

KEALAN PATRICK BURKE

"A MODERN CLASSIC" - FEARNET



KINN

Kin
Kealan Patrick Burke

Kindle Edition

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Praise for KIN

"If you're a fan of Jack Ketchum, Richard Laymon, or movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Deliverance*, don't miss *Kin*. Burke's novel not only re-imagines the classic slasher tropes, but invents new ones. *Kin* is sure to garner Burke a wider readership, awards, and to inspire a slew of new slasher novels and films. This is a modern classic, and I cannot recommend it highly enough." FEARNET

"It's odd that an Irish transplant to the Northern US has written one of the best Southern Gothic novels in recent memory. I'll look forward to Burke's next work just as much as I hated to see this one end. I would highly recommend *Kin* to lovers of old fashioned horror fiction with a twist." DARK DISCOVERIES

"...with this novel, Burke has fully arrived as a novelist...his talent running full throttle... *Kin* ends a long period of silence from Burke, and has me quite excited to see what's coming next. It gets my highest possible recommendation." OCTOBER COUNTRY

"THIS is serious horror fiction that has set a high standard for future stories in this subgenre. Don't miss it." THE CROW'S CAW

"The blurb will tell you that this is in the vein of the 'Texas Chain Saw Massacre' and 'Deliverance' and, while I can see what they mean, it doesn't do the book justice. This is not a 'slasher' book or a book that reads like a movie. This is far more. This is a novel that begins where the other stories end and explores the impact such horror has on the survivors, their family and, though we may not like them, the perpetrators of the horror." THE BIG THRILL

"Kin is not only the best novel I've read all year, it is one of the most horrifying ones I've ever read." – HORROR WORLD

"If you took the moral quandaries about revenge, justice and violence against evil from Dennis Lehane's Patrick Kenzie novels, spread it over the sprawling cast of a Stephen King thriller, and mixed it with the Southern Gothic grotesques of Eudora Welty, you might end up with something like Kealan Patrick Burke's new novel, *Kin*." LITSTACK

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing is a solitary pursuit, and yet one that so frequently depends on the generosity of others to make it work. With this in mind, my heartfelt thanks must go to Jennifer & Tyler Burke, Elaine Lamkin, Kathy Jewell, Tod Clark, my friends and family, and of course, you the reader.

For Doogie, and the staff at The Delaware County 911 Center



KIN

kealan patrick
burke

PART ONE

Elkwood, Alabama
July 15th, 2004

Everything is dead.

Naked, bloodied and stunned, the sun high in the cloudless sky and scalding her sweat-slicked skin, Claire Lambert nevertheless managed to note that the stunted, bone-white tree in the field to her right was the same one she'd commented on a few days, months, or years earlier, though what she might have said about it was a mystery now. She stopped walking—if indeed she'd been walking at all, for the sensation thus far was one of being still, spine bent, the road moving like a granite-studded conveyor belt beneath her torn and filthy feet—and squinted at the gnarled trunk, which looked like an emaciated mother with an elaborate wind-wracked headdress, twisted limbs curled protectively around its womb, knees bent, feet splayed and poking out from beneath the hem of a skirt that had been washed and worn a few times too often.

It fascinated Claire, and though she swayed as if she might fall on legs that had many miles ago ceased registering as anything but independent creatures burdened with her weight, she couldn't look away. Fire licked with cold tongues at her groin; the blood in her hair hardened, and whatever viscous substance now lay in a gelid, solidifying lump in the hole which had once contained her right eye ticked as if someone had replaced it with a watch to measure the time she had left. But still she looked, still she stared, as the merciless sun turned her scalp pink and cooked the flesh on her back. Sweat, cooler in the scant shade beneath her breasts, fell like tears. At length, she twitched, and her legs shuffled her toward the barbed wire fence that separated the field from the road. Cotton whispered in the breeze as her stomach met the wire, the barbs pressing deep into the skin; she felt nothing but an involuntary shiver. A startled bird exploded from the cotton with a cry that dragged her attention to its whickering form as it soared high, then lost itself in the blinding blanket of the sun. Claire lowered her head, licked dry, cracked lips with a sandpaper tongue and pushed again against the fence, unable to understand why her progress was being halted. Surely no one would begrudge her a conference with that tree, a taste of the maternal comfort she felt it might offer. Again she pushed, and again she was withheld. This time the barbs pierced her skin. Troubled, she took a half-step back, the black wire thrumming like a guitar string strummed by the breeze. A single drop of her blood welled from the iron tip of a barb and hung, suspended in time, refusing the sun, before it plummeted and colored crimson a finger of grass. Frowning, she looked slowly from the wire to the tree, as if the blame might lay with that withered woman, and tried to speak, to beg. A thin whistle was all that emerged from her parched throat—*Help me*—and she swallowed what felt like a handful of hot stones.

A sound.

She turned, reluctant to look away from the tree, but drawn by the only other noise she had heard thus far not immediately attributable to nature, or that soft voice inside her chanting incessantly and with tireless determination that everything was dead. A strand of her hair snagged on her lower lip and stayed there, held in a fissure where the skin had split.

Raging white light thundered toward her. Of this she was only dimly aware, for between that light and where she stood swaying, was a man with no face or hands. No, that wasn't quite right. Daniel still had his hands, but they no longer had skin and looked impossibly dark and raw. This didn't concern her, for rarely had he held her anyway—a lapse in affection of which she had once upon a time hoped to disabuse him.

Why won't you hold my hand?

Because we're not kids anymore, babe.

But at the sight of that flayed skull, a tear, like the blood on the wire, defied the sun and spilled from her one good eye.

"We can hitch a ride," he told her, though his lips never moved. The raw ragged open wound of his face, topped by a nest of unruly brown hair, turned to nod at the glaring light behind him, which had grown closer still. The mirrored sun floated above shimmering metal, the wheels grinding up thick mustard-colored clouds.

She opened her mouth to respond, to tell her boyfriend that they really should wait for the other but even had she possessed the voice to convey the words, a sudden bolt of dazzling pain tried to scissor her in half, forcing her to double over as she vomited into the dirt at her feet.

Everything is dead.

Her head swelled as she watched a dark red river flow from her mouth, turning dust to rust and splattering her ankles. The veins in her neck stuck out in thick cords, her ruined eye began to burn and throb, making it feel as if her brain was trying to force its way out of her, to distance itself farth from this confusing reality than she had thus far managed on her own.

Weakened, she dropped to her knees, felt the ground abrade the skin there. But there was no pain. Her flesh had become a thick heavy coat, and the many tears in the lining affected her not at all. Her palms slid into the dirt.

