

Virginia Creeper
by
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“She may as well been behind bars...
Covered in tears... Her body covered in scars...”
“Nowhere to run...
Nowhere to hide...”

-Disillusioned

Chapter One

He turned the lights on as he rounded the tiny, decrepit studio. When the equipment wasn't set up, it was the living room for the cabin. It was nearly time for another sick "session," as he liked to call them. He methodically went from stand to stand, flipping the spotlights on, adjusting the shades, and aiming the web cameras at her. The warmth from the spotlights eased her pain, but her relief was short-lived. She knew what was coming. She couldn't move her manacled hands. Her wrists were chained behind her. The excess chain left only three or four inches for movement before connecting to a black iron loop that protruded from the floor. Her backside was asleep. She tried shifting on the ancient hardwood flooring, but only succeeded in making herself more uncomfortable.

How long had it been since she arrived? She'd lost track of the days. It seemed fruitless to keep track after the second week. It took her a moment to notice the brown recluse that emerged from the shadows under the computer stand. He had disturbed it. She had been terrified of spiders before she came to the cabin, but she couldn't recall why. It slowly crawled towards her. Was it going to bite her or was it searching for an escape? Everything wanted to flee the monster. "Now." He positioned the last light. "It's time. Let's call your fans, my dear."

She watched him work on the computer. He quickly opened the email program and began composing his letter. The white background looked like something from a video game. A banner at the top of the page showed virtual people in tattered clothing as they stood

surrounding a dilapidated cabin. It was a lot like her current cabin. All of the caricatured characters carried shotguns except the old man who had a bazooka with a moonshine jug on the end. “Cabin Fever,” screamed across the top in blood red letters.

He began typing and the first sentence, “*Come out and play.*” She tried to see more details of his letter. It was improbable, but what if some miracle happened and she escaped? What if she did get away and needed to remember? She couldn’t see the addresses. She strained to see with her fluctuating vision; damn it, she couldn’t see shit. What had happened to her sight?

Would people who watched believe it was a game? How could he be the person he was? He was just supposed to be an ordinary data entry clerk. Not the producer of the most cruel and depraved game imaginable. The action was not simulated and the pain wasn’t pretend. How many believed his program to be an act? She prayed that’s what it was. They were probably all convinced it was just a twisted program. That was much easier to consider. What if they were like him? Were there other people around the world like him? She wanted to ignore that possibility at all costs.

Raymond sent the email and angled the laptop screen closer to show her. “Here are your fans.” He pointed to the counter. It was at the bottom of the screen this time. “They want to see you perform.” Every time he tortured her, he enjoyed flaunting the number of people watching her. She looked over the screen when it was in her direction. Wasn’t there anything half way identifying about his computer? It was a Dell. It just looked like a newer high-end black laptop. He had the icon for the Yahoo instant messaging service in the corner with the clock. She tried to study without arousing his suspicion. There were several programs minimized. She silently gasped. There was a numeric

URL. Her vision flickered and she lowered her head. It was too much to take in. There were too many numbers to remember.

Perform. It was a simple amusement to him. He pulled out the iron poker and laid it aside. He kept many items she'd only seen on television before lying around like props to a wicked play. There were whips, flails, chains, and other bizarre objects she had never seen before in her life. On the other side of her, he placed needles, a scalpel, and medical supplies just in case he needed them. Suddenly the laptop beeped. "Look! They're arriving." He smiled. The surgical tools were for "complete disobedience." She'd never pushed against his orders long enough for him to resort to them. She didn't want to. She wouldn't walk away from it if he used those supplies. *It's not like I can walk anyway*, she thought. It had been weeks since she'd been without bondage. She couldn't walk anywhere.

The initial beep was followed by another and a steady stream of them followed. The counter topped at three hundred. "Are you ready?" He seemed almost drunk with anticipation.

"Bastard," she spat. She shivered and the hunger pains flared. Her stomach had cramped for two weeks until it became a constant dull throb. The pain was like the tide. It ebbed and flowed in intensity. She couldn't remember her last meal. Her body had become skeletal and people still came to watch. It wasn't for her looks, it couldn't be. The only improvement he allowed was some bright red lipstick that he applied when she was shackled and the camera was rolling. Why did they watch her?

"Yes." He laughed. "They like you spicy." He approved. He reached behind her and loosened the chain. He allowed her to bring her arms around front before locking them again. She didn't want to perform again. He'd just held a session earlier-wait was it yesterday?

The day before? She couldn't trust her short-term memory. Every day seemed like yesterday. She'd run the gauntlet from the maniac for so long. It was a continuous pursuit and she was so tired.

He came around to her back with the poker. "Get on all fours," he commanded. She refused. She knew she shouldn't. Sadly, she had no choice other than complying with the monster. *Choice*. As if she had chosen anything. She didn't want to be in his play or whatever the hell it was. She just wanted to go home. She just wanted to sleep.

But, he was going to hurt her again. He would wound her again and she couldn't stop it. She'd learned to accept the pain before it happened. Somehow, it didn't hurt so severely when it happened. The only thing she could expect in the cabin was the fact that he would hurt her. Food was an occasional luxury and never enough to fill her stomach. The only drink was the disgusting water from the bathroom tap when she was in there. It smelled like sulfur or rust. She had no desire for companionship. She could sleep often, but never rest.

He jabbed her hip with the sharp end of the iron poker. He pressed harder until she felt the object rest against her pelvic bone. She got up on all fours. He pulled a black leather mask over his head before he stepped within range of the lens. It covered his head and only revealed the flesh of his neck. There were open silver zippers over the eyes and mouth. He stood above her and gestured widely with his arms, "The Virginia Creeper welcomes you to the cabin. Now we shall begin this gathering of Cabin Fever." He strode in front of her.

"For new members, this is the latest trespasser. We must punish her." He looked away from the camera and back down at her, "Are you going to do what I say?" He barked in front of his audience. Over three hundred faceless, nameless ghosts who applauded and gawked while he inflicted his misery. When she remained silent, he kicked her side.

“Yes.” She had to say something. The last time she didn’t, he had kicked her side until she thought her ribs would implode.

She refused to move further. She couldn’t. It was more of simple inability than rebellion. She didn’t have the strength. She sat limply until he beat her back so hard it felt like her spine would crack. That was only the beginning of the pain. He always performed the same acts in different patterns. Through rape, abuse, verbal shouts, and all other violent outbursts, she silently waited for him to finish. She could only hang her head and let him do as he wished. Fighting was futile.

The audience wanted to hear her scream and she would not do that. Only in the worst instances would she mutter a whimper. That was his goal. Once she submitted and became vocal, it was only a matter of time before she would die. That was his ultimate goal for her: to kill her in front of his audience.

He wanted noise to fill his cabin. His following wanted her shrieking as loudly as possible. She learned it quickly. He’d nearly trembled when he first tried filming her and she wouldn’t react. She was always a fast learner. There had been no alternative since she’d come to the cabin.

She went along with his orders until the session was over. Raymond seemed disappointed again with her lack of activity. His frustration was becoming more evident. If he was becoming so much more infuriated, how long did she have before he would kill her anyway? She knew he would kill her. No amount of money or promise could pacify that sick lust. He had clients to serve, as he liked to say. He had a duty to fulfill. Since he was the “Creep,” he had so many obligations. She rolled her eyes when his back was turned.

