

'If you've missed Laymon, you've missed a treat'

STEPHEN KING



RICHARD
LAYMON
OUT ARE THE
LIGHTS

Out Are the Lights

The Vampire movie came first - the girl died in a welter of blood as the vampire bit clean through her jugular...

The Inquisition came next - the victim confessed all as the spider crawled over her naked body...

Then came the story of the Ax-man...

This was the horror-movie series to end them all. Cinema buffs particularly admired the grainy amateurish camera work - it suggested the action was the real thing. But it couldn't be - could it?

... And *Out Are the Lights*, the short novel, and other terror stories...

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OUT ARE THE LIGHTS

*Out - out are the lights - out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall
Comes down with the rush of a storm.
While the angels, all pallid and wan.
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy 'Man',
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.*
-Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Conqueror Worm'

PROLOGUE

'You sure it's not haunted?' Ray asked.

The weathered, Victorian house cast a shadow over its weedy yard and Ray's Trans Am.

'Wouldn't that be rich?' Tina said. 'I've never seen a ghost.'

'This may be your big opportunity.' Ray reached for the door handle, but hesitated and looked again out the windshield. He gnawed his lower lip.

'Would you rather not stay here?' Tina asked. 'I mean, just because Todd offered to let us use it, we aren't obliged to stay. We could go someplace else if you want. A motel or something.'

'I guess this is all right,' Ray said.

'It's just old. He told me not to expect too much. He bought it as a fixer-upper.'

'When's he planning to start?'

Tina smiled. 'It might be wonderful, once we get inside.'

'I don't like those bars in the windows.'

'He's had a few problems with vandals.'

'So remote, out here I hope there's not a fire. An old place like this, it'd go up like paper. And those bars... I don't know, Tina. The place rubs me wrong.'

'You've seen too many movies, that's your problem.'

'Think so?'

'Let's at least have a look inside.'

'Why not.'

They climbed from the car. In the shade, the breeze from the ocean felt chilly on Tina's bare skin. She pulled the back of the seat forward, and leaned into the car.

'Let's just leave the groceries and stuff till we've had a chance to look around.'

'I'm getting my blouse,' Tina said. She found it wadded behind the picnic basket they used at the beach, and tugged it free.

Ray made a mocking pout as she put it on.

She grinned. 'I don't want the ghosts to see me in my bikini,' she said.

'Nothing worse than a horny ghost,' Ray agreed.

As she buttoned the blouse, Ray slipped a hand inside the seat of her bikini shorts. Her skin was moist from the damp swimsuit. His warm, dry hand felt good.

He started to take it out.

'Oooo, don't stop.'

He removed his hand, and patted her rump. 'Tempis is fighting. Let's have that look inside, and get going, it's a long drive to the nearest motel.'

'Maybe you'll just love it here.'

'Well, the price is certainly right. Have you got the key?'

'Right here.' She lifted her handbag off the car floor, and slung the strap over her shoulder.

They started across the overgrown yard.

'I think it's rather quaint,' Tina said.

'It is that, I suppose.'

They climbed half a dozen stairs to a roofed porch that extended along the entire front of the house. As Tina reached into her handbag, she saw the door's heavy brass knocker—a skull.

'That's Todd for you,' she said, grinning. 'It's no wonder he bought the place. It's so him.'

Ray didn't look amused. 'What's Todd; a ghoul?'

'He's really rather nice.'

'Is he?'

She hunted for the key, face toward the door to hide her grin. Ray could be so childish, sometimes. It was fun to bait him, but she knew she'd better back off. If she went too far, he might start his silent treatment.

She found the key. 'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be.'

She pushed it into the keyhole, and turned it. A bolt clacked back. She pushed the door open, enjoying the groan of its hinges.

'Naturally they squeak,' Ray muttered.

'We oughtta spray this sucker with WD-40 before we go. That's fix his wagon.'

That brought a grin from Ray.

It's all right now, she thought.

She stepped into the dim foyer, glimpsed someone beside her, and lurched back. She collided with Ray.

Laughing, he caught her in his arms. 'So who's the nervous one?' he asked, and nodded toward the wall mirror. 'Jumping at your own reflection.'

She snapped the waistband of his swimming trunks.

'Big deal,' she said. Then she turned away from him, and looked around. 'The place is rather dismal,' she admitted.

Ray flicked a switch. A ceiling light came on. 'At least there's electricity.'

Tina moved to the front of the staircase. The steps were narrow and steep. At a landing, halfway up, they angled to the right and vanished. 'The bedroom's probably up there,' she said.

'You go ahead. I'll wait here.'

'Ha, ha, ha.'

'Do you want me to lead the way?'

'If you please.'

He shut the front door, and started up the stairs ahead of her. 'Watch out,' he warned. 'Mirror ahead.'

She yanked his trunks.