The sound of squealing might have been of old hinges in the doors of the earth opening to accept her; it might have been her own struggle to breathe against a torrent of vile regurgitated panic and grief, or it might have been the brakes on the car she'd seen coming because now a new voice, a strange voice, drifted down to her sunburned ears as a figure eclipsed the sun and a cool shadow was thrown like a blanket over her bare back.

"Jesus, Mary'n Joseph'n all the holy saints," it said. "What happened, Miss?"

It's them, she thought feebly. One of them come to take me back. To hurt me again. It was the same knowledge that had kept her going this far, the unmistakable feeling of being watched, stalked, hunted, meant to die but breathing still.

She shook her head to deny him. Opened her mouth to speak but only blood emerged, the river sickness forcing her throat to swell. Still she tried to struggle, but when she raised her hands to protect herself, it happened only in her mind. Her limbs would not respond. The pair of dusty boots that had pressed into her field of vision moved away.

Good. Go. Leave me alone. You've done enough. Everything is dead. You killed them all.

"Christ, Pete, get me that 'ol dog blanket an' the flask. Move!"

At last the dizzying current ceased and she found strength enough to raise her head. The man was a wiry knot of shadow under a crooked hat, a scarecrow with a golden halo, trying to deceive her into thinking him salvation. Dread pounded at her chest, igniting further knots of pain that seemed to radiate from the core of her.

Another shadow sprouted from the man's shoulder, this one just as thin, but without a hat, just fuzz of hair.

They're here to kill me.

"Oh God, lookit her eye."

"Shut your fool mouth, boy."

"What happ'ned to her? She ain't got no clothes on." The voice was filled with nervous excitement.

The hatless shadow was elbowed aside. The thin one flapped its arms until its chest became wings, descending around Claire, swaddling her.

"Help me carry her."

She opened her mouth to moan at the sudden, terrible heat enveloping her and felt new warmth seep from between her legs. The dirt turned dark quickly.

"Pa she done wet hers—"

"Now."

Before the arms could press their wings even tighter around her, Claire took a series of quick, dry, painful swallows, then drew in a breath that sounded like nails on a blackboard, and screamed for Daniel. But even as that tortured, awful noise poured out of her, and though she was surrounded by shadows that were lifting her up and carrying her back to Hell, she knew for the first time in her life that she was well and truly alone, and that no help was coming now, or ever.

-2-

The smell of burned flesh, though only a figment of his imagination, made Luke's mouth water. He was hungry, his dinner having been interrupted not a full hour before by the sound of Matthew keening from the woodshed. It had reminded him of that day when they were kids, when Luke had observed his younger brother trying to skin a deer they had taken down with a bow and arrow. Luke had known the excitement and desire to prove himself would lead Matt to make a mistake, and he had been right. With a wide smile on his face, and sweat on his brow, Matt had held up the fistful of pelt he'd managed to free from the deer, his other hand still digging that Bowie knife into the carcass as he sought approval from Luke. *Told'ya I could*. Before Luke could satisfy him, the pelt slipped free of Matt's grip and the momentum made his other hand snap back. The blade cut a thin half-inch-deep groove through Matt's bare side, just below the ribs. Luke doubted it hurt very much, but it was enough to send his brother to his knees, hands grabbing fistfuls of hair as he vented his shame and disappointment in that irritating singsong keening sound—the same sound he'd used earlier today after the blonde woman drove a wooden spur through his chest.

Anger made Luke forget himself and he rose from where he'd been crouching atop a grassy hillock. Up ahead, an old black man and his boy were helping his brother's attacker into the back of a flatbed truck. Helpless to do anything but watch, he'd been tracking the woman on this road, which few fo

ever traveled, biding his time before he closed the distance and dragged the woman back to make her pay for what she'd done. Rage had made him abandon the traditional rules of running down the quarry and he'd stayed on the road, in full view of the woman. She hadn't seen him, and was moving slower than a crippled coon. Even if she had looked over her shoulder and spied through the heat haze his lean, sinewy form striding toward her, there was no chance she'd get away. She was bleeding a lot, and he didn't figure she'd get very far.

It should not have been a difficult task.

But damned if she hadn't kept on staggering away, her pace even despite her obvious disorientation. It was as if, instead of just floundering blindly through the woods, she'd been drawn to the road like a piece of iron filing to a magnet. Still, he hadn't hurried. There was no need. He'd been confident despite the ache that throbbed steadily within him whenever it came back to him that Matt was hurt, and hurt bad.

But then Luke heard the truck, and noted the sound of the engine was not a safe, familiar one, and he'd quickly hopped the fence and ducked down in the grass, watching with queer, unfamiliar dread the red vehicle bearing down on the woman.

Claire, he remembered. One of the others had called her "Claire".

No one ever got away. Not for long. To let someone escape was an unthinkable, unimaginable mistake they had managed to avoid for as long as Luke had been alive. Papa-in-Gray had showed them how and what to hunt, and why it needed to be done, and they had executed his instructions flawlessly.

But today...

Today an implausible number of distractions had left Matt alone with the woman. Even so, she'd been tied to a stake, her hands and feet bound behind her, her mouth gagged. His brothers had already raped her and blinded her in one eye, cut off most of the toes on her right foot, and stabbed her repeatedly in the arms and legs. There should have been little life and even less fight in her, but yet somehow she'd managed to free herself and skewer Matt with the spur. She'd been gone damn near half an hour before Luke, oldest of his five brothers, heard Matt's pitiful mewling, and by then he'd already bled out on the floor.

He knew it was not too late. He could still try to close the distance between himself and the truck before they got the woman settled and the engine running again, before they carried *Claire* out of the woods for good, lives forever. If the two men he'd seen hefting her into the truck put up a fight, he'd deal with them. He had Matt's Bowie knife, plucked from his brother's hand with a vow to finish what the other had begun, denied the chance to do. Luke was quick. He could make it, and all their troubles would be over. All he needed to do was start running.

But then he heard the sound of the engine coughing, saw the dirty black plume of smoke puffing from the truck's exhaust, and knew it *was* too late. Slowly, he started moving toward the fence, and the road beyond. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, tear at his hair, rip at his skin, but instead he hopped the fence, and raced in the opposite direction, away from the truck, and back the way he'd come.

When he'd left home, Matt had been conscious. Breathing. Alive. That Joshua, Isaac and Aaron hadn't piled into the truck and come roaring down the road in pursuit of the woman told Luke that the might no longer be the case.