She could only concentrate on her family, and how she needed to return to them, when his blows became merciless. She couldn’t let her

mind drift to anything else in the universe or the agony compounded. Her body often felt so exhausted until it seemed the very act of blinking would be enough to drive her into a coma. She had to lie wherever he put her. That had to be why he wouldn't allow her food. She had to remain weak and fatigued. He implied that he enjoyed defiance, but he didn't want her physically objecting. She'd fought him before and learned what happened when she disobeyed. The iron poker seemed to stare at her from its place on the floor. It was a constant reminder of how severely he punished.

She had a husband waiting for her, if he still wanted her. Jason probably wouldn't, after the things Raymond had done. No matter what her marital status might be, she had three beautiful boys to care for. They were all that kept her alive. If she just focused on her body being a temporary vessel, it wasn't so horrible. Who cared what he did? The most important thought was that she somehow returned to her family. That was all that mattered. Her children would still hold the same feelings even if her husband didn't.

Raymond began giving his audience the speech, she had been sentenced, and her punishment was to perform until she died. Didn't the viewers get sick of hearing it? Was this how Aunt Eugenia felt when Uncle Harlan beat her? She was the only woman in the family to suffer from domestic violence.

She remembered whispers from the women in the kitchen when she was little. She didn't know Uncle Harlan. He avoided family gatherings. Aunt Eugenia could only attend when he gave her permission.

She snapped back to the present. He finally said, "Thank you audience. The session has ended for the moment. More will come soon. Watch your email for the invitation." It was over. He mercifully

switched the recording off.

“You have to start doing better, Karen.” Raymond began shutting off the lamps around his makeshift set. “I can’t broadcast such mediocre shows. They want to hear your lovely voice and I do, too. They want to hear your sweet octaves of agony.”

He calmly walked from light to light and extinguished their illumination.

“Why don’t you kill me?” She couldn’t take it.

“And ruin the show?” he chided. “That would be such a waste to take my clients’ entertainment from them. If you’re still so cooperative, perhaps I will next week. Before I can end anything, though, I have some other activities I wish to try. Besides, that’s something I only do on camera. My audience demands it, you know.” He unlocked her chain and refastened it behind her.

“What did I do to you?” As furious as he made her, she could’ve cried. If she’d had any excess liquid in her body, it would have been pouring out of her eyes.

“You caught my attention. You should be flattered. Out of all the women we worked with, you held the most promise. Think of the long months I worked with your company. Me? In some pathetically bourgeois data entry job? That should be enough to impress you. You were the one who held my interest during all that time.”

“Let me go, Raymond. I have kids.”

“I can’t. I’m not through. I have no interest in your kids. They’re far too young. Do you think I’m sick?” He didn’t raise his voice. His silence made him more frightening. He was too calm and everything was so calculated. She tried to pull on the links of the chain. Maybe there was a weak spot. Maybe a tiny opening where they hadn’t fully come together. The top of her right hand rubbed across a rough patch

of the wooden floor beneath her. She felt a long splinter sink into her flesh. “Shit.” She cursed under her breath. She couldn’t pull her arm around to look, but the top of her hand was starting to feel wet.

When most of the equipment was packed, he returned to the room, and ignored her muttering. Why didn’t he get mad? Why was it always silence? He slowly came towards her. He unlocked the manacles and quickly snapped a metal handcuff on her wrist. He dragged her by the arm through the living room into the kitchen and attached the other cuff to the handle of the oven. He snapped the lock shut. It was to tempt her. To let her think she could break it easily and get away. Then, he’d have another reason to punish her. He enjoyed punishment when he was the executioner.

He went back to work at the laptop in the living room. There had to be something she’d overlooked. He couldn’t be *that* perfect. He couldn’t be smart enough to cover all his bases all the time. It had been too damned long. She had to cling to the belief in miracles. She had to believe they happened and one would happen to her. She had to get home.

She felt his eyes on her again. He was grinning, “You’re like a caged animal. I love that.”

Why did he have to talk to her? Why couldn’t he just ignore her? She just wanted to be left alone. “Why is that?” She had to ask or he’d do something to get a response out of her. What if he felt like throwing the iron poker again? The last time he threw it at her, it slammed against her back. She had a strip of agony spanning her back for days.

He condescendingly talked to her. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to find a way out. Don’t bother. There isn’t any. You aren’t the first and you won’t be the last starlet I have here.” He kneeled down next to her. If only she could reach his neck. If only

there was a way to bite through his artery, he might bleed to death. Of course, he would probably have enough energy to kill her prior to his demise. She frowned at the thought. It was another dead end. She had to think of something.

“Let me go, Raymond.”

He slapped her across the cheek. “Stop asking.” She squinted until the pain subsided. The taste of blood filled her mouth. “If it’s any consolation and your attitude hasn’t improved by tomorrow, you won’t have to worry about it. I’ll kill you then. I’ll just have to find someone else to continue my work with.”

She had been so certain he wouldn’t kill her since she arrived. But, things were changing. Even in her stupor of dehydration and exhaustion, she noticed his subtleties. He had been more intensely focused on just getting a reaction from her before. Now, he was slowly losing that drive.

“No, you won’t.” She grasped at straws. She had to preoccupy him with something. Her time grew shorter every day. She was running on empty and his patience was fading.

He laughed. His deep voice echoed through the room. “Maybe not. But, I’ll try my best.” The previous humor left his face, “Slowly.” He ignored her stare. “They aren’t looking for you, Karen. I bet they’re relieved you’re gone.”

He was focusing on draining her psychological strength. He did that when the physical torture was disappointing. The first two weeks had been worse, but she learned how to tune him out. “Whatever you say.” She couldn’t argue. He wanted her to disagree with him. Anger was another emotion he loved.

“I had such high hopes for you, Karen. I was so certain you would’ve been more cooperative.” He walked back to his computer.

She didn't answer. He was leading up to something. "We had our little flirtation at work, I brought you here, and you've been a pain in the ass the entire time. What's your problem? You have a damned fan base and it's not good enough?"

"Raymond, they aren't my fans. They're yours." That was good. If she stroked his ego enough he would forget what a disappointment she was. His arrogance appeared to be his only weakness.

"They are, aren't they?" He always manipulated things to compliment himself. She was a fool, an ignorant and stupid fool. He was an average guy at work and within a few days became a monster.

She hadn't forgotten his face when he confronted her that morning. She never would. His bloodshot eyes and dirty clothes shocked her into paralysis. He appeared like a nightmare and had knocked her out before she could run. The first day was an endless session of beatings and violation.

She'd even forgotten what day it was. Was it a new month? She hadn't been gone that long had she? Time had gone by so quickly, but she was still in the same situation. She couldn't remember exactly when that second week ended. Was it two, three, or four days ago? Was it longer than that?

Raymond didn't maintain the cabin. It was his, "private paradise." He insisted the dilapidated condition warded off curious hikers. His electricity was supplied from a quiet generator in the cabin's insulated cellar. He used a wireless computer connection and a cell phone.

The rest of the cabin was far from modern. The walls were bare and warped. They were lined with crumbling paneling. The flooring was nearly rotten, and the windows were frosted with filth and age. He hung a black dusty sheet from the ceiling before he filmed to hide the walls behind them.

A damned recluse had walked by her foot and she didn't have the strength to react. Why had she been afraid of spiders before? They didn't kill out of joy or boredom. They didn't shackle their victims. Her fear seemed so trivial. Everything from her former life that she thought was important seemed so worthless.

