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VIOLATION

The stairs were empty and yet the noise continued. Step after step, slowly and deliberately, someone was climbing towards her. *Someone she couldn't see!*

She was stunned for a moment. A chill started at the base of her skull and notched its way down her spine. She wasn't crazy, someone was there; she'd heard him.

A foul, acrid odor stung her nostrils and turned her stomach. There were harsh whisperings assaulting her ears, but she couldn't hear what they were saying.

Hands were touching her, lots of them--cold, monstrous hands; they violated her sanity, aroused her in an erotic manner. Someone whispered. No! Someone screamed her name. Then she was falling...into an endless void in time . . . just falling.

PROLOGUE

Father, Son, and Holy Beast

Amelio Rodriguez lay in bed and tried to remember when it was that things had gone sour. It was close to impossible though; the room was noisy, full of sounds that didn't belong. After all, he was in the privacy of his own home, with the cold, motionless body of his wife beside him. It should've been quiet!

Night had fallen hours before, bringing a terrible amount of activity; the house was alive with madness. Furniture moved. No! It slammed across the altar room with fury. But no one was present in that room. And there were noises, all sorts of noises. The low-throated groans of an enraged beast had filled him with dread at first until something far worse assaulted his senses.

It started with heartbeats—several of them—letting Amelio know they were there. And the whisperings—a chorus of creatures with harsh, gravelly voices told him about death, promised him pain, and took the breath from his wife!

He shuddered spasmodically when the door to his bedroom opened—locked and bolted though it was—and a black, swirling mass of raging hatred drifted in to greet him.

Julio! This was his father Julio's fault. Julio—master of the Black Arts—turning his only son into a prodigy. Bu in all fairness, Julio had seen the error of his ways. He became enlightened when daemons from the lower order of Acheron gouged an inverted crucifix an inch deep into his chest, leaving a raw, painful wound. Then they wrote the name of their master, Mephisto, over the altar with Julio's blood.

And to think the altar had been placed in a room with blue walls and blue carpeting to pay homage to the beast because blue is the color of evil. But the Beast turned, the Beast demanded payment for past favors, and Julio ran back to Puerto Rico.

The black, swirling mass floated in a dizzying pattern until it reached the foot of Amelio's bed. He was frightened beyond belief; these were his friends, but they were turning . . . turning on him. Then perhaps, he thought, it was only fitting and fair if he did the same. But where would he begin? The words were stuck in his throat. He had never used them before.

“Dear Lord,” he moaned--

An arm reached for him from the core of the black mass; an arm rippled with muscles and edged with claws that glistened like steel in the dark. His heart went into spasms as his life passed before him in tiny vignettes muddled with confusion. These creatures had once catered to him, had sung whispers of praise in his ears. Now those same whispers were angry, filled with intentions of destruction.

They told him plainly, in an open display of defiance, that despite their former allegiance he had been created in the image of a God they hated above all else. And what was created in that image must not be allowed to survive! Then they filled his head with frighteningly sadistic descriptions of revenge.

“Oh, Jesus, Lord,” he choked. “Help me!”

“FUCK HIM!” came the whispered answer. “SATAN IS SAVIOR!”

Amelio felt himself rising, being sucked into the swirling mass in front of him as though it were a deadly cyclone. He grabbed the frame of his bed and tried to hold o, but it was useless, the force was stronger. This was it! Payback was a bitch! He screamed, but the sound died in his throat and fear knotted the base of his skull. The arm was in motion, its claws tearing his clothes, slicing through the tender flesh of his body, shredding his face

Why hadn't he stopped when Julio begged him to? Why had he allowed stupidity and conceit to dominate his senses? ‘You're old,’ he'd said to his father Julio. ‘When you cannot control the Beast or its emissaries, it's time to pack it in’. So fucking cool he was, standing there surveying the angry, bleeding ridges of his father's body and acting so fucking cool! Well, he wasn't cool now. Hell no! Now it was his turn to pay the price and he was terrified.

“Oh, God, Jesus, help me!” he raged as the razor-sharp claws sliced through his body in layers, shredding his flesh, searing his skull with agony. And the heartbeats increased in rhythm, and the whispers turned to mocking laughter in the face of his helplessness.

“JULIO THE FATHER; AMELIO THE SON, AND MEPHISTO THE HOLY BEAST.” They chastised him with their words, and declared that no form of aid could be

THE GATEKEEPER

expected from a God he had forsaken years before. Then they reveled in the thought that victory was theirs, this house was theirs, along with any future inhabitants.

“Jesus, Lord,” Amelio pleaded. His vision was gone; a steady stream of blood ran from two empty sockets in his face. He was blind and half-mad with pain, half-mad with the knowledge of his own destruction. His ears were ringing with blasphemies, vile, filthy, frightening blasphemies.

“FUCK JESUS AND HIS MOTHER MARY! WHORE BITCH! AND FUCK YOU TOO, AMELLO!”

Henry Wittaker reread the last few pages of the novel and shuddered. The story, especially the ending, ran on a plain parallel to what he had recently experienced.

Particularly the part about the house being *theirs*—

Chapter One

Erica Walsh felt a warm shaft of sun caressing her bare back. The weather forecaster had promised clear skies. At least there was no mention of snow in his predictions. She rolled on her side; stared through her bedroom window and saw that it was a real spring day for a change, a house-hunting day!

She reached for her cigarettes and listened to the usual sounds of morning around her; the children down the hall, Mike by her side, all were snoring softly. She rolled onto her back and threw off her covers, exposing her nakedness. She felt wonderful, wonderful and warm and sexy. Her dream was coming true—a house, her own house.

She puffed on her cigarette, then exhaled while the sun wedging in through a window caressed her body. But deep inside there was an uneasiness casting a pall over her positive emotions. Otherwise she wouldn't have been smoking so early in the day. Would her dream really come true? Knowing Mike, she felt a sense of urgency at this point, a need to confirm a promise.

She shook Mike and whispered to him, "You awake?"

Mike mumbled and started to snore again.

She shook him harder this time. "Mike, are we still looking at houses today?"

"Don't be so friggin' insecure," he mumbled.

But it wasn't her fault that she was insecure. Mike wasn't always a man of his word; he'd broken promises before. After a minute she heard his shallow breathing. No use asking any more questions, she thought, and watched him while he slept. There was something about this man that stirred her to a pitch at times and she had to wonder why. He was far from being handsome, and he wasn't rich. In fact, he was downright cruel when he wanted to be, which was often enough. So why did she stay?

For more reasons than she cared to dwell on at present.

She stared down at the slight scar on his face that ran along one cheek; then at the rise and fall of his chest; her gaze scanning the length of his long, sinewy body, thick with black, curly hair, her attention finally coming to rest on the mound of his briefs where his

manhood lay hidden. She quickly ditched her cigarette and wondered if there was time to show Mike how much she loved him. The children were still sleeping.

She rolled towards him and laid her leg gently across his while her hand made small, circular motions on his chest before moving downwards with determination. Yes, there was time; she'd make time.

Mike opened his eyes, glared at her dazedly at first then smiled when he felt her hand connect with his groin. He flipped on his side to face her. "You're so beautiful, baby."