Most telling of all, Luke realized, was that *he* hadn't thought to take the truck. He couldn't drive for shit, not with the way his fingers were arranged, but that was no excuse. Not now. He had always been an efficient hunter, and he knew the real reason his brothers weren't coming was because they assumed Luke would handle what needed to be handled. But for the first time ever, they were wrong. He had lost them their prey. And he knew what that would mean when he returned home. He would have no answer to Momma-In-Bed, and she would not be at all pleased. And the last time she'd been mad at him, she'd gotten Papa-In-Grey to bust the fingers on his left hand and set all but the thumb and the

middle one wrong.

~~Dispirited and fearful, he slowed, and whispered a small prayer to God that she would go easy on him. But as the sun rose higher, became a blazing eye in the center of the cornflower blue sky, he knew two things at once.~~

God wasn't listening. Not to him. No more than Papa ever did.

And that today, there was every possibility that Momma-In-Bed would kill him.

*

"Stop starin'."

"Sorry, Pa."

"Watch the road."

Pete nodded and righted himself in the passenger seat. They had covered the girl with a tarp, which was all they had, but just now, through the small begrimed window at the back of the cab, Pete had seen that a corner of the tarp had come loose, flapping madly at the billowing dust the Chevy was kicking up and exposing the girl's right side, down to her hip. One small breast was visible and despite it being crisscrossed by cuts and scratches, the boy's breath had quickened, his heart beating faster and faster the longer he looked. He didn't even know if she'd been a pretty girl before whatever had happened to her. It was hard to tell because of her wounds, and the swelling, which made her face look like a beaten squash. He hoped she was, and that once she recovered—assuming she didn't die right there among the tools and empty chicken cages—that she might take the kind of interest in him he thus far been unable to excite in members of the fairer sex; maybe as a thank you for rescuing her.

Of course, it had really been his father who had plucked the wounded woman from the road, but Pete would be in no hurry to dissuade any misguided gratitude she might choose to throw his way the first few days of her convalescence. And it wasn't like the old man hadn't needed his help.

"What do you think happ'ned to her?" he asked his father again.

"Animals."

Resisting the urge to glance back over his shoulder again, Pete focused on the road being sucked beneath the old Chevrolet's grille. "Never seen an animal do that to someone," he muttered. "D'you see her eye?"

"She's gonna be all right," his father told him, but he had the same look on his face he got on those days when the wind was high and the clouds above their farm were black and mean and boiling and ready to send whirling devils down to tear their place asunder. "You just sit quiet now. We'll bring her to the Doc's. He'll fix her up."

"Think he'll be able to save her?"

Instead of responding, the old man reached out a withered hand and jabbed at the radio. Low twanging music and his father's long low sigh infiltrated the silence. A moment later, the sickly sweet aroma of burning tobacco filled the cab as his father touched a flame to the tip of a crumpled hand-rolled cigarette. It was a smell that comforted Pete, a familiar scent that always seemed to drift through his skull and stroke some sense into the wild dog of his thoughts. He smiled slightly and went back to looking out the window.

He didn't care if the wounded girl wasn't pretty under all that blood and other stuff. He wasn't much to look at either and didn't think it fair to judge others by standards he didn't meet himself. And he had a bad heart since birth, which he figured maybe explained why he was always so quick to hope that whatever wounded bird he encountered would view him as her savior and love him accordingly.

Repairing his flawed heart was not a job he would ever be able to do on his own, which, in a town like Elkwood—comprised mostly of hard-faced, hardworking men—meant his chances of dying young were better than average.

He wasn't afraid to die.

He was afraid to die alone.

At one time, Valerie Vaughn down at the grocery store had been the object of his fixation. She'd always been kind to him, and for a time, he might have loved her, until he summoned up the courage to confess as much and she'd folded in on herself like a deckchair with a bad leg, told him that was "nice" then went to great lengths to avoid ever having to talk to him again.

There were others, of course, all highly unlikely to ever give him the time of day, or stay around Elkwood long enough to see him as anything other than a not-so-bright farm boy with aspirations that didn't stretch farther than the town's borders.

Valerie had left, bound for Birmingham.

After that he'd quickly grown tired and discouraged by the amount of polite refusals or horrific rejections, the gleeful mockery and cruel teasing, and instead had taken his father's advice and focused on work at the farm.

And now they'd found an outsider—hurt, lost, and in desperate need of help. Help he could give her if she let him.

A nervous flutter in his stomach reminded him that all he was doing was setting himself up for more disappointment, more heartbreak, more blows to his fragile heart. *She's a stranger. She's prob'ly got a guy in some big city somewheres. She's prob'ly hitched. You're bein' a damn fool.*

As always, however, hope gave him the strength to ignore those warnings, and whatever reason or sense might have inveigled its way into them.

He smiled.

This one would stay.

He could feel it.

Luke knew there were three kinds of silence. There was the ordinary kind—when there was no one around to make a sound, like when he wandered down to the junkyard a half-mile from his home where they flattened and crumpled up the cars they decided they had no use for, after flattening and crumpling up their owners. That was where he went for peace and quiet, to gather his thoughts and sometimes to pray.

Then there was the kind of silence you heard when it only *looked* like you were alone, when someone was watching you, hidden and holding their breath. That silence was different, heavier because it was unnatural, forced. And it never lasted long. Luke had long ago learned that no matter

how clever, or scared they were, people were not good at staying quiet, even if it meant the difference between life and death. He had no idea how many of their victims might have gotten away, even for a little while, if they'd just held their breath a moment longer, or choked back a whimper or a sob, or just watched where they were going.

The third kind of silence was when you were surrounded by people, all of them staring without seeming to breathe, none of them moving or saying a word because what they had to say was written in their eyes, and that message was not good. This was the worst kind of silence, the most dangerous kind.

This was the one Luke found himself faced with when he finally made it home.

A light rain had started as he'd crested the hill and started down the slope toward the house, as if God himself had chosen a side, and it wasn't Luke's. From his elevated position, he'd been able to see that the rain had not discouraged his brothers. Joshua, Isaac and Aaron were standing in a ragged semicircle in front of the house, facing him. Matt was a dark bundle lying in the mud before them, and there was no doubt that he was dead. He was on his back, shirt soaked with blood, eyes glassy and open, staring unblinkingly up at the rain coming down. Luke stopped a few feet away from him. "When?" he asked, as though it mattered. He was speaking merely to break the silence, which had already begun to coil like morning mist around him.

"Soon's you was gone," Aaron told him eventually, a hard edge to his voice. No grief at all, but plenty of swallowed pain. "Where's the girl at?"

