of her, mixed

with the moist coolness of the fog, was like suntan oil

“How old are you, Mark?”

He considered lying, but knew it was useless. “Sixteen.”

She nodded as if she’d already known. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“I guess so. I mean, I guess it all depends.”

“How’s that?”

“My mom called in sick.”

“Your mother’s ill?”

“No. I mean, she called in sick for me. So I’m officially absent today.”

Officer Chaney turned slightly toward him, rested her right elbow on top of the seatback, and smiled with just one side of her mouth. Mark supposed it would be called a smirk. But it sure looked good on her. “So you’re staying home sick today?”

“That’s right, Officer.”

“In that case, shouldn’t you be home in bed?”

“Well...”

He felt his gaze being pulled down to her throat, to the open neck of her uniform blouse, on a course that would soon lead to her chest. He forced his eyes upward, tried to lock them on her face.

“Well?” she asked.

I can’t lie to her. She’ll see right through it!

“The thing is, I’m not all that sick. And I’m a really good student anyway and Fridays at school are always pretty much of a waste of time and it’s such a nice morning with the fog and all.” He shrugged.

Eyes narrowing slightly, she nodded. Then she said, “And there are such few and such morning songs.”

Mark raised his eyebrows.

“ ‘Fern Hill,’ ” she said. “Dylan Thomas.”

“Oh. Yeah. The guy who wrote ‘A Child’s Christmas in Wales.’ ”

This time, she smiled with both sides of her mouth. She nodded again and said, “Have a good day, Mark.”

“Thank you, Officer Chaney. You, too.”

She looked away from him so he quickly glanced at the taut front of her blouse before she took her arm off the seatback. Facing forward, she put both hands on the steering wheel.

Mark took a step backward but remained bent over.

Just when he expected her to pull away, she turned her head again. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t,” she told him.

“I won’t. Thanks.”

She gave him another nod, then drove slowly away.

Standing up straight, Mark watched her car move down the road, watched it turn right and disappear.

“Wow,” he whispered.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Mark resumed walking, his legs felt soft and shaky. He seemed to be trembling all over.

He could hardly believe that he'd actually been stopped by Officer Eve Chaney, that he'd gotten such a good look at her. It was almost like something too good to be true. But even better—and more unbelievable—she hadn't balled him out, hadn't lectured him, hadn't busted him or driven him back to school or back to his house. She'd not only been friendly, but she had *let him go*.

Let him go with the caution, "Don't do anything I wouldn't."

What was *that* supposed to mean?

He knew it was just a saying. But it didn't really make a lot of sense when you considered that he didn't know enough about Officer Chaney to judge what she might or might not do. All he knew for sure was that she was a local legend. Since coming to Malcasa Point about three years ago, she'd made a lot of arrests and she'd even been in gunfights. She'd shot half a dozen bad guys, killing a couple of them.

Don't do anything I wouldn't?

"Good one," he said quietly, and grinned.

Still shocked and amazed but feeling somewhat more calm, Mark came to the corner. He turned his head and looked toward Front Street, hoping to see Officer Chaney's car again. But it was gone.

He shook his head.

Continuing across the street, he found himself wishing that she *hadn't* let him go. If she'd busted him, he would've gotten to sit in the car with her. He would've had a lot more time to be with her.

Maybe she would've frisked me.

"Oh, man," he murmured.

But he supposed it was just as well that she'd let him go. Nice as it might've been, it would've wrecked his plans for sneaking into Beast House. He still wanted to go through with that, or at least give it a good try—even though Alison suddenly seemed a little less special than usual.

It's just temporary, he thought. Like sun blindness. After I've been away from Officer Chaney for a while, it'll all go back to normal.

"Eve," he said quietly. "Eve Chaney."

He sighed.

Hell, he thought. If Alison's out of my league (and she is), then what's Eve? Like a grown-up, improved version of Alison, and probably at least ten years older than me. Not a chance, not a chance. The best I can ever hope for is a little look and a little talk. With Eve, it'll probably never be better than what just happened.

Forget about her.

Yeah, sure.

He suddenly found himself only a few strides away from the dead-end barricade. A little surprised, he turned around. Nobody seemed to be nearby, so he waded into the weeds, descended one side of a shallow ditch, climbed the other side, and trudged through more weeds until he stood at the black iron fence.

Beyond it were the rear grounds: the snack stand; the outdoor eating area with chairs upside-down on tabletops; the restroom/gift shop building; and the back of Beast House itself.