Her platinum hair, caught by darts of sunlight at her back, had an almost halo-like effect. Her deep blue eyes still had a natural innocence. He sucked in his breath while her fingers wove their magic on his body, moving in gentle swirls, yet with urgency for fulfillment.

"This is the only way to wake up," he husked, especially when his dreams had been overtaken with painful flashbacks, tiny vignettes of an ugly childhood. And Mother was in it as usual.

He was drawn then to the curving allure of Erica's mouth and slipped his tongue between her lips to taste the sweetness of her flesh. He kissed her softly at first, but his lust soon became rough and cruel, the way he imagined Erica liked it. Erica never wanted to be pampered, in his opinion, setting her apart from the other women he'd known over the years. Besides, Erica drove him crazy when they made love. Her body was so soft and so yielding that she deserved his acts of bestiality.

He stopped kissing her and slid his tongue hungrily across her neck, her shoulders, working his way down until he connected with the rigid nipple of one breast. He toyed with it gently at first, but soon became bored. Opening his mouth, he took in a good portion of her breast and clamped down hard with his teeth.

Erica moaned and tried to push him away. Mike felt she was ready, that she wanted it now! He released her breast, then shed his briefs and mounted her.

* * *

Erica was relieved; he hadn't really hurt her this time. But she found herself wondering again why she stayed with him, and why she insisted on making love with a man who had absolutely no idea of the meaning of the word *love*.

Erica was sitting at the table in the kitchen when Mike stormed in, naked except for a towel around his waist. She knew he was angry by the way his lips were drawn into a tight grimace. She stared straight ahead to avoid looking directly into his eyes, her gaze focused on the hair on his chest, all glistening wet and curly from the shower. Whatever his problem, she didn't want to face it now. Not today when they were supposed to be hunting for a house. Why spoil the mood? But Mike didn't share her enthusiasm.

"Tell them boys to straighten up," he ordered. "Get them pillows and blankets and the rest of the shit off the couch!"

"It's where they sleep. If they had their own bedroom like the girls do--"

"Don't start *your* shit again! In other words, 'Buy me a house, Mike'." The mocking tone in his voice matched his twisted expression.

She knew there was more.

"Why ain't you fixing breakfast?"

Erica shot a weary look at the stove, then back at Mike. Her silence said it all.

"The friggin' stove's not working again?" His voice rose to an angry pitch in the stillness around her, shattering her nerves. She stifled the urge to scream.

"We gotta get outta here," he bellowed. "This fucking place's driving me nuts!"

"Tell me about it!" she shot back. "What the hell do you think it's doing to me?"

But Mike never heard a word she said. He was already halfway through the door, dismissing her opinion as though she had none worth hearing.

Mike treated her like her mother did at times, which was ironic because she'd left home to escape this same sort of treatment. Hell, she wasn't a child. She sighed and lit a cigarette and fought the urge to follow Mike and really tell him off. If she did, that would surely turn his anger to rage. Then she could just as well forget about buying a house. And Erica had to get out of this dump before she went crazy.

The kitchen alone threw her into helpless fits of despair; the torn and faded linoleum, the heavily marred cabinets over the sink with the new handles she'd bought at the hardware store. And hell, if she hadn't bought those handles herself, there was no way the landlord was about to. He did shit around here. She and Mike were always putting their hands into their pockets for repair money.

Like the day they moved in, it was a nightmare.

There were cavernous holes in every wall in the house, the roof leaked; puddles of water coated the floor. But, like it or not, they had no choice other than to take this place. Up until then she'd been renting an apartment near her mother. It was small and cramped, but it was a palace compared to this. Then there was a fire, a bad one, and they needed a roof over their heads.

It was either take this place or move in with Mama.

Both she and Mike had chosen to move in here!

Erica was startled when a small, moist hand touched her. She looked down and saw Sam, her youngest son, still in pajamas, a shock of blond hair almost covering his eyes. She lifted him to her lap and brushed her lips against his forehead.

"The stove's not working, honey. You'll have to eat cold cereal. No eggs."

"It's okay, Mommy. It's not yer fault."

Sam became quiet at that point and followed Erica's gaze. There was a pan under the sink to catch the leak. The water in it was rust colored and coated with scum.

"Did hippies wreck this place?" Sam had the biggest eyes when he was curious.

"You've been listening to the landlord again." Erica nearly smiled despite her anxiety.

"Well, he had to call the police to put 'em out, didn't he?"

"That's what he said." She did smile this time.

"And he hadda hire a *terminator* to kill the roaches and mice." Sam had faith in the wrong people.

"It's called an exterminator, Sam. And I figure the landlord wasted his money. The roaches and mice still have the run of the place."

She put him down and started to plug in the electric coffee pot, but Sam stopped her.

"Mom, you gotta pull the plug on the fridge first. You wanna lose the 'lectricity?"

"Oh, Christ. I almost blew the circuit breakers again." She wiped her face with her hands. "Mommy forgets sometimes. Or maybe she wants to forget what a dump we're living in."

"It's okay. Daddy's buying us a house, right?"

“Right.”

Thinking about a new house made her feel wonderful inside. “And, Sam...the house we’re looking at it has three bedrooms.” Her words sounded apologetic.

“You mean we don’t hafta sleep on the coach anymore? Yippee!” Sam jumped in the air and skipped around the table in wide circles.

“And it has new kitchen appliances.”

She suddenly wanted to skip along beside Sam but for one fleeting second she stopped to reflect on how they had moved in here because of a deep sense of urgency. Then she found herself hoping she wasn’t making the same mistake twice. They were buying a new house for the same reason--a sense of urgency.

* * *

Henry Wittaker was in the kitchen when the lid on the mailbox out front clapped shut. It was a horrible sound and it caused the blood in his veins to congeal into knots. They never missed a day, them lawyers, with their son-of-a-bitch letters that just as well called him a deadbeat. *Pay up or else*, the bastards said in them letters as if he had piles of money hidden away somewhere and was saving it for better things. *Send a check for this amount within ten days or we’ll see you in court*, they said, as if they’d get the money with their threats alone.

Well, the way Henry saw it, he’d damned well be spending every single day of the next two years in court if they *all* kept their word. The most absurd thing about those letters was that the bastards never gave a thought to reality. Like each one must have imagined his letter was the first and only. But whenever Henry called them and told them the full story, then it was different; then their attitudes changed, only not by a whole lot.

It was always, “We’re sorry to hear about your situation, Mr. Wittaker, but Dr. So and So wants his money *now!*” And Henry invariably wound up telling them to stand in line and wait their turn. And now, as if he wasn’t depressed enough, his son Buddy was selling his Corvette to help out. Jesus, what a blow to the balls that was.

Buddy was barely eighteen and already learning the cold facts of life. It wasn’t fair, especially since Henry had vowed years ago that things would be different for his kids. Henry, himself, had grown up holes-in-the-shoes-poor, and had sworn an oath on his

mother's grave when he was Buddy's age that life wouldn't repeat itself. In other words, he would make it where his own father had failed. He was going to be the best damned provider the world had ever seen, and he almost had been.

But he was fired—

From his dream job—

Through no fault of his own—

And now he was earning shit—

And the burner on the stove was flickering—

Henry felt sweat running between his legs and wondered if he'd peed himself. Maybe he had. His nerves were shot lately, ever since he'd run into that listing in Monroe, the one he was showing today. Strange house. He knew that for a fact.