'Don't!' He grabbed them at his knees. 'Want me to trip?'

'Then don't be such a wiseguy.'

'Sorry, sorry,' he said, pulling them up.

'Nice ass,' Tina remarked.

'Thank you.'

'Cracked, though.'

At the top of the stairs, they came to a narrow hallway. The only windows, at each end, were hidden with heavy red drapes.

'Charming,' Tina said.

'Your friend's a great decorator.' Ray found a light switch. Dim bulbs came alive in sconces along the walls.

He tried a door. It was locked. 'Great,' he muttered. 'Hope that isn't the john.'

He tried a door on the other side of the hall, and glanced at Tina as the knob turned. He pushed the

door open. The room was bare.

Tina shrugged. 'He's got an austere taste in furniture.'

'I'll say.'

They found two more empty rooms, then the bathroom.

'We're in luck,' Tina said.

They stepped inside. When she saw the enormous tub, she smiled with delight. 'Oh, this is great.'

'No shower.'

'But look at the size of that! Look, it's even got legs. Must be a real antique. Boy, I can't wait!'

'You don't really want to stay here!'

'Let's see if there's a bedroom.'

'If there's no bedroom, can we leave?'

'Then we can leave.'

They left the bathroom. Tina hurried ahead of Ray and opened the last door on the right. 'Voila!'

'Shit,' Ray muttered. He came up the hall, and looked in.

'Now this isn't so shabby, is it?'

'It's all right,' Ray admitted.

Tina kicked off her sandals and walked across the soft thickness of the carpet. 'Ain't shabby at all.' She hopped onto the king-sized bed and marched on its mattress, surveying the long dresser, the armoire, and her own image in the big wall mirrors.

Ray watched her, a grin slowly coming to his face.

'I think this'll do just fine,' she said. 'Don't you?'

'It's not bad.'

'Better than some dippy motel, right?'

'Right.'

She flopped backwards and sprawled on the mattress.

Smiling languidly, she opened the buttons of her blouse.

'Maybe we'd better take a look downstairs,' Ray said.

'Right now?' Slipping off the blouse, she rolled onto her belly. She pressed herself against the soft quilt. Reaching back, she untied her bikini top.

'Right this moment?' she drawled.

And grinned at the warm touch of Ray's hands.

Tina eased away from Ray's warm, sleeping body. She was reluctant to leave the bed but the room was nearly dark and she was hungry. Ray would probably wake up famished. It'd be nice if she had supper on the stove when he got up.

If there is a stove.

She slipped out of bed, picked up her blouse, and stepped silently over to a window. Through the grill-work, she looked down at Ray's car. She could just bring in the grocery bags, and let the luggage wait.

They'd better bring in the suitcases soon, though.

A thick, gray bank of fog was rolling in from the coast. It already hung in the trees near the highway. When it got here, they would want heavier clothes.

She stepped away from the window and glanced at Ray. He was still asleep, his tanned back dark

against the white sheets. She slipped into her sandals. Carrying her blouse, she went to the door.

~~Before stepping into the hallway, she looked both ways. She caught herself doing it, and rolled her eyes. What'd she expect, for Christsake, traffic?~~

She started down the hall toward the stairs. Ray had left the lights on. The candle-like bulbs in the wall sconces weren't very bright. They made a menagerie of dim shadows as she walked down the hall. Shadows within shadows, overlapping and chasing one another along both walls. Watching them, she flapped her arms and twirled. The shadows went crazy. She kicked and spun, swinging her blouse wildly overhead.

A low, moaning sound jerked her to a stop. She stood motionless near the stairway, listening.

The sound, she thought, had come from behind the door-the first door at the top of the stairs, the one they'd found locked.

Feeling suddenly timid and vulnerable, she put on her blouse. She buttoned it, her eyes fixed on the door.

Her hand tightened around the knob.

What if it's not locked now? she thought.

She pulled her hand away.

She backed up, watching the door, a tightness clutching her stomach as she half expected it to swing open. Then she turned from it and rushed to the bedroom.

'Ray?' she called into the darkness. Her hand searched the inside wall for a light. 'Ray!'

'Huh?'

She found it, and snapped it. A bright light came on above the bed. Ray sat up, squinting.

'What're you doing?' he asked.

She hurried forward. 'Let's get out of here.'

'I thought-'

'I heard something.'

He threw aside the sheet, sat on the edge of the bed, and reached for his swimming trunks on the floor. 'What'd you hear?' he asked, pulling them on.

'Sounded like a moan.'

'Jesus!'

'Could've been my imagination, I guess.'

'But what if it wasn't?'

'I know.' Flinging through the sheets and blankets, she found her bikini. She climbed off the bed and stepped quickly into the brief pants. She stuffed the top into her handbag, and hurried after Ray.

He stopped in the doorway.