He saw nobody.

~~The parking lot, off in the distance, looked empty.~~

Now or never, he thought.

After another quick look around, he leapt, caught the fence's upper crossbar with both hands and pulled himself up. The effort suddenly reminded him of gym class.

He struggled high enough to chin the crossbar, then hung there, wondering what to do next. He tried to go higher, couldn't. He tried to swing a leg up high enough to catch the crossbar with his foot, couldn't.

Muttering a curse, he lowered himself to the ground.

There's gotta be a way!

The rear side of the fence, extending along the eastern border of the lawn at the base of a hillside, was overhung in a few places by the limbs of trees outside the fence. Maybe he could climb one of the trees, crawl out on a limb to get past the fence, and drop inside the perimeter.

The limbs looked awfully high.

Climbing high enough to reach any of them might be tough. And if he succeeded, the drop to the ground...

He murmured, "Shit."

If only I'd brought a rope, he thought. I could rappel down. If only I knew how to rappel.

Screw a rope, I should've brought a ladder.

He'd heard that there were places where you could crawl *under* the fence, but he had no idea where to look for them.

There were also supposed to be "beast holes" in the hillside...openings that led to a network of tunnels. But he didn't know anyone who'd ever actually *found* one.

If only I'd brought a shovel, he thought. I could dig my way under the fence.

If I'd had a little more time to prepare...

I've gotta get in somehow! And fast!

He glanced at his wristwatch. Ten till nine. By nine thirty, the staff would start arriving.

He sighed, then hurried back to the street and broke into a run.

The last resort.

He'd intended to hop over the fence. While planning the details of his adventure, it hadn't seemed like such an impossible task. He'd seen people do that sort of thing all the time on TV, in movies, even in documentaries.

James Bond, he thought as he ran, would've hurled himself right over the top of a simple little fence like that.

Shit, Bond would've *parachuted* in.

As Mark ran, he realized that the *real* people he'd observed performing such feats in documentaries were Marines, Navy Seals, Army Rangers...not a sixteen-year-old high school kid whose idea of a good time was reading John D. MacDonald paperbacks.

What would Travis McGee do?

The fence would've been a cinch for Travis. But he might do what I'm gonna do.

The new plan was risky. He'd kept it in the back of his mind only as a last resort.

If all else fails...

All else *had*.

Nearing the front corner of the fence, Mark slowed his pace from a sprint to a jog.

If anybody's watching, he thought, they'll think I'm just running for exercise.

A car went by on Front Street. He glanced at it, saw the driver, didn't recognize him. A moment later, the car was gone and he found himself staring at the Kutch house in the field across the street.

The sight of the old brick house sent a chill racing up his back. He knew what had happened there. And he couldn't help but wonder what might *still* be happening within its windowless walls.

Old lady Kutch lived in there like some sort of mad hermit.

There were rumors of beasts.

Of course, there were *always* rumors of beasts.

The real things were probably long gone or all killed off.

But old Agnes Kutch was beast enough for Mark. Walking too close to her house late at night, he'd once heard an outcry...almost like a scream, but it might've been something else.

He looked away from the Kutch house and watched Beast House as he ran toward its ticket booth.

Bloodbaths had taken place inside Beast House. Men, women and children had been torn apart within its walls. But the place didn't seem nearly as creepy to him as the Kutch house. Maybe because he'd been inside it so many times before. Maybe because it was flooded with tourists day after day.

Looking at the old Victorian house as he ran alongside its fence, the place seemed almost friendly.

He slowed down as he neared the ticket booth.

Looked around.

Saw a car in the distance, but it was still a few blocks away.

He walked casually to the waist-high turnstile and climbed over it.

Easy as pie.

On his right was the cupboard where the cassette players were stored. It had a padlock on it.

He walked past the cupboard, stepped around the back of the ticket shack, took a deep breath, then raced for the northwest corner of Beast House.

CHAPTER SIX

In the area behind the house, Mark found several metal trash cans, one just to the left of the gift shop entrance. He dragged it a few inches closer to the wall, then climbed onto it. Touching the wall for support, he rose from his knees to his feet and stood up straight.

His head was only slightly lower than the roof.

This I can do, he thought.

He sure hoped so, anyway.

Not with the belly pack on.

Releasing the wall, he used both hands to unfasten its belt. Then he put one hand on the wall to steady himself. With the other, he tossed his small pack onto the roof. It landed out of sight with a quiet thump.

Now I *have* to get up there, he thought.