Henry was an occult buff who prided himself on his knowledge as well as his senses. He had the ability to *feel* unseen presences when nobody else could. Hell, he could *feel* a spook in a house big as a mansion with his eyes closed and blindfolded and his hands tied behind his back. What's more, he felt something in that house in Monroe, and it made his nerves do the Dance of the Seven Veils. It happened as soon as he crossed over the threshold and entered the living room. Zingo, his senses went wild, picking up one here and one there, one on the staircase, one in the kitchen, a few in the bedrooms upstairs... correction, a few in the *closets* in those bedrooms.

Then the strangest thing occurred. He had the sensation of being followed when he left the house. The feeling was strong enough to cause him to turn and glance over his shoulder, which was silly because you only saw them when *they* wanted you to, so he saw nothing. But he sensed plenty, *felt* it following him, right out to his car. He *felt* it sitting in the back seat when he drove home too. At one point, he went so far as to look in the rear view mirror, half expecting to see a face staring back at him. But again, that was silly shit; you only saw them when *they* wanted you to. And obviously, this *thing* wasn't ready to be seen yet.

But it was here, in his house. And now the stove burner was flickering.

Henry rose and poured fresh coffee into a silver server, then placed the server gently onto a silver tray: leftovers from his better days. Still, his mind wasn't on the task at

hand; it was on that flickering burner...and the sudden chill in the kitchen even though he had the heat running on high to keep the house warm for Bess.

That fucking thing was energizing itself!

Henry knew from studying these matters that invisible entities sucked energy from different sources whenever they wanted to materialize. They stole wattage from lights, drew the heat from a room, and filled their 'devilified' veins to the overflowing with stolen energy so that you could *see* them and *hear* them. Energy heightened their powers.

Well now, Henry thought to himself, fuck this bastard. He hadn't time for this nonsense, and he was scared besides. He took the tray and left the kitchen.

* * *

Bess Wittaker ran until she thought her lungs would burst. The ground was soft and warm beneath her bare feet; wild crocus and snow-on-the mount caressed her ankles. She was laughing. Henry was behind her, running in the slow motion of her dream. They were young again, both of them. She glanced back at Henry with his muscled chest and virile body and felt proud that she hadn't let herself go. Henry was a man's man, envied by most of the men in town and desired by most of the women. But it was her supple breasts and slim-waist that had him on the hook and kept him there.

She turned to look ahead and at that point, as always, Henry caught her from behind. She felt his strong, muscle-knotted arms encircle her waist, felt his hands reach up to fondle her breasts. She stopped running and swung around to press her body against his, to feel the heat of his manhood as it rose with desire.

"Henry," she whispered hoarsely, "Take me now."

But Henry was a tease; he wanted it to last. He started with the buttons on her blouse, then her underclothing until she was naked from the waist up. He played maddening games with his tongue and the nipples of her breasts, while his hands traveled down her body, drawing her lower torso against his.

It lasted a long while as Henry had wanted, and by the time he was finally ready for penetration she was screaming with desire. Those screams woke her and she found herself alone in bed as usual, and as usual, she cried.

But she abruptly stopped when she heard Henry coming up the steps and prayed for death. She knew it was he by the slight hesitation of his footsteps every third step. Bess had been confined to bed for so many years that she'd developed a finely honed sense of hearing; a gift from God, she imagined, to compensate for her illness. Big deal, she thought, she would've traded it in at any time for a month's worth of good health.

At any rate, she could damn well recognize the footsteps of nearly everyone who came to see her. Mainly it was her doctors who came up those stairs, her friends had stopped coming a while back. Long illnesses scared most people, especially when you stayed sick longer than they expected you to. It kind of made them think about death and their own lack of immortality.

So other than Henry and her children, Buddy and Patricia, only the doctors came. And not so many of them came anymore.

She heard Henry struggling with the knob moments before he came in carrying her breakfast tray. "Poor, Henry," she mumbled. Then she inhaled deeply several times and fought the urge to cry. She was no longer useful to him. She was no longer a wife or a mother. She was a frail, dying, thing: an albatross around his neck.

She forced a smile and lied when he spoke to her.

"How do you feel?" he'd asked.

"Oh much better," was her answer, the lie rolling off her tongue with ease while pain throbbed in her kidneys. The truth was that the pain was excruciating and she wanted to die.

Henry laid the tray on her lap, then bent over and kissed her. But the kiss was too quickly over and done with to suit her. She longed for the days when there had been more, before those damned renal scans proved she was finished!

"Where to today?" she asked, wanting so desperately to remain a part of his active life.

"I'm showing a couple of houses this morning. Won't be in the office at least until noon." Henry wiped his palms on his shirt—a grease stain darkened the pocket. He glanced down at it absently and took a tie from the closet. He was trying desperately not

to think about showing those houses, especially the one in Monroe. It had him bothered to hell and back.

Bess sipped her coffee, never taking her eyes off Henry. The healthy, virile body had long given way to middle age. His feet shuffled heavily when he walked. She watched him putting on a wrinkled tie and slipping into a soiled jacket like a man in a trance. This wasn't Henry; normally he was very meticulous about his appearance. "What is it?" she asked. "What's eating you?"

"Nothing much. I'm just tired." He turned his back before she could look at his face. Bess was good at reading faces. She was equally good at seeing what was written in your eyes. Eyes told the truth, and his said that he was beaten, stomped into the ground.

Henry had gotten the mail from the box on his way upstairs. Today's mail had contained the usual collection notices. One was from her urologist, along with a note telling Henry to find another doctor. The others remained unopened. What the hell was the use, he reasoned, his insurance coverage was gone, and now they were starting to pick his pockets. Only the pockets were as empty as the cupboard was bare.

And he had to show that damned house today because they needed the money from his commissions so badly.

"Henry? Are you sure there's nothing else bothering you?" Bess was smart. She was waiting for an answer, one he could not truthfully provide without hurting her deeply. She had no idea just how tight the money situation was.

He forced a smile and turned. "I just realized I'm walking out of here looking like a bum. There are stains all over my jacket. Tie's wrinkled—"

"Well, it's nothing to brood over," she joked.

And, I have to show that *Goddamn* house, he wanted to scream, but he swallowed and took a deep breath instead. No use taking it out on her.

"Come on, baby," he said in a silly way. "How's about a big, juicy kiss before I leave?"

Chapter Two

The house in Monroe looked different in the light of day; there was no threat. It was a white two-story dwelling, nothing more, nothing less. Of course it was in dire need of a paint job and could have used some grass seed out front. Otherwise, everything was cool. Henry Wittaker laughed at his choice of words. At the moment, his children seemed to be dominating his deepest thoughts. Their crude diction had become the norm for him.

But then they were part of his reason for existing, part of the reason he was here today trying to make a buck selling this...house to an unsuspecting couple. Buddy had that damned FOR SALE sign on his Corvette. Buddy wanted to help out because of the doctors' bills. Henry had to sell this house whether he wanted to or not. But it was haunted!