'Where'd you hear it?' he asked.

'The end of the hall. By the stairs. I think it's in the room with the locked door.'

'Christ, that means we've gotta go past it!'

'Maybe it was nothing.'

'Let's run. We'll run right by, and down the stairs, and out.' He took his car keys from the small, side pocket of his trunks. 'Ready?'

'I guess.'

'Okay, let's go!'

He burst ahead of her into the hallway. Tina ran hard, trying to catch up, but Ray was a dozen feet in front of her when the door near the stairway flew open.

A man leaped out, black cape billowing, fangs bared.

CHAPTER ONE

'*Heads, You Lose*. It's playing at the Haunted Palace, over near Lincoln. You know, the theater that was closed for so long. It used to be the Elsinore.'

Connie nodded. She remembered the Elsinore. She'd gone there many times, before it closed. It was an old place, built in the days long before they made theaters like lecture halls—long and low and sterile, three or six to a building. This one's interior had ivy covered walls like a castle, battlements and turrets, and a high blue ceiling speckled with stars. It had been well named. The Elsinore was Hamlet's castle.

'Can I go with you?' Connie asked.

'If you want,' Dal said. 'It's not the kind of movie you like, though. I've heard it's awfully gory.'

'Well...' *He wants to go alone*, she thought. She forced herself to smile. 'You're probably right. You go on ahead.'

'You sure?' he asked.

He wants it definite. His conscience must be bothering him, though not enough to make a difference.

'Yeah,' she said. 'I'm sure. I wanted to wash my hair tonight, anyway.'

'Well, okay,' he said, sounding reluctant.

'What time's it over?'

'I ought to be home by midnight. It's a double feature.' He kissed her quickly, and she smelled the scent of the cologne she'd given him for his birthday.

'You'll be the best-smelling guy at the movies,' she told him.

For an instant, he looked flustered. 'Oh yeah, that.'

'Bring me some candy?'

'Sure.'

'Good 'n Plenty.'

'Okay, if they have it. See you later.'

'Have fun. And don't get too scared.'

'Me?' He winked, and left.

Connie stood by the door, disappointed and wondering what to do with herself. It seemed strange having to face a night alone. Strange and sad, almost like the times before Dal.

Which hadn't been so long ago, really. They'd met only six months before, and he'd moved in two months after that. They'd been together almost every night since then.

Well, he deserved a night on his own. She shouldn't mind. It's healthy to be alone sometimes.

He's with people all day long, at work. Forced to be polite to everyone, including the creeps who come into the store from time to time—creeps he told her about through taut lips, his eyes narrow with anger.

Connie had none of that. Alone in her apartment all day with her typewriter, she met only creeps on her own devising. She dealt with them ruthlessly, and enjoyed it. By three o'clock, though, she was used up. The next three hours, she spent in solitary waiting.

Waiting to see the face of another human being, the only face that mattered much in her life.

anymore.

~~She crossed the apartment to her bedroom, and began to undress for a bath.~~

I spend my days in solitary, she mused, while Dal's among the madding crowd. At night, we each need a different cure.

I shouldn't hold it against him if he wants time by himself. I shouldn't feel rejected.

But I do.

Her satin robe felt soft on her bare skin. She tied its belt, and went into the bathroom. As the tub filled, she let the robe fall away. She stepped into the water. It wrapped around her ankles, almost too hot. It stung, at first, when she sat down.

The tub filled. She turned off the faucets. With a sigh, she eased herself backwards. The water roared over her, hot and soothing, until only her face and upthrust knees remained above the surface.

This is not so bad, she thought.

She shut her eyes.

Better than sitting in a cramped, stuffy movie theater. A lot better than that.

Dal drove past the Haunted Palace, and kept on driving. The steering wheel was slick in his sweating hands. The armpits of his shirt were soaked.

Well damn, she was worth sweating over! He'd never seen a woman he wanted so much.

When she strolled into Lane Brothers that afternoon, Dal couldn't take his eyes off her. She walked toward him, a creamy, pleated skirt caressing her legs, her breasts obviously bare under a loose, velvet top that trembled, just slightly, as she moved. Lush, brown hair swung at her shoulders. It brushed the sides of a face so striking that Dal ached.

She stopped in front of him. He stared into her green, clear eyes.

'May I help you?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, and paused as if to let him savour the liquid whisper of her voice. 'I want a man with cologne.'

'Anything in particular?' he asked.

'I want it masculine, but subtle.'

He nodded. 'Would you like to step over this way?'

Moving sideways towards the counter, he let his eyes drop to the woman's hands. She wore no wedding ring.

'We have a new fragrance called Ram. It's quite popular.'

'I like what you're wearing.'

He smiled and blood rushed to his face. 'My cologne?'

'Yes.'