Luke shook his head, unable to meet his brother's eyes. He did not want to see in them the disgust, the fear, and the relief that Aaron was not likely to suffer the same degree of punishment for letting the girl escape as he would. He almost expected his brothers to ask how she'd evaded him and where he thought she might have gone, but of course they didn't. It didn't matter now. Very soon they would have to uproot themselves and find someplace else to settle down, a task that, despite Momma-In-Bed's insistence that they not tie themselves to anything or indulge in luxuries they couldn't move at a moment's notice, would not be easy. It would mean a lot of hard work done quickly, all the time looking over their shoulders and listening for the sound of sirens. It would mean a new kind of silence for their family: an absolute absence of sound that might at any moment be broken by the enemy, by the Men of the World, as Papa called them, threatening the only world they knew.

"Momma-In-Bed wants to see you," Aaron said. "Tole me to tell you soon's you got back. 'Straight away,' she said. 'Don't even stop to make water. I want 'im in my room, soon as you see his face,' she said."

Luke finally looked up, and his younger brother's long narrow ashen face, made longer by the close cut of his dark hair, was grim. He couldn't tell if Aaron was getting any satisfaction from being the bearer of such a message, nor did he thank him for it, for they were not given to gratitude. Acknowledging it only risked opening themselves up to empathy for their victims, who were so often uncannily good at trying to evoke it from them.

"I'll go see her then," Luke answered, and took one last look at Matt, lying there looking perfectly at ease with his death, the picture of calm marred only by the small rusty-red puddles forming in the mud around his body, the deep dark puncture wound in his chest, and the scarlet rivulets meandering their way toward where Luke stood watching. "You boys go start the fire."

The twelve-year-old twins—Joshua, who could speak just fine but seldom did, and Isaac, who'd had his tongue cut out when he was nine years old for cussing at Papa-In-Grey—both nodded dutifully and hurried off toward the barn where they kept the stacks of old wood, a fragment of which the girl had used to end their brother's life. In the rain, they were going to need kerosene to get the fire to catch, so Luke mumbled instructions to this effect to Aaron and watched his brother lumber off, shoulders hunched, toward the small ramshackle shed with walls of badly rusted corrugated iron where they

hung and skinned one of the girl's friends.

Then, with a shuddering sigh, he knelt briefly in a puddle of Matt's blood, and said a short prayer intended not solely for the dear departed, but for himself too. He asked for forgiveness, and courage, but didn't wait to find out if either had been bestowed on him. Somehow he doubted it. Far too much had gone wrong for him to expect any mercy from God or anyone else.

Luke rose up and started up the steps into the house.

*

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, Doc Wellman finally emerged from the bedroom he had once shared with his wife until her death in '92. Nowadays he slept on a tattered sofa in his living room, and always with the TV on and the volume turned low. He couldn't sleep without it. It was all he had for company. That, and the few patients willing to travel thirty miles outside of town to see him. He had witnessed much in his lifetime, not the least of which was the slow and painful decay of his wife in those endlessly long weeks before the cancer finally took her, but it was clear from the deathly pallor on his face as he stood before the old black man and his boy, that he had never seen anything quite like this.

Driven by equal parts excitement and impatience, Pete stood first, leaving his father sitting alone on the small wicker bench in the hall. "She alive?" the boy asked, searching but not finding the answer in the aged doctor's expression.

Wellman was so thin his limbs were like broom handles snapped over someone's knee, his chest deflated accordion topped by a long face writhing with wrinkles in which small blue eyes, magnified by a pair of rimless spectacles, shone with surprising alertness. Those eyes looked troubled now as they found the boy's face. Pete had expected to be ignored, that whatever the doctor said would be directed toward his father, and so was pleasantly surprised to find the doctor addressing him directly. "Yes," he said in a quiet voice. "She is, but barely."

"Will she make it?" Pete persisted.

"I think so, though she's lost quite a bit of blood."

The boy let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Who did this to her?" Wellman asked, frowning. "I can't imagine anyone..." He trailed off, and put a hand to his mouth as if censoring a line of thought that would yield answers he preferred not to hear.

"Animals," Pete's father said again, as if he'd been programmed to give that response whenever the question was put to him.

The doctor dropped his gaze from the boy to his father. "Not unless we got animals in this state can we work a knife, Jack."

Pete looked to his father to see how this news had affected him. It hadn't, or if it did, he was doing a fine job of hiding the fact. In the dull gray light through the windows in the hall, all he saw on the old man's face were shadows.

"No," Wellman said, "Wasn't animals did this. Poor girl's been cut up something terrible. Beaten too. She's got a concussion, multiple fractures, and a couple of busted ribs. Whoever took a blade to her used it to take out one of her eyes and lop off a few of her fingers and toes. If it was an animal, the wounds would be ragged, Jack. No." He sounded as if he didn't believe it was possible or didn't want to believe it, but knew there was no other explanation. "Someone real angry wanted her to die, and did it slow." He shook his head and touched a pair of trembling fingers to the small silver crucifix that hung around his neck. Then he sighed and stepped away from the boy. "Either one of you called the

Sheriff?"

Pete shook his head. "I guess we wanted to get her here 'fore it was too late."

"Well that was the right thing to do, but we'd best give Hal a call now. Need to tell him he's got some kind of lunatic out there running around chopping up women." He started to move down the hall but Jack stood and put a hand on his arm. Wellman looked at it like it was a strange species of exotic spider that had just dropped from the ceiling.

With a pained expression on his face, Pete's father leaned in close to the doctor and said in a low voice, "You can't. Not 'less you want more people in that room of yours tonight."

Puzzled, Wellman slowly withdrew his arm from the man's grip. "You know something I don't?"

Jack licked his lips and nodded slowly. "I do, but might be better if you didn't hear it." His gaze, which Pete was shocked to see was one of fear, dropped to the floor. "Now if you're sayin' that girl's gonna make it, I reckon me and Pete's done about all we can and we'll just head on home and leave her to you."

Wellman studied Jack's face. "What's going on?"

"Leave it, Doc. Please. It's the best thing to do."

"The hell it is, Jack. Someone's gonna be missing that girl and I don't know where to start. That Sheriff's work right there, and how's he gonna help if he don't know about it?" He glanced at Pete and a funny look passed over his face. "You boys didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

Pete felt as if he'd been punched. "Hell no, Doc. We found her just like that, honest we did. She was on the road, throwin' up blood. I reckon if we hadn't come along she'd be roadkill right now, or cooked in the sun. Me and Dad loaded her up and came right here, ain't that right?"