Many things had changed in such a short time. She no longer viewed her body as something valuable. She used to take pride in her health and appearance. Why? So some narcissistic maniac could lay waste to what she was so careful with? It was so damned unfair. She had avoided smoking, drinking, and all else for absolutely no reason. What was her moderation for? So she could die just before hitting forty? What a way to die.

How long had Raymond been in operation? How many people had he victimized? She wasn't his first, not by a long shot. He assembled his equipment and handled her like he'd been working with prisoners for decades. He was too sly and calculating. Others had died here. The stains on the floor weren't from food. She recognized the dark brown blotches through any amount of dirt. It was blood.

When the room was free of technological evidences, the only related item visible was the iron ring that protruded from the floor. What had that been used for before Raymond? Didn't it have something to do with the fireplace nearby? It was something ordinary that he was able to turn into something horrible. He had created small dents in most items capable of holding handcuffs attached to a struggling victim.

A fluttering rush came forward. The whispers started again. But Raymond seemed oblivious to the murmurs. They sounded like a group of people whispering together, but saying different things. The cabin was haunted. For the first two weeks, the whispers visited her when he

was gone. She would hear them all around her when she was locked in the bathroom. But, when he came home, they would disappear. The whispers didn't remain a subtle presence for long; they were gaining strength and frequency. They weren't running anymore when he was there.

With the whispers came restless feet that wandered the floors. The whispers stayed in the corners while the steps paced through the cabin. They spoke of things she didn't know about. A million voices whispered, but all of them told a different story. When the steps and whispers had occurred a few times, light breezes would sweetly play across her face. The drafts came when there weren't any open windows or doors. The sounds and sensations had evolved into a wind of whispers.

The skepticism she'd enjoyed prior to her abduction seemed like luxury which had been burned away. How could she not believe there were many unseen presences before her? They were getting bolder. They weren't running like they used to.

If a simple man could evolve into what Raymond became, who was she to ignore the possibility of spirits? His malevolence was no more visible than the whispers she'd heard. Yet, it was there. His business seemed as invisible as his clients, but it was all there in front of her.

He had to be making lots of money to have all that technology at his disposal. He said his Internet business had been in operation since the turn of the century. He kept everything private and not even his family knew of his online activities. As far as they knew, he really worked those little jobs for the money. He purposefully drove an older car and lived in a dump. He claimed he didn't want to draw attention to his assets. He even mentioned volunteering regularly at animal shelters to keep a positive, "public image," in case any suspicions turned

towards him.

Ransoms were out of the question. She had to roll her eyes at that thought. It wasn't like they had enough money to draw the attention of someone seeking a ransom. Money had nothing to do with his agenda. If only it had been something so simple. If only he hadn't touched her and had no interest in breaking her body. If only there weren't clients. If only there was no Cabin Fever. It was a futile train of thought. There were no "what ifs," in the situation. Everything was real and no insanity or panic would change the past.

Raymond stopped typing on the laptop and stood up. At least he'd removed that ridiculous mask. She hated that damned mask. She hated him. He removed the shade from the lamp he used for work on the computer and collapsed it. It looked like a black umbrella from afar. It was over. She could breathe a sigh of relief for the day.

He didn't have any pattern for when he held his sessions, but he never held two in a single day. There was always at least one day between shows. God, now even she was calling them, "shows." What else could she call them? Her frazzled mind couldn't find the right word.

After he removed the remaining shades, he moved to the lamp stands. He was packing everything up to hide again in the closet. He walked each piece to the other bedroom. Each part had to be carried as not to damage it. He wrapped the more fragile items in black velvet fabric as he disassembled the rest of the lighting. It was always a blessing to know it was over for a time.

There was never a promise as to how long she could relax before he began his brutality off-camera, but every second was something. The clients evidently enjoyed seeing her battered and bound. Every time she went before the camera, she had a host of new bruises and injuries. Her

lip was now busted in two places where it had been one. Her eye felt much more swollen than it had been last week. Was there something wrong with her gums? They felt strange.

She rubbed her face with her free hand. How long could it go on? How long did he intend on torturing her? She had known he was going to eventually kill her that first week. Gradually, it became the second week. Now who the hell knew how long she'd been there? She tried to talk to him as little as possible. Her internal dialogue kept her sane. The more she talked to him the scarier life was.

He didn't seem real. He was so damned normal at work, interacted normally, and he had a normal social circle. There were no signs that he was unstable. At times he was charismatic, charming, and there were single girls who wanted to date him. She hung her head and tried to ease the knots in her spine. It couldn't go on. It just couldn't.

Chapter Two

Her wounds were throbbing. The old injuries hurt as much as those freshly inflicted. Would they ever heal? Would she ever be without pain again? It seemed she'd been running the gauntlet from the monster for months, if not years. There were many times when her injuries seemed worse. Three times it felt like she'd sustained a concussion. Twice he allowed her to straddle towels to capture the bleeding from his violation. Her body was wasted, at best. No one would ever look at her with anything aside from disgust again.

She turned her attention from her diminishing self-image to her surroundings. The oven was dingy and rusted. It used to be white. The handle that the cuff was fastened around had rusted together with the door. A small indentation on the right side was only large enough to hold the sideways cuff. He'd created that. How many other women had been fastened to the door?

It was so hopeless. She didn't have the strength to keep fighting him. Sooner or later he was going to kill her; or she would break and his use for her would end. What had she done to deserve it? What act of hate had she inadvertently done to justify her torture? Why would God put her through it? There were no miracles and no sparks of hope.

His fingers kept hitting the keys even after the lighting was gone. She had a perfect chance to do something. He was across the cabin from her in a chair near the fireplace. He was miraculously ignoring her. She sighed at the moment of peace. He never allowed her to clean or dress her wounds. She couldn't remember her last bath. She'd give anything for a hot tub of water and a long soak. She wanted anything that would wash his filth away.

The dilapidated Kelvinator feebly kicked on a rattled. Every time the refrigerator came on, it sounded like it would be the last. The fan clattered and clanged and once sparks flew out from behind the appliance. Yet, it worked and didn't catch the kitchen on fire. Not that Raymond would get her out if it did.

He'd probably film it and sell it to interested audiences. He'd probably make tee shirts and bumper stickers to commemorate the event. She bitterly smirked to herself and kept her back towards the madman. She rested her head on her cuffed arm. The fridge was a lot like her. It continued working in spite of the abuses.

Her eyes went over the kitchen. His bedroom door was opposite her place at the oven. He kept tall stacks of pornographic magazines in his room. They lined the wall at the door and in the closet. It was always dark in there, even when the sun was its brightest outside. She'd been forced in there the first day and awkwardly knocked over two stacks. After he hit her a few times, he dragged her out. It was an inadvertent victory she'd been proud of. He wouldn't "allow" her back in the room.

She tried to straighten her back. It felt like Raymond had cracked every vertebra in her spine. She couldn't twist or do anything that put stress on her sides, but she could sit up and slouch. She couldn't move in any way without some kind of pain. Her hands were tender. She couldn't remove many of the splinters without a pair tweezers. She made fists and claws with her fingers. They felt foreign to her.

She looked over the counter surface beside the oven. She paused with a silent gasp. Above her was an old knife crusted with peanut butter. What the hell? Raymond didn't leave knives out. Ever. The rotted, black handle was pointed towards her. The blade was charcoal with age. The middle of the knife was bowed like someone had ground

it away. It was so close.