'It's...' He cleared his throat, 'it's called Rawhide. It's new from-'

'Let me,' she said. Fingertips lightly touching his chest, she leaned toward him. Her face moved close to his neck. He felt her breath. 'Yes,' she said. 'This is just what I want.'

He licked his dry lips. 'Will there be anything else?' he asked.

'Yes.' Her lips brushed his neck, and she whispered, 'You.'

Thinking back as he drove toward her house, Dal could hardly believe it had happened. It was almost like a dream.

Damn lucky I didn't faint, he thought. He laughed nervously.

All day long, he'd relived those moments with her, analyzed them, wondered at times if it was only a hideous, cruel joke. But who would pull a stunt like that?

No, it couldn't be a joke. It had to be real.

Had to be!

Please God, let it be real.

Waiting at a stop light, he took out his wallet and found the slip of paper with her name and address: *Elizabeth Lassin, 522 Altina*. He put it back.

Altina Road was halfway up a wooded hillside of the Highland Estates, a plush area north of town, an area way out of his financial range.

Not necessarily out of Connie's, though. She could easily afford one now. If her next steamy historical romance ('rape epics', she called them) sold like the others, she'd start looking in the vicinity.

Dal had planned to stick with her-marry her, if necessary.

Until today.

Until Elizabeth.

Lovely Elizabeth. For her, he would gladly give up Connie. God, what wouldn't he give up, for her?

For even one night with her.

For even one hour!

He found the address, and swung into a long, circular driveway. As he drove toward the lighted veranda, he gazed at the house. It looked like a southern plantation house-scaled down a bit, but nonetheless elegant. A fitting home for a woman like Elizabeth.

He parked. He climbed from his car. He walked toward the door. He reached toward the lighted doorbell button.

And stopped.

Bet she doesn't live here, he thought. *Gave me the address as a joke. Get the guy worked up, toy with him, lots of laughs.*

Damn her! If she did a shitty thing like that...!

He jabbed the doorbell.

It rang.

God, this probably is her house!

He rubbed his sweaty hands on his pants legs.

She'll probably laugh at me.

Christ, why didn't I bring her something? Flowers, wine...

'Cause I'm a klutz.

Oh shit, why didn't I...?

The door opened and she stood in the dimly lighted foyer, her bare feet on the marble floor, her body draped in a white chiffon dress that hung on her like a wispy veil, the mild breezes shifting

against her skin. Her lips were moist and slightly open, her eyes intense, almost fierce.

'Kiss me,' she said.

I'm dreaming, Dal thought, and stepped across the threshold.

CHAPTER TWO

The line in front of the Haunted Palace moved swiftly once the box office opened. Pete Harvey shuffled forward. Brit stuck close, a hand inside the back pocket of his jeans, a breast pushing soft against his arm.

She was a bit clingy for Pete's taste, but he let her. If a gal clings, she has a reason. She's just more afraid, than some, of getting left behind.

At the ticket window, he bought two tickets from a teenaged girl with straight black hair and white make-up. Supposed to look like a vampire, he supposed. She wore a black T-shirt with the logo BEWARE OF SCHRECK.

'Your hairdresser?' Pete asked.

The girl laughed. 'It's a wig, and itchy as hell.'

Pete moved along. He gave the tickets to a fat man in red-stained pants and undershirt, a nylon stocking over his head. His face, pale and weirdly mashed, looked grotesque enough to make Pete uneasy.

'Isn't he a charmer?' Brit whispered, 'I think he's overdoing it.' She hugged Pete's arm. 'Scared you didn't he?'

'He looks like someone I used to know.'

'Oh?'

Pete nodded, and wished he hadn't brought it up. 'How about some popcorn, or Bon Bons, something?'

'Do you think I dare?'

'You're skin and bones.'

She leaned against him, nudging him again with that breast. 'Do you prefer your women plump?'

'Plump and juicy. I'm having popcorn and a Pepsi, how about you?'

'I'll have a hot dog.'

Pete laughed. 'Are you serious?'

'A plump, juicy hot dog.' She licked her lips. 'I can almost taste it now.'

He bought the snacks from another pale girl in a *Schreck* T-shirt.

The auditorium was dimly lit.

'Hey, it looks like a castle,' Brit said.

'The Haunted Palace.'

'Pretty neat.'

'Where do you want to sit?' Pete asked.

'A little closer, I think.'

'An aisle seat all right? I like to stretch out my legs.' He switched to his W. C. Fields voice. 'Trip the little bastards as they toddle by.'

'Oh, you're terrible!'

'It's better than my Bogart.'

'That's not...' Laughing, she shook him by the arm.

'Don't rip it off.'

'Come on.' She pulled him toward a seat.

He went along with her, amused but irritated. If he saw more of her, after tonight, he would have to straighten her out on a few items. For now, though, he wouldn't try to criticize her unless she got unbearable. Dragging him like a leashed dog nearly qualified, but he held off.