He was tempted momentarily to call the Walsh's' and confess all. And yet, somewhere in his mind he was telling himself to grow up! The house was perfectly normal. Hell, here he was in the yard and nothing had happened yet. He'd gotten this far without *feeling* anything. And he was able to stare up at the windows on the second floor with no one staring back. Nothing wrong with this house, he reiterated to himself, and glanced at his watch. It was 9:45. The Walsh's' were due at 10:00. He had fifteen minutes to air out the place. He approached the front door with determination, but hesitated when the stench hit him full force. This time it smelled like acid poured over rotted meat.

What a hell of a way to make a living, he thought bitterly, because it hadn't always been this way. Henry could remember the good old days when he lived in Nassau County and worked for a prestigious insurance firm in Valley Stream. He really had the world by the short hairs then--a big office, a private secretary, a company car. He was a hotshot insurance executive on his way to the top. Money was no object. Hell, he threw the stuff around as if it grew in the dust under his bed. Bought both his kids brand new cars: Corvettes, nothing cheap. Bought a house on a large estate for Bess.

Then a positive reading on a renal scan shattered his world beyond repair. Time off, that's what killed him, time off for doctors' visits, in-hospital tests, dialysis. He literally

committed occupational suicide. But, other than his kids, there was no one else to see that Bess had proper care. Then too, he had to be honest with himself. It was his responsibility. Hadn't he taken her hand in marriage for better or worse?

He could still recall the day he was terminated! He'd missed a meeting, one that had taken months to set up. It was for a group package for a large corporation; life insurance, health, disability; thousands of small commissions on each and every corporate soul all adding up to a very comfortable sum. Not to mention the referrals he would've gotten. And he missed it. And the corporation, whose business he so desperately desired, bought elsewhere. But it wasn't his fault.

Still his own company had fired him for not caring. But he did care. He cared about Bess! She was bad that day, spasmodic pain racking her kidneys, her sweat-drenched body huddled into a ball, scaring hell out of his kids when she screamed. He had to stay with her, and at what a cost. Now he was in Suffolk County where it was cheaper to live, working for a real estate firm on a commission only basis, forced to hustle to make ends meet, forced to sell *haunted houses* for those doctors' bills.

Henry forced himself to smile at the last part. He had to be able to effectively deal with what he was doing. He had to forget those hundreds of books he'd read on occult phenomena. Besides, everyone knew there was no such thing as a haunted house, right? Some were a bit stranger than others, which meant they had character. Keeping that thought in mind he was able to turn the key in the lock and open the front door. But the house was ready for him.

It was cold inside: a cryptic, paralyzing, silent cold. *They* were drawing energy from the room, had sucked heat from the air. Oh God, he wanted to run. He felt his body shiver; his joints ached. And the walls were still blue. How many coats of paint would it take to cover it? The blue was a dominant force, meant to pay homage?

Henry forced himself to move, made his feet carry him to the nearest window, and made his hands undo the lock. The place had to be aired. There was an imprint of a hand pressed against the glass, but he ignored it because it was too large to be...human. And the fingernails--

No, he cursed inwardly, no beasts, no demons here. He would not allow himself to think or *feel* or sense anything this time around, especially since he was here to make money and nothing else. But there were movements upstairs; doors were closing. Slowly. Deliberately. The hairs on his neck bristled. Character, he thought. But it was cold in here: *they* were energized.

The first window offered resistance as though it had a mind of its own and could tell him *no, don't open me!* But Henry knew that the window was not human, so he blamed his inability to open it on fear, forced himself to think this way. Fear hampered his movements. Right! The window was just that, a window--wood, metal, glass--no mind to think with.

Henry tugged at the damn thing until he swore he was ruptured. It finally gave way. He then walked to the next. What a hell of a way to make a living, he thought again, his nerves rumbling beneath his skin when the first window slammed shut behind his back.

He ignored it, *had* to ignore it. He opened the second and the third and stood mutely by and watched them close in rapid succession. He wanted to run, but running wasn't cool, as Buddy would've put it. Besides, these were just windows, nothing else: no brain to think with, to be purposely defiant. He opened the windows again and saw them slam shut in front of him.

Sweat beaded his forehead as the banging and slamming echoed in his ears. And someone approached the landing at the top of the steps. He heard him, *felt* him. He wanted to turn and look, and at the same time he felt it would be safer for him to ignore the noises in this house and to forget those books he'd read as well. Ignore it and it will surely go away, he told himself. And yet, would it?

He crossed to the kitchen thinking perhaps he'd open the windows in there. He put his hand to the door to push it open and saw a streak of white, something that maybe wasn't really there, flash in the corner of his eye. It was upstairs and it had substance. It was a solid form. He shuddered, closed his eyes and reminded himself that the house had character. Isn't that what he'd thought outside? It had character. No ghosts! No spirits!

Well, keep on thinking like that and ignore the goddamn thing, he screamed inside! He turned the knob on the kitchen door and pushed at it. The door swung halfway open

before he felt a resistance, like something was leaning against it from the other side, using weight as leverage to keep it halfway closed. Henry couldn't see what it was and didn't want to. He knew it was a large, immovable object and the knowledge suited him fine, scant though it was. Any more and he would've been forced to leave the house for sure.

He was still holding the knob when it spun between his fingers, but Henry wasn't the one doing the spinning. And a click, he heard the tumbler click just before the door slammed shut in his face. He didn't try the knob again because the door was locked, no doubt about it.

He turned and scanned the interior of the house. It was dim and eerie. He could *feel* a blanket of death creeping across the floor like mist on a moor, and there were things creeping along with it, only he couldn't see them, but he *felt* their presence just the same. Ancient beasts. Henry wondered if they craved his flesh or were they just curious. Oh, God, he wanted to run, but where to?

He was trapped; the doors, windows, everything, all shut tight and bolted. He was a prisoner in a two-story tomb, in a great Sphinx, in a breathing entity. Sand had dribbled from its pores setting off a chain reaction, and huge granite blocks, each weighing several tons, had been released and slid into place. Now the tomb was sealed! With him inside.

And someone was watching him from the top of the steps. Henry was trapped in a place full of character with a beast that had been energized and now was materialized so that Henry could see him. And he was perhaps the most dangerous of them all, this one who had solid form.

“They reveled in the thought that victory was theirs, this house was theirs, along with any future inhabitants.”

When Henry had first read those words in that awful book, he knew it was so. The house in that cursed book was real and ran on a plain parallel to this one. The book could've been written there for all he knew. Even the walls were the same.

The walls were still blue out of a hateful defiance. They refused to be painted over because blue was the color of evil and had been purposely chosen to pay homage to the beast, to honor the beast. The beast! The alleged king of kings: he who reigns over a

throne in the strange outer world of the occult: he who hides in the farthest recesses of the human mind, who rises in the night to torment our dreams, who lurks in the shadows of darkness on stormy nights.

Henry swore he saw him once...hiding in the blackest corner of his basement. Henry was in the basement checking out the boiler, and something had moved in a corner near the stairs. Something had knocked over a mop and had caught his attention, and it had *red eyes*. A rat maybe? Of course, Henry smiled, his lips a thin line of fear. A rat had been foraging for food and had knocked over a mop. Simple. And as long as he was in this house he wouldn't allow himself to think otherwise.

But truth is a funny thing. One can only hide it and distort it until it yearns to be free like a bird in a cage because eventually it struggles to spread its wings, to take flight out in the open, to escape the entrapment of lies.