"That's right," Jack said, his gaze still directed at the floor as if something down there was of fierce interest to him. "This wasn't our doin'."

"But you know whose doing it was?"

Jack said nothing for a moment, then raised his head and looked hard at his son. "Go on out to the truck."

"But I want—"

"Now."

Pete knew it would be unwise to argue. He'd been on the receiving end of the back of his father's hand for less. But before he obeyed, he asked Wellman, "Can I come back'n see her?"

"If it's all right with your Pa."

"We'll see," Jack said, which Pete knew was as good as a "no", and stepped aside to indicate the boy needed to get moving.

"Thanks for patchin' her up," Pete said to the doctor.

The old man nodded. "Wouldn't have been a whole lot I could've done if you boys hadn't picked her up. You saved her life, I reckon."

"Will you tell her we was the ones brought her in?"

"Sure, son."

Reluctantly, the boy did as he was told, passing between the men and through an invisible cloud of their intermingled scents: sweat, tobacco, and disinfectant. Once clear of them, however, he took his time making his way to the door, pretending to admire the sparsely furnished interior of the doctor's house, hoping to hear just what it was his father knew, but they said nothing, obviously aware he was still within earshot. Aggravated by questions unanswered, he opened the front door and stepped out into the rain.

"You know I've got to report this, Jack."

"I know."

"Then you'd best give me a hell of a good reason why I shouldn't or that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Jack was afraid. Good sense had abandoned him over the past few hours and all because he'd had the boy in the truck with him. If he'd just left Pete at home, he could have done what reason and common goddamn sense had suggested and just kept driving when he saw the girl in the road. Sure, the guilt would have weighed heavily on him later, but that was what whiskey was for, and it wouldn't be the first round of it he'd had to deal with. After sixty-one years of hard living, he'd gotten pretty good at sweeping things under the rug and stomping them down until they were easier to walk over than studs. But he knew the boy wouldn't have let it go. He was too simple, too unaware that there was a great big gray area between right and wrong, especially when it meant putting yourself in harm's way. He had not yet been educated on the kind of monsters who preyed on Samaritans.

Jack had spotted the girl before Pete, but had kept his mouth shut, even tried to distract the boy so he might miss it, told him it looked like a storm if those thunderheads coming over the hills to the left of them were anything to go by. He should have known the boy would catch on. He rarely said two words to his son unless he had to—in all his years he'd never truly learned how—and certainly wasn't given to idle banter, so instead of looking out his window at the clouds, and away from the girl, Pete frowned and looked at his father instead. And from there, his eyes had drifted to the crumpled form on the side of the road. Even so, even when Pete had grabbed Jack's arm hard and pointed at the girl, he considered just stepping on the gas and telling the boy what he was telling the doctor now.

"It's just...trouble, Doc."

"What kind of trouble?"

Jack searched for a way to say what he wanted without saying too much, but his mind was a jumble of unfinished thoughts and burgeoning panic. It needed numbing. He ran a hand through his hair and looked beseechingly at Wellman. "You got somethin' to drink?"

The doctor nodded. "Come on into the kitchen."

In the strained light of the ageing day, Pete inspected the rust-colored stains on his fingers, then held them out to the rain. It was strange to have her blood on his skin, something she would not have shared with him had the choice been hers. A secret she was not yet aware he'd been let in on, a part of her she might not yet know was missing. When they were wet enough, he withdrew his hands and rubbed them together, then wiped them on his jeans. It made him feel a little sad, almost disrespectful.

as if her blood was of little consequence to him, like dirt he was anxious to be rid of. Nothing could be further from the truth. As he lingered before Doctor Wellman's door, still hoping to overhear something of the discussion inside, but thus far unable to make out much over the grumbling distant thunder and the hiss of the rain, he wished he were inside. Not with the men and their whispering, but in the girl's room, if only so she would have someone there when she woke up. He hated the thought of her being alone, as she had been alone when they'd come upon her, as she must have felt when her attacker had done those horrible things to her. Alone, helpless, lost. It made his heart hurt to think of her that way.

Stepping out from the shelter of the porch, he narrowed his eyes against the rain and looked at the truck. It stared back, headlights dull, chrome fender long past gleaming.

Pete dug his hands into his pockets. *You don't even know her.* He exhaled through his nose. He wondered how long his father would be inside. He was a man of few words, so Pete guessed it wouldn't be long. Then again the way he'd looked in the hall, all wrapped up in himself, made it seem as if he had plenty to tell.

He glanced to his left, at the two windows at the front of the doctor's house. The window to the girl's room would be somewhere around back.

Leave her be.

Knowing he was probably making a mistake, and one that might get him in a world of hurt and trouble, he nevertheless ducked low and moved away from the truck, toward the corner of the house.

*

They sat facing each other at a small square table, which had once worn a lacy tablecloth, but was now bare and scarred. Since his wife's death, Wellman hadn't seen the need for those little touches that made ordinary things look pretty, not when the only thing he had ever considered pretty was buried in a cold, uncaring earth. He offered Jack the bottle of Scotch and watched the man pour himself a haughty glass.

"Do you know who did this to her?" He accepted the bottle but did not take his eyes from Jack's face as he filled his cup.

"Not for sure, no," the other man said, before taking a draw from his glass that almost emptied it. "I mean...I didn't see 'em do it, or nothin', but..."

"Go on," Wellman urged when it seemed the man had snagged on his own thoughts.

Rain pattered at the window. The single bulb above them, hooded by a floral glass shade that was the room's sole concession to decorativeness only because the doctor couldn't for the life of him figure out how to remove it without breaking it, made their shadows long and blurry. It was not yet night, but plenty dark, almost as if Jack Lowell and his boy had brought it with them.

"You remember those kids that went missin' years back?"

Wellman nodded. "Backpackers. Couple of guys and their girls. I remember."

"Yeah. You remember the big fuss around here at that time. Kids were rich. Once their folks found out that Elkwood's where they'd last been seen alive, they came down here like an army, put their screws on the Sheriff pretty bad. Newsfolk and everythin'."

"That's right."

"I saw those kids." He joined his hands around the glass. There was dirt caked beneath his nails, his grubby fingertips touching.

Wellman sat back. "When?"

"Gave 'em a lift that day. Saw 'em all out there on the road, in that heat, sweatin' like a buncha hogs. Felt kinda bad for 'em, even though no one in their right mind should be out walkin' in that kinda heat. So I told 'em to pile in. Took 'em as far as the General Store, though it were closed. Even offered to take 'em farther if they wanted. They didn't. Heard one of 'em say the truck smelt like cowshit. 'Nothin' one said I was like somethin' outta *Deliverance*, whatever the hell that is."