'Are these all right?' she asked, once they were seated.

'Fine.'

She unwrapped her hot dog. 'Now, tell me. Who did the fat man remind you of?'

'He reminded me of the bird. The black bird, and a beautiful dame, and-'

'Right, your Bogart stinks.'

The lights dimmed, saving Pete from a reply.

On the screen, he saw a fog-shrouded forest. A terrible scream brought silence to the theater. Something moved among the trees. Slowly, the dim figure of a man appeared. He limped forward through the fog.

The fat man who'd taken the tickets.

He wore the same tan slacks, the same sleeveless T-shirt. They streamed with blood. In his right hand, he held a hatchet dripping gore. A nylon stocking distorted his face.

'Good evening,' he said. 'Welcome to the Haunted Palace.'

'Freaky,' Brit whispered.

'I am your host, Bruno Blood.'

Laughter in the audience.

'Each night, I shall bring you a feast of hideous delights, tales of horror to make you cringe and scream. You'll see all the best in grisly entertainment. Not only the latest gems of satanic morbidity, but also the great classics of the past. In weeks to come, I shall bring you such fare as *Halloween Freaks*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Rabid*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *The Night of the Living Dead*.'

Whistles and applause greeted his announcement. He held up his bloody hatchet for silence, as if he foresaw the audience reaction.

'Plus!' he bellowed. In a soft and menacing voice, he continued. 'Plus a special treat available only at the Haunted Palace. Each night, in addition to the regular features, you'll witness the evil, delicious exploits of Otto Schreck, the madman—a new depravity each and every week.'

The audience roared with yells, whistles, and applause. *A lot of regulars*, Pete figured.

'Schreck must be quite a guy,' Brit whispered in his ear.

Pete shrugged.

'And now,' Bruno said, 'prepare yourself for tonight's show. Sit back, take hold of a friendly hand, and...' He grinned. 'Don't look to see who is sitting behind you.'

The audience went wild as Bruno turned, and slowly limped away until he vanished in the fog.

The screen went dark.

'Is *Schreck* first?' asked a girl behind Pete.

'It's after the feature,' a boy whispered. '*Heads, You Lose* first, then *Schreck*, then *Nightcrawlers*.'

'Three?'

'*Schreck*'s a short. Ten, fifteen minutes. Just wait, though. It'll be fabulous.'

The first movie started. Brit tossed her hot dog wrapper to the floor, grinned at Pete, and squeezed his thigh.

CHAPTER THREE

Taking Dal's hand, Elizabeth led him down the hallway to a bedroom. She pushed the door shut. The room was dark except for lights from the pool in back.

'Isn't it lovely?' she said. 'We'll go swimming later, if you like.'

He watched her walk across the carpet and open the sliding glass door. A breeze entered the room stirring her gown. The lights from the pool passed through it, making the material nearly transparent. Breathless, Dal gazed at the dark, slender shape of her legs and buttocks.

'You're beautiful,' he whispered.

She looked over her shoulder, turning slightly, her breasts visible through the veil of fabric. 'Come here,' she said.

He stepped toward her.

She turned to him. 'Don't move,' she said. Slowly, her fingers opened the buttons of his shirt. Her hands slipped inside, and lightly caressed his chest.

She drew the shirt off him. Her mouth brushed his chest, kissing, licking his nipples, as her hands unfastened his pants. When they were loose, she reached inside.

Dal moaned at the cool touch.

'You're so big,' Elizabeth murmured. 'So big and hard.' She knelt, sliding the pants down his legs. Her tongue stroked the underside of his shaft. Its touch nearly set him off.

He stepped back.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' he gasped. 'Nothing. It's just... too much. I don't want to... not so fast.'

'There'll be more,' she said. Reaching out, she clutched his buttocks. She pulled him forward, and licked, and sucked him deeply into her mouth.

Connie, alone in her apartment, felt restless. After bathing, she washed her hair and put it in curlers. That took little more than an hour.

She heated up coffee, carried it into the living-room, and tried to read. Though her eyes moved over the words, her mind kept wandering.

To Dal.

She felt cheated, being left alone this way. Especially on a Friday night.

Ever since high school, Friday nights had been a time for dating and fun, a time for football game dances in the gym, parties, bowling, movies, or just bumming around with her friends on the lookout for a good time. Friday nights brought a terrible urgency for freedom after a week of confinement, need to get out and do something.

Here I am, she thought.

Alone, at home, hair in curlers-stuck here on Friday night with nothing to do but bemoan my outcast fate.

She would never allow Sandra Dane such a miserable situation. Sandra Dane, the beautiful raven-haired mistress of White Oak plantation, wouldn't sit here grumbling. She'd rush out to the stable and mount her stallion, and ride wildly through the moonlit countryside, the wind in her face.

