STEPHEN KING

MILE 81

Contents

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1. PETE SIMMONS (’07 Huffy)

“You can’t come,” his older brother said.

George spoke in a low voice, even though the rest of his friends—a neighborhood group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who styled themselves the Rip-Ass Raiders—were up at the end of the block, waiting for him. Not very patiently. “It’s too dangerous.”

Pete said, “I’m not afraid.” He spoke stoutly enough, although he was afraid, a little. George and his friends were headed up to the sandpit behind the bowling alley. There they’d play a game Normie Therriault had invented. Normie was the leader of the Rip-Ass Raiders, and the game was called Paratroops From Hell. There was a rutted track leading up to the edge of the gravel pit, and the game was to ride your bike along it at full speed, yelling “*Raiders rule*!” at the top of your lungs and bailing from the seat of your bike as you went over. The usual drop was ten feet or so, and the approved landing area was soft, but sooner or later someone would land on gravel instead of sand and probably break an arm or an ankle. Even Pete knew that (although he sort of understood why it added to the attraction). Then the parents would find out and that would be the end of Paratroops From Hell. For now, however, the game—played without helmets, of course—continued.

George knew better than to allow his brother to play, however; he was supposed to be taking care of Pete while their parents were at work. If Pete wrecked his Huffy at the gravel pit, George would likely be grounded for a week. If his little

brother broke an arm, it would be for a month. And if—God forbid!—it was his neck, George guessed he might be whiling away the hours in his bedroom until he went to college.

Besides, he loved the little cock-knocker.

"Just hang out here," George said. "We'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Hang out with *who*?" Pete asked morosely. It was spring vacation, and all of *his* friends, the ones his mother would have called "age appropriate," seemed to be somewhere else. A couple of them had gone to Disney World in Orlando, and when Pete thought of this, his heart filled with envy and jealousy—a vile brew, but strangely tasty.

"Just hang out," George said. "Go to the store, or something." He scrounged in his pocket and came out with two crumpled Washingtons. "Here's a couple of bucks."

Pete looked at them. "Jeez, I'll buy a Corvette. Maybe two."

"Hurry up, Simmons, or we'll go withoutcha!" Normie yelled.

"Coming!" George shouted back. Then, low, to Pete: "Take the money and don't be a boogersnot."

Pete took the money. "I even brought my magnifying glass," he said. "I was gonna show em—"

"They've all seen that baby trick a thousand times," George said, but when he saw the corners of Pete's mouth tuck down, he tried to soften the blow. "Besides, look at the sky, numbo. You can't start fires with a magnifying glass on a cloudy day. Hang out. We'll play computer Battleship or something when I come back."

"Okay, chickshit, seeya later!" Normie yelled.

“I gotta go,” George said. “Do me a favor and don’t get in trouble. Stay in the neighborhood.”

“You’ll probably break your spine and be fuckin’ paralyzed for life,” Pete said . . . then hastily spat between his forked fingers to take the curse off. “*Good luck*!” he shouted after his brother. “*Jump the farthest*!”

George waved one hand in acknowledgment, but didn’t look back. He stood on the pedals of his own bike, a big old Schwinn that Pete admired but couldn’t ride (he’d tried once and wiped out halfway down the driveway). Pete watched him put on speed as he raced up this block of suburban houses in Auburn, catching up with his homies.

Then Pete was alone.

He took his magnifying glass out of his saddlebag and held it over his forearm, but there was no spot of light and no heat. He looked glumly up at the low-hanging clouds and put the glass back. It was a good one, a Richforth. He’d gotten it last Christmas, to help with his ant-farm science project.

“It’ll wind up in the garage, gathering dust,” his father had said, but although the ant-farm project had concluded in February (Pete and his partner, Tammy Witham, had gotten an A), Pete hadn’t tired of the magnifying glass yet. He particularly enjoyed charring holes in pieces of paper in the backyard.

But not today. Today, the afternoon stretched ahead like a desert. He could go home and watch TV, but his father had put a block on all the interesting channels when he discovered George had been DVR-ing *Boardwalk Empire*, which was full of gangsters and bare titties. There was a similar

block on Pete's computer, and he hadn't figured a workaround yet, although he would; it was only a matter of time.

So?

"So what," he said in a low voice, and began to pedal slowly toward the end of Murphy Street. "So . . . fucking . . .what."

Too little to play Paratroops From Hell, because it was too dangerous. How sucky. He wished he could think of something that would show George and Normie and all of the Raiders that even little kids could face dan—

Then it came to him. He could explore the abandoned rest area. Pete didn't think the big kids knew about it, because it was a kid Pete's own age, Craig Gagnon, who had told him about it. He said he'd been up there with a couple of other kids, ten-year-olds, last fall. Of course the whole thing might have been a lie, but Pete didn't think so. Craig had given too many details, and he wasn't a particularly imaginative boy.

With a destination in mind, Pete began to pedal faster. At the end of Murphy Street he banked left onto Hyacinth. There was no one on the sidewalk, and no cars. He heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner from the Rossignols', but otherwise everyone might have been sleeping or dead. Pete supposed they were actually at work, like his own parents.

He swept right onto Rosewood Terrace, passing the yellow sign reading DEAD END. There were only a dozen or so houses on Rosewood. At the end of the street was a chain-link fence. Beyond it was a thick tangle of shrubbery and scraggly second-growth trees. As Pete drew closer to the chain-

link (and the totally unnecessary sign mounted on it reading NOT A THROUGH STREET), he stopped pedaling and coasted.

He understood—vaguely—that although he thought of George and his Raider pals as Big Kids (and certainly that was how the Raiders thought of themselves), they weren't *really* Big Kids. The true Big Kids were badass teenagers who had driver's licenses and girlfriends. True Big Kids went to high school. They liked to drink, smoke pot, listen to heavy metal or hip-hop, and suck major face with their girlfriends.

Hence, the abandoned rest area.

Pete got off his Huffy and looked around to see if he was being observed. There was nobody. Even the annoying Crosskill twins, who liked to jump rope (in tandem) all over the neighborhood when there was no school, were not in evidence. A bald-ass miracle, in Pete's opinion.

Not too far away, Pete could hear the steady *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of cars on I-95, headed south to Portland or north to Augusta.

Even if Craig was telling the truth, they probably fixed the fence, Pete thought. *That's the way today's going*.

But when he bent close, he could see that although the fence *looked* whole, it really wasn't. Someone (probably a Big Kid who had long since joined the ranks of Young Adults) had clipped the links in a straight line from top to bottom. Pete took another look around, then laced his hands in the metal diamonds and pushed. He expected resistance, but there was none. The cut piece of chain-link swung open like a farmyard gate. The

Really Big Kids had been using it, all right. Booya.

It stood to reason, when you thought about it. Maybe they had drivers' licenses, but the entrance and exit to the Mile 81 rest area were now blocked off by those big orange barrels the highway crews used. Grass was growing up through the crumbling pavement in the deserted parking lot. Pete had seen this for himself thousands of times, because the school bus used I-95 to go the three exits from Laurelwood, where he got picked up, to Sabattus Street, home to Auburn Elementary School No. 3.

He could remember when the rest area had still been open. There had been a gas station, a Burger King, a TCBY, and a Sbarro's. Then it got closed down. Pete's dad said there were too many of those rest areas on the turnpike, and the state couldn't afford to keep them all open.

Pete rolled his bike through the gap in the chain-link, then carefully pushed the makeshift gate back until the diamond shapes matched up and the fence looked whole again. He walked toward the wall of bushes, being careful not to run the Huffy's tires over any broken glass (there was a lot of it on this side of the fence). He began looking for what he knew must be here; the cut fence said it had to be.

And there it was, marked by stamped cigarette butts and a few discarded beer and soda bottles: a path leading deeper into the undergrowth. Still pushing his bike, Pete followed it. The high bushes swallowed him up. Behind him, Rosewood Terrace dreamed through another overcast spring day.

It was as if Pete Simmons had never been there at all.

The path between the chain-link fence and the Mile 81 rest area was, by Pete's estimation, about half a mile long, and there were Big Kid signposts all along the way: half a dozen small brown bottles (two with snot-caked coke spoons still attached), empty snack bags, a pair of lace-trimmed panties hanging from a thornbush (it looked to Pete like they'd been there for a while, like maybe fifty years), and—jackpot!—a half-full bottle of Popov vodka with the screw cap still on. After some interior debate, Pete put this into his saddlebag along with his magnifying glass, the latest issue of *American Vampire*, and a few Double Stuf Oreos in a baggie.

He pushed his bike across a sluggish little stream, and bingo-boingo, here he was at the back of the rest area. There was another chain-link fence, but this one was also cut, and Pete slipped right through. The path continued through high grass to the back parking lot. Where, he supposed, the delivery trucks used to pull up. Close to the building he could see darker rectangles on the pavement where the Dumpsters had been. Pete lowered the kickstand of his Huffy and parked it on one of these.

His heart was thumping as he thought about what came next. *Breaking and entering, sugarbear. You could go to jail for that.* But was it breaking and entering if he found an open door, or a loose board over one of the windows? He supposed it would still be entering, but was entering all by itself a crime?

In his heart he knew it was, but he guessed that without the breaking part, it wouldn't mean jail time. And after all, hadn't he come here to take a risk? Something he could brag about later to Normie and George and the other Rip-Ass Raiders?

And okay, he was scared, but at least he wasn't bored anymore.

He tried the door with the fading EMPLOYEES ONLY sign on it, and found it not only locked but *seriously* locked–no give at all. There were two windows beside it, but he could tell just by looking that they were boarded down tight. Then he remembered the chain-link fence that looked whole but wasn't, and tested the boards anyway. No good. In a way, it was a relief. He could be off the hook if he wanted to be.

Only . . . the Really Big Kids *did* go in there. He was sure of it. So how did they do it? From the front? In full view of the turnpike? Maybe so, if they came at night, but Pete had no intention of checking it out in broad daylight. Not when any passing motorist with a cell phone could dial 911 and say, "Just thought you might like to know that there's a little kid playing Freddy Fuckaround at the Mile 81 rest area. You know, where the Burger King used to be?"

I'd rather break my arm playing Paratroops From Hell than have to call my folks from the Gray State Police Barracks. In fact, I'd rather break both arms and get my dick caught in the zipper.

Well, maybe not that.

He wandered toward the loading dock, and there, once again: jackpot. There were dozens of stamped-out cigarette butts at the foot of the concrete island, plus a few more of those tiny brown

bottles surrounding their king: a dark green NyQuil bottle. The surface of the dock, where the big semis backed up to unload, was eye-high to Pete, but the cement was crumbling and there were plenty of footholds for an agile kid in Chuck Taylor High-Tops. Pete raised his arms over his head, snagged fingerholds in the dock's pitted surface . . . and the rest, as they say, is history.

On the dock, in faded red, someone had sprayed EDWARD LITTLE ROCKS, RED EDDIES RULE. *Not true*, Pete thought. *Rip-Ass Raiders rule*. Then he looked around from his current high perch, grinned, and said, "Actually, *I* rule." And standing up here above the empty back lot of the rest area, he felt that he did. For the time being, anyway.

He climbed back down—just to make sure it was no problem—and then remembered the stuff in his saddlebag. Supplies, in case he decided to spend the afternoon here, exploring and shit. He debated what to bring, then decided to unstrap the saddlebag and take everything. Even the magnifying glass might come in handy. A vague fantasy began to form in his brain: boy detective discovers a murder victim in a deserted rest area, and solves the crime before the police even know a crime has been committed. He could see himself explaining to the drop-jawed Raiders that it had actually been pretty easy. Elementary, my dear fucksticks.

Bullshit, of course, but it would be fun to pretend.

He lifted his bag onto the loading dock (being especially careful on account of the half-full vodka bottle), then climbed back up. The corrugated metal door leading inside was at least

twelve feet high and secured at the bottom with not one but two humongous padlocks, but there was a human-sized door set into it. Pete tried the knob. It wouldn't turn, nor would the human-sized door open when he pushed and pulled, but there was some give. Quite a lot, actually. He looked down and saw that a wooden wedge had been pushed under the bottom of the door; a totally dope precaution if he'd ever seen one. On the other hand, what more could you expect from kids who were stoned on coke and cough syrup?

Pete pulled the wedge, and this time when he tried the inset door, it creaked open.

The big front windows of what had been the Burger King were covered with chickenwire instead of boards, so Pete had no trouble seeing what there was to see. All the eating tables and booths were gone from the restaurant part, and the kitchen part was just a dim hole with some wires sticking out of the walls and some of the ceiling tiles hanging down, but the place was not exactly unfurnished.