"A movie," Wellman told him. "'About a bunch of hillbillies who hunt some city folk."

Jack considered this for a moment, then smiled, but only briefly. "Yeah. Anyways, I left 'em there and they went missin' soon after."

"So you didn't see what happened?"

"No, but my place's only about twenty miles from the store. Only other house 'tween here and the store is the Merrill's. Out there in the woods past the river." At the blank look on the doctor's face he said, "They don't come into town much. Keep to themselves. They have a junkyard. Hunt their own food. Buncha brothers, far's I know. Heard there used to be a sister too, but for all I know that might be just talk. Only one I ever seen in town is their old man, and he's a scary lookin' sumbitch. Has a way of lookin' at you...like he's lookin' *inside* your skull or somethin'...readin' your thoughts or..." He trailed off, and drained the glass.

Wellman refilled it. "So you think they had something to do with those kids going astray?"

"I do."

"But...why? They could've gone anywhere. Might even have passed your place that day and you just didn't see them."

Jack raised his glass a little, tipped it in gratitude, and took a sip. Then he smacked his lips and stifled a belch. "I called the Sheriff a few weeks later when I heard those kids' folks was in town asking questions. Told 'im what I thought, even though there weren't no good reason for thinkin' it other than a bad feelin' I got every time I passed that damn place. So McKindrey comes over, tells me he'll go out there and ask some questions. See if the Merrills know anythin'."

"And did they?"

"Dunno. He never went out there, or if he did, he pretended he didn't. But the night after I called him tellin' him what I knew, or thought I knew, I woke up to find Old Man Merrill standin' in my room with a big rusty lawnmower blade to my throat." He finished the drink, set the glass before the doctor, who filled it without hesitation and slid it back.

"Thought I was dreamin' 'bout Death itself, I swear. He was wearin' dark clothes: long coat, and one of them hats like the preachers used to wear." He raised his hand and made a twirling motion with one upraised finger in front of his face. "Big hat. Couldn't see his face. And he were tall. Least I think he was, but I guess anyone standin' in your room at night with a blade to your throat with only the moonlight showin' you he's there's gonna look tall, right?"

"Right," Wellman agreed, and noted the other man's hands had started to tremble.

"He says to me, and I'll never forget it: 'I don't want to kill a good, Godfearin' man like you even though you is just an old dirty nigger with a big mouth, but I won't hesitate to cut out your tongue if you keep spreadin' lies about my family.' He told me his boys never did nothin' they weren't forced to do to protect themselves and the family, and never would. Said they respected our boundaries and we should respect theirs."

Jack swallowed, eyes cloudy with the memory. He took a long drink of his whiskey, and it could have been water for all the effect it had on him. "I dunno what came over me, but I sat right up there despite that big ol' blade at my throat, and I told him to get the hell out of my house. He stepped away and raised an arm that looked like it belonged to a scarecrow, and pointed at my bedroom door. I looked, saw a boy standin' there holding hands with Pete, who weren't more than a little kid himself at the time. He looked sleepy, standin' there in his underpants, wonderin' what was goin' on, and who the

kid holdin' his hand was. And I couldn't tell him, couldn't say nothin' because that other kid, the Merrill kid, was holdin' a huntin' knife in his other hand and lookin' at me like he knew exactly how to use it, like he *wanted* to use it."

"Jesus..." Wellman said, and removed his spectacles so he could wipe a hand over his face. "Jesus."

"Merrill asked me if we had ourselves an understandin'." He shook his head slowly, and finished his drink. "I told him we did, and he left. Mussed up my boy's hair on the way out as if he were nothing more than some 'ol kind uncle come to visit. I didn't sleep for weeks after that. Sat up with my shotgun and moved Pete's bed into the livin' room where I could watch over him."

"You tell the boy any of this?"

"Told him it were a dream. Didn't see the sense in scarin' 'im any worse."

"They shouldn't have gotten away with that, you know. No one should get away with that kind of thing. Not in this day and age."

Jack looked up from his drink. "I ain't never told no one what I just told you, Doc, but I'm tellin' you now because you wanted to know why I didn't want you callin' the Sheriff. Even if you do, he'll tell you he'll take a look, but he won't, 'cuz I reckon he's just as scared of 'em as I am. Maybe they paid him a visit one night, told him what they told me. But if *they* find out, it might be *you* they come see me. You understand now?"

Wellman nodded slowly. He wasn't sure how much of Jack's story he should believe. It was the madness what he'd been told, but then hadn't he witnessed firsthand the very worst kind of madness and desperation the world had to offer three years before when he'd been summoned to operate on Alice Niles, a fifteen-year-old girl who'd tried to burn her unborn baby out of herself with a blowtorch, believing it to be the spawn of Satan itself? That particularly frightening conviction had come about by courtesy of the girl's mother, Lynn, after she discovered her own husband was the baby's father.

What Jack had said scared him, even worse than the realization that had he not refused Alice Niles' anguished request to aid in the abortion, she might not have felt compelled to take the torch to it. That scared him more, because something had occurred to him that he wasn't sure he should say aloud for fear of terrifying Jack more than he already was. Assuming it hadn't already dawned on him.

What if they saw you, Jack? What if they saw you taking the girl?

*

She was sleeping, but it was not a peaceful sleep. Even over the rain that sizzled around him and the wind that had risen, even through the thick glass, Pete could hear her moaning low in her throat. One hand was flung over her brow; the other twitched spasmodically every few minutes. Doctor Wellman had washed her cuts and bandaged her eye, or rather the hole where her eye had once been, and put icepacks on her cheeks to help ease the swelling. She looked a little better now, but not much. She was still naked—he could tell by the shape of her, and the raised points of her nipples beneath the material, the sight of which caused something within him to stir—but the sheets were pulled up to her chin, as if she was cold. There were bloodstained cloths, swabs, and a kidney-shaped metal dish full of dark red water on a stand by the bed. Next to these, laid out on a blood-spotted white towel, a variety of steel instruments gleamed like shiny letters surrounded by wild crimson periods.

As Pete watched, consumed with the sudden urge to go back inside and bring her another blanket, she slowly turned her head toward him, as if following the flight path of a bird in a dream, and he almost ducked down beneath the sill for fear she'd wake and see him peering in at her like some kind of peeping tom. But he waited a moment, then straightened, his face pressed to the glass.