She wouldn't go out in curlers, though.

Connie got up from the couch. Taking off her robe, she went into the bedroom.

Where'll I go? she wondered. Since I don't have a stallion...

A nice, long walk.

She opened a dresser drawer, and pulled out her blue warm-up suit.

Seven-Eleven's open all night.

She stepped into her pants. They felt soft and snug.

It's pretty far away, she thought, but right on Pico. A heavily travelled boulevard like Pico shouldn't be very dangerous, even at night.

She put on the jacket of her warm-up suit, zipped it halfway up, and regarded herself in the mirror.

That's how Sandra Dane would wear it, she thought.

Sandra, of course, is rape-prone.

Rape-prone. Shit. Not funny at all.

Bending down to tie her shoes, she saw her jacket bulge open, revealing her entire left breast.

No way.

She zipped it to her throat, and headed for the door. With her handbag slung over her shoulder, she stepped outside.

From the balcony, she saw that someone on the ground floor was having a party. All the other apartments, she imagined, were deserted.

People out enjoying themselves.

As she trotted down the stairs, she pulled up the hood of her jacket to hide her curlers.

Fine way to spend a Friday night, she thought.

I should've gone with Dal, whether he wanted me or not.

Elizabeth bent over the bed, and pulled back the covers. She lay down on the white sheet, her arms and legs outstretched.

'This time,' she said, 'I want to look at you.'

One of her arms curled toward the headboard. Directly over the bed, a light came on—a low-hanging light like those Dal had seen over pool tables. Though it left the rest of the room in shadow, it cast soft light on the bed, and on Elizabeth.

Dal climbed onto the end of the bed. He crawled slowly, sliding his hands up the smoothness of her spread legs as he looked at her. At her solemn, intense eyes, at the painful beauty of her face. At her slim neck, and the hollows above the bows of her collar bones. At breasts, so full when she was upright, now low against her chest, pulled by gravity and her arms stretched overhead. The nipples looked almost brown. He fingered the firm, rumpled skin. Elizabeth squirmed. He moved his fingers down the softness of her breasts and along her ribs, and over a pale ridge of skin.

A scar.

Six inches long, running diagonally down her belly.

Dal drew his finger gently along it.

'Operation?' he asked.

'Without the benefit of a surgeon,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'My husband, bless his heart, opened me up with a carving knife.'

'My God,' Dal muttered.

~~'He thought I'd been unfaithful.'~~ She folded her hands behind her head, and frowned toward the ceiling. 'He was such a jealous man. He was far older than me, and incredibly wealthy, so I concluded that I'd only married him for his money. Which wasn't true at all. I loved him, I truly did, even when he made my life unbearable.'

'The harder I tried to convince him of that, though, the more certain he grew of my infidelity. He followed me, he eavesdropped. He saw proof everywhere, in everything I did. At one point, he hired a private investigator, then accused the investigator of having an affair with me.'

'It must've been horrible,' Dal said.

'It wasn't pleasant. He beat me constantly. With fists, with his belt. His favourite whip was a extension cord.'

'Why didn't you leave him?'

'I loved him. I always believed that someday, somehow, he would finally come to realize he had no reason for his jealousy. But it didn't work out that way.'

She propped herself up on her elbows, and stared into the darkness.

'One night, he tried to kill me. It was our sixth anniversary. I'd given the housekeeper the day off, so we could be alone. I expected him home at seven. He was a lawyer, and very successful, as you can see from all this. I realized, sometime around six, that we had no champagne. So I threw on some of my clothes and drove over to Vendome. On the way, I saw an ambulance in my rearview mirror. I pulled off the road to let it pass. The shoulder was rough and littered with debris, and I think that's where he picked up the nail. I drove on to Vendome, and bought the champagne. But when I returned to the parking lot, my front right tire was flat. One of the clerks changed it for me. By the time I got home, though, Herbert was already waiting in a rage.'

'Here it was, our anniversary, and I only went out to do something nice for him, and he had the gall to accuse me of adultery. "Who were you fucking?"'

'I'd had it. I threw down the champagne bottles so they shattered all over the foyer. Herbert slapped me, and kept yelling, "Who? Who were you fucking!"'

' "I didn't catch his name," I said. "But he was young and handsome and hung like a horse."'

'Herbert turned away. I knew I'd hurt him, and I was glad. He'd finally gone too far. Then I heard him crying. He was in the kitchen, sobbing like his heart was broken. I went to him. His back was toward me. I put my hands on his shoulders. Before I could say a word, he turned around and slashed me with a knife.'

Dal saw her eyes lower to the scar on her belly. She stared at it as she continued.

'I ran. He chased me upstairs with that knife, but we had pictures on the wall. Framed portraits. At the top, I jerked one down and swung it at him. The corner of the frame hit him in the face, and he fell down the stairs.'