In the center, surrounded by folding chairs, two old card tables had been pushed together. On this doublewide surface were half a dozen filthy tin ashtrays, several decks of greasy Bicycle cards, and a caddy of poker chips. The walls were decorated with twenty or thirty magazine gatefolds. Pete inspected these with great interest. He knew about pussies, had glimpsed more than a few on HBO and CinemaSpank (before his folks got wise and blocked the premium cable channels), but these were *shaved* pussies. Pete wasn't sure what the big deal was—to him they looked sort of oogy—but he supposed he might get

with the program when he was older. Besides, the bare titties made up for it. Bare titties were fuckin awesome.

In the corner three filthy mattresses had been pushed together like the card tables, but Pete was old enough to know it wasn't poker that was played here.

"Let me see your pussy!" he commanded one of the *Hustler* girls on the wall, and giggled. Then he said, "Let me see your *shaved* pussy!" and giggled harder. He sort of wished Craig Gagnon was here, even though Craig was a dweeb. They could have laughed about the shaved pussies together.

He began to wander around, still snorting small carbonated bubbles of laughter. It was dank in the rest area, but not actually cold. The smell was the worst part, a combination of cigarette smoke, pot smoke, old booze, and creeping rot in the walls. Pete thought he could also smell rotting meat. Probably from sandwiches purchased at Rosselli's or Subway.

Mounted on the wall beside the counter where people once ordered Whoppers and Whalers, Pete discovered another poster. This one was Justin Bieber. Justin's teeth had been blacked out, and someone had added a Notzi swat-sticker tattoo to one cheek. Red-ink devil horns sprouted from Justin's moptop. There were darts sticking out of his face. Magic Markered on the wall above the poster was MOUTH 15 PTS, NOSE 25 PTS, EYES 30 PTS ITCH.

Pete pulled out the darts and backed across the big empty room until he came to a black mark on the floor. Printed here was BEEBER LINE. Pete stood behind it and shot the six darts ten or

twelve times. On his last try, he got 125 points. He thought that was pretty good. He imagined George and Normie Therriault applauding.

He went over to one of the mesh-covered windows, staring out at the empty concrete islands where the gas pumps used to be, and the traffic beyond. Light traffic. He supposed that when summer came it would once more be bumper to bumper with tourists and summer people, unless his dad was right and the price of gas went to seven bucks a gallon and everybody stayed home.

Now what? He'd played darts, he'd looked at enough shaved pussies to last him . . . well, maybe not a lifetime but at least a few months, there were no murders to solve, so now what?

Vodka, he decided. That was what came next. He'd try a few sips just to prove he could, and so future brags would have that vital ring of truth. Then, he supposed, he would pack up his shit and go back to Murphy Street. He would do his best to make his adventure sound interesting—thrilling, even—but in truth, this place wasn't such of a much. Just a place where the Really Big Kids could come to play cards and make out with girls and not get wet when it rained.

But booze . . . that was *something*.

He took his saddlebag over to the mattresses and sat down (being careful to avoid the stains, of which there were many). He took out the vodka bottle and studied it with a certain grim fascination. At ten-going-on-eleven, he had no particular longing to sample adult pleasures. The year before he had hawked one of his grandfather's cigarettes and smoked it behind the 7-Eleven. Smoked half of it, anyway. Then he had leaned over

and spewed his lunch between his sneakers. He had obtained an interesting but not very valuable piece of information that day: beans and franks didn't look great when they went into your mouth, but at least they tasted good. When they came back out, they looked fucking horrible and tasted worse.

His body's instant and emphatic rejection of that American Spirit suggested to him that booze would be no better, and probably worse. But if he didn't drink at least some, any brag would be a lie. And his brother George had lie-radar, at least when it came to Pete.

I'll probably puke again, he thought, then said: "Good news is I won't be the first in *this* dump."

That made him laugh again. He was still smiling when he unscrewed the cap and held the mouth of the bottle to his nose. Some smell, but not much. Maybe it was water instead of vodka, and the smell was just a leftover. He raised the mouth of the bottle to his mouth, sort of hoping that was true and sort of hoping it wasn't. He didn't expect much, and he certainly didn't want to get drunk and maybe break his neck trying to climb back down from the loading dock, but he was curious. His parents *loved* this stuff.

"Dares go first," he said for no reason at all, and took a small sip.

It wasn't water, that was for sure. It tasted like hot, light oil. He swallowed mostly in surprise. The vodka trailed heat down his throat, then exploded in his stomach.

"Holy Jeezum!" Pete yelled.

Tears sprang into his eyes. He held the bottle out at arm's length, as if it had bitten him. But

the heat in his stomach was already subsiding, and he felt pretty much okay. Not drunk, and not like he was going to puke, either. He tried another little sip, now that he knew what to expect. Heat in the mouth . . . heat in the throat . . . and then, boom in the stomach.

Actually not bad. Now he felt a tingling in his arms and hands. Maybe his neck, too. Not the pins-and-needles sensation you got when a limb went to sleep, but more like something was waking up.

Pete raised the bottle to his lips again, then lowered it. There was more to worry about than falling off the loading dock or crashing his bike on the way home (he wondered briefly if you could get arrested for drunk biking and supposed you could). Having a few swigs of vodka so you could brag on it was one thing, but if he drank enough to get loaded, his mother and father would know when they came home. It would only take one look. Trying to act sober wouldn't help. They drank, their friends drank, and sometimes they drank too much. They would know the signs.

Also, there was the dreaded HANGOVER to consider. Pete and George had seen their mom and dad dragging around the house with red eyes and pale faces on a good many Saturday and Sunday mornings. They took vitamin pills, they told you to turn the TV down, and music was absolutely verboten. The HANGOVER looked like the absolute opposite of fun.

Still, maybe one more sip might not hurt.

Pete took a slightly larger swallow and shouted, "*Zoom, we have liftoff*!" This made him laugh. He felt a little light-headed, but it was a totally

pleasant feeling. Smoking he didn't get. Drinking, he guessed he did.

He got up, staggered a little, caught his balance, and laughed some more. "Jump into that fucking sandpit all you want, sugarbears," he told the empty restaurant. "I'm fuckin stinko, and fuckin stinko is better." This was *very* funny, and he laughed hard.

Am I really stinko? On just three sips?

He didn't think so, but he was definitely high. No more. Enough was enough. "Drink responsibly," he told the empty restaurant, and snorted.

He'd hang out here for a while and wait for it to wear off. An hour should do it, maybe two. Until three o'clock, say. He didn't have a wristwatch, but he'd be able to tell three o'clock from the chimes of St. Joseph's, which was only a mile or so away. Then he'd leave, first hiding the vodka (for possible further research) and putting the wedge back under the door. His first stop when he got back to the neighborhood was going to be the 7-Eleven, where he'd buy some of that really strong Teaberry gum to take the smell of the booze off his breath. He'd heard kids say vodka was the thing to steal out of your parents' liquor cabinet because it *had* no smell, but Pete was now a wiser child than he'd been an hour ago.

"Besides," he told the hollowed-out restaurant in a lecturely tone, "I bet my eyes are red, just like Dad's when he has too marny mantinis." He paused. That wasn't quite right, but what the fuck.

He gathered up the darts, went back to the Beeber Line, and shot them. He missed Justin with all but one, and this struck Pete as the most

hilarious thing of all. As he gathered them up, he sang a few lines of "Baby," Justin's big hit from last year. He wondered if Justin could have a hit with a song called "My Baby Shaves Her Pussy," and this struck him so funny that he laughed until he had to bend over with his hands on his knees.

When the laughter passed, he wiped double snot-hangers from his nose, flicked them onto the floor (*there goes your Good Restaurant rating*, he thought, *sorry, Burger King*), and then trudged back to the Beeber Line. He had even worse luck the second time. He wasn't seeing double or anything, he just couldn't nail the Beeb.

Also, he felt a little sick, after all. Not much, but he was glad he hadn't tried a fourth sip. "I would have popped my Popov," he said. He laughed, then uttered a ringing belch that burned coming up. Blick. He left the darts where they were and went back to the mattresses. He thought of using his magnifying glass to see if anything really small was crawling there, and decided he didn't want to know. He thought about eating some of his Oreos, but was afraid of what they might do to his stomach. It felt, let's face it, a little tender.

He lay down and laced his hands behind his head. He had heard that when you got really drunk, everything started spinning around. Nothing like that was happening to him, but he wouldn't mind a little nap. Sleeping it off kind of thing.

"But not too long."

No, not too long. That would be bad. If he wasn't home when his folks came home, and if they couldn't find him, he would be in trouble. Probably George would be, too, for going off

without him. The question was, could he wake himself up when the St. Joseph's chimes struck?

Pete realized, in those last few seconds of consciousness, that he'd just have to hope so. Because he was going.

He closed his eyes.

And slept in the deserted restaurant.

Outside, in the southbound travel lane of I-95, a station wagon of indeterminate make and vintage appeared. It was traveling well below the posted minimum turnpike speed. A fast-moving semi came up behind it and veered into the passing lane, blatting its air horn.

The station wagon, almost coasting now, veered into the entrance lane of the rest area, ignoring the big sign reading CLOSED NO SERVICES NEXT GAS AND FOOD 27 MI. It struck four of the orange barrels blocking the lane, sent them rolling, and came to a stop about seventy yards from the abandoned restaurant building. The driver's side door opened, but nobody got out. There were no hey-stupid-your-door's-open chimes. It just hung silently ajar.

If Pete Simmons had been watching instead of snoozing, he wouldn't have been able to see the driver. The station wagon was splattered with mud, and the windshield was smeared with it. Which was strange, because there had been no rain in northern New England for over a week, and the turnpike was perfectly dry.

The car sat there a little distance up the entrance ramp, under a cloudy April sky. The barrels it had knocked over came to a stop. The driver's door hung open like an invitation.

2. DOUG CLAYTON (’09 Prius)

Doug Clayton was an insurance man from Bangor, bound for Portland, where he had a reservation at the Sheraton Hotel. He expected to be there by two o’clock at the latest. That would leave plenty of time for an afternoon nap (a luxury he could rarely afford) before searching out dinner on Congress Street. Tomorrow he would present himself at the Portland Conference Center bright and early, take a nametag, and join four hundred other agents in a conference called Fire, Storm, and Flood: Insuring for Disaster in the Twenty-First Century. As he passed the Mile 82 marker, Doug was closing in on his own personal disaster, but it was nothing the Portland conference would cover.

His briefcase and suitcase were in the backseat. Lying in the passenger bucket was a Bible (King James version; Doug would have no other). Doug was one of four lay preachers at the Church of the Holy Redeemer, and when it was his turn to preach, he liked to call his Bible “the ultimate insurance manual.”

Doug had taken Jesus Christ as his personal savior after ten years of drinking that spanned his late teens and most of his twenties. This decadelong spree ended with a wrecked car and thirty days in the Penobscot County Jail. He had gotten down on his knees in that smelly, coffin-sized cell on his first night there, and he’d gotten down on them every night since.

“Help me get better,” he had prayed that first time, and every time since. It was a simple prayer that had been answered first twofold, then

tenfold, then a hundredfold. He thought that, in another few years, he would be up to a thousandfold. And the best thing? Heaven was waiting at the end of it all.

His Bible was well-thumbed, because he read it every day. He loved all the stories in it, but the one he loved the best—the one he meditated on most often—was the parable of the Good Samaritan. He had preached on that passage from the Gospel of Luke several times, and the Redeemer congregation had always been generous with their praise afterward, God bless them.

Doug supposed it was because the story was so *personal* to him. A priest had passed by the robbed and beaten traveler lying at the side of the road; so had a Levite. Then who comes along? A nasty, Jew-hating Samaritan. But that's the one who helps, nasty Jew-hater or not. He cleanses the traveler's cuts and scrapes, then binds them up. He loads the traveler on his donkey, and fronts him a room at the nearest inn.

"So which of these three do you think was a neighbor to him who fell among thieves?" Jesus inquires of the hotshot young lawyer who asked him about the requirements for eternal life. And the hotshot, clearly not stupid, replies: "The one who shewed mercy."

If Doug Clayton had a horror of anything, it was of being like the Levite in that story. Of refusing to help when help was needed. Of passing by on the other side. So when he saw the muddy station wagon parked a little way up the entrance ramp of the deserted rest area—the downed orange barrier-barrels in front of it, the driver's door

hanging ajar—he hesitated only a moment before flicking on his turn signal and pulling in.