But, wasn't it that way with the apple? Was it last week, when he locked her in the bathroom and was gone for two days? She had thought she would die from the pain in her stomach, but the fruit had appeared on the floor next to her inside that locked bathroom. What was helping her? She had to go. She got up on her knees, spikes of agony traveled up her thighs and down her calves. She had to do it. She had to get it. It might help her.

She didn't know how she would use it or where she would hide it, but it was there. He only allowed her to wear the dingy tank top and panties that she had on when he abducted her. What happened to the rest of her clothes? If she lived she could pursue a career as a runway model. She was just skeletal enough to look like a prepubescent boy. Wasn't that all the rage? What little modesty she'd retained was bruised by her lack of clothing. She couldn't fully lose her self-dignity. What would be left if she did?

"Hey!" He'd seen her move. She tried to go more quickly. This was it. She would get the knife or he would find out what she was doing. Then she would die. He would see what she was planning and that would be the last desperate plot she could devise.

"What the hell are you doing?" He was closer, but he wasn't running. Obviously he had no idea there was a weapon out. He knew she didn't have the energy to be nimble or agile.

She reached towards the blade. Her shoulder burned and ached. She had to get it. She whimpered as she forced herself to move. Her body protested with daggers of muscle spasms and sharp contractions. How could she hurt so bad and still live? She stood up and grabbed at it. She touched the handle. It was dry and cold. The wood was attached on either side of the metal blade. The wood felt petrified and as hard

as the blade itself.

Raymond saw it. He saw the weapon and shouted, “Put that down,” as he was reaching towards her. His voice faded as victory was so close. She grabbed the piece and grasped as tightly as she could. She bit her lip to remain conscious and ignore the pain in her body.

She whirled to find him nearly on top of her. He had been right behind her. She looked into his eyes as she brought the knife up. “I like you spicy,” he grinned. She screamed and raised the knife. She plunged it again and again into his torso and chest. He seemed amused at her wrath, but didn’t speak until she was finished. She drove the blade into him a final time and yanked up, tearing him apart inside. The blade caught on something, it had to be bone.

“Do you think that will stop me?” He gargled. “I’m always going to be right behind you, Karen. You’ll never be rid of me or my shadow.”

She tried to catch her breath as he stumbled backwards. He tried to yank the knife out, but couldn’t. He fell to the floor with a loud thump. The old boards cracked and popped beneath him, but they didn’t break. His body curled up into a fetal position with his back towards her as he fell. His rattling stopped.

How could she know if he was dead? How could she see when his back was towards her? How would she get herself free? Had she suffered those weeks and weeks of Raymond only to die after it seemed a miracle had happened?

The only tool she had was inside the monster in the next room. Why hadn’t she considered what would happen? Why hadn’t she thought it through? Who knew what she would suffer before she died? Would animals invade and try to devour her while she was still chained to the metal oven?

She couldn’t think, reason, or make any logic out of what had

happened. The knife wasn't there before. He hadn't eaten peanut butter. She felt woozy. She was hovering over a black void and didn't know if she'd return when she couldn't fight it any longer. She yanked her cuff and hoped the pain in her arm would keep her alert. She yanked the cuff against her wounded wrist and hoped the pain would keep her alert.

She fought, but it came closer. Suddenly, she wasn't afraid. She didn't fear the inevitable blackness. It started to look inviting. There would be no pain and no humiliation. What was left for her in consciousness? The monster may be dead, but she wasn't. She was alive and bound to the cabin.

She tried to keep her eyes wide, but they hurt. She had a migraine and her body was so weak. She whimpered in the silence of the cabin. It was quieter than it had ever been. Not even the animals outside made noise.

Down she flew into that darkness. Faster and faster her body plummeted to the floor. Her cuffed wrist pulled her falling body into the oven door before it hit the ground. He'd sealed the door shut. Her arm remained attached, but she couldn't feel any more pain than she was already in. She barely felt herself thud. What if he woke before she did? What if...

Chapter Three

She opened her eyes and felt immediate disgust. Her face had fallen sideways onto a sticky part of the kitchen floor. She'd tried to avoid it when he cuffed her at the oven. She rose up and her stomach nearly heaved. A wide stream of blood had drifted away from Raymond and had gone beneath her. The warped floorboards directed the trail to the kitchen. Blood covered her back and the back of her legs. She nearly fell when she tried to stand.

She wobbled as she stood on the wet floor. Since he hadn't allowed her food, her body's reactions were unpredictable and erratic. She occasionally felt normal, but most of the time she felt feeble from exhaustion and dehydration. She was always in pain of some sort.

So, was this the great escape? The exile from his grasp she'd dreamed of? Did fate give her the ultimate victory over him just to force her into a slow death? A black centipede crawled out from under the oven. She tried to stay out of its way as it seemed to consider trudging through the blood or going around.

It turned and started down the side to avoid the thick trail. She moved her feet accordingly and watched it go on. Her stomach clenched. She wanted to cry, but nothing would come out.

She looked down and a dull shine caught her eye. It was far down the left side of the oven, back in the recess of the wall. There was a three-inch gap between the appliance and the wall. Something metallic laid back in the darkness. She tried to kneel, but slipped in the liquid and fell back on her knees. She held her breath to avoid screaming in agony.

What if there were more centipedes in the darkness? What if the recluse was hidden? She shook her doubt. If there were anything hiding

in the blackness that would kill her, it would be better than starving to death. She hadn't died yet and God only knew how long she'd been going on nothing. Who knew how long a death like that would take? She was the undead. She had to smile at the image of a vampire. Only she was "undead" without wealth or cosmetics so that meant something entirely different than what was popular.

She reached back and felt something wooden. She clenched her eyes together and moved her hand around to grab it. It felt coarse and heavy as her fingers traveled across it. It was a handle? Prickly splinters stood out on the worn wooden sides. It was a hammer. She almost dropped it from surprise. How the hell did a hammer get there? It hadn't been there before. Or had it?

Why had the mysterious items chosen this night to emerge? Raymond hadn't used that knife or any other. If he ate, he brought food that was quick to fix, sandwiches, salads, simple foodstuffs that didn't require preparation. She was given an apple or banana here and there. Twice he gave her a sandwich when he ate one.

Where had the items come from? How, in all the time she was there, were they hidden from Raymond? He was a professional at what he did. No stone was left unexamined and no potential weapon was unguarded. She looked upward, half-expecting to see an angel above. It was a miracle. She felt awe-struck. Raymond hadn't moved. The locks and chains didn't stop his victim from killing him.

She puzzled over the sudden advent of the weapons and stared at the blood. The stream appeared to have stopped just before going into his bedroom. Even it had sensed the evil atmosphere of the room. The liquid seemed to glow beneath her. She blinked and shook her head. Blood couldn't glow. She needed to keep track of what could and couldn't happen. She needed to use the hammer. She needed to get

away from the cabin as soon as possible. He could be in shock, and once he woke there would be no more opportunities for escape. She would only be able to hope for a quick death.

She inhaled and lifted the hammer; it was now or never. She had this time alone to escape. At least he was immobilized and she might only have minutes before he regained consciousness. She would not have the strength to fight him any more. It took everything in her just to stand.

She brought the hammer down with all her weight on the handle. It clanged and seemed to echo through the cabin. She looked at Raymond. The monster was still asleep. She didn't break the handle, but did get an encouraging dent out of her work. She hammered again and again, each time the handle warped a little more.