Henry could no longer lie to himself about the incident in his basement. The truth was it couldn't have been a rat. Henry remembered that he'd been scared enough to run for his life when he heard heavy footsteps coming after him out of the darkness. And they were much too loud for a small animal like a rat.

No, that thing was big and it moved with determination. *Big* as a beast should be?

He suddenly felt his heart thumping wildly in his chest. This was no time to dwell on his past, especially when it scared hell out of him, especially when he already had a good start in that direction to begin with. Don't let your mind wander, he thought. But it was too late. He choked on his fear, gagged actually. Out! He had to get out. And away. Eyes were watching him, voices were whispering.

A solid form was coming down the stairs!

He ran to the front door, the blanket of death, the fog, hugging his ankles, invisible ancient beasts brushing against his body, whispering threats. He twisted the knob on the door but it wouldn't turn; it was frozen, atrophied, cemented by unseen hands. *They wouldn't allow him to open the door!* He pounded against it with his fists and cringed when laughter assaulted his senses.

Out! He had to get out. The voices were telling him to GET OUT! And yet, they were holding him prisoner, entombing his body, threatening his sanity. He felt wetness and

touched his face--tears, he was crying. "Men don't cry," he raged and crumpled to the floor, his eyes roaming to the figure on the stairs.

Someone was coming...for him--

* * *

Mike Walsh pulled onto Sunrise Highway near Patchogue and headed east. Monroe was about ten miles from this point. He felt his stomach sour with anticipation. This was a big move for him, a firm commitment. Was he ready? He wasn't sure.

And suddenly, even with Erica next to him and the kids in the back seat, Mike felt lonely and miserable. Everything was resting on his decision. "You're happy about the house, aren't you?" Erica was studying him closely. "We can afford it, can't we?" Her words were clipped, her voice riddled with uncertainty.

Mike pulled into the left lane to pass a slower moving vehicle ahead of them before answering. His tone was nasty when he spoke. "Yes, Erica. For the last time... We got the money."

He reached up involuntarily and rubbed the scar on his face. He'd gone over the mortgage payments again that morning, they were affordable, especially with the second job he'd taken, the job Erica didn't approve of.

"You're positive now?"

She was ready for anything. Mike had broken promises in the past. She concentrated on the road in front of her and waited for an answer. But Mike was driving much too close to the car ahead and that made her even more nervous.

"Don't be so friggin' insecure. Grow up! We're looking at the goddamn house. What more do you want?"

He slid up until he was almost bumper-to-bumper with the car in front. Money wasn't the issue here. The issue here was freedom; what he was sacrificing for Erica and those kids. He glanced at them in the rear view mirror. They were quiet and sitting up straight in their seats, both boys and both girls. Mike had them well trained. A commitment meant buckling down in his mind, no more chicks on the side, and the idea of becoming a one-woman man frightened him. He might even grow mellow enough to ask Erica to marry him, to give those kids a legal right to call him, "Daddy."

Then again, it might not be such a bad idea, he thought to himself. Erica had been his screwing partner for a long time, at least ten years. She even used his last name; and the kids *were* his. No doubt about it. Erica was the most faithful bitch he knew, even after catching him with other women.

For the first time since climbing behind the wheel that morning, he noticed how tense she was. He'd been so involved with his own feelings that hers seemed of little importance until now. "Come on, loosen up." He poked her playfully and tried to get her to smile. It made him nervous whenever Erica turned serious. He never knew what was running through her mind, especially about him. "Loosen up," he repeated.

But Erica was so hyper she could do nothing except stare at the road ahead, her mouth drawn into a tight line. She was wearing blue jeans and a heavy wool sweater that accentuated her breasts. He ran his hand down the front of her sweater and she half-smiled and slapped him away. She wasn't entirely amused. "Both hands on the wheel, Mike. And watch where you're going."

"Yes, ma'am!" Mike slipped his hand along the seat and pinched her bottom. She slapped at him again.

"I'd like to get there in one piece. Will you watch the road?"

There was tightness in her voice until she heard muffled laughing coming from the back seat. If the kids were thrilled with Mike's behavior and excited about the house, then why spoil the mood? Why give Mike an excuse to lose his temper? He was just dying to turn the car around and head back to that dump they called home anyway. She smiled broadly at him, her mouth drawn back to the point where dimples formed on her cheeks.

He was pleased: she wasn't thinking anything bad about him. "You know, kid," he said, his tone on an upswing. "Maybe it's time we settled down. Made a commitment."

Erica hoped he was sincere. For the first time in years she wanted to believe him.

* * *

Henry Wittaker rushed out of the house and slammed the door behind him, his face contorted with fear, his body sweaty and limp. He couldn't sell this house, no siree! He'd talk to the Walsh's' -- make them take the one over on Evergreen. And to hell with the

doctors' bills and the medical collection agencies if the Walsh's' decided to buy from another broker. His conscience was involved here!

Of course, he wasn't absolutely sure of what he'd seen. It might have been an illusion. A pair of legs: that was it. A pair of legs coming down the steps with no body attached to it. He heard noises too, clicking noises, like heartbeats, lots of them. And the whispered threats telling him to "GET OUT!" Those were the worst of all.

No! The worst part was his forced entrapment. It was a warning. "DON'T COME BACK," the voices said, "OR DEATH WILL BE IN YOUR FUTURE."

So he GOT OUT, and what's more he was STAYING OUT.

He glanced at his watch and noticed that his hands were still trembling. It was after 10:00, the Walsh's' were late. Maybe they weren't coming and that was fine with him. He wouldn't have to come up with an excuse for showing them another house.

He'd wait ten minutes longer and if they didn't arrive by then, he was leaving.

But the windows in the house were open. Henry looked at the windows and his skin crawled. Every thing was done in defiance. Now he wanted the windows to be closed and they were open. *Defiance!*

Henry took out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

Someone had to close those windows. This town was crawling with punk, bastard junkies. Those sneaky, little assholes would drive by there, spot the open windows and it would be goodbye copper plumbing and anything else they could nail. Henry would lose his job.

But he made no move to re-enter the house. Instead, he allowed his gaze to wander up to the second floor, his breath catching in his throat when he saw HER there, standing in front of one of the bedroom windows, in broad daylight, waving at him: a little girl with long, black hair hanging in ringlets; a sweet-faced girl with large, black innocent eyes. And to think she was one of *them!*

There was a sudden hardness in his chest that hampered his breathing. It felt like he'd been slammed with a mallet. He staggered to the curb and climbed into his car. Screw the open windows, screw his job, and screw this house! He was leaving!

* * *

Carol Anderson watched Henry through the spaces in her rose bushes out back. The man was visibly upset and she felt sorry for him.

There was a time not long ago when the house was a showplace, and realtors tripped over themselves trying to sell it. But the house had other ideas and refused to cooperate. It became vengeful and monstrous and threw temper tantrums like a spoiled child wanting its own way and not getting it. Doors fell off their hinges, the exterior paint bubbled and peeled, grass on the front lawn went to rot.

Now Henry Wittaker was the only realtor who persisted.

“You know, Burt,” she began, but Burt wasn’t listening. He was setting up the timing on the engine of her old Chevy. “That house deteriorated so fast. Just a few short months. It wants everyone to stay away.”

Burt picked up the last part of her sentence and scowled. “Yeah. Like it has a brain and thinks for itself.”