'I went to him, but he didn't move. He just lay there, staring up at me. The fall-it broke his neck.'

'Did he die?' Dal asked.

Reaching out, she took Dal's hand. She guided it to the slick wetness between her legs. 'Don't talk. Fuck me. Fuck me, now. Put your cock in me, and fuck me till I scream.'

Connie enjoyed the long walk to the Seven-Eleven. It felt good to be out in the night air, walking briskly, sometimes slowing down to look at the window display of a closed store. At times, she forg

about Dal, forgot that he had abandoned her for a couple of horror movies.

~~In the Seven-Eleven store, she stepped over to the rack of paperback books. She spun it, glancing covers, until she found Barbary Rage, 'a lusty tale of passion on the high seas'. She flipped the front book forward, and saw only one behind it. Two left. Last week, there'd been four.~~

Not bad, not bad.

Someone tapped her shoulder. She swung around.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' the young man said. He had a friendly smile and a pale, almost invisible moustache.

'It's all right,' Connie said.

'I thought you were somebody else.'

'No, I'm just me.'

He laughed. 'From the back you looked... well, I thought you were an old girlfriend.'

'Sorry,' Connie said.

The boy shrugged.

She turned again to the book rack, and studied paperbacks for a minute. When she looked around the boy was standing at the end of a long line, a six-pack of Michelob at his side.

Must be older than he looks, she thought.

He was still in line when she left the store. She crossed the street, and looked back. A girl in shorts and a halter top came out, a small sack in her hand.

Connie walked away.

Had the boy, she wondered, been trying to pick her up? If so, he hadn't been very persistent.

Should've tried harder, pal.

Tonight, I might have been willing. Serve Dal right.

She kept walking. Farther and farther from the apartment. With no destination in mind until she remembered the liquor store next to Safeway. She might as well stop in there, see if they'd got her book in yet.

She walked for blocks. Finally, she reached the liquor store. But she didn't go in. She stood on the sidewalk, staring across the intersection and down the next block at the lighted marquee of a movie theater.

The Haunted Palace.

Dal thrust and thrust, driving into her. She was wild under him, gasping, shoving up to meet his thrusts, fingers digging into his back. Their sweaty bodies slapped together.

They rolled, and she was on top. He clutched her breasts, squeezed and mauled them. Her face was sweaty and contorted

above him. She twisted, writhed as if trying to grind his spike deeper into her slick tightness, impacting herself on it, ream out her hugging sheath.

Connie glanced at the movie posters, at the grim, coloured stills above them. The girl in the ticket window was reading a paperback.

Clever, Connie thought, *dressing her up like a vampire.*

She looked at the posted showtimes.

A triple feature?

No, the one in the middle, *Schreck the Vampire*, was only a short.

She glanced at her wristwatch.

Schreck the Vampire should be starting soon.

Wouldn't Dal be surprised if she went in, and sat down beside him?

He might be pissed, though.

What if he's not alone, if he's sitting with his arm around a girl...?

No. He wouldn't.

But the fear of it was enough to keep her from entering.

She looked again at the showtimes. Nightcrawlers would be next, after the vampire thing. The Heads, You Lose came on again, at 11:20.

Give him five minutes to drive home.

So she could expect him by 11:25 or so.

As she walked away, she wondered if he would remember the Good 'n Plenty.

'Shall we go for a swim?' Elizabeth asked.

'That'd be great. I think I'll hit the john, first.'

Elizabeth smiled strangely. She sat up. and pointed into the shadows across the room.

'See the doorway?'

'I think so.'

'It's right through there.'

Dal climbed from the bed. He walked over the thick, soft carpet toward a patch of darkness deeper than the shadows.

'Don't trip,' Elizabeth said.

He looked back at her. The bed and Elizabeth were closer than he expected, so bright and starkly clear in the overhead lamp that he could see the red marks his mouth had left on her skin.

'I'll try not to,' he said.

He stepped into the doorway, bumped a dark shape, and lurched backwards. 'What the hell!'

'Here, let me get it out of your way.'

Elizabeth leaped from the bed. She rushed to Dal's side, patted him on the rump, and stepped past him. Leaning into the doorway, she pulled something forward.

Then she turned on the bright, fluorescent lights of the bathroom.

'Jesus!' Dal gasped.

The withered, bald man in the wheelchair blinked his eyes.

Elizabeth grinned. 'Dal, I'd like you to meet my husband, Herbert. He likes to watch. I know he must enjoy it.' She patted the old man's cheek. Patted it hard. 'You do enjoy watching us, don't you, Herbert?'

SCREAM GEMS PRESENTS OTTO SCHRECK

SCHRECK THE VAMPIRE

Near the head of the coffin, two black candles burn. They are in a statue's stone hands. Only blue stubs remain of the candles. The hands of the statue are clogged with black. The mouth gapes with silent agony. The eye holes are empty.