Her excitement fueled her determination. Raymond lay in the same position. She prayed he was dead. Even if death would be easier than trying to get her shattered life back together, she didn't want to die. How had Aunt Eugenia felt when she did what she did to Uncle Harlan? Had she felt victorious or despondent? If only she were still living.

After a few more swings the handle finally came off and dangled from the cuff. She was free. The concept took a moment to consider. How long had she been bound? She could look at the date on the computer, but that meant getting near his body. She wanted to stay as far from him as possible.

She had to get some clothes. The tank and panties she'd worn the entire time were filthy and tattered. Cigarette burns and holes littered the fabric that was almost sheer from wear and tear. She looked over the visible area. She couldn't go into his room. She couldn't look at those magazines again. Besides, he didn't keep clothes in there.

She had to go in the other room. She had to get to the front door. She whimpered as she looked across Raymond. The room seemed to grow longer. Was the cabin as big as that? It had always seemed so stifling and claustrophobic. Yet, when she was free it looked as long as a football field.

There was no hope of removing the cuff from her wrist before she left. She'd simply have to wear it. She carried the hammer with her just in case he woke. The fridge made more noise and she silently gasped. What if it woke him? The iron poker lay at the fireplace. She glared at it and felt it did the same to her. How could he do what he did with that damned poker? It seemed to sneer at her. It was ready to tattle and wake the monster. She felt a soft wave of energy pass through her limbs. It was now or never.

She tiptoed along the wall keeping as much distance between them as possible. His chest didn't rise or fall. She was getting closer, but still wasn't there. The cabin was silent. Even the animals outside seemed to have stopped their usual chatter and were waiting for her to leave.

She could finally see his face. His eyes were closed and his arms stretched out in front of him towards the computer. Did he think he was going to type more before he died? She crept to the bedroom door and flipped the light on. The spare bedroom wasn't any better than his in furnishings. There weren't any magazines, but the air smelled like decomposition.

She wrinkled her nose and tried to search for clothes and watch his body at the same time. A pair of track pants and a tee shirt lay crumpled across the broken bed. She walked backwards to the bed and grabbed them. She quickly threw them on. Did she need anything else?

Keys. She needed to find his car keys. They were on the small scuffed table behind the front door. She needed proof. She needed the

DVDs he kept. He recorded all of their “sessions,” but where did he store them? She didn’t know where the cabin was. She couldn’t describe it. He’d kept her in the car trunk on the way there. It was so remote. There was no way she was near a city. She’d be lucky to find her way out.

How the hell could she call 9-1-1 even if she made it to the car? She could talk to a dispatcher, but she couldn’t direct them to where she was. She braved the moment and let him out of her eyesight. She needed something to back her story up. She was going straight to the authorities. Should she really go home in the shape she was in? What if he had inflicted internal damage? She’d stopped bleeding, but that didn’t mean she was healthy.

She opened the closet door and frowned. A locked door lay at the bottom. That was how he got to the basement so often without her knowing. She needed to see what was down there. What if someone else was chained there? But, there might also be corpses. There might be so many she’d never find any evidence she could take with her.

His laptop started beeping. *Shit!* What if it woke him? A Yahoo notification was flashing on the screen. Someone was trying to instant message him. What if it woke him? She bolted towards the front door. If they were waiting on a reply, they might contact someone else like Raymond. The person they contacted might know where the cabin was. They would arrive and she would be drenched in his blood. She didn’t want any one else hurting her.

She started towards the front door and almost yelled when an old board popped beneath her. She grabbed the keys and the front door swung open. Why didn’t it do that earlier? How did it open? She snapped out of confusion. Who cared? She ran. Who cared if he woke? She was outside. The cool night air rushed in and woke her body up.

She was breathing clean air, and the only malicious thing touching her was the handcuff on her wrist.

Why was she just walking? She'd been a daily runner before he abducted her. Her body hadn't changed that much. Had it? She started to sprint towards the car and stopped mid-stride. Her body had dramatically changed. She could almost feel flesh tear from his abuses. She walked quickly, with knees together, towards the vehicle and yanked the door open. Where was his cell phone? A sharp piece of something jabbed her bare foot.

She had stepped on something fragile. After a sickening crunch, she realized his cell phone had fallen from the pocket in the door. Now she couldn't call anyone. She cried as she got inside. The animals' sounds came. Had they really been quiet for her?

She stuck the key in the ignition and locked all the doors as she fired up the aged Caviler. She was starting to feel paranoid. Why was everything going so well? Why was there a nearly full tank of gas and no emergency lights flashing? After the weeks she had endured, any good luck was cause for suspicion. Why hadn't such good luck stuck the first day? Why had it waited so long?

She floored the gas pedal and the car swerved backwards. She could hear the dirt flying and pine needles from the trees crunch under her tires. The cabin was in a glade of pine trees, all of them were at least forty feet tall. Their trunks were thick and wide. A carpet of reddish brown needles lay below. She slammed on the brakes when she noticed the tail of the car was going towards a tree. That would be the luck she was accustomed to: a wreck in the middle of nowhere with a monster inside the only near-by structure.

She had to stop being so pessimistic. It was to be expected inside the cabin, but she wasn't in there any more. She needed to adjust her

thinking. If she allowed her mind to continue focusing on the problems, how could she find a resolution? She pushed the accelerator down and went onward.

Chapter Four

For the first time in weeks, perhaps over a month, she was alone and completely free. She was also without identification, money, or anything else. Why did everything come with a price? No, she couldn't think that way. She was free and that was miracle enough for the moment. She couldn't expect a map to fall from the sky. She had to help herself.

She sped down the road, across the flat fields and between the mountains. Everything looked so familiar and so foreign at the same time. She was near her home. That was easy to see by the foliage next to the road. Even in the night she could make out silhouettes of oak, ash, and beech trees. The rye planted in the fields swayed with the light winds. The moon was nearly full and shone across the landscape. The night appeared calm and beautiful, but as she watched it, seemed to meld and combine. What was wrong with her vision? It really was a beautiful night. The trees at the cabin had hid her from the moon and the views.

The soft glow across the land did little to tell her how to get back. The environment was vacant of animals and signs of life. The only structures she passed were abandoned barns and houses. The roofs had fallen through on most of the buildings and there weren't any power or telephone poles in sight. It was so damned remote. Did such empty and uninhabited places still exist in this size? The odometer rolled from mile to mile, yet the rural road never ended. Her journey wasn't leading to familiar ground.

Why had it all happened to her? What had she done that was so horrible? She hadn't tried to hurt anyone, so why did fate target her? Why did God target her? She'd already suffered a rape in her life and

remembered the familiar feelings.

How long ago had that been? Fifteen years? Seventeen? Her brain couldn't quite grasp the length of time. Even recent recollections seemed to be decades old. What was his name? William? Wayne? It was Wade Daniels. She'd tried so hard to forget it all for so long her mind had complied.

Yet, she remembered some of that period in her life. Wade Daniels had been the sweetheart of the college. All the girls were crazy about him and all the guys wanted to be just like him or at least hang out with him. She had been a shy wallflower with no real social circle. She'd been a freshman who'd yet to make an impression on anyone.

Wade had unexpectedly asked her to study. In adulthood she would've suspected something, but at eighteen years of age, it wasn't strange at all. It was the fickle hand of destiny leading her to happiness. Why had she been so stupid back then? Her mind-set as a teen seemed alien and unknown. Many things she thought were so urgent at that time were long forgotten. She still felt gullible and naïve.