He parked behind the wagon, put on his four-ways, and started to get out. Then he noticed that there appeared to be no license plate on the back of the station wagon . . . although there was so much damn mud it was hard to tell for sure. Doug took his cell phone out of the Prius's center console and made sure it was on. Being a good Samaritan was one thing; approaching a plateless dog of a car without caution was just plain stupid.

He walked toward the wagon with the phone clasped loosely in his left hand. Nope, no plate, he was right about that. He tried to peer through the back window and could see nothing. Too much mud. He walked toward the driver's side door, then paused, looking at the car as a whole, frowning. Was it a Ford or a Chevy? Darned if he could tell, and that was strange, because he had to've insured thousands of station wagons in his career.

Customized? he asked himself. Well, maybe . . . but who would bother to customize a station wagon into something so *anonymous*?

"Hi, hello? Everything okay?"

He walked toward the door, squeezing the phone a little tighter without being aware of it. He found himself thinking of some movie that had scared heck out of him as a kid, some haunted house thing. A bunch of teenagers had approached the old deserted house, and when one of them saw the door standing ajar, he'd whispered "Look, it's open!" to his buddies. You wanted to tell them not to go in there, but of course they had.

That's stupid. If there's someone in that car, he could be hurt.

Of course the guy might have gone up to the restaurant, maybe looking for a pay phone, but if he was *really* hurt—

"Hello?"

Doug reached for the door handle, then thought better of it and stooped to peer through the opening. What he saw was dismaying. The bench seat was covered with mud; so were the dashboard and the steering wheel. Dark goo dripped from the old-fashioned knobs of the radio, and on the wheel were prints that didn't look exactly as if hands had made them. The palm prints were awfully big, for one thing, but the finger marks were as narrow as pencils.

"Is someone in there?" He shifted his cell phone to his right hand and took hold of the driver's door with his left, meaning to swing it wide so he could look into the backseat. "Is someone hur—"

There was a moment to register an ungodly stink, and then his left hand exploded into pain so great it seemed to leap through his entire body, trailing fire and filling all his hollow spaces with agony. Doug didn't, couldn't, scream. His throat locked shut with the sudden shock of it. He looked down and saw that the door handle appeared to have impaled the pad of his palm.

His fingers were barely there. He could see only the stubs of them, just below the last knuckles where the back of his hand started. The rest had somehow been swallowed by the door. As Doug watched, the third finger broke. His wedding ring fell off and clinked to the pavement.

He could feel something, oh dear God and dear Jesus, something like teeth. They were chewing. The car was eating his hand.

Doug tried to pull back. Blood flew, some against the muddy door, some splattering his slacks. The drops that hit the door disappeared immediately, with a faint sucking sound: *slorp*. For a moment he almost got away. He could see glistening fingerbones from which the flesh had been sucked, and he had a brief, nightmarish image of chewing on one of the Colonel's chicken wings. *Get it all before you put that down*, his mother used to say, *the meat's sweetest closest to the bone*.

Then he was yanked forward again. The driver's door opened to welcome him: *hello, Doug, come on in*. His head connected with the top of the door, and he felt a line of coldness across his brow that turned hot as the station wagon's roofline sliced through his skin.

He made one more effort to get away, dropping his cell phone and pushing at the rear window. The window yielded instead of supporting, then enveloped his hand. He rolled his eyes and saw what had looked like glass now rippling like a pond in a breeze. And why was it rippling? Because it was chewing. Because it was chowing down.

This is what I get for being a good Sam—

Then the top of the driver's door sawed through his skull and slipped smoothly into the brain behind it. Doug Clayton heard a large bright *SNAP*, like a pine knot exploding in a hot fire. Then darkness descended.

A southbound delivery driver glanced over and saw a little green car with its flashers on parked

behind a mud-coated station wagon. A man—presumably he belonged to the little green car—appeared to be leaning in the station wagon's door, talking to the driver. *Breakdown*, the delivery driver thought, and returned his attention to the road. No good Samaritan he.

Doug Clayton was jerked inside as if hands—ones with big palms and pencil-thin fingers—had seized his shirt and pulled him. The station wagon lost its shape and puckered inward, like a mouth tasting something exceptionally sour . . . or exceptionally sweet. From within came a series of overlapping crunches—the sound of a man stamping through dead branches in heavy boots. The wagon stayed puckered for ten seconds or so, looked more like a lumpy clenched fist than a car. Then, with a *pouck* sound like a tennis ball being smartly struck by a racquet, it popped back into its station wagon shape.

The sun peeked briefly through the clouds, reflecting off the dropped cell phone and making a brief hot circle of light on Doug's wedding ring. Then it dived back into the cloud cover.

Behind the wagon, the Prius blinked its four-ways. They made a low clocklike sound: *Tick . . . tick . . . tick*.

A few cars went past, but not many. The two workweeks surrounding Easter are the slowest time of year on the nation's turnpikes, and afternoon is the second-slowest time of the day; only the hours between midnight and 5 AM are slower.

Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

In the abandoned restaurant, Pete Simmons slept on.

3. JULIANNE VERNON (’05 Dodge Ram)

Julie Vernon didn’t need King James to teach her how to be a good Samaritan. She had grown up in the small town of Readfield, Maine (population 2,400), where neighboring was a way of life, and strangers were also neighbors. Nobody had told her this in so many words; she had learned from her mother, father, and big brothers. They had little to say about such issues, but teaching by example is always the most powerful teaching of all. If you saw a guy lying by the side of the road, it didn’t matter if he was a Samaritan or a Martian. You stopped to help.

Nor had she ever worried much about being robbed, raped, or murdered by someone who was only pretending to need help. Julie was the sort of woman who would supposedly make a good wife because—in the parlance of the old Maine Yankees, of whom there are still a few—“She’ll give ya warmth in the winter and shade in the summer.” When asked for her weight by the school nurse when she was in the fifth grade, Julie had replied proudly, “My dad says I’d dress out around one-seventy. Little less if skinned.”

Now, at thirty-five, she would have dressed out closer to two-eighty, and had no interest in making any man a good wife. She was as gay as old Dad’s hatband, and proud of it. On the back of her Ram truck were two bumper stickers. One read SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY. The other, a bright pink, opined that GAY IS A **HAPPY** WORD!

The stickers didn’t show now because she was hauling what she referred to as the “hoss-

trailah.” She had bought a two-year-old Spanish jennet mare in the town of Clinton, and was now on her way back to Readfield, where she lived on a farm with her partner just two miles down the road from the house where she’d grown up.

She was thinking, as she often did, of her five years of touring with The Twinkles, a female mud-wrestling team. Those years had been both bad and good. Bad because The Twinkles were generally regarded as freakshow entertainment (which she supposed they sort of were), good because she had seen so much of the world. Mostly the American world, it was true, but The Twinkles had once spent three months in England, France, and Germany, where they had been treated with a kindness and respect that was almost eerie. Like young ladies, in other words.

She still had her passport, and had renewed it last year, although she guessed she might never go abroad again. Mostly that was all right. Mostly she was happy on the farm with Amelia and their motley menagerie of livestock, but she sometimes missed those days of touring—the one-night stands, the matches under the lights, the rough camaraderie of the other girls. Sometimes she even missed the push-and-bump with the audience.

“*Grab her by the cunt, she’s a dyke, she likes that!*” some shitbrained yokel had yelled one night—in Tulsa that had been, if she remembered right.

She and Melissa, the girl she’d been grappling with in the Mudbowl, had looked at each other, nodded to each other, and stood up facing the section of the audience from which the yell had came. They stood there wearing nothing but their sopping bikini briefs, mud dripping from their

hair and breasts, and had flipped the bird at the heckler in unison. The audience had broken into spontaneous applause . . . which became a standing O when first Julianne, then Melissa, turned, bent, dropped trou, and shot the asshole a double moon.

She had grown up knowing you cared for the one who had fallen and couldn't get up. She had also grown up knowing you ate no shit—not about your hosses, your size, your line of work, or your sexual preferences. Once you started eating shit, it had a way of becoming your regular diet.

The CD she was listening to came to an end, and she was just about to poke the eject button when she saw a car ahead, parked a little way up the ramp leading to the abandoned Mile 81 service stop. Its four-way flashers were on. There was another car in front of it, a muddy old beat-to-shit station wagon. Probably a Ford or a Chevrolet, it was hard to tell which.

Julie didn't make a decision, because there was no decision to be made. She flipped her blinker, saw there would be no room for her on the ramp, not with the trailer in tow, and got as far over in the breakdown lane as she could without hooking her wheels in the soft ground beyond. The last thing she wanted to do was overturn the horse for which she had just paid eighteen hundred dollars.

This was probably nothing, but it didn't hurt to check. You could never tell when some woman had all at once decided to have herself a baby on the interstate, or when some guy who stopped to help got excited and fainted. Julie put on her own four-ways, but they wouldn't show much, not with the hoss-trailer in the way.

She got out, looked toward the two cars, and saw not a soul. Maybe someone had picked the drivers up, but more likely they'd gone up to the restaurant. Julie doubted if they'd find much there; it had been closed down since the previous September. Julie herself had often stopped at Mile 81 for a TCBY cone, but these days made her snack-stop twenty miles north, at Damon's in Augusta.

She went around to the trailer and her new horse—DeeDee by name—poked her nose out. Julie stroked it. "Soo, baby, soo. This'll just take a minute."

She opened the doors so she could get at the locker built into the trailer's left side. DeeDee decided this would be a fine time to exit the vehicle, but Julie restrained her with one beefy shoulder, once again murmuring "Soo, baby, soo."

She unlatched the locker. Inside, sitting on top of the tools, were a few road flares and two fluorescent-pink mini traffic cones. Julie hooked her fingers into the hollow tops of the cones (no need for flares on an afternoon that was slowly beginning to brighten). She closed the locker and latched it, not wanting DeeDee to step a hoof in and maybe hurt herself. Then she closed the back doors. DeeDee once more poked her head out. Julie didn't really believe a horse could look anxious, but DeeDee sort of did.

"Not long," she said, then placed the traffic cones behind the trailer and headed for the two cars.

The Prius was empty but unlocked. Julie didn't particularly care for that, given the fact that there was a suitcase and a fairly expensive-looking briefcase in the backseat. The driver's door of the old station wagon was hanging open.

Julie started toward it, then stopped, frowning. Lying on the pavement beside the open door was a cell phone and what just about had to be a wedding ring. There was a big crack zigzagging up the phone's casing, as if it had been dropped. And on the little glass window where the numbers appeared —was that a drop of blood?

Probably not, probably just mud—the wagon was covered with it—but Julie liked this less and less. She had taken DeeDee for a good canter before loading her, and hadn't changed out of her no-nonsense split riding skirt for the trip home. Now she took her own cell phone out of the righthand pocket and debated punching in 911.

No, she decided, not yet. But if the mud-splattered wagon was as empty as the little green car, or if that dime-sized spot on the dropped phone really was blood, she'd do it. And wait right here for the State Police cruiser to come instead of walking up to that deserted building. She was brave, and she was kindhearted, but she was not stupid.

She bent to examine the ring and the dropped phone. The slight flare of her riding skirt brushed against the muddy flank of the station wagon, and appeared to melt into it. Julie was jerked to the right, and hard. One hefty buttock slammed against the side of the wagon. The surface yielded, then enveloped two layers of cloth and the meat beneath. The pain was immediate and enormous. She screamed, dropped her phone, and tried to shove herself away, almost as if the car were one of her old mud-wrestling opponents. Her right hand and forearm disappeared through the yielding membrane that looked like a window. What

appeared on the other side, vaguely visible through the scrim of mud, wasn't the hefty arm of a large and healthy horsewoman but a starving bone with flesh hanging from it in tatters.

The station wagon began to pucker.

A car passed southbound, then another. Thanks to the trailer, they didn't see the woman who was now half in and half out of the deformed station wagon, like Brer Rabbit stuck in the tarbaby. Nor did they hear her screams. One driver was listening to Toby Keith, the other to Led Zeppelin. Both had his particular brand of music turned up loud. In the restaurant, Pete Simmons heard her, but only from a great distance, like a fading echo. His eyelids fluttered. Then the screams stopped.

Pete rolled over on the filthy mattress and went back to sleep.

The thing that looked like a car ate Julianne Vernon clothes, boots, and all. The only thing it missed was her phone, which now lay beside Doug Clayton's. Then it popped back into its station wagon shape with that same racquet-hitting-ball sound.