“Not a brain, a soul. All houses have souls. In a way they’re almost living, breathing entities. Only this house is evil.”

Burt acted as though he hadn’t understood what she’d said. Then again, his mind didn’t travel that deep. She clutched the rose bushes tensely when Henry ran to his car.

“Would you get the hell over here and help? Screw that fucking place.” There were large sweat stains under the arms of his shirt, but a chill swept over his body. It happened every time his wife mentioned that house. “Over here, love.” He watched her walk towards him, her face lined in thought. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“We cannot turn our backs on that house.” She wiped a wisp of brown hair from her face. “What if the taint spreads here?”

“Oh for shit sakes! Hold the timing gun. I gotta get another screwdriver.”

She watched his short, stubby legs hurry out of sight, her attention then drifting to the discarded items in the yard next door; the black leather sofa and chairs, the fairly new bedroom set, the kitchen utensils. “Why would anyone in their right minds leave such expensive furnishings behind?”

“They would if they were one step ahead of their bill collectors.” Burt was back, wielding a smaller screwdriver.

Carol stiffened. He never looked beyond the obvious and mocked her because she did. “Not everyone lives as we do.”

Burt smiled, his words laced with anger. “We *all* got bills, honey. We’re all in the same fix.” But then the smile faded and his voice rose. “Now hold the damn timer still, will you?”

She watched him lean over and concentrate on the car, ignoring her fears about the house and the people who once lived there. But Carol couldn’t let go. She knew that Burt was wrong. Those people were driven away, and it had more to do with the house itself than with bill collectors. She was even willing to sink to Burt’s level and bet real money on that.

She still recalled, with a great deal of anguish, the night she stood in the living room next door and...

It was about a year ago. Burt wanted tea--light and sweet. Carol was out of sugar. At Burt’s insistence she went over to that house to borrow some.

Carol now wished she’d defied the son-of-a-bitch and refused to go. But Burt had an edge over her: he knew how eager she was to please him, to be the closest thing to the perfect wife as she could possibly be. He often used this to his advantage. That night was one of those times.

She could still remember the man who’d answered the door: a light-skinned Spanish man with coal black hair and teeth that were even and white when he smiled. But his eyes... The expression in his eyes was different, no eager to please politeness there. Rather she saw a mixture of fear and caution and didn’t know why, not at first anyway.

He let her in and told her to wait while he got the sugar. After he’d gone, she looked around with an inane curiosity. To her knowledge, none of the other neighbors had ever gotten this far; she was the first to be allowed inside.

She found herself standing in a large living room with cathedral ceilings and expensive black, leather furniture and walls that had been painted a hideous shade of blue. There was a staircase near the kitchen that disappeared beyond her line of vision. And there was something else. She’d tried to suppress it because it left an emotional scar.

Carol heard footsteps on those stairs. Thinking it was his wife, she glanced up and smiled politely...at nothing. Then she jammed her hands into her jeans and giggled because she felt foolish.

The kitchen door, separating her from the Spanish man, was closed. She stared at it impatiently and waited for him to return, finally praying for his return when the footsteps continued to descend the stairs. Heavy boots. She recognized the sound because Burt had a pair and when he walked Burt's footsteps were similar to...to what?

Because the staircase was empty! Down one step, down another, still the sound of those heavy boots. There was a cut across the top of one of the cushions on the sofa, she concentrated on that. When the man returned with her sugar, she'd tell him where to get a repair kit.

A knot started at the base of her skull and caused her to tremble. Someone had reached the bottom of the stairs by this time. Someone she was unable to see. And the heavy boots were crossing the living room, right over to where she was standing.

She forced her attention to the sofa again. The slit in the cushion was even, she noticed, no jagged edges. And leather was easy to fix. Carol tried to keep a tight rein on her emotions, but her hands were sweating and her mouth had begun to quiver. She sensed a face close to hers, and felt hot breath on her neck that was so foul and stale she winced. A voice whispered obscenities, called her a "CUNT" and a "BITCH." She crossed herself with the sign of the crucifix and refused to listen when the voice boomed with laughter, and she pretended not to notice when two firm hands, laced with the coldness of death, fondled her below the waist.

The Spanish man returned and she hastily thanked him, took the sugar and ran. She ran until she reached the safety of her own front door and never looked back, and never returned to that house. More importantly, she never told Burt what happened. Why give him more ammunition to throw her way?

Carol knew it had been real, more real than she cared to remember, and more real than she could ever forget.

Chapter Three

“You don’t really want this house,” Henry Wittaker was leading the Walsh’s’ through the living room to the kitchen. Henry had not been able to make his escape in time. They’d driven up as he was pulling away from the curb. Henry was in one hell of a fix. “There’s a strange odor in here... And we’re having trouble getting rid of it,” he stressed.

“In other words, it stinks in here. We know.” Mike was disappointed; everything else about the house seemed perfect. Erica’s face flushed red and she glared at Mike, silently admonishing him for his crudeness. He gave her a sharp look in return. So he was crude in his mannerisms. So what? At least he wasn’t putting on airs; at least he was being honest.

Erica went at once to the kitchen, letting out an audible sigh of relief when she opened the door. It was something out of the pages of a magazine, everything new as promised. She ran her hand over the smooth Formica counters, and across the soft wood-grained cabinets. She bent to feel the pile of the lavish carpet beneath her feet, her gaze coming to rest on the screen door leading to the back yard, and finally on a clutter of discarded furniture. Mike saw it too.

“What about that junk outside?” He crossed to the door and glared back at Henry while he waited for an answer.

“I’ll have it removed.” Henry was sick inside, it sounded as though they were seriously thinking of buying this house. He mopped his face with a handkerchief and shuddered when a chill iced his spine. He felt hot and cold at the same time. The smell inside hadn’t been enough to discourage these people; he’d failed.

And what would *they* do to him because he’d come back, because he’d defied their authority, ignored their warnings to STAY OUT!

"We’d like to see the bedrooms, please.” Erica had large dressers, and Mike had promised to buy her a king-sized waterbed. It all had to fit. It just had to.

Henry Wittaker was nervous and almost crumpled in front of her. She pretended not to notice when he led them up the staircase directly outside of the kitchen. The man must've had personal problems and it was his business, not hers.

She squeezed Mike's hand excitedly as they climbed the stairs, but Mike pulled away from her. He was sulking because of the odor; he didn't want the house. Then why did he give Henry Wittaker a hard time about the discarded furniture? The only answer she could think of was that Mike was a small person with an inflated ego, and this was his style.

"I'll use a pine cleaner," she whispered tensely behind Henry's back. "It'll kill the smell." But Mike continued to sulk.

As she climbed the steps, Erica noticed that the medium blue color on the living room walls extended to the walls adjoining the staircase. This wouldn't do; she pictured it a different color, white maybe to emphasize the majestic charm of the cathedral ceilings.

She was startled when she bumped into Henry, who was poised on the top landing, his eyes nervously scanning the upper floor.

"Something wrong, Henry?" Mike was abrupt. He was picking now, looking for any little thing he could find, any flaw to discourage Erica from wanting the house. She ignored him for the second time. After seeing this house, nothing could force her to accept life as they lived it in that dump they called home.

"We can see the bedrooms, can't we? I mean, there ain't nothing wrong with 'em?" Mike was persistent, still looking for flaws.