She had her own dorm that semester. She remembered well the precious few months of happiness there. She had her own little life of independence and occasional classmates stopping by. It had been her private sanctuary. She'd been so proud to be an adult. That was her first "apartment."

Wade had arrived on time and they proceeded to study history. She made a large pot of coffee and he served it. He said he thought it was only polite. She agreed, in her naiveté. She drank her last cup and tried to get out of the folding mushroom chair, but she felt woozy. She smirked in the confines of the car. It had been much like her current feeling. It was a biting reminder that there were no exemptions in life.

She had passed out, and when she woke she was nude and laid out

on the bed. Her panties were around her ankles. Her hips were so sore and her abdominal muscles were tender to the touch. She had no idea of what really happened. She had sat up on the small bed and gasped.

The pain told her what had happened. She had been raped. She tried to consult the campus clinic with no success. As soon as she mentioned a name, they changed. Suddenly, he was the victim of her obsession. She had deliberately turned with her purse on her hip and was able to grab her file papers before fell to the floor. She dashed off with the doctor calling to her.

She was still running all these years later. As she fled in the car, one curve gave into another stretch of nothingness. She had run during that past era in her life and she was running now. It was getting old and she was so tired of running from monsters or their aftermath. She was tempted to pull the car to the side of the road and just lay. It might mean Raymond would find her and it might mean she would die.

A deep sleep was more appealing than struggling through the ungodly rural roads around her and facing the police. Shit, she also needed to go to the hospital. Or could she forget the hospital? Maybe she could just notify the authorities of what happened and go home. Was that too much to hope for?

After she had visited the doctor at the clinic that morning so many years earlier, she ran to an empty chemistry lab and snuck into the professor's office. She turned the copier on and waited for it to warm up. She turned on a tiny desk lamp to avoid drawing attention from the window at the back of the room.

She examined the papers she had taken from the clinic. The doctor had noted it was a rape, detailed her injuries, yet there was an "x" marked over it all. At the bottom there was a small circle with, "WD," scrawled inside. WD? Wade Daniels. She made copies and returned the

papers to the clinic. She excused her actions, as grabbing what she thought were extra credit papers.

Even with youthful ignorance surrounding her, she walked out of the clinic a second time and towards her car. She was leaving that campus. Wade and his little cronies laughed and talked in the parking lot. They watched her as she moved towards her car. She couldn't show fear, or they would swarm, and who knew what they would do.

She had gotten in her car and went to her doctor. She couldn't avoid anything back then. When her doctor examined her and read the papers, he immediately notified the state police.

Would she go through a similar process if she reported Raymond? She wasn't spared any trauma after she reported Wade. The aftermath of that was as grueling as the violation. The classmates that had been nice to her turned against her. Her teachers harassed her. Her grades inevitably plummeted downward.

The school was closed within a month and publicly admonished by the state governor. After a few weeks, she transferred to a community college. Wade was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to six months in jail and two years probation. The Daniels family couldn't buy away jail time for their boy, even with all their money. It was some justice, even if it were slight.

When the authorities overtook the medical records, they found over fifty female students with Wade's initials used on their paperwork. The clinic doctor stated the mark simply meant, "well diagnosis," but ten of the females listed in those files came forth after he was charged. The doctor who covered for him couldn't cover herself. The state officials found she'd been accepting large sums of money from the Daniels family. When the facts were established, her medical license was revoked.

Thoughts of the past did little to bring her comfort. She couldn't imagine her future. She didn't know if Jason would want anything to do with her ever again. Who could really blame him?

She's the one who refused to report Raymond to the police as Jason suggested. It was the one time his instincts were better than hers. She's didn't read the now obvious signs that he wasn't joking about their "relationship." Why did she think he wanted to make that other girl jealous? She didn't want anyone to think she was paranoid. She was an idiot.

"Karen..." She heard someone call to her from outside the car. But, how could she? She was traveling at sixty miles per hour. The windows were rolled up and the engine was going. She couldn't have heard anyone. She couldn't even trust her senses. What had Raymond done to her?

There was so much to consider and she had no energy to think. She had nothing. She was a shell of a woman with barely a sliver of dignity left. For weeks, those strangers had watched everything he did to her. Who knew how many people had witnessed the events? She felt nauseated when she thought of the number of people who saw her degradation. If she'd had anything in her stomach, it would have come back up.

Maybe those viewers would think that Cabin Fever was just a game. Maybe there wouldn't be any serious attention drawn to it and she would just slip out of the spotlight. They might believe it was all the magic of special effects and computer animation, that she really wasn't the one stretched out before them, usually naked, and always being beaten or violated. If only she could make herself believe it had all been an act, something that wasn't real even though it seemed that way. It had worked with Wade and the travesty at college.

Was that a shadow that darted beneath the overhanging trees ahead? The glade of trees ahead crowded the road and she floored the gas pedal. If Raymond dropped on the car or tried to run at her, she would run him over. She would flatten him and laugh about it before she would go back to that place again.

No matter how much she dwelled on her own situation, she couldn't escape thoughts of the others. He'd mentioned them often, but always in vague reference. He always only used first names with them. He'd said he didn't know how many he'd brought there. All his past "actors" were generally forgotten once he used them up. Some were killed and others were "given away."

He never stated precisely what was "given." Did they give their lives? Did they give their futures? Were they returned in a horribly maimed condition? Or was it like slavery? Did he hand them over in bondage to people who were just like him? What if was part of a worldwide slave trade?

That didn't seem likely, though. Surely, he would consider any return to be an act of cowardice or some other weak emotion. He thrived on others' weaknesses. She'd been weak. Why had she been so damned ignorant? Why did she play into his trap with her own arrogance? Why did she automatically believe he was trying to impress the single girls? No, she could take care of him, she had told Jason. The police would be wasting their time because she'd known she was much more mature than he was. He'd just called her at home a few times. And so what if he hung around her at work for a few weeks? The whole time she had been a complete moron. She knew nothing.

The road showed no signs of changing. She sighed in the silence of the car. She didn't want to hear music. She felt the migraine returning. Her head throbbed at the temples and felt like it would split down the

center. Two sledgehammers were pounding away at the sides of her skull. What was wrong with her? Sure, she needed some food and rest, but what else was happening inside her body? She wasn't herself any longer.

She had a haunting vision of Aunt Eugenia. When she was little, Aunt Eugenia had been a sparkling and vibrant woman. She'd been vivacious, but little by little, Harlan removed it. By the time she entered high school, it was nearing the end for Aunt Eugenia.

So much seemed dream-like and distant before the abduction. The morning jogs, the long baths before the boys returned from school, and a warm, soft bed to sleep with her husband on. It was all so obscure in her mind. Had they really existed? There was so much she'd taken for granted; so many things were luxuries which never crossed her mind as being such. They had just been part of her routine. That was part of her ignorance. If she'd simply paid more attention to everything, so much could've been prevented.

She watched the barren fields. It was summer, but no one had planted in the countryside. Old patches of dirt that hadn't been tilled or sown were sprouting grass and weeds. The occasional remnants of structures continually sprinkled the rolling hills in random clusters around every mile. She couldn't find any lights or signs of life anywhere along those bleak stretches.

Maybe she didn't really escape the cabin. Maybe her dead body was still back there, and her own personal hell would be traveling forever with no destination. Perhaps she would travel for eternity, desperately trying to find her home. Would she see the souls that he'd killed before her?