In the hoss-trailer, DeeDee nickered and stamped an impatient foot. She was hungry.

4. THE LUSSIER FAMILY (’11 Expedition)

Six-year-old Rachel Lussier shouted, “Look, Mommy! Look, Daddy! It’s the horse-lady! See her trailer? See it?”

Carla wasn’t surprised Rache was the first one to spot the trailer, even though she was sitting in the backseat. Rache had the sharpest eyes in the family; no one else even came close. X-ray vision, her father sometimes said. It was one of those jokes that isn’t quite a joke.

Johnny, Carla, and four-year-old Blake all wore glasses; everyone on both sides of their family wore glasses; even Bingo, the family dog, probably needed them. Bing was apt to run into the screen door when he wanted to go out. Only Rache had escaped the curse of myopia. The last time she’d been to the optometrist, she’d read the whole damn eye chart, bottom line and all. Dr. Stratton had been amazed. “She could qualify for jet fighter training,” he told Johnny and Carla.

Johnny said, “Maybe someday she will. She’s certainly got a killer instinct when it comes to her little brother.”

Carla had thrown him an elbow for that, but it was true. She had heard there was less sibling rivalry when the sibs were of different sexes. If so, Rachel and Blake were the exception that proved the rule. Carla sometimes thought the most common two words she heard these days were *started it*. Only the gender of the pronoun opening the sentence varied.

The two of them had been pretty good for the first hundred miles of this trip, partially

because visiting with Johnny's parents always put them in a good mood and mostly because Carla had been careful to fill up the no-man's-land between Rachel's booster seat and Blake's car seat with toys and coloring books. But after their snack-and-pee stop in Augusta, the squabbling had begun again. Probably because of the ice cream cones. Giving kids sugar on a long car trip was like squirting gasoline on a campfire, Carla knew this, but you couldn't refuse them *everything*.

In desperation, Carla had started a game of Plastic Fantastic, serving as judge and awarding points for lawn gnomes, wishing wells, statues of the Blessed Virgin, etc. The problem was the turnpike, where there were lots of trees but very few vulgar roadside displays. Her sharp-eyed six-year-old daughter and her sharp-tongued four-year-old boy were beginning to renew old grudges when Rachel saw the horse-trailer pulled over just a little shy of the old Mile 81 rest stop.

"Want to pet the horsie again!" Blake shouted. He began thrashing in his car seat, the world's smallest break-dancer. His legs were now just long enough to kick the back of the driver's seat, which Johnny found *très* annoying.

Somebody tell me again why I wanted to have kids, he thought. *Somebody remind me just what I was thinking. I know it made sense at the time*.

"Blakie, don't kick Daddy's seat," Johnny said.

"Want to pet the *horrrrsie*!" Blake yelled. And fetched the back of the driver's seat an especially good one.

"You are such a babykins," Rachel said, safe from brother-kicks on her side of the backseat DMZ. She spoke in her most indulgent big-girl

tone, the one always guaranteed to infuriate Blakie.

"*I AM AIN'T A BABYKINS*!"

"Blakie," Johnny began, "if you don't stop kicking Daddy's seat, Daddy will have to take his trusty butcher knife and amputate Blakie's little feetsies at the ank—"

"She's broken down," Carla said. "See the traffic cones? Pull over."

"Hon, that'd mean the breakdown lane. Not such a good idea."

"No, just swing around and park beside those other two cars. On the ramp. There's room and you won't be blocking anything because the rest area's closed."

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to get back to Falmouth before d—"

"Pull over." Carla heard herself using the DEFCON-1 tone that brooked no refusal, even though she knew it was a bad idea; how many times lately had she heard Rache using that exact same tone on Blake? Using it until the little guy broke down in tears?

Switching off the she-who-must-be-obeyed voice and speaking more softly, Carla said, "That woman was nice to the kids."

They had pulled into Damon's next to the horse-trailer when they stopped for ice cream. The horse-lady (nearly as big as a horse herself) was leaning against the trailer, eating an ice cream cone of her own and feeding something to a very handsome beastie. To Carla the treat looked like a Kashi granola bar.

Johnny had one kid by each hand and tried to walk them past, but Blake was having none of that.

“Can I pet your horse?” he asked.

“Cost you a quarter,” the big lady in the brown riding skirt had said, and then grinned at Blakie’s crestfallen expression. “Nah, I’m only kiddin. Here, hold this.” She thrust her drippy ice cream cone at Blake, who was too surprised to do anything but take it. Then she lifted him up to where he could pet the horse’s nose. DeeDee regarded the wide-eyed child calmly, sniffed at the horse-lady’s dripping cone, decided it wasn’t what she wanted, and allowed her nose to be stroked.

“Whoa, soft!” Blake said. Carla had never heard him speak with such simple awe. *Why haven’t we ever taken these kids to a petting zoo*? she wondered, and immediately put it down on her mental to-do list.

“Me, me, me!” Rachel bugled, dancing around impatiently.

The big lady set Blake down. “Lick that ice cream while I lift your sister,” she told him, “but don’t get cooties on it, okay?”

Carla thought of telling Blake that eating after people, especially strange people, was not okay. Then she saw Johnny’s bemused grin and thought what the hell. You sent your kids to schools that were basically germ factories. You drove them for hundreds of miles on the turnpike, where any drunk maniac or texting teenager could cross the median strip and wipe them out. Then you forbade them a lick on a partially used ice cream? That was taking the car seat and bike-helmet mentality a little too far, maybe.

The horse-lady lifted Rachel so Rachel could pet the horse’s nose. “Wowie! Nice!” Rachel said.

“What’s her name?”

“DeeDee.”

“Great name! I love you, DeeDee!”

“I love you, too, DeeDee,” the horse-lady said, and put a big old smackeroo on DeeDee’s nose. That made them all laugh.

“Mom, can we have a horse?”

“Yes!” Carla said warmly. “When you’re twenty-six!”

This made Rachel put on her mad-face (puckered brow, puffed cheeks, lips down to a stitch), but when the horse-lady laughed, Rache gave up and laughed, too.

The big woman bent down to Blakie, her hands on knees covered by her riding skirt. “Can I have my ice cream cone back, young fella?”

Blake held it out. When she took it, he began to lick his fingers, which were covered with melting pistachio.

“Thank you,” Carla told the horse-lady. “That was very kind of you.” Then, to Blake, “Let’s get you inside and cleaned up. After that you can have ice cream.”

“I want what she’s having,” Blake said, and that made the horse-lady laugh some more.

Johnny insisted that they eat their cones in a booth, because he didn’t want them decorating the Expedition with pistachio ice cream. When they finished and went out, the horse-lady was gone.

Just one of those people you meet—occasionally nasty, more often nice, sometimes even terrific—along the road and never see again.

Only here she was, or at least here her truck was, parked in the breakdown lane with traffic cones neatly placed behind her trailer. And Carla

was right, the horse-lady *had* been nice to the kids. So thinking, Johnny Lussier made the worst—and last—decision of his life.

He flipped his blinker and pulled onto the ramp as Carla had suggested, parking ahead of Doug Clayton's Prius, which was still flashing its four-ways, and beside the muddy station wagon. He put the transmission in park but left the engine running.

"I want to pet the horsie," Blake said.

"I also want to pet the horsie," Rachel said in the haughty lady-of-the-manor tone of voice she had picked up God knew where. It drove Carla crazy, but she refused to say anything. If she did, Rache would use it all the more.

"Not without the lady's permission," Johnny said. "You kids sit right where you are for now. You too, Carla."

"*Yes, master*," Carla said in the zombie voice that always made the kids laugh.

"Very funny, Easter bunny."

"The cab of her truck's empty," Carla said. "They *all* look empty. Do you think there was an accident?"

"Don't know, but nothing looks dinged up. Hang on a minute."

Johnny Lussier got out, went around the back of the Expedition he would never finish paying for, and walked to the cab of the Dodge Ram. Carla hadn't seen the horse-lady, but he wanted to make sure she wasn't lying on the seat, maybe trying to live through a heart attack. (A lifelong jogger, Johnny secretly believed a heart attack was waiting by age forty-five at the latest for anyone

who weighed even five pounds over the target weight prescribed by Medicine.Net.)

She wasn't sprawled on the seat (*of course not, a woman that big Carla would have seen even lying down*), and she wasn't in the trailer, either. Only the horse, who poked her head out and sniffed Johnny's face.

"Hello there . . ." For a moment the name didn't come, then it did. " . . . DeeDee. How's the old feedbag hanging?"

He patted her nose, then headed back up the ramp to investigate the other two vehicles. He saw there *had* been an accident of sorts, albeit a very tiny one. The station wagon had knocked over a few of the orange barrels blocking the ramp.

Carla rolled down her window, a thing neither of the kids in back could do because of the lockout feature. "Any sign of her?"

"Nope."

"Any sign of *anyone*?"

"Carl, give me a ch—" He saw the cell phones and the wedding ring lying beside the partially open door of the station wagon.

"What?" Carla craned to see.

"Just a sec." The thought of telling her to lock the doors crossed his mind, but he dismissed it. They were on I-95 in broad daylight, for God's sake. Cars passing every twenty or thirty seconds, sometimes two or three in a line.

He bent down and picked up the phones, one in each hand. He turned to Carla, and thus did not see the car door opening wider, like a mouth.

"Carla, I think there's blood on this one." He held up Doug Clayton's cracked phone.

“Mom?” Rachel asked. “Who’s in that dirty car? The door’s opening.”

“Come back,” Carla said. Her mouth was suddenly dust-dry. She wanted to yell it, but there seemed to be a stone on her chest. It was invisible but very large. “Someone’s in that car!”

Instead of coming back, Johnny turned and bent to look inside. When he did, the door swung shut on his head. There was a terrible thudding noise. The stone on Carla’s chest was suddenly gone. She drew in breath and screamed out her husband’s name.

“*What’s wrong with Daddy*?” Rachel cried. Her voice was high and as thin as a reed. “*What’s wrong with Daddy*?”

“*Daddy*!” Blake yelled. He had been inventorying his newest Transformers and now looked around wildly to see where the daddy in question might be.

Carla didn’t think. Her husband’s body was there, but his head was in the dirty station wagon. He was still alive, though; his arms and legs were flailing. She was out of the Expedition with no memory of opening the door. Her own body seemed to be acting on its own, her stunned brain just along for the ride.

“*Mommy, no*!” Rachel screamed.

“*Mommy, NO*!” Blake had no idea of what was going on, but he knew it was bad. He began to cry and struggle in his car seat’s webwork of straps.

Carla grabbed Johnny around the waist and pulled with the crazy superstrength of adrenaline. The door of the station wagon came partway open and blood ran over the footing in a little waterfall. For one awful moment she saw her husband’s head,

lying on the station wagon's muddy seat and cocked crazily to one side. Even though he was still trembling in her arms, she understood (in one of those lightning-flashes of clarity that can come even during a perfect storm of panic) that it was how hanging victims looked when they were cut down. Because their necks were broken. In that brief, searing moment—that shutterflash glimpse—she thought he looked stupid and surprised and ugly, all the essential Johnny out of him, and knew he was already dead, trembling or not. It was how a kid looked after hitting the rocks instead of the water when he dived. How a woman who had been impaled by her steering wheel looked after her car slammed into a bridge abutment. It was how you looked when disfiguring death came at you out of nowhere.

The car door slammed viciously shut. Carla still had her arms wrapped around her husband's waist, and when she was yanked forward, she had another lightning-flash of clarity.

It's the car, you have to stay away from the car!

She let go of Johnny's midsection just a moment too late. A sheaf of her hair fell against the door and was sucked in. The top of her head smacked against the car before she could tear free. Suddenly the top of her head was burning as the thing ate into her scalp.

Run! she tried to scream at her often troublesome but undeniably bright daughter. *Run and take Blakie with you*!

But before she could even begin to articulate the thought, her mouth was gone.

Only Rachel saw the station wagon slam shut on her daddy's head like a Venus flytrap on a bug, but both of them saw their mother somehow pulled through the muddy door as if it were a curtain. They saw one of her mocs come off, they got a flash of her pink toenails, and then she was gone. A moment later, the white car lost its shape and clenched itself like a fist. Through their mother's open window, they heard a crunching sound.

"*Wha' that*?" Blakie screamed. His eyes were streaming tears and his lower lip was lathered with snot. "*Wha' that, Rachie, wha' that, wha' that*?"