~~Who are you?~~ he wondered, smiling slightly as he cocked his head to see better through the rivulets of rain streaming down the pane. ~~Where d'you come from?~~ He pressed his fingers to the glass, wishing it were her skin he was feeling beneath them, knowing her flesh would be infinitely warmer. He closed his eyes, confused by this yearning for someone he didn't even know, and not for the first time chiding his foolishness. But the warmth inside him countered the uncertainty. She would wake, and she would need a friend, that was all there was to it. And if they forbade him his visits to see her, then he would sneak out. He had done it all the time for Valerie, even if she'd never learned that he'd been watching her, looking in on her from time to time like a guardian angel. On reflection, that had probably been for the best. She hadn't loved him anyway.

He wondered if it would be different this time.

The rain hammered the glass and needled the back of his head like nature's way of opposing such foolish thoughts, and he opened his eyes. The cold trickling down the nape of neck chilled him as he checked to make sure his father or Doctor Wellman hadn't suddenly appeared at the door.

The coast was clear.

Thunder made a sound like barrels tumbling down a stairs.

Pete turned back to the window, saw that the girl was awake, and watching him, and his mouth fell open.

A split second later, he was surprised when the girl did the same.

Then she screamed.

"They'll come looking for her, you know. Someone will come looking for the girl. If not the cops then her family, and even if by some miracle they don't, she's going to wake sooner or later and she wants to go home."

Jack nodded his understanding and wiped tears from his eyes. "I know that. When she's able, you best just put her on a bus home. Though it might not be wise to keep her here longer than you need to. Take her to a hospital, soon. Tomorrow mornin'. Tell 'em you found her on the road and patched her up best you could. They'll get the cops involved and figure somethin' out for themselves."

Wellman finished his drink. "And you don't think it will all lead back here?"

"Doesn't matter if it does. We won't know nothin'."

"I will, Jack, and I'm a lousy liar."

"You won't know more than that you found her by the road. Half-truth's better than none, ain't it? And the girl'll be in good hands."

"Then what? Think they won't go poking around by themselves? And I'm only a doctor, not a surgeon. I can patch her up, but I can't give her what she needs."

Jack put his hands to the sides of his head and squeezed, as if hoping to compress the frustration.

"Then drop her off somewhere. Drive into Mason City, leave her by the—"

~~A sudden terrifying shriek made them both jump. Jack's right hand flew out and knocked over his empty glass. It rolled toward the edge of the table but he caught it in time, then looked in desperation at the doctor, who rose and swallowed.~~

Overcome by panic, nerves frayed, "Why?" Wellman asked. "After all you've said, why did you *bring her here?*"

Jack stared dumbly. He had no ready answer, only unspoken apologies for an act he knew had endangered them all.

Pale-faced and trembling, Wellman hurried down the hall.

A moment later, Jack quickly and quietly stood and headed for the front door.

*

The face vanished from the window. It didn't matter. Whether or not she could see them, Claire knew they were close. She could smell their suffocating stink—a mixture of unwashed bodies, blood, and engine oil. She screamed, and would not stop screaming, because despite what they had told her, despite what they had whispered lovingly into her ear, their noxious breath warm against her skin, *someone would come. Someone would hear.*

Casting a fearful glance at the window, empty now but for the rain, she felt a dazzling burst of pain and pain as she remembered being tied to the stake, remembered the feel of them taking turns as they violated her, tore her asunder, tried to reach the part of her she was keeping from them, the only part of her they still, after all their torturing, hadn't yet destroyed.

Her soul.

As if on cue, her ribs seemed to tighten, her lungs cutting off the breath required to carry the scream, and it died, became an airless croak that drained her. Searing pain chewed on her extremities as if despite the warmth that lay upon her like an invisible lover, she was suffering from frostbite. Her body jerked of its own volition; her teeth clacked together hard enough to send a bolt of fresh, clean, glassy pain to her temples. In her right eye, through which she could see nothing, a smoldering ember ignited anew, and she tried to scream again, as her hands—*wounded hands bandaged bleeding hands*—flew to the burning epicenter of her suffering and found no blood, no damage, only a soft, slightly damp gauze. She began to weep, and felt consciousness reel away from her, then back again as if she were on a swing. Slowly, like fires lighting in the dark, other sites of pain registered across the terrain of her body, reaching toward the surface of her skin with flaming arms. Her back arched and she opened her mouth, but the scream she could hear in her ears stayed trapped in her throat. Her skin felt scalded.

Madness danced through her, offering itself up as an alternative to the unbearable suffering, and she grunted, pummeled by invisible fists of pain, and tried to listen.

Any minute now, that soothing velvet voice told her. *Any minute now they'll be back with their knives and their ropes and their filthy things, ready to do to you what they did to...to...*

She closed her eyes, opened them again. Darkness in one; light in the other. The room seemed to jump and jitter every time she tried to focus. The rataplan of the rain at the window was designed to distract her, to make her believe it was the dirty finger of one of *them*, eager to draw her attention, but she didn't look, didn't care. The pain was too much now, and even that didn't matter because pain meant she was alive, and alive meant they hadn't done to her what she'd seen them do to the others, her friends, and she couldn't understand why they *hadn't* done the same to her, couldn't—

And then she did.

She hadn't let them.

She had escaped, survival instinct taking control of her, muddying her mind, narrowing her thoughts into one single inner cry of primal self-preservation.

Loosening rope burning her wrists. The dimwitted single-minded smile of her captor, as he tugged down his pants with trembling hands. Claire, arching her back away from the stake, spreading her legs, exposing herself more fully, watching his eyes drop to the raw wounded lips there. Come on, come take it you dirty fuck. Her fingers fumbling, tips jabbed by the sharp point of a sliver of wood from the haphazardly stacked pile behind her and to the left. Reaching, weeping, gripping... Come closer. Swaying her hips despite the pain, the degradation, watching his fascination as he approached his stubby cock springing free from his shorts, the tip glistening. Come closer...The memory of her friends, of what had been done to them, the black fire seizing her, the pain, the anguish, the horror...the rage. Come on! Then he was there, leering at her, hands outstretched to paw her breasts and her own hands were suddenly mercifully free, the rope falling to the floor. His mouth opening, eyes reluctantly leaving her body, frowning as he realized what that severed snake of rope on the floor meant, then a moan, low in his throat as she snatched the wood, swung it around and...

She had fled them in a dream, and woken now to find that was all it had been, for wherever she was it was no place she knew, no place she wanted to be. It was a bed, and had it been an earthen one she might have understood. But the sheets were clean where she hadn't bled on them. The room was tidy where there were no instruments and knives.

Knives.