They were still there. They had helped her escape. She knew the knife and the hammer was their work. Those spirits of his previous

victims had escorted her away from the monster. She might physically be stranded there, but they ushered her soul away from him. Perhaps they were even in the vehicle with her. She just wanted to see her husband and children. Even if they couldn't see or hear her, she wanted to see them one last time.

She slowed to wipe her eyes, and finally parked the vehicle. Why was it taking so long? She'd been driving for over an hour and there was still no sign of paved road. Just for a moment, tiny tears came out, but her eyes still felt dry. She looked up and noticed a white-tailed doe crossing the road in front of her. It looked so calm and graceful. Maybe it sensed her fear and desperation.

The graceful creature walked between her headlights and studied her. She wanted to pet it. It looked so soft and clean. It had actually stopped to watch her. Didn't wild deer always run from people? But, was she still alive? Animals sensed things people couldn't. That could simply mean she really had died and the deer was seeing a ghost. She waited as it leisurely strolled off the side of the road and started bounding into the field. It was gone.

How could she complain? The doe had been brave and walked in front of the car without fear. It never knew when a bullet would be flying by, but it had pressed on. She had to be the same way regardless of how she felt or what she feared. She had babies to go to, as well. Three were waiting on their mother to come back home.

She shifted the gear back into drive and hit the gas. She still had over half a tank, what did she have to worry about? Who knew how far she could get on that amount? She came to a crossroad and stopped the car again. She had three choices. Which road could she take? She had to go on. She went straight through the intersection without looking back.

Surely, Raymond couldn't catch her now. She'd put a number of miles between the cabin and the car. There were no other vehicles around so he couldn't steal one. It would take thirty minutes just to get off that mountain on foot. Even if he was familiar with every inch, he couldn't get down the curving road or through the thick brush quickly.

She was so sleepy. The inviting blackness remained beneath her while she hovered above. She couldn't go to sleep, she just couldn't. There could be many more miles to go and she had to get somewhere. She needed food and water. Her body wasn't running on any aside from hope, and there was no hope that would continue for long.

She saw something blue in the distance. It had been so long since she'd seen real color outside of that damned laptop screen. This was a vibrant, bright blue. It wasn't a virtual sign. As a matter of fact, it was completely three-dimensional and real. A sign?

Her mouth fell open when she saw it was a road sign. What was that doing out there? Why would there be a road sign in the middle of nowhere? She gasped when she saw the interstate was twenty miles away. Just twenty miles and she would be on her way home. It seemed unreal after the previous weeks she'd endured.

She floored the car and rolled the window down. Maybe the damp night air would heighten her senses and keep her awake. She sped down the remaining road and didn't stop when she came to the stop sign. There weren't any headlights ahead. Why should she waste valuable time? She didn't know what was happening, but the sense of urgency had come again. She had to get somewhere, or... She didn't know what. She just knew she had to get out of the rural area.

She flew out of the dirt road and onto the asphalt. The tires screeched as she swerved to the left and sped ahead. She was getting closer and every mile brought her nearer to her home. The sides of the

road became blurry and cleared over and over. She had to get home. Her vision was diminishing.

She roared down the two-lane highway and prepared to go onto the interstate. She could be with her boys in hours. The exhilaration made her heart fluctuate. It didn't feel like it used to, but nothing did. Her heart, her stomach, and even her kidneys felt like they were operating differently than how they did prior to the abduction. In many ways it felt like they were behaving differently than when she was just at the cabin.

She finally arrived at the ramp to the interstate. I-70 beckoned. She laughed hysterically and nearly lost control of the car. The last thing she needed was a wreck. She couldn't shake the desperation to find someone. She had to locate help.

She swerved up the ramp and screamed at the top of her lungs. She was purging her lungs of the residue at the cabin. Who knew what kind of decomposition she had been breathing? He could've had the basement packed with the dead.

How did he have a basement under the cabin? How could he store things of value there when the floor above could cave in at any minute? Did he have some sort of support system on the ceiling below?

She came out of her thoughts again and continued driving. She shook her head to keep her mind from wandering. It could be dangerous if she lost concentration. The interstate was barren of vehicles, wasn't it supposed to be populated? Didn't interstates always have traffic? What was going on?

She returned to the possibility that she hadn't really made it. That she was just in hell and the road would keep repeating and going on for the rest of her eternal life. It really was just repeating in one way or another. But, it hadn't started over yet. It was still going towards home.

There was a tiny light in the distance. Then there were two lights. Headlights? Headlights were shining in the distance. She saw a Sullivan County police car parked on the right side of the road ahead, and she cried with joy. They would help her. They would protect her. *Unless Raymond got to them first.* What if he did? What if he made up some story about how she was chasing him? He was sly, he could fabricate everything and someone would believe it. There was no doubting his creativity or malevolence when it came to his own life.

But what choices were there? Who knew how long she would be driving? The car was below half a tank of gas and she was so tired. Could she really continue knowing it could be hours before she reached anyone who could help? That was a big risk and she had nothing to bet with.

Logic intervened. If that were Raymond, would he really just be sitting on the side of the road? What were the odds that he would have seen the crushed cell phone in such a dark area? The moon had lit her path at the cabin, however clouds had been rolling in. If there hadn't been moonlight she couldn't have found her way to the car.

With that logic in mind, wouldn't he be fleeing the area if he had transportation? If he survived the injury and found the strength to leave the cabin, wouldn't he be off seeking medical care for himself? There was no way he wouldn't take care of himself. He always declared, "Self first."

She had asked him about a doctor for her injuries and he blankly stated he couldn't take such a risk. He was the doctor. He would cure her of all her ills when his use for her was complete.

How would she heal-?

She was already at the police car and slammed on the brakes. It was too late. She was too uncoordinated. The old Caviler slammed into the

rear side of the police car. A uniformed officer leapt outside the door as her car slid.

She couldn't escape the blackness beneath her. It was too overwhelming and she felt too weak. She didn't have the strength to go on. The officer ran towards the wreckage with his flashlight shining. "Hey, you!" he gruffly yelled. She blinked and turned her head when he shone his flashlight.

His aggressive voice changed when he looked at her up close. "Ma'am?" Concern overtook his tone. "Are you all right?"

"I must get home..." What the hell was happening to her? She couldn't die then, not when she was so close to home. She couldn't. Her protests seemed further and further as she closed her eyes. She didn't have the strength to keep them open.

She felt the officer's hands on her throat checking for a pulse. She could hear him, "I need an ambulance on I-70 immediately. An injured female rammed my vehicle, but she's suffering some serious injuries that occurred prior to the wreck..."

She couldn't listen anymore. She couldn't hear anything. She couldn't blink. *Sleep...* Her mind went blank as her eyes closed.

Chapter Five

She breathed in frigid, sterile air. What was going on? Did Jason clean the bathroom? It was so cold. She tried to pull at the covers around her. They must've been tucked in because they wouldn't move. What was that constant beeping sound? She didn't want to wake up. She wanted to sleep more. Did she still have the cuff on her left wrist? She couldn't move it freely, it must still be there.

There were muffled voices near-by. Who was there? Did they have company? There were so many things she needed to do. The house wasn't clean. She needed to fix breakfast and scrub the bathrooms. They couldn't have company yet; it was too early. She needed to dust and mop or they would see her messy house.

More sounds arose and she realized she wasn't home. She couldn't get her eyes open. She struggled further and suddenly there was light that almost blinded her. She brought her free hand up and shielded her sensitivity. How long had it been since she'd opened her eyes. Why was her arm so heavy?