Their bones, Rachel thought. She was only six years old, and not allowed to go to PG-13 movies or watch them on TV (let alone R; her mother said R stood for *Raunchy*), but she knew that was the sound of their bones breaking.

The car wasn't a car. It was some kind of monster.

"Where mommy-n-daddy?" Blakie asked, turning his large eyes—now made even larger by his tears—on her. "Where mommy-n-daddy, Rachie?"

He sounds like he's two again, Rachel thought, and for maybe the first time in her life, she felt something other than irritation (or, when extremely tried by his behavior, outright hate) for her baby brother. She didn't think this new feeling was love. She thought it was something even bigger. Her mom hadn't been able to say anything in the end, but if she'd had time, Rachel knew what it would have been: *take care of Blakie*.

He was thrashing in his car seat. He knew how to undo the straps, but in his panic had forgotten

how.

Rachel opened her seat belt, slid out of her booster seat, and tried to do it for him. One of his flailing hands caught her cheek and administered a ringing slap. Under normal circumstances that would have earned him a hard punch on the shoulder (and a time-out in her room, where she would have sat staring at the wall in a boiling fugue of fury), but now she just grabbed his hand and held it down.

"Stop it! Let me help you! I can get you out, but not if you do that!"

He stopped thrashing, but kept on crying. "Where Daddy? Where Mommy? I want Mommy!"

I want her too, asshole, Rachel thought, and undid the car seat straps. "We're going to get out now, and we're going to . . ."

What? They were going to what? Go up to the restaurant? It was closed, that was why there were orange barrels. That was why the gas pumps in front of the gas station part were gone and there was grass poking out of the empty parking lot.

"We're going to get away from here," she finished.

She got out of the car and went around to Blakie's side. She opened his door but he just looked at her, eyes brimming. "I can't get out, Rachie, I'll fall."

Don't be such a scaredy-baby, she almost said, then didn't. This wasn't the time for that. He was upset enough. She opened her arms and said, "Slide. I'll catch you."

He looked at her doubtfully, then slid. Rachel did catch him, but he was heavier than he looked, and they both went sprawling. She got the worst of

it because she was on the bottom, but Blakie bumped his head and scraped one hand and began to bawl loudly, this time in pain instead of fear.

"Stop it," she said, and wriggled out from under him. "Put on your man-pants, Blakie."

"H-Huh?"

She didn't answer. She was looking at the two phones lying beside the terrible station wagon. One of them looked broken, but the other—

Rachel edged toward it on her hands and knees, never taking her eyes off the car into which their father and mother had disappeared with terrifying suddenness. As she was reaching toward the good phone, Blakie walked past her toward the station wagon, holding out his scraped hand.

"Mom? Mommy? Come out! I hurted myself. You have to come out n kiss it bet—"

"*Stop right where you are, Blake Lussier.*"

Carla would have been proud; it was her she-who-must-be-obeyed voice at its most forbidding. And it worked. Blake stopped four feet from the side of the station wagon.

"But I want *Mommy*! I want *Mommy*, Rachie!"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the car. "Not now. Help me work this thing." She knew perfectly well how to work the phone, but she had to distract him.

"Gimme, I can do it! Gimme, Rache!"

She passed it over, and while he examined the buttons, she got up, took him by the back of his Wolverine tee-shirt, and pulled him back three steps. Blake hardly noticed. He found the power button of Julie Vernon's cell phone and pushed it. The phone beeped. Rachel took it from him, and for

once in his dopey little-kid life, Blakie didn't protest.

She had listened carefully when McGruff the Crime Dog came to talk to them at school (although she knew perfectly well it was only a guy in a McGruff suit), and she did not hesitate now. She punched in 911 and put the phone to her ear. It rang once, then was picked up.

"Hello? My name is Rachel Ann Lussier, and—"

"This call is being recorded," a man's voice overrode her. "If you wish to report an emergency, push one. If you wish to report adverse road conditions, push two. If you wish to report a stranded motorist—"

"Rache? Rachie? Where Mommy? Where Da—"

"*Shhh*!" Rachel said sternly, and pushed 1. It was hard to do. Her hand was trembling and her eyes were all blurry. She realized she was crying. When had she started crying? She couldn't remember.

"Hello, this is nine-one-one," a woman said.

"Are you real or another recording?" Rachel asked.

"I'm real," the woman said, sounding a little amused. "Do you have an emergency?"

"Yes. A bad car ate up our mother and our daddy. It's at the—"

"Quit while you're ahead," the 911 woman advised. She sounded more amused than ever. "How old are you, kiddo?"

"I'm six and a half. My name is Rachel Ann Lussier, and a car, a bad car—"

"Listen, Rachel Ann or whoever you are, I can trace this call. Did you know that? I bet you

didn’t. Now just hang up and I won’t have to send a policeman to your house to paddle your—”

“*They’re dead, you stupid phone person*!” Rachel shouted into the phone, and at the d-word, Blakie began to cry again.

The 911 woman didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, in a voice no longer amused: “Where are you, Rachel Ann?”

“At the empty restaurant! The one with the orange barrels!”

Blakie sat down and put his arms over his face. That hurt Rachel in a way she had never been hurt before. It hurt her deep in her heart.

“That’s not enough information,” the 911 lady said. “Can you be a little more specific, Rachel Ann?”

Rachel didn’t know what *specific* meant, but she knew what she was seeing: the back tire of the station wagon, the one closest to them, was melting a little. A tentacle of what looked like liquid rubber was moving slowly across the pavement toward Blakie.

“I have to go,” Rachel said. “We have to get away from the bad car.”

She dragged Blake to his feet, staring at the melting tire. The tentacle of rubber started to go back where it had come from (*because it knows we’re out of reach*, she thought), and the tire started to look like a tire again, but that wasn’t good enough for Rachel. She kept dragging Blake down the ramp and toward the turnpike.

“Where we goin, Rachie?”

I don’t know.

“Away from that car.”

“I want my Transformers!”

"Not now, later." She kept a tight hold on Blake and kept backing, down toward the turnpike where the occasional traffic was whizzing by at seventy and eighty miles an hour.

Nothing is as piercing as a child's scream; it's one of nature's more efficient survival mechanisms. Pete Simmons's sleep had already thinned to little more than a doze, and when Rachel screamed at the 911 lady, he heard it and finally woke up all the way.

He sat up, winced, and put a hand to his head. It ached, and he knew what that sort of ache was: the dreaded HANGOVER. His tongue tasted furry, and his stomach was blick. Not I'm-gonna-hurl blick, but blick, just the same.

Thank God I didn't drink any more, he thought, and got to his feet. He went to one of the mesh-covered windows to see who was yelling. He didn't like what he saw. Some of the orange barrels blocking the entrance ramp to the rest area had been knocked over, and there were *cars* down there. Quite a few of them.

Then he saw a couple of kids—a little girl in pink pants and a little boy wearing shorts and a tee-shirt. He caught just a glimpse of them, enough to tell that they were backing away—as if something had scared them—and then they disappeared behind what looked to Pete like a horse-trailer.

Something was wrong. There had been an accident or something, although nothing down there *looked* like an accident. His first impulse was to get away from here in a hurry, before he got caught up in whatever had happened. He grabbed his saddlebag and started toward the kitchen and the loading

dock beyond. Then he stopped. There were kids out there. *Little* kids. Way too little to be close to a fast road like I-95 on their own, and he hadn't seen any adults.

Gotta be grownups, didn't you see all those cars?

Yes, he'd seen the cars, and a truck hooked up to a horse-trailer, but no grownups.

I have to go out there. Even if I get in trouble, I have to make sure those stupid kids don't get smeared all over the turnpike.

Pete hurried to the Burger King's front door, found it locked, and asked himself what would have been Normie Therriault's question: *Hey afterbirth, did your mother have any kids that lived*?

Pete turned and pelted for the loading dock. Running made his headache worse, but he ignored it. He placed his saddlebag at the edge of the concrete platform, lowered himself, and dropped. He landed stupid, banged his tailbone, and ignored that, too. He got up, and flashed a longing look toward the woods. He *could* just disappear. Doing so might save him oh so much grief down the line. The idea was miserably tempting. This wasn't like the movies, where the good guy always made the right decision without thinking. If somebody smelled vodka on his breath—

"Jesus," he said. "Oh, Jesus-jumped-up-Rice-Krispies-*Christ*."

Why had he ever come here?

Holding Blakie firmly by the hand, Rachel walked him all the way to the end of the ramp. Just as they got there, a double-box semi blasted by at seventy-five miles an hour. The wind blew their

hair back, rippled their clothes, and almost knocked Blakie over.

"*Rachie, I'm scared! We're not supposed to go in the road*!"

Tell me something I don't know, Rachel thought.

At home they weren't supposed to go any farther than the end of the driveway, and there was hardly any traffic on Beeman Lane in Falmouth. The traffic on the turnpike was far from constant, but the cars that *did* come along were going superfast. Besides, where was there to go? They might be able to walk in the breakdown lane, but it would be horribly risky. And there were no exits here, only woods. They could go back to the restaurant, but they would have to walk past the bad car if they did.

A red sports car swept past, the guy behind the wheel blaring his horn in a constant *WAAAAAAAA* that made her want to cover her ears.

Blake was tugging her, and Rachel let herself be tugged. At one side of the ramp were guardrail posts. Blakie sat down on one of the thick cables running between them and covered his eyes with his chubby hands. Rachel sat next to him. She didn't know what else to do.

5. JIMMY GOLDING (’11 Crown Victoria)

A child’s scream may be one of Mother Nature’s more efficient survival mechanisms, but one of mankind’s—at least when it comes to automotive traffic on roads with high speed limits—is the parked State Police cruiser, especially if the black bulb of the radar detector is facing the oncoming traffic. Drivers doing seventy ease back to sixty-five; drivers doing eighty step on the brake and begin mentally figuring out how many points they’ll lose off their licenses if the blue lights go on behind them. (It’s a salutary effect that wears off quickly; ten or fifteen miles farther up or down the line, the stampeders are once again stampeding.)

The beauty of the parked cruiser, at least in Maine State Trooper Jimmy Golding’s opinion, was that you didn’t really need to *do* anything. You just pulled over and let nature (*human* nature, in this case) take its guilty course. On this overcast April afternoon, his Simmons SpeedCheck radar gun wasn’t even on, and the traffic passing southbound on I-95 was just a background drone. All his attention was on the iPad propped against the lower arc of the steering wheel.

He was playing a Scrabble-like game called Words With Friends, his Internet connection provided by AT&T. His opponent was an old barracks-mate named Nick Avery, now with the Oklahoma State Patrol. Jimmy couldn’t imagine why anyone would trade Maine for Oklahoma, seemed like a bad decision to him, but there could be no doubt that Nick was an *excellent* Words With Friends player. He beat Jimmy

nine games out of every ten, and was leading in this one. But Nick's current lead was unusually small, and all the letters were out of the electronic draw-bag. If he, Jimmy, could play the four letters he had left, he would win a hard-earned victory. Currently he was fixated on FIX. The four letters he had left were A, E, S, and another F. If he could somehow modify FIX, he would not only win, he would kick his old pal's ass. But it didn't look hopeful.

He was examining the rest of the board, where the prospects seemed even less fruitful, when his radio gave two high-pitched tones. It was an all-units alert from 911 in Westbrook. Jimmy tossed his iPad aside and turned up the gain.

"All units, attention. Who's close to the Mile Eighty-one rest area? Anyone?"

Jimmy pulled his mike. "Nine-one-one Dispatch, this is Seventeen. I'm currently at Mile Eighty-Five, just south of the Lisbon-Sabattus exit."

The woman Rachel Lussier thought of as the 911 lady didn't bother to ask if anyone else was closer; in one of the new Crown Vic cruisers, Jimmy was just three minutes away, maybe less.

"Seventeen, I got a call three minutes ago from a little girl who says her parents are dead, and since then I've had multiple calls from people who say there are two unaccompanied little kids at the edge of that rest area."

He didn't bother to ask why none of those multiple callers had stopped. He had seen it before. Sometimes it was a fear of legal entanglements. More often it was just a case of don't-give-a-shit. There was a lot of that going around. Still . . . *kids*. Jesus.

"Nine-one-one, I'm on this. Seventeen out."

Jimmy lit his blues, checked his rearview to make sure he had the road, and then peeled out of the gravel pass-through with its sign reading NO U-TURN, OFFICIAL VEHICLES ONLY. The Crown Vic's V-8 surged; the digital speedometer blurred up to 92, where it hung. Trees reeled giddily past on both sides of the road. He came up on a lumbering old Buick that stubbornly refused to pull over and swept around it. When he pulled back into the travel lane, Jimmy saw the rest area. And something else. Two little kids—a boy in shorts, a girl in pink pants—sitting on the guardrail cables beside the entrance ramp. They looked like the world's smallest vagrants, and Jimmy's heart went out to them. He had kids of his own.