Squinting, hissing through her teeth at the pain, she raised herself up on one elbow, and like a barrel full of rocks falling on its side, the pain seemed to tumble through her, settling in one half of her body, adding weight to the arm she was using to hold herself up. She took a series of short painful breaths, the light grew hazy and spun away from her, then she slowly, slowly opened her eye fully, willing it to focus on the small metal tray by the bed.

Knives. Lots of them, some still wet with her blood. The tools they'd used to fix her, sew her up so they could tear her stuffing out again.

She tried to smile but her lips felt like taut rubber, so she settled for a huffed laugh and the momentary surge of warmth that almost dulled the pain in her chest at the thought of what she was going to do with that knife—a scalpel, she noted.

Any minute now...

Yes, any minute now, they would barge into the room, those dirty seething bastards, but no matter how fast or how strong they were, they would not get her again.

They would not get a second chance to kill her.

Because she was going to do it for them.

As he approached the girl's room, Wellman heard the front door slam shut. Jack was gone, and that was good. His account had shaken Wellman, threatened to drain him of his resolve, imbuing in him the temptation to just drive the girl ten miles up the road and dump her somewhere, to avoid whatever her presence might call down upon him. But he was not going to do that, felt guilty for even thinking it. Once the girl was fit to be moved, he would put her in his car and drive her into Mason City, to one of the hospitals there, and once she was checked in, his next call would be to the police. The girl would have to be identified, her family told where to find her, so they could begin the long and heartbreaking and arduous process of rebuilding their lives. He knew what that was like. He had been there himself. Hell, still *was* there, and he didn't envy them the journey.

What he didn't know was what would happen when he returned home after doing what he knew his heart was the right thing. Would the Merrill clan be waiting for him? Would they simply demand to know what he'd done with the girl, or would they already know, having forced the information out of Jack? Surely, if they were indeed responsible for what had happened to the girl, wouldn't they not be too busy uprooting themselves and moving elsewhere in anticipation of a major manhunt once she was found?

He couldn't think about that now. He was old, and he was scared, and given too much consideration the fear might consume him. All he knew was that he had watched a woman he had loved, still loved with all his heart, die in that room once and had never recovered from it, despite doing all he could to ease her suffering. He had prayed for Alice Niles's forgiveness the night he refused her request for help, and she had died too. He would not idly stand by and watch another human being perish if it was within his power to prevent it.

The screaming stopped.

He hesitated at the door, listening. The silence in the wake of her scream seemed bottomless, and unsettling. After a moment, he gently gripped the handle of the door and eased it open.

"Miss?" he asked quietly, like a bellboy afraid of disturbing a guest, which was, now that he thought about it, not all that inaccurate, for until she decided whether or not to live or die, he was bound to serve her.

He stepped into the room.

She was awake.

Steel gleamed just above the covers.

Her body convulsed, just as he saw the scalpel in her hand, just as he noticed the fresh blood on the sheets.

Rain sprayed the glass as he hurried to her side.

She looked at him, frowned slightly, her face the same shade as the pillow beneath her bandaged head.

"My name is Doctor Wellman," he said, struggling to keep calm as he sat down on the bed and gripped her wrist. He was relieved to see that she had not had the strength to make more than a superficial cut, but it was bad enough. "I'm here to help you. You've been badly injured." A quick inspection of her other wrist revealed a deeper wound. It was from this the majority of the fresh blood had come. Still looking at the dreamy puzzled expression on her face, he reached blindly out and tugged open the nightstand drawer, fumbled inside until he found the bandages, and began to unwind them from the roll. As he wrapped her wounds, a flicker of pain passed briefly over her face.

"Am I dead?" she asked him in a whisper.

He summoned a smile. "You're going to be fine."

"I shouldn't be. Don't touch me." The struggle she put up was child-like, and not hard to restrain.

without causing her further discomfort. After a few moments, the strength left her.

"Hush now," Wellman soothed. "I'm a doctor. I'm not here to hurt you. I want to help you."—

"Are they here?"

"Who?"

"Those men. They took the skin from Danny's hands. And his face. They pulled it off like it was a Halloween mask." Her breathing caught. Her face contorted into a grimace as a tear welled in her uncovered eye. "They hurt me. All my friends are gone. Everything is dead. Make it quick."

His smile faltered. "Honey, I'm not one of them. Listen to me now." He gently stroked her hair. "I'm a friend."

"All my friends are dead."

"How many were with you?"

She didn't reply. At length, she seemed to drift off to sleep, but whispered, "I have to die now. If don't do it, they will and I can't let them." Her eyelid fluttered. Wellman did not panic. She was going to die. He knew that. Her pulse, though weak, was constant. Her breathing was fine, her pupil no longer dilated. Unconsciousness was probably her only solace from the pain and the horror, and he permitted her the escape. While she slept, he wrapped her wrists and injected her with a dose of morphine in the hope that it would ease her dreams and numb the pain, at least for a little while. Then he set the tray with the instruments against the far wall, pulled a chair close to the bed, and listened to the rising wind trying to drown out the sound of her peaceful breathing.

He would wait a while for the bleeding to cease, before he sewed her up again.

Until then, he would pray.

And when he was done, he would take the girl to his car and head for Mason City.

We'll get you home, he promised.

-7-

Her room was in darkness.

Luke stood by the door, fists clenched so she wouldn't see them trembling, because even in the darkness he knew it would not escape her attention. The room smelled of sweat and bodily fluids, but he did not mind. It was his mother's perfume to him, and ordinarily soothing.

But not this evening.

Now he craved the smell of cooking meat and kerosene, of wood smoke and sizzling fat that would soon permeate the air outside as his brothers burned the bodies. It was a ritual he had been a part of for so long he had ceased to appreciate it. But he appreciated it now, would rather be drawing that pungent mixture of aromas into his nostrils than the smell of shit and piss and vomit that hung in the air in the small squalid room his mother called her own.

From the wide bed, shoved into the corner farthest from the window, where the darkness was thickest, he heard the sound of her moving, just slightly, maybe raising her head to look at him, to peer at him through the muddy gloom. The bedsprings did not so much creak, as whimper.

"Momma?"

"Boy," she responded in her bubbling voice, as if she was forever gargling.

"Momma I—"

"Come 'ere."

He pretended he hadn't heard because it was safer by the door, and that in turn made him feel guilty because he knew if he stayed here she would not rise up and come get him. She couldn't. In over twenty years she hadn't left that bed, not once, and in daylight, when the clouds covered the sun and the flies obscured the window, it was hard to tell where Momma ended and the bed began. It was all darkness.

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