Hands on the roof, he leaped, thrust himself upward and forward and imagined his balance shifting, saw himself falling backward. But a moment later he was scurrying and writhing, digging at the tar paper with his elbows and then with his knees until he found himself sprawled breathless.

Made it!

He raised his head. His belly pack was within easy reach. The roof stretching out ahead of him had only a slight slope. A few vent pipes jutted up here and there. Near the middle was the large gray block of the air-conditioning unit, nearly the size of a refrigerator.

He picked up his pack, crawled over to the air conditioner and lay down beside it. Braced on his elbows, he looked around.

Nobody should be able to spot him from the ground. Anyone on the hillside would be able to see him, but people mostly stayed away from there. His main problem would be the back windows of Beast House itself, especially the upstairs windows. The air conditioner would do a fair job of concealing him, but not a *complete* job.

He was lucky to have the air conditioner. He hadn't known it would be here. Making his plans, however, he'd figured that the roof of the gift shop might be the only hiding place available to him.

He'd never intended to stay here all day, anyway.

He lowered his face against his crossed arms. Eyes shut, he tried to concentrate on his plans, but his mind kept drifting back to his encounter with Officer Chaney. He told himself to stop that. If he wanted to daydream he should daydream about Alison.

He imagined himself opening the back door of Beast House at midnight, Alison standing there in the moonlight. "You *did* it!" she blurts.

"Of course."

"I'm so proud of you." She puts her arms around him.

Some time later, Mark heard voices that weren't in his head.

He lay motionless.

Just a couple of voices, then more. Some male, some female. He couldn't make out much of what was being said, but supposed the voices must belong to the guides and other workers.

Soon, they seemed to hold a meeting. After a few minutes, it broke up and the voices diminished.

By the sounds of jingling keys and opening doors, he guessed that people were opening the snack

stand, the restrooms and gift shop.

~~Mark raised his face off his arms and looked at his wristwatch.~~

9:55

In five more minutes, the first tourists would start heading down the walkway to the front of Beast House. They would be stopping at Station One to hear about Gus Goucher, then entering the house and going into the parlor for Ethel Hughes's story. Then upstairs. There, the earlier portions of the tour took place in areas toward the front of the house. Not until the boys' room would there be a window with a good view of the rear grounds.

The first tourists probably wouldn't reach the boys' room until about 10:30.

Making his plans, Mark had figured that he ought to be safe on the gift shop's roof until then.

Might be pushing it, he thought.

After all, the tour's self-guided. He'd done it often enough to know that some visitors were more interested in seeing the crime scenes and gory displays than in listening to the whole story, so they pretty much ignored the audiotape and hurried from room to room.

Only one way to be *sure* nobody saw him from an upstairs window: get off the roof as soon after ten o'clock as possible. But he didn't want to leave his hiding place *too* early; he needed others to be around so he could mingle with them.

So he waited until ten past ten. Then he belly-crawled around the air conditioner and saw the dog.

His mouth fell open.

The dog, big as a German shepherd, lay on its side a few feet from the far corner of the roof. It looked as if it had been mauled by wild animals. *Hungry* wild animals that had disemboweled it, torn huge chunks from its body...

Where's its head? Mark wondered. Did they *eat* its head?

How the hell did it get on the roof?

Feeling a little sick, he belly-crawled toward the remains of the dog. He didn't want to get any closer, but it lay between him and the corner of the roof where he needed to descend.

Flies were buzzing around the carcass. It looked very fresh, though, its blood still red and wet.

Must've *just* happened, Mark thought. Not too long before I got here. If I'd shown up a little earlier...

His skin went prickly with goose bumps.

There didn't seem to be a great deal of blood on the roof under and around the dog.

This isn't where the thing got nailed, Mark thought. It must've been hurled up here afterward. *Or* dropped?

He found his head turning toward Beast House, tilting back, his gaze moving from the second-floor windows to the roof.

Nah.

A bear could've done something like this, maybe. Or a wildcat. Or a man. A very strong, demented man.

Suddenly wanting badly to be off the roof, Mark scurried the rest of the way to its edge. He peered down. Nothing behind the building except for a patch of lawn and the back of Beast House.

For now, nobody was in sight.

Mark swung his legs over the edge. As they dangled, he lowered himself until he was hanging by his hands. Then he let go and dropped. Dropped farther than he really expected.

His feet hit the ground hard. Knees folding, he stumbled backward and landed hard on his rump.

It hurt, but he didn't cry out.

Seated on the grass, he looked around.