They stood up when they saw the flashing lights, and for one terrible second Jimmy thought the little boy was going to step in front of his cruiser. God bless the little girl, who grabbed him by the arm and reeled him in.

Jimmy decelerated hard enough to activate the ABS system. His citation book, logbook, and iPad went cascading off the seat onto the floor. The Vic's front end drifted a little, but he brought it back and parked blocking the ramp, where several other cars were already parked. What was going on here?

The sun came out then, and a word completely unrelated to the current situation flashed through Trooper Jimmy Golding's mind: *AFFIXES. I can make AFFIXES, and go out clean.*

The little girl was running toward the driver's side of the cruiser, dragging her weeping, stumbling kid brother with her. Her face, white

and terrified, looked years older than it should have, and there was a big wet patch on the little boy's shorts.

Jimmy got out, being careful not to hit them with his door. He dropped on one knee to get on their level and they rushed into his arms, almost knocking him over. "Whoa, whoa, take it easy, you're all ri—"

"The bad car ate Mommy and Daddy," the little boy said, and pointed. "The bad car right there. It ate them all up like the big bad woof ate Riddle Red Riding Hoop. You have to get them back!"

It was impossible to tell which vehicle the chubby finger was pointing at. Jimmy saw four: a station wagon that looked like it had been rode hard along nine miles of woods road, a spandy-clean Prius, a Dodge Ram hauling a horse-trailer, and a Ford Expedition.

"Little girl, what's your name? I'm Trooper Jimmy."

"Rachel Lussier," she said. "This is Blakie. He's my little brother. We live at Nineteen Fresh Winds Way, Falmouth, Maine, 04105. Don't go near it, Trooper Jimmy. It looks like a car, but it's not. It eats people."

"Which car are we talking about, Rachel?"

"That one in front, next to my daddy's. The muddy one."

"The muddy car ate Daddy and Mommy!" the little boy—Blakie—proclaimed. "You get them back, you're a policeman, you got a gun!"

Still on one knee, Jimmy held the children in his arms and eyeballed the muddy station wagon. The sun went back in; their shadows disappeared.

On the turnpike, traffic swished past, but slower now, mindful of those flashing blue lights.

No one in the Expedition, the Prius, or the truck. He was guessing there was no one in the horse-trailer, either, unless they were hunkered down, and in that case the horse would probably seem a lot more nervous than it did. The only vehicle he couldn't see into was the one these kids claimed had eaten their parents. Jimmy didn't like the way the mud was smeared on all its windows. It looked like *deliberate* mud, somehow. He didn't like the cracked cell phone lying by the driver's door, either. Or the ring beside it. The ring was downright creepy.

Like the rest of this isn't.

The driver's door suddenly creaked partway open, upping the Creepy Quotient a bit more. Jimmy tensed and put his hand on the butt of his Glock, but no one came out. The door just hung there, six inches ajar.

"That's how it tries to get you to come in," the little girl said in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "It's a *monster* car."

Jimmy Golding hadn't believed in monster cars since he saw that movie *Christine* as a kid, but he believed that sometimes monsters could lurk *in* cars. And someone was in this one. How else had the door opened? It could be one of the kids' parents, hurt and unable to cry out. It could also be a man lying down on the seat, so he wouldn't make a shape visible through the mud-smeared rear window. Maybe a man with a gun.

"Who's in the station wagon?" Jimmy called. "I'm a state trooper, and I need you to announce yourself."

No one announced himself.

"Come out. Hands first, and I want to see them empty."

The only thing that came out was the sun, printing the door's shadow on the pavement for a second or two before ducking back into the clouds. Then there was only the hanging door.

"Come with me, kids," Jimmy said, and shepherded them to his cruiser. He opened the back door. They looked at the backseat with its litter of paperwork, Jimmy's fleece-lined jacket (which he didn't need today), and the shotgun clipped and locked to the back of the bench seat. Especially that.

"Mommy-n-daddy say never get into a stranger's car," the boy named Blakie said. "They say it at school, too. Stranger-danger."

"He's a policeman with a policeman's car," Rachel said. "It's okay. Get in. And if you touch that gun, I'll smack you."

"Good advice on the gun, but it's secured and the trigger lock's on," Jimmy said.

Blakie got in, and peered over the seat. "Hey, you got a iPad!"

"Shut up," Rachel said. She started to get in, then looked at Jimmy Golding with tired, horrified eyes. "Don't touch it. It's *sticky*."

Jimmy almost smiled. He had a daughter only a year or so younger than this little girl, and she might have said the same thing. He guessed little girls divided naturally into two groups, tomboys and dirt-haters. Like his Ellen, this one was a dirt-hater.

It was with this soon-to-be fatal misconception of what Rachel Lussier meant by *sticky* that he

closed them in the backseat of Unit 17. He leaned in the front window of the cruiser and snared his mike. He never took his eyes from the hanging front door of the station wagon, and so did not see the little boy standing next to the rest area restaurant, holding an imitation-leather saddlebag against his chest like a small blue baby. A moment later the sun peeked out again, and Pete Simmons was swallowed up by the restaurant's shadow.

Jimmy called in to the Gray barracks.

"Seventeen, come back."

"I'm at the old Mile 81 rest area. I have four abandoned vehicles, one abandoned horse, and two abandoned children. One of the vehicles is a station wagon. The kids say . . . " He paused, then thought *what the hell*. "The kids say it ate their parents."

"Come back?"

"I think they mean someone inside grabbed them. I want you to send all available units over here, copy?"

"Copy all available units, but it'll be ten minutes before the first one gets there. That's Unit Twelve. He's Code Seventy-three in Waterville."

Al Andrews, no doubt chowing down at Bob's Burgers and talking politics. "Copy that."

"Give me MML on the wagon, Seventeen, and I'll run it."

"Negative on all three. No plate. As far as make and model, the thing's so covered with mud I can't tell. It's American, though." *I think*. "Probably a Ford or a Chevy. The kids are in my cruiser. Names are Rachel and Blakie Lussier. Fresh Winds Way, Falmouth. I forget the street number."

"*Nineteen*!" Rachel and Blakie shouted together.

"They say—"

"I got it, Seventeen. And which car did they come in?"

"*Daddy's Expundition*!" Blakie cried, happy to be of help.

"Ford Expedition," Jimmy said. "Plate number three-seven-seven-two-I-Y. I'm going to approach that station wagon."

"Copy. Be careful there, Jimmy."

"Copy that. Oh, and will you reach out to nine-one-one dispatch and tell her the kids are all right?"

"Is that you talking or Peter Townshend?"

Very funny. "Seventeen, I'm sixty-two."

He started to replace the mike, then handed it to Rachel. "If anything happens—anything *bad*—you push that button on the side and yell 'Thirty.' That means officer needs help. Have you got it?"

"Yes, but you shouldn't go near that car, Trooper Jimmy. It *bites* and it *eats* and it's *sticky*."

Blakie, who, in his wonder at being in an actual police car, had temporarily forgotten what had befallen his parents, now remembered and began to cry again. "I want mommy-n-daddy!"

In spite of the weirdness and potential danger of the situation, Rachel Lussier's eye-rolling *you see what I have to deal with* expression almost made Jimmy laugh. How many times had he seen that exact same expression on the face of five-year-old Ellen Golding?

"Listen, Rachel," Jimmy said, "I know you're scared, but you're safe in here, and I have to do

my job. If your parents are in that car, we don't want them hurt, do we?"

"*GO GET MOMMY-N-DADDY, TROOPER JIMMY*!" Blakie trumpeted. "*WE DON'T WANT THEM HURRRT*!"

Jimmy saw hope spark in the girl's eyes, but not as much as he might have expected. Like Agent Mulder on the old *X-Files* show, she wanted to believe . . . but like Mulder's partner, Agent Scully, she didn't. What had these kids seen?

"Be careful, Trooper Jimmy." She raised one finger. It was a schoolteacherly gesture made even more endearing by a slight tremble. "Don't touch it."

As Jimmy approached the station wagon, he drew his Glock service automatic but left the safety on. For the time being. Standing slightly south of the hanging door, he once again invited anyone inside to exit the vehicle, open and empty hands foremost. No one came out. He reached for the door, then remembered the little girl's parting admonition, and hesitated. He reached out with the barrel of his gun to swing the door open. Only, the door didn't open, and the barrel of the pistol stuck fast. The thing was a glue-pot.

He was jerked forward, as if a powerful hand had gripped the Glock's barrel and yanked. There was a second when he could have let go, but such an idea never even surfaced in his mind. One of the first things they taught you at the Academy after weapons issue was that you never let go of your sidearm. *Never*.

So he held on, and the car that had already eaten his gun now ate his hand. And his arm. The sun came out again, casting his diminishing shadow

on the pavement. Somewhere, children were screaming.

The station wagon AFFIXES itself to the Trooper, he thought. *Now I know what she meant by stick—*

Then the pain bloomed large and all thought ceased. There was time for one scream. Only one.

6. THE KIDS (’10 Richforth)

From where he was standing, seventy yards away, Pete saw it all. He saw the state trooper reach out with the barrel of his gun to open the station wagon’s door the rest of the way; he saw the barrel disappear *into* the door as if the whole car were nothing but an optical illusion; he saw the trooper jerk forward, his big gray hat tumbling from his head. Then the trooper was yanked through the door and only his hat was left, lying next to somebody’s cell phone. There was a pause, and then the car pulled into itself, like fingers into a fist. Next came the tennis-racquet-on-ball sound—*pouck*!—and the muddy clenched fist became a car again.

The little boy began to wail; the little girl was for some reason screaming “*thirty*” over and over again, like she thought it was a magic word J. K. Rowling had somehow left out of her Harry Potter books.

The back door of the police car opened. The kids got out. Both of them were crying their asses off, and Pete didn’t blame them. If he hadn’t been so stunned by what he’d just seen, he’d probably be crying himself. A nutty thought came to him: another swig or two of that vodka might improve this situation. It would help him be less afraid, and if he was less afraid, he might be able to figure out what the fuck he should do.

Meanwhile the kids were backing away again. Pete had an idea they might panic and take to their heels at any second. He couldn’t let them do that;

they'd run right into the road and get splatted by turnpike traffic.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, you kids!"

When they turned to look at him—big, buggy eyes in pale faces—he waved and started walking toward them. As he did, the sun came out again, this time with authority.

The little boy started forward. The girl jerked him back. At first Pete thought she was afraid of him, then realized it was the car she was afraid of.

He made a circling gesture with his hand. "Walk around it! Walk around and come over here!"

They slipped through the guardrails on the left side of the ramp, giving the station wagon the widest berth possible, then cut across the parking lot. When they got to Pete, the little girl let go of her brother, sat down, and put her face in her hands. She had braids her mom had probably fixed for her. Looking at them and knowing the kid's mother would never fix them for her again made Pete feel horrible.

The little boy looked up solemnly. "It ate mommy-n- daddy. It ate the horse-lady and Trooper Jimmy, too. It's going to eat everyone, I guess. It's going to eat the *world*."

If Pete Simmons had been twenty, he might have asked a lot of bullshit questions that didn't matter. Because he was only half that age, and able to accept what he had just seen, he asked something simpler and more pertinent. "Hey, little girl. Are more police coming? Is that why you were yelling 'Thirty'?"

She dropped her hands and looked up at him. Her eyes were raw and red. "Yes, but Blakie's right.

It will eat them, too. I told Trooper Jimmy, but he didn't believe me."

Pete believed her, because he had *seen*. But she was right. The police wouldn't believe. They would eventually, they'd have to, but maybe not before the monster car ate a bunch more of them.

"I think it's from space," he said. "Like on *Doctor Who*."

"Mommy-n-daddy won't let us watch that," the little boy told him. "They say it's too scary. But this is scarier."

"It's alive." Pete spoke more to himself than to them.

"Duh," Rachel said, and gave a long, miserable sniffle.

The sun ducked briefly behind one of the unraveling clouds. When it came out again, an idea came with it. Pete had been hoping to show Normie Therriault and the rest of the Rip-Ass Raiders something that would amaze them enough to let him be part of their gang. Then George had given him a big-brother reality check: *They've all seen that baby trick a thousand times*.