She allowed a few more minutes for her vision to adjust and removed her hand. She was in a hospital room. What had happened? She tried to sit up and the pain hit her. Everything hurt. From her face to her foot agony ripped through her body. She held her breath to avoid crying out. Why was she there? Why did she hurt...?

She remembered Raymond. She recalled the cabin and his activities. She even remembered the broken cell phone. That was why her foot was hurting so much. She tried to wiggle her toes and couldn't.

She gently dropped back onto the bed and looked over at the rail. She hit the button to rise up and the springs creaked as the bed rose. The room was so white it hurt her eyes to look around. There were no

windows, but the fluorescent light above made the stark and starched room almost glow. A prim and fashionable older woman came into the room, “Hello, dear. I’m Elizabeth. How are you today?” She looked so familiar. Where had she seen Elizabeth before?

“Fine, I think.” She didn’t really feel fine. She felt like shit. The nurse was so cheerful and perky. She didn’t feel like it, but she wanted to be that way too. “How long have I been out?”

“Not too long. You’ve had quite an ordeal. Do you feel like company?”

She clenched the sheet until her fingers ached. It was Jason. Jason and the boys were there to see her. It was a miracle, “Oh, please, please, please.” She could hardly control her enthusiasm.

“Karen, honey. Calm down,” Elizabeth gently admonished. “No sudden movements.”

She adjusted the white covers and left, “I’ll send him in.”

Just a “him,” meant it was Jason. She couldn’t wait to see him! How wonderful life was to her. She didn’t deserve happiness after allowing Raymond into their lives. She didn’t deserve a loving husband waiting on her. She didn’t deserve her freedom or anything else.

She didn’t get a loving husband as her mouth dropped open. She had to blink a few times to be sure it was him. Raymond entered her room and she whimpered.

“Hunneee, I’m back.” he sang as he drew nearer.

The noises in the hall outside ceased. It was so quiet. She called for help, but her voice wouldn’t raise enough. No one outside acknowledged her cries.

“Get away from me.” She couldn’t run. She didn’t have the energy to get out of bed.

“Oh, I couldn’t do that. Didn’t I tell you no one would be here?”

The waiting room is empty as far as you're concerned. Except for me, of course. You see I'm the only one who's here for you. Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't be missed? No one is here waiting, are they?"

"Get away from me."

"Yes, I'm leaving and I'm taking you with me where your crimes can be considered... And judged. Don't forget your fans; they are so very interested in your whereabouts."

"Leave me alone. Please, just leave."

"Don't think so. I bet you thought you were brilliant, huh?" He was standing at her bedside leaning towards her. He opened his coat. "Giving me this little love mark and all." He grinned as she stared at a massive hole in his torso. The wound she created wasn't like that. There wasn't a hole through him at the cabin. It looked like he'd been impaled with a utility pole. The opening was so large it looked like a basketball could fit through it. What the hell was going on?

"I didn't do that," she cried defensively. "I did not create that."

"No? Let's see..." He was enjoying his act. "Who all has stabbed me today? Hmmm. That is a puzzler. Oh! I know! You get the cigar." He roughly grabbed her arm.

"Stop it. Leave me alone."

"No."

"Please, just leave and I won't say anything to the authorities."

"Too late. They already know." He stretched out her arms and acted like he was going to lift her.

"Raymond. You'll never get out of here carrying me." That was correct. He couldn't carry her out past doctors and nurses. He had to see some kind of logic.

"So, I'll just have to judge and punish here, won't I?" He wrapped his hands around her throat. She could hear splatters of gore slapping

against the sterile tile below with his movement. It was a nasty sound that she couldn't get out of her mind. She could guess what it looked like, she didn't want see. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the slimy sound.

She couldn't let him know how happy he was making her. To end her suffering was the least he could do. If it weren't for his admittance of enacting revenge, she'd almost think he could feel pity and end the pain. No, he had no humanitarian motive at all. It was purely selfish.

She could feel another hand on her opposite arm. Somewhere far off, she heard a strange female voice, "Karen? Karen? Ms. Hamilton?" Everything went white. Had she died? Was this the bright light? Raymond's hands suddenly released and she covered her eyes with her hands. She hurt.

Her airway loosened and she could breathe. She wheezed with the sudden intake of air. She blinked again and her vision returned. She was in a different hospital room. The sheets were white, and the wool blanket over them was light mauve. The walls weren't stark; they were papered with a neutral beige design. The air wasn't quite so cold.

"Elizabeth?" she whispered.

"No. I'm sorry, sweetie." The nurse smiled. "I'm Annie. Who's Elizabeth?"

"It was just a dream?"

"I guess so. From your reaction it must've been a bad one."

She laid back and sighed. He wasn't there. Raymond really wasn't in the hospital. Or was he? What if that dream were an omen? What if it was meant to tell her it wasn't over, and that he was still lurking somewhere out there, or even inside the hospital?

What if she'd only sent him into shock and he was still searching for her? It was possible. If he'd been treated for his injuries and was

able to get around, there was a chance, however slight, that he would be coming back for her.

“How do you feel today?” The nurse stopped tucking the covers in and stared. She felt self-conscious under the weight of Annie’s gaze.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Do you know what day it is?” She stopped moving and stood at her right side. She delicately examined her face.

“All I can think of is that it’s the day after I came back?” She was void of that information. She didn’t even know what day it was at the cabin.

“Yesterday?” Annie chuckled. “Honey, you were out, weren’t you?”

“I suppose. Why?”

Annie pulled a chair up beside her bed. “Karen, please brace yourself.” She paused. “You’ve been in the hospital for a week and a half.”

“A week and a half?” She jumped. Her voice was louder than she anticipated. How? How did that many days fly by without her being aware?

“Yes.” Annie examined her hand that held the I.V. “When they first brought you in, we had no idea who you were. But, that’s our work schedule, for you. You’ve been on the news quite a bit, but it isn’t like we have time to see television.”

She appeared annoyed for a second and then brightened, “Dr. Rutherford placed you in intensive care for four days. You were getting ready to die, Karen, before we started treating you. Your organs were shutting down. Your kidneys would have shut down completely within two hours if you hadn’t been found. But, we saved everything so you have nothing to fear.”

Her mind returned to her drive. There was more behind her refusal

to park and sleep than she imagined. “What is wrong with me now?”

“Well, actually you’re doing well. In fact, Dr. Rutherford is already discussing your discharge. Your body’s been working so hard to get you back to normal. Your fluid intake has been excellent. Dr. Rutherford wants to observe you for a few days longer and then, if you have no further problems, you’ll be released. We were afraid you might have sustained permanent kidney damage because they were so bruised. But, amazingly, they’re healing just fine. You have been blessed.”

She began examining the IV machine. “First, we checked you for the typical drugs and diseases. You didn’t have any identifying information on you and you were physically emaciated. We see that a lot in substance abusers.”

She hit a few buttons and began examining the bandages, “After we found you were clean of substances, we summoned the authorities. The police sent a detective who recognized you from your missing posters and flyers.”

“Missing posters?” She’d meant to ask earlier about being on television and had gotten sidetracked.

“Yes. Honey, you were missing. Didn’t you think anyone would be looking for you?” Annie looked sympathetic and gently stroked her hair. She sat in the chair by the bed.

“I just didn’t know I’d have posters.”

“There were many people missing you, Karen.”

That was something Raymond hadn’t told the truth on. There were people looking for her. She was loved and