Bones litter the dirt floor of the cellar. The small, fragile bones of rodents. Bigger bones. Of dogs and cats. Of humans.

In a shadowy corner of the cellar, a human rib cage trembles. A rat, inside it, waddles up the spine column. It squeezes underneath a collar bone, pauses, then moves up the neck and climbs onto the pale, hanging jaw.

The jawbone breaks loose. The rat tumbles. It starts towards the skull again, but stops and raises its head at the faint, rumbling sound of an engine.

The engine goes silent.

In front of the house, a woman climbs the porch steps. She is young and cute, her blonde hair windblown, her legs bare under the tails of a plaid blouse.

A slim, dark-haired man follows her up the stairs.

Smiling, the woman searches her handbag and takes out a key. 'Ready?' She opens the door, enters and leaps back against the man. He hugs her, laughing.

'So who's the horny one?' he asks.

She tugs open the waistband of his swimming trunks. 'Aren't you?'

The woman turns toward the stairway. 'The bedroom's probably up there.'

She follows him up the stairs. As they climb, she suddenly jerks his swimming trunks. They drop from his pale buttocks.

'Don't!' He clutches them. 'Want me to trip?'

'Then don't be so damned handsome.'

'Sorry, Mary.' He pulls up his trunks, and continues to climb.

'Nice ass.'

'Thank you.'

'Cracked, though.'

At the end of the upstairs hallway, she pushes open a door. 'Voila!'

He hurries to join her.

'Now this isn't so shabby, is it?'

'It's all right,' he says.

Leaving her sandals on the carpet, she says, 'Ain't so shabby at all,' and leaps onto the bed. She walks on the mattress, hands on hips, turning to look at the room. 'I think this'll do just fine, don't you?'

The man grins.

Mary falls backwards, bouncing slightly as she hits the mattress. With a seductive smile, she opens her blouse.

The man steps toward her.

Out of the blouse, she rolls over and unties the back of her bikini.

~~The man bends over her. He strokes her back. He kisses her between the shoulder blades.~~

In the cellar, black gummy wax drips from the hands of the statue. The candles are nearly spent. Their flames waver and stretch, as if struggling not to die.

The rat crouches beside the coffin, nibbling a bit of raw meat.

Fingers curl around the edge of the coffin lid, lift it, and slide it aside.

The rat pauses at the sound of scraping wood.

A hand snatches it from the ground. It squeals as Schreck, sitting upright in the coffin, raises toward his pallid face.

'The blood is the life,' he whispers.

He bites off the rat's head, and spits it out. He raises the rat above him like a wine bottle, the blood splashing his face, spilling into his wide mouth, running in dark rivulets down his cheeks and chin.

In the dark bedroom, Mary lies awake beside the sleeping man.

The wooden steps of the cellar stairway groan as Schreck slowly climbs. At the top, he pushes open a door. His hand leaves a bloody print on the wood.

Mary climbs from bed, and steps silently across the carpet to a window. She stares out.

Schreck climbs the main stairway. When he reaches the top, he looks up the long, dimly lit hall.

Mary crosses the bedroom. She pauses in the doorway, and glances to her right.

Schreck, seeing her, slips through a door. For a moment, he watches her. She is naked. She skips and twirls, dancing down the hallway, waving her arms overhead.

Schreck silently closes the door. Leaning against it, he stares at the ceiling and runs his tongue over his dry lips. He moans.

Mary stops. She gazes at the door. Quickly, she puts on her blouse and fastens it. She reaches for the knob, then jerks her hand away and runs. She runs up the long, dim hall, bare legs flying, the tail of her blouse flapping above her buttocks.

She lunges through the bedroom door. 'Hey! Hey!'

'What?'

The light comes on. The man sits up, shading his eyes against the brightness. 'What're you doing?'

'Let's get out of here.'

'I thought...'

'I heard something.'

'What'd you hear?' he asks, pulling on his trunks.

'Sounded like a moan.'

'Jesus!'

'Could've been my imagination, Arthur.'

'But what if it wasn't?'

As he rushes toward the door, Mary retrieves her bikini from the mussed bed. She steps into the shorts, and stuffs the top into her handbag.

'Where'd you hear it?'

The end of the hall. By the stairs.'

'Christ, that means we've gotta go past it!'

'Maybe it was nothing.'

Schreck, in the dark room, grins at the sound of rushing footsteps. He jerks open the door. Leaping into the hallway, he grabs the throat of the running man and flings him against a wall.

The terrified woman halts. She simply watches, aghast, as Schreck picks up the man and throws him over the railing. With a smile, he walks toward her. 'You will be my bride.'

'No. Come on!'

'We shall wander the nights together, you and I-all the nights of eternity-feasting on the blood of the

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