Henry couldn't answer at first; his heart was pounding heavily in his chest. Although he hadn't seen or heard anything, he knew they were here, scowling at him, repeating their threat, "DEATH WILL BE IN YOUR FUTURE." He wanted to run, but controlled himself.

"The bedrooms are this way," he managed, not looking at Mike.

There was nothing wrong with the bedrooms; all three of them were large and full of sunshine and a cheery atmosphere. Nothing wrong with the bedrooms, he wanted to tell Mike. It was just that there were problems with the *closets* in those bedrooms.

* * *

Sam Walsh was five by the time he was able to assert himself and speak up in his own defense. Sam was the next to the last in a line of four children. There was Todd, age seven, Didi, six, Sam, and then Katie, four. All born a year apart, they were often referred to as “steps and stairs” by their maternal grandmother, Mary Rogers.

Sam was a hyper child, always climbing and jumping and otherwise getting himself into one awful mess after another.

Today was different though. He was much too excited over the idea of a house of their own to cause problems. Besides, if he misbehaved Mike might use this as an excuse for not taking the house. And Sam wanted to be blamed for as little as possible this time. So he sat on the front lawn with his legs crossed, silently ignoring his brothers and sisters, although they were teasing him quite a bit about being such a Goody Two Shoes.

The other kids were racing around him in wide circles and throwing grass and crumpled leaves in his hair. Sam reacted by ignoring them and turning his full attention to the house. It fascinated him. White with large shutters on the windows, it was, except for the peeling paint, the best looking house he’d ever seen. He prayed with everything in him that his parents would like it as much as he did and maybe buy it.

“Come on, Sam. Don’t just sit there,” Todd shouted. Todd was standing over him, his face sweaty and flushed from running.

“Yeah, Sam,” Didi chimed in. “Let’s go look at the back yard. I seen lotsa good junk back there.”

But Sam refused to budge. He was content to sit where he was and dream about having his own room--to be shared with Todd, of course. It sure beat sleeping on a sofa in the living room.

Katie plopped down next to him at one point to envision her own dreams of living there. She allowed her eyes to roam freely, to take in everything at once, finally coming to rest on an upstairs window. She saw a small girl probably around her own age standing there; a sweet-faced child with long, black hair hanging in ringlets, who wore a white dress edged with lace.

The little girl gazed down at Katie intently and smiled, then waved. Katie waved back.

Sam observed Katie's behavior with rigid silence at first. He didn't want to challenge her and upset his parents, Mike especially. But when Katie continued to wave at an empty window and otherwise act like a fool, it was too much for him to bear.

"What the hell you wavin' at?" he wanted to know? Katie turned to face him, a smug grin creasing the corners of her mouth. She had him now. "That little girl upstairs," she replied haughtily, pointing at the window, her gaze riveted on Sam.

Sam followed her direction and concentrated hard as he could. And yet, there was no one standing in front of the window Katie was pointing to. "Yer nuts! I can't see 'er."

"She's right there!" Sam could damn well see her Katie imagined. He was just acting stubborn and trying to make an ass out of her. In her frustration Katie took hold of his head and forced him to look the window again. The little girl was still there waving down at them. "See, smarty?"

Sam snapped at this point. Not only was she making a fool of him, she was hurting his neck as well. He tried to pull her hands away, and when he failed he balled up a fist and punched her.

Katie howled in pain and gave Sam 'a-you're-gonna-get-it-now' kind of look before concentrating on the little girl in the window upstairs once again.

* * *

Erica wanted to see the master bedroom first. She followed Henry down the hall, but hesitated when the commotion started outside. The children were fighting.

"*Your* kids again," Mike snapped and ran downstairs. They were always hers whenever they were bad.

"Don't hit them," she pleaded as he disappeared out of sight. Henry was watching her. She wondered if he'd heard what Mike had said to her. Henry might misunderstand the relationship.

In her opinion, Mike always referred to them as *her* children so he'd be free to leave whenever the mood struck him without looking back. But Erica was no fool; she had a strong hold on Mike. Even with the scores of women he'd dated on the side, he was still her man.

To her amazement, Henry seemed more concerned with her words than Mike's. "Does he hit the children often?" It was more of a statement than a question. She sensed confusion in his voice. "I can't imagine anyone beating a child."

"He doesn't beat his children. Or me." Her answer was quick, almost too quick. "He doesn't drink either." That sounded contrived, she thought.

Mike had made a terrible impression on Henry. He'd come off as sounding gruff and crude. How could she expect this man to believe her? At that point she was embarrassed by Henry's opinion of her more than his opinion of Mike. It was degrading to think she'd allow Mike to beat her children and then tell lies to protect him.

And especially since Mike was, in essence, a man who never used his hands to enforce punishment, not when the tone of his voice and the expression on his face had always been enough.

She was disturbed by Henry's silence, and the way he kept his head lowered so he wouldn't have to look at her. But she decided to let the matter drop.

"Would you show me the bedrooms, please?"

The stench of decayed animal flesh, as she perceived it, so overwhelming throughout the rest of the house wasn't evident in the master bedroom. It did smell bad though, sweet and sickening. The heady aroma of several types of cheap perfume mixed together caused her head to reel. She felt her stomach tighten with nausea.

Henry walked into the room ahead of her, then wheeled to face her, his expression somber, almost depressed looking. "Erica," he began then thought better of it. "May I call you *Erica*?"

She nodded silently.

"I wanted to speak to you alone. Mr. Walsh doesn't like this house. And frankly, I agree."

She'd been expecting this. Over the years she'd learned never to trust realtors, or lawyers, or public officials.

"In fact," he continued, "there's a house over on Evergreen that's more suited to your needs." He tried to be nonchalant, but his words sounded choked and strained. He wiped his palms with a handkerchief.

“The house on Evergreen...it just happens to cost more. Am I right?”

Henry diverted his gaze and remained silent.

“Look. You gave us a big buildup about this place. Raised our hopes. Now you don’t want us to buy it? You think we’re stupid or something?”

It was hot up there. Her jeans were glued to her body with sweat and she felt very uncomfortable. And who the hell used that awful perfume, she wondered? The son-of-a-bitch must’ve taken a bath in it. Good Christ, her head was reeling. “You do think we’re stupid! Otherwise you’d have something to say in defense of yourself.”

Henry stared down at his feet while Erica waited for an answer. His voice sounded even more strained than before. “I’m not promising you anything...but maybe I can get you the other house for the same price.”

“I want this one!” She brushed her hair away from her face, wishing she had some pins to put it back with. It was so hot in that room. “I want this house, she repeated firmly.

Then she turned her back on Henry and concentrated on the room. It was perfect, except for the color, the same hideous blue covering the wall throughout the entire house. Well, it can be painted over, she thought, admiring the room for its size. There would be plenty of space for that king-size water bed and...

She heard footsteps on the staircase down the hall and knew it had to be Mike. She rushed out, full of childish excitement, to tell him about their new bedroom. Mike would have to buy this house now. This place was everything they hoped it would be and more.

But when she reached the top of the landing and looked down, the stairs were empty. And yet, the noise continued. Step after step, slowly and deliberately, someone was climbing towards her. *Someone she couldn’t see!*

She was stunned for a moment. A chill started at the base of her skull and notched its way down her spine. She wasn’t crazy. Someone was *there*; she heard him.