Maybe so, but maybe that thing down there *hadn't* seen it a thousand times. Or even once. Maybe they didn't have magnifying glasses where it came from. Or sun, for that matter. He remembered a *Doctor Who* episode about a planet where it was dark all the time.

He could hear a siren in the distance. A cop was coming. A cop who wouldn't believe anything little kids said, because as far as grownups were concerned, little kids were all full of shit.

"You guys stay here. I'm going to try something."

"No!" The little girl grasped his wrist with fingers that felt like claws. "It'll eat you, too!"

"I don't think it can move around," Pete told her, disengaging his hand. She had left a couple of bleeding scratches, but he wasn't mad and he didn't blame her. He probably would have done the same, if it had been his parents. "I think it's stuck in one place."

"It can *reach*," she said. "It can reach with its tires. They melt."

"I'll watch out," Pete said, "but I have to try this. Because you're right. Those cops will come, and it will eat them, too. Stay put."

He walked toward the station wagon. When he was close (but not *too* close), he unzipped the saddlebag. *I have to try this*, he had told the kids, but the truth was a little balder: he *wanted* to try this. It would be like a science experiment. That would probably sound bizarre if he told someone, but he didn't have to tell. He just had to do it. Very . . . very . . . carefully.

He was sweating. With the sun out, the day had turned warm, but that wasn't the only reason, and he knew it. He looked up, squinting at the brightness. *Don't you go back behind a cloud. Don't you dare. I need you.*

He took his Richforth magnifying glass out of the saddlebag, and bent to put the saddlebag on the pavement. The joints of his knees cracked, and the station wagon's door swung open a few inches.

It knows I'm here. I don't know if it can see me, but it heard me just now. And maybe it smells me.

He took another step. Now he was close enough to touch the side of the station wagon. If he was fool enough to do so, that was.

"*Watch out*!" the little girl called. She and her brother were both standing now, their arms around each other. "*Watch out for it*!"

Carefully—like a kid reaching into a cage with a lion inside—Pete extended the magnifying glass. A circle of light appeared on the side of the station wagon, but it was too big. Too *soft*. He moved the glass closer.

"*The tire*!" the little boy screamed. "*Watch out for the TII-YIII-IRE*!"

Pete looked down and saw one of the tires melting. A tentacle was oozing across the pavement toward his sneaker. He couldn't back away without giving up his experiment, so he raised his foot and stood stork. The tentacle immediately changed direction and headed for his other foot.

Not much time.

He moved the magnifying glass closer. The circle of light shrank to a brilliant white dot. For a moment nothing happened. Then tendrils of smoke began to drift up. The muddy white surface beneath the dot turned black.

From inside the station wagon there came an inhuman growling sound. Pete had to fight every instinct in his brain and body to keep from running. His lips parted, revealing teeth locked together in a desperate snarl. He held the Richforth steady, counting off seconds in his head. He'd reached seven when the growl rose to a glassy shriek that threatened to split his head. Behind him, Rachel and Blake had let go of each other so they could cover their ears.

At the foot of the rest area entrance ramp, Al Andrews brought Unit 12 to a sliding stop. He got out, wincing at that terrible shrieking sound. *It was like an air-raid siren broadcast through a heavy metal band's amplifiers*, he would say later. He saw a kid holding something out so it almost touched the surface of a muddy old Ford or Chevy station wagon. The boy was wincing in pain, determination, or both.

The smoking black spot on the flank of the station wagon began to spread. The white smoke curling up from it began to thicken. It turned gray, then black. What happened next happened fast. Pete saw tiny blue flames pop into being around the black spot. They spread, seeming to dance *above* the surface of the car-thing. It was the way charcoal briquettes looked in their backyard barbecue after their father doused them with lighter fluid and then tossed in a match.

The gooey tentacle, which had almost reached the sneakered foot still standing on the pavement, snapped back. The car yanked in upon itself again, but this time the spreading blue flames stood out all around it in a corona. It pulled in tighter and still tighter, becoming a fiery ball. Then, as Pete and the Lussier kids and Trooper Andrews watched, it shot up into the blue spring sky. For a moment longer it was there, glowing like a cinder, and then it was gone. Pete found himself thinking of the cold darkness above the envelope of the earth's atmosphere—those endless leagues where anything might live and lurk.

I didn't kill it, I just drove it away. It had to go so it could put itself out, like a burning stick in a bucket of water.

Trooper Andrews was staring up into the sky, dumbfounded. One of his brain's few working circuits was wondering how he was supposed to write up a report on what he had just seen.

There were more approaching sirens in the distance.

Pete walked back to the two little kids with his saddlebag in one hand and his Richforth magnifying glass in the other. He sort of wished George and Normie were here, but so what if they weren't? He'd had quite an afternoon for himself without those guys, and he didn't care if he got grounded or not. This made jumping bikes off the edge of a stupid sandpit look tame.

You know what? I fuckin rock.

He might have laughed if the little kids hadn't been looking at him. They had just seen their parents eaten by some kind of alien—eaten *alive*—and showing happiness would be totally wrong.

The little boy held out his chubby arms, and Pete picked him up. He didn't laugh when the kid kissed his cheek, but he smiled. "Fanks," Blakie said. "You're a good kid."

Pete set him down. The little girl also kissed him, which was sort of nice, although it would have been nicer if she'd been a babe.

The trooper was running toward them now, and that made Pete think of something. He bent to the little girl and huffed into her face.

"Do you smell anything?"

Rachel Lussier looked at him wisely for a moment. "You'll be okay," she said, and actually smiled. It was only a small one, but better than no smile at all. "Just don't breathe on him. And

maybe get some mints or something before you go home."

"I was thinking Teaberry gum," Pete said.

"Yeah," Rachel said. "That'll work."

For Nye Willden and Doug Allen, who bought my first stories.

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Turn the page for a preview of Stephen King's new novel

11/22/63

Lee Harvey Oswald lived on Mercedes Street in Fort Worth, Texas, with his wife, Marina, and their daughter, June, for a few months in the late summer, early fall of 1962. Jake Epping, the protagonist of Stephen King's new novel 11/22/63*, moves in across the street to monitor Oswald's movements, intending to prevent him from assassinating JFK. Jake has fallen in love with Sadie Dunhill, a high school librarian in Jodie, a small town not far from Dallas.*

Living on Mercedes Street was not an uplifting experience.

Days weren't so bad. They resounded with the shouts of children recently released from school, all dressed in too-big hand-me-downs; housewives kvetching at mailboxes or backyard clotheslines; teenagers driving rusty beaters with glasspack mufflers and radios blaring K-Life. The hours between 2:00 and 6:00 A.M. weren't so bad, either. Then a kind of stunned silence fell over the street as colicky babies finally slept in their cribs (or dresser drawers) and their daddies snored toward another day of hourly wages in the shops, factories, or outlying farms.

Between four and six in the afternoon, however, the street was a jangle of mommas screaming at kids to get the hell in and do their chores and poppas arriving home to scream at their wives, probably because they had no one else to scream at. Many of the wives gave back as good as they got. The drunkadaddies started to roll in around eight, and things really got noisy around eleven, when either the bars closed or the money ran out. Then I heard slamming doors, breaking glass, and screams of pain as some loaded drunkadaddy tuned up on the wife, the kiddies, or both. Often red lights would strobe in through my drawn curtains as the cops arrived. A couple of times there were gunshots, maybe fired at the sky, maybe not. And one early morning, when I went out to get the paper, I saw a woman with dried blood crusting the lower half of her face. She was sitting on the curb in front of a house four down from mine, drinking a can of Lone Star. I almost went down to check on her, even though I knew how unwise it would be to get involved with the life of this low-bottom working neighborhood. Then she saw me looking at her and hoisted her middle finger. I went back inside.

There was no Welcome Wagon, and no women named Muffy or Buffy trotting off to Junior League meetings. What there was on Mercedes Street was plenty of time to think. Time to miss my friends in Jodie. Time to miss the work that had kept my mind off what I had come here to do. Time to realize the teaching had done a lot more than pass the time; it had satisfied my mind the way work does when you care about it, when you feel like you might actually be making a difference.

There was even time to feel bad about my formerly spiffy convertible. Besides the nonfunctional radio and the wheezy valves, it now blatted and backfired through a rusty tailpipe and there was a crack in the windshield caused by a rock that had bounced off the back of a lumbering asphalt truck. I'd stopped washing it, and now—sad to say—it fit in perfectly with the other busted-up transpo on Mercedes Street.

Mostly there was time to think about Sadie.

You're breaking that young woman's heart, Ellie Dockerty had said, and mine wasn't doing so well, either. The idea of spilling everything to Sadie came to me one night as I lay awake listening to a drunken argument next door: *you did, I didn't, you did, I didn't, fuck you.* I rejected the idea, but it came back the following night, rejuvenated. I could see myself sitting with her at her kitchen table, drinking coffee in the strong afternoon sunlight that slanted through the window over the sink. Speaking calmly. Telling her my real name was Jacob Epping, I wouldn't actually be born for another fourteen years, I had come from the year 2011 via a fissure in time that my late friend Al Templeton called the rabbit-hole.

How would I convince her of such a thing? By telling her that a certain American defector who had changed his mind about Russia was shortly going to move in across the street from where I now lived, along with his Russian wife and their baby girl? By telling her that the Dallas Texans—not yet the Cowboys, not yet America's Team—were going to beat the Houston Oilers 20–17 this fall, in double overtime? Ridiculous. But what else did I know about the immediate future? Not much, because I'd had no time to study up. I knew a fair amount about Oswald, but that was all.

She'd think I was crazy. I could sing her lyrics from another dozen pop songs that hadn't been recorded yet, and she'd still think I was crazy. She'd

accuse me of making them up myself—wasn't I a writer, after all? And suppose she *did* believe it? Did I want to drag her into the shark's mouth with me? Wasn't it bad enough that she'd be coming back to Jodie in August, and that if John Clayton was an echo of Frank Dunning, he might come looking for her?

"All right, get out then!" a woman screamed from the street, and a car accelerated away in the direction of Winscott Road. A wedge of light probed briefly through a crack in my drawn curtains and flashed across the ceiling.

"COCKSUCKER!" she yelled after it, to which a male voice, a little more distant, yelled back: "You can suck mine, lady, maybe it'll calm you down."

That was life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

Leave her out of it. That was the voice of reason. *It's just too dangerous. Maybe at some point she can be a part of your life again—a life in Jodie, even—but not now.*

Only there was never going to be a life for me in Jodie. Given what Ellen now knew about my past, teaching at the high school was a fool's dream. And what else was I going to do? Pour concrete?

One morning I put on the coffeepot and went for the paper on the stoop. When I opened the front door, I saw that both of the Sunliner's rear tires were flat. Some bored out-too-late kid had slashed them with a knife. That was also life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

ON THURSDAY, THE FOURTEENTH OF JUNE, I dressed in jeans, a blue workshirt, and an old leather vest I'd picked up at a secondhand store on Camp Bowie Road. Then I spent the morning pacing through my house. I had no television, but I listened to the radio. According to the news, President Kennedy was planning a state trip to Mexico later in the month. The weather report called for fair skies and warm temperatures. The DJ yammered awhile, then played "Palisades Park." The screams and roller-coaster sound effects on the record clawed at my head.

At last I could stand it no longer. I was going to be early, but I didn't care. I got into the Sunliner—which now sported two retread blackwalls to go with the whitewalls on the front—and drove the forty-odd miles to Love Field in northwest Dallas. There was no short-term or long-term parking, just parking.

It cost seventy-five cents a day. I clapped my old summer straw on my head and trudged approximately half a mile to the terminal building. A couple of Dallas cops stood at the curb drinking coffee, but there were no security guards inside and no metal detectors to walk through. Passengers simply showed their tickets to a guy standing by the door, then walked across the hot tarmac to planes belonging to one of five carriers: American, Delta, TWA, Frontier, and Texas Airways.

I checked the chalkboard mounted on the wall behind the Delta counter. It said that Flight 194 was on time. When I asked the clerk to make sure, she smiled and told me it had just left Atlanta. "But you're awfully early."

"I can't help it," I said. "I'll probably be early to my own funeral."

She laughed and wished me a nice day. I bought a *Time* and walked across to the restaurant, where I ordered the Cloud 9 Chef's Salad. It was huge and I was too nervous to be hungry—it's not every day that a man gets to see the person who's going to change world history—but it gave me something to pick at while I waited for the plane carrying the Oswald family to arrive.