~~Nobody in sight.~~

So he got to his feet and rubbed his butt. Walking casually toward the far back corner of Beast House, he removed the Walkman headphones from his belly pack.

By the time he arrived at the front of the house, he was wearing the headphones. The cord vanished under the zippered front of his windbreaker, where it was connected to nothing at all.

At least a dozen tourists were milling about the front lawn or gathered in front of the porch stairs. They all wore headphones, too. Not exactly like his, but close enough.

Mark wandered over and joined those at the foot of the stairs.

He stared up at the hanged body of Gus Goucher.

He'd seen Gus plenty of times before: the bulging eyes, the black and swollen tongue sticking out of his mouth, the way his head was tilted to the right at such a nasty angle—worst of all, the way his neck was two or three times longer than it should've been.

They stretched his neck, all right.

The sight of Gus usually bothered Mark, but not so much this morning. As gruesome as it looked, it seemed bland compared to the actual remains of the dog he'd just seen.

Gus looked *good* compared to the dog.

Gazing up at the body, Mark stood motionless as if concentrating on the voice from his self-guided tour tape.

A breeze made the body swing slightly. Near Mark, a woman groaned. A white-haired man in a plaid shirt was shaking his head slowly as if appalled by Gus or the story on the tape. A teenaged girl was gaping up at Gus, her mouth drooping open.

She didn't look familiar.

None of the people looked familiar.

Not surprising. Though plenty of townies did the tour, the vast majority of visitors came from out of town, many of them brought here on the bus from San Francisco.

Several of the nearby people, including the teenaged girl, clicked off their tape players and moved toward the stairs.

Mark followed them.

Up the porch stairs, past the dangling body of Gus Goucher, across the porch and through the front door of Beast House.

I'm in!

CHAPTER SEVEN

From now on, *staying* in would be the trick. To manage that, Mark needed a hiding place.

He glanced at the guide in the foyer. A heavysset brunette. Busy answering someone's question, she didn't notice him. He followed a few people into the parlor.

Though not here for the tour, he figured he should *look* as if he were, and try to blend in with the others. Besides, he really liked the parlor exhibit.

Ethel Hughes, or at least her wonderfully life-like mannequin, was a babe. On the other side of a thick red cordon, she lay sprawled on the floor, one leg raised with her foot resting on the cushion. She was supposedly the first victim on the night of August 2, 1903, when the beast came up from the cellar and tried to slaughter everyone in the house. It had ripped her up pretty good. Better yet, it had ripped up her nightgown.

The replica of her nightgown, shredded in precise accordance with damage to the tattered original (now on display in Janet Crogan's Beast House Museum on Front Street), draped Ethel's body here and there but left much of it bare. For the sake of decency, narrow strips of the fabric concealed her nipples and a wider swath passed between her parted thighs. Otherwise, she was nearly naked.

A year ago, taking the tour by himself, Mark had noticed that one of the strips was out of place just enough to let him see a pink, curved edge of Ethel's left areola. He'd gazed at it for a long time.

Today, nothing showed that shouldn't. He found himself staring at Ethel, anyway. So beautiful. And almost naked. What if a wind should come along...?

How? The windows are shut.

Cut it out, he thought. She's nothing compared to Alison or Officer Chaney. She's not even real. But she sure looked exciting down on the floor like that.

The image returned to his mind of the day he'd seen Ethel with the shred of cloth off-kilter.

Quit it, he told himself.

Only one thing mattered: hiding.

Late last night in his bedroom, Mark had pulled out his copy of Janice Crogan's second book, *Savage Times*. In addition to containing the full story of Beast House, along with copies of photos and news articles, it provided floor plans of the house. He'd studied the plans, used them to refresh his memory of what he'd observed during the tours, and searched them for a good place to hide.

So many possibilities.

Behind the couch in the parlor? Under one of the upstairs beds? In a closet? Maybe. But those were so obvious. For all Mark knew, they might be routinely checked before closing time.

He needed someplace more unusual.

The attic seemed like a good possibility. Though visitors weren't allowed up there, its doors were kept open during the day. He'd heard that it was cluttered with old furniture, even some mannequins that had once been on display. He could probably hide among them until closing time...if he could get into the attic unseen.

That would be the hard part. A guide was usually posted in the hallway just outside the second-floor entrance. And even if he should find the door briefly unguarded (maybe if he created a diversion to draw the guide elsewhere), he would hardly stand a chance of making it all the way to the top before being spotted.

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