The footsteps grew louder and the footfalls sharper as they drew closer to the landing, closer to where she stood. And although her mind was clouded with confusion and she was unable to reason this out, her senses sharpened with the tenacity of a radar scan.

A foul, acrid odor stung her nostrils with the force of a punch and turned her stomach. There were harsh whisperings assaulting her ears, but she couldn't hear what *they* were saying. And laughter, she detected its mocking laughter; several voices, but only one set of footsteps. She felt overwhelmed by the riddle.

The voice of a child, a girl, rang out from behind, calling her "Mommy!"

And someone stepped onto the landing, giving Erica the courage to back up. Henry was still in the master bedroom. If she were at least able to reach the door, and yet, her senses told her that it would be useless to try. The force behind the footsteps was an ancient evil, well acquainted with pursuit and afraid of nothing. It could move with great swiftness, surround her completely and choke the life from her body before she even took another step if it so desired.

Sweat beaded her forehead. She brushed it away with trembling hands as her mind began to cooperate with the invisible entity in front of her. Only seconds had passed since she'd rushed to the top of the steps, but it seemed longer. She felt trapped in a time warp. It was as though everything around her continued on in normal sync except for her own movements. Her body dragged at a maddening half-pace and she longed to be free to run from the danger she felt.

Hands were touching her, lots of them; cold, monstrous, hands; they violated her sanity, aroused her in an erotically sexual manner; played games with her clitoris. Someone whispered. No! Someone screamed her name. But the voice was unfamiliar. Mike? Mike was standing at the top of the stairs only a few feet away.

But Erica had trouble seeing him, could barely hear him. Mike hadn't screamed her name. She reached out for him, for the strength of his hands to protect her. She reached through the invisible mass separating her from Mike and felt blackness clamping down hard on her brain. Then she was falling...into an endless void in time...just falling.

* * *

Henry Wittaker pulled up in front of his house and sat in the car for a few minutes, his hands clutching the wheel so tightly that it caused the veins in his neck to protrude.

He was no closer now to knowing whether the house had been sold than he'd been this morning. The Walsh' had left right after Mrs. Walsh, Erica, had recovered. And Mr.

Walsh had refused to listen when Henry shouted after him. Henry wanted to explain about the house on Evergreen.

The entire commission could've been lost to him at this point and all because, "Those fucking bastards wouldn't stop playing their games!"

Henry was startled when he realized he'd been shouting at the top of his voice. He scanned the street ahead of him and checked the rear view mirror--no one in sight. Good, he told himself and stepped from the car.

Buddy's Corvette was parked in the driveway with the FOR SALE sign in the back window. Tears misted Henry's eyes. "Goddamn *them*," he cursed and raised his fist to an invisible enemy.

Henry's plan had been to sell a house! Maybe not the one the Walsh's' wanted at first, but a house nevertheless. Then he could come home and rip that son-of-a-bitch sign off the kid's car and tear it to shreds. Then perhaps he'd regain the respect he felt he'd lost in the eyes of his son, his daughter, and his wife, too--if the truth were known.

But it wasn't meant to be. And Henry would have to live with that sign in the back window of the Corvette for a while longer. God, he thought suddenly alarmed, the kid might even have to sell his car if the Walsh's' bought nothing!

"That you, dear?" Bess called down as soon as he got in the door. Then again, she didn't have to ask; she already knew it was Henry.

"Yes, love. Are you okay?" He wished to hell *he* was.

"I'm fine." But her voice was choked with pain.

"I'll be right up. I'm getting a cup of coffee. Can I bring you some?" Thankfully, she said no. He needed time to talk to Buddy alone, to reassure his son, and himself, that the car wouldn't be sold.

Buddy was doing this unselfishly, but Henry knew it had to hurt. The car was three years old and still looked brand new. A boy and his toy, he thought, an expensive toy, one that aroused the right set of chicks and made Buddy a king of the hill.

Of course, Buddy would never admit to using the car as bait. His face would always flush whenever Henry taunted him about girls, and Buddy would then swear the car was only used for "dependable transportation, Dad." It became a running gag between them

Plus, the car was impressive at the right times. Buddy had gotten himself a pretty good after-school job because old Rick DeSota, the owner of the one and only newspaper in town, had seen the kid pulling up in that car. Rick told Buddy that anyone smart enough to acquire a Corvette at his age, whether or not he bought it himself, deserved a job with his paper. Then he hired the kid for eight bucks an hour, way above minimum wage.

Now Buddy was throwing it all away because he wanted to help. “Goddamn them,” Henry cursed again.

Buddy was in the kitchen reading a paper when he got there. Henry surveyed the brown hair, the knotted muscles, and thought about himself and about how old he’d gotten; the gray streaks on his temples, the paunch over the belt of his trousers. It was hard to believe he’d ever looked like Buddy.

The boy watched him with anxious eyes, searching Henry’s face for a sign of victory. Whenever Henry sold a house his cheeks were puffed red with excitement. At the moment, the boy saw only the grayness of defeat and turned back to his newspaper.

Henry had to say something, even if it was a lie. He just couldn’t admit to failure in front of his son. “I have to show another house to the Walsh’s tomorrow. They’re going to buy. It’s just a matter of which one.”

Buddy looked up at him, forced a smile, and tried to believe what he’d said.

“Well,” Henry began, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s see the insurance ads. Maybe with a bit of luck I’ll find something good.” Buddy smiled again and handed him the employment section. “After all,” Henry continued in a falsely jubilant tone of voice, “I still have my licenses.”

To Buddy, this was further proof of Henry’s failure. Whenever Henry struck out in real estate and his future looked bleak, he tried to go back to insurance. However, a large insurance company had given Henry the boot, leaving him with no references. A fifty-year-old man didn’t walk into a swell job with no references. There would be no company cars, no secretaries, and most of all, no weekly salary.

Henry had but one choice; a commission-only sales job in the insurance field, working his ass off from morning till night the same as he had in real estate. Henry knew

this and Buddy knew it, too. But Buddy also knew that pretension was an important part of his father's life at this point. And damned if he was going to be the one to burst the old man's bubble.

Henry hadn't heard the front door open and close with a strange rigidity after he walked to the kitchen. But Bess did. And Henry hadn't heard someone climbing the steps to the second floor. But Bess did.

And Bess damned well knew the identity of everyone who entered by their footsteps alone. This one had her stumped though. It wasn't a familiar gait. And it frightened her as well.

She felt that footsteps, like body movements, were an extension of an inner personality. People had a tendency to shuffle their feet and take smaller steps when they were depressed. But when they were happy and didn't have a care at all, they took long, vigorous, confident steps. These footsteps didn't match either category.

This stranger wasn't happy or depressed. He was angry. His footfalls were slow, true, but they were also deliberate, as if he knew where he was headed and why. It was one step after another, with a kiss-my-butt attitude, yet hardly with confidence. She sensed defiance more than anything else; he was after trouble and getting caught was the least of his worries.

Oh, yeah! His footsteps told her a lot; they told her she should probably be screaming for help at this point. But Henry and Buddy were in the kitchen. Would they hear her cries? Would they reach her in time? Or would she just be telling this person her exact location in the house by screaming?