I was in a booth with a good view of the main terminal. It wasn't very crowded, and a young woman in a dark blue traveling suit caught my eye. Her hair was twisted into a neat bun. She had a suitcase in each hand. A Negro porter approached her. She shook her head, smiling, then banged her arm on the side of the Traveler's Aid booth as she passed it. She dropped one of her suitcases, rubbed her elbow, then picked up the case again and forged onward.

Sadie leaving to start her six-week residency in Reno.

Was I surprised? Not at all. It was that convergence thing again. I'd grown used to it. Was I almost overwhelmed by an impulse to run out of the restaurant and catch up to her before it was too late? Of course I was.

For a moment it seemed more than possible, it seemed necessary. I would tell her fate (rather than some weird time-travel harmonic) had brought us together at the airport. Stuff like that worked in the movies, didn't it? I'd ask her to wait while I bought my own ticket to Reno, and tell her that once we were there, I'd explain everything. And after the obligatory six weeks, we could buy a drink for the judge who had granted her divorce before he married us.

I actually started to get up. As I did, I happened to look at the cover of the *Time* I'd bought at the newsstand. Jacqueline Kennedy was on the cover. She

was smiling, radiant, wearing a sleeveless dress with a V-neck. THE PRESIDENT'S LADY DRESSES FOR SUMMER, the caption read. As I looked at the photo, the color drained away to black and white and the expression changed from a happy smile to a vacant stare. Now she was standing next to Lyndon Johnson on *Air Force One,* and no longer wearing the pretty (and slightly sexy) summer dress. A blood-spattered wool suit had taken its place. I remembered reading—not in Al's notes, somewhere else—that not long after Mrs. Kennedy's husband had been pronounced dead, Lady Bird Johnson had moved to embrace her in the hospital corridor and had seen a glob of the dead president's brains on that suit.

A head-shot president. And all the dead who would come after, standing behind him in a ghostly file that stretched away into infinity.

I sat back down again and watched Sadie carry her suitcases toward the Frontier Airlines counter. The bags were obviously heavy but she carried them con brio, her back straight, her low heels clicking briskly. The clerk checked them and put them on a baggage trolley. He and Sadie conferred; she passed him the ticket she had bought through a travel agency two months ago, and the clerk scribbled something on it. She took it back and turned for the gate. I lowered my head to make sure she wouldn't see me. When I looked up again, she was gone.

FORTY LONG, LONG MINUTES LATER, a man, a woman, and two small children —a boy and a girl—passed the restaurant. The boy was holding his father's hand and chattering away. The father was looking down at him, nodding and smiling. The father was Robert Oswald.

The loudspeaker blared, "Delta's flight 194 is now arriving from Newark and Atlanta Municipal Airport. Passengers can be met at Gate 4. Delta Flight 194, now arriving."

Robert's wife—Vada, according to Al's notes—swept the little girl into her arms and hurried along faster. There was no sign of Marguerite.

I picked at my salad, chewing without tasting. My heart was beating hard.

I could hear the approaching roar of engines and saw the white nose of a DC-8 as it pulled up to the gate. Greeters piled up around the door. A waitress

tapped me on the shoulder and I almost screamed.

"Sorry, sir," she said in a Texas accent that was thick enough to cut. "Jes wanted to ask if I could get y'all anything else."

"No," I said. "I'm fine."

"Well, that's good."

The first passengers began cutting across the terminal. They were all men wearing suits and prosperous haircuts. Of course. The first passengers to deplane were always from first class.

"Sure I can't get you a piece of peach pah? It's fresh today."

"No thanks."

"You sure, hon?"

Now the coach class passengers came in a flood, all of them festooned with carry-on bags. I heard a woman squeal. Was that Vada, greeting her brother-in-law?

"I'm sure," I said, and picked up my magazine.

She took the hint. I sat stirring the remains of my salad into an orange soup of French dressing and watched. Here came a man and woman with a baby, but the kid was almost a toddler, too old to be June. The passengers passed the restaurant, chattering with the friends and relatives who had come to pick them up. I saw a young man in an Army uniform pat his girlfriend's bottom. She laughed, slapped his hand, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

For five minutes or so the terminal was almost full. Then the crowd began to thin out. There was no sign of the Oswalds. A wild certainty came to me: they weren't on the plane. I hadn't just traveled back in time, I had bounced into some sort of parallel universe. Maybe the Yellow Card Man had been meant to stop something like that from happening, but the Yellow Card Man was dead, and I was off the hook. No Oswald? Fine, no mission. Kennedy was going to die in some other version of America, but not in this one. I could catch up with Sadie and live happily ever after.

The thought had no more than crossed my mind when I saw my target for the first time. Robert and Lee were side by side, talking animatedly. Lee was swinging what was either an oversized attaché case or a small satchel. Robert had a pink suitcase with rounded corners that looked like something out of Barbie's closet. Vada and Marina came along behind. Vada had taken one of

two patchwork cloth bags; Marina had the other slung over her shoulder. She was also carrying June, now four months old, in her arms and laboring to keep up. Robert and Vada's two kids flanked her, looking at her with open curiosity.

Vada called to the men and they stopped almost in front of the restaurant. Robert grinned and took Marina's carry-bag. Lee's expression was . . . amused? Knowing? Maybe both. The tiniest suggestion of a smile dimpled the corners of his mouth. His nondescript hair was neatly combed. He was, in fact, the perfect A. J. Squared Away in his pressed white shirt, khakis, and shined shoes. He didn't look like a man who had just completed a journey halfway around the world; there wasn't a wrinkle on him and not a trace of beard-shadow on his cheeks. He was just twenty-two years old, and looked younger—like one of the teenagers in my last American Lit class.

So did Marina, who wouldn't be old enough to buy a legal drink for another month. She was exhausted, bewildered, and staring at everything. She was also beautiful, with clouds of dark hair and upturned, somehow rueful blue eyes.

June's arms and legs were swaddled in cloth diapers. Even her neck was wrapped in something, and although she wasn't crying, her face was red and sweaty. Lee took the baby. Marina smiled her gratitude, and when her lips parted, I saw that one of her teeth was missing. The others were discolored, one of them almost black. The contrast with her creamy skin and gorgeous eyes was jarring.

Oswald leaned close to her and said something that wiped the smile off her face. She looked up at him warily. He said something else, poking her shoulder with one finger as he did so. I remembered Al's story, and wondered if Oswald was saying the same thing to his wife now: *pokhoda, cyka*—walk, bitch.

But no. It was the swaddling that had upset him. He tore it away—first from the arms, then the legs—and flung the diapers at Marina, who caught them clumsily. Then she looked around to see if they were being watched.

Vada came back and touched Lee's arm. He paid no attention to her, just unwrapped the makeshift cotton scarf from around baby June's neck and flung *that* at Marina. It fell to the terminal floor. She bent and picked it up without speaking.

Robert joined them and gave his brother a friendly punch on the shoulder. The terminal had almost entirely cleared out now—the last of the deplaning passengers had passed the Oswald family—and I heard what he said clearly. "Give her a break, she just got here. She doesn't even know where here is yet."

"Look at this kid," Lee said, and raised June for inspection. At that, she finally began to cry. "She's got her wrapped up like a damn Egyptian mummy. Because that's the way they do it back home. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. *Staryj baba!* Old woman." He turned back to Marina with the bawling baby in his arms. She looked at him fearfully. *"Staryj baba!"*

She tried to smile, the way people do when they know the joke is on them, but not why. I thought fleetingly of Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men.* Then a grin, cocky and a little sideways, lit Oswald's face. It made him almost handsome. He kissed his wife gently, first on one cheek, then the other.

"USA!" he said, and kissed her again. "USA, Rina! Land of the free and home of the turds!"

Her smile became radiant. He began to speak to her in Russian, handing back the baby as he did so. He put his arm around her waist as she soothed June. She was still smiling as they left my field of vision, and shifted the baby to her shoulder so she could take his hand.

I WENT HOME—IF I COULD CALL Mercedes Street home—and tried to take a nap. I couldn't get under, so I lay there with my hands behind my head, listening to the uneasy street noises and speaking with Al Templeton. This was a thing I found myself doing quite often, now that I was on my own. For a dead man, he always had a lot to say.

"I was stupid to come to Fort Worth," I told him. "If I try to hook up that bug to the tape recorder, someone's apt to see me. Oswald himself might see me, and that would change everything. He's already paranoid, you said so in your notes. He knew the KGB and MVD were watching him in Minsk, and he's going to be afraid that the FBI and the CIA are watching him here. And the FBI actually *will* be, at least some of the time."

"Yes, you'll have to be careful," Al agreed. "It won't be easy, but I trust you, buddy. It's why I called you in the first place."

"I don't even want to get near him. Just seeing him in the airport gave me a class-A case of the willies."

"I know you don't, but you'll have to. As someone who spent damn near his whole life cooking meals, I can tell you that no omelet was ever made without breaking eggs. And it would be a mistake to overestimate this guy. He's no super-criminal. Also, he's going to be distracted, mostly by his batshit mother. How good is he going to be at anything for awhile except shouting at his wife and knocking her around when he gets too pissed off for shouting to be enough?"

"I think he cares for her, Al. At least a little, and maybe a lot. In spite of the shouting."

"Yeah, and it's guys like him who are most likely to fuck up their women. Look at Frank Dunning. You just take care of your business, buddy."

"And what am I going to get if I do manage to hook up that bug? Tape recordings of arguments? Arguments in *Russian*? *That'll* be a big help."

"You don't need to decode the man's family life. It's George de Mohrenschildt you need to find out about. You have to make sure de Mohrenschildt isn't involved in the attempt on General Walker. Once you accomplish that, the window of uncertainty closes. And look on the bright side. If Oswald catches you spying on him, his future actions might change in a *good* way. He might not try for Kennedy after all."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No. Actually I don't."

"Neither do I. The past is obdurate. It doesn't want to be changed."

He said, "Buddy, now you're cooking . . ."

"With gas," I heard myself muttering. "Now I'm cooking with gas."

I opened my eyes. I had fallen asleep after all. Late light was coming in through the drawn curtains. Somewhere not far away, on Davenport Street in Fort Worth, the Oswald brothers and their wives would be sitting down to dinner—Lee's first meal back on his old stomping grounds.

Outside my own little bit of Fort Worth, I could hear a skip-rope chant. It sounded very familiar. I got up, went through my dim living room (furnished with two thrift-shop easy chairs but nothing else), and twitched back one of

the drapes an inch or so. Those drapes had been my very first installation. I wanted to see; I didn't want to be seen.

2703 was still deserted, with the FOR RENT sign double-tacked to the railing of the rickety porch, but the lawn wasn't deserted. There, two girls were twirling a jump rope while a third stutter-stepped in and out. Of course they weren't the girls I'd seen on Kossuth Street in Derry—these three, dressed in patched and faded jeans instead of crisp new shorts, looked runty and underfed—but the chant was the same, only now with Texas accents.

"Charlie Chaplin went to *France*! Just to watch the ladies *dance*! Salute to the *Cap'un*! Salute to the *Queen*! My old man drives a sub-ma-rine!"

The skip-rope girl caught her foot and went tumbling into the crabgrass that served as 2703's front lawn. The other girls piled on top of her and all three of them rolled in the dirt. Then they got to their feet and went pelting away.

I watched them go, thinking *I saw them but they didn't see me. That's something. That's a start. But Al, where's my finish?*

De Mohrenschildt was the key to the whole deal, the only thing keeping me from killing Oswald as soon as he moved in across the street. George de Mohrenschildt, a petroleum geologist who speculated in oil leases. A man who lived the playboy lifestyle, mostly thanks to his wife's money. Like Marina, he was a Russian exile, but unlike her, from a noble family—he was, in fact, *Baron* de Mohrenschildt. The man who was going to become Lee Oswald's only friend during the few months of life Oswald had left. The man who was going to suggest to Oswald that the world would be much better off without a certain racist right-wing ex-General. If de Mohrenschildt turned out to be part of Oswald's attempt to kill Edwin Walker, my situation would be vastly complicated; all the nutty conspiracy theories would then be in play. Al, however, believed all the Russian geologist had done (or *would* do; as I've said, living in the past is confusing) was egg on a man who was already obsessed with fame and mentally unstable.

Al had written in his notes: *If Oswald was on his own on the night of April 10th, 1963, chances that there was another gunman involved in the Kennedy assassination seven months later drop to almost zero.*

Below this, in capital letters, he had added his final verdict: *GOOD ENOUGH TO TAKE THE SON OF A BITCH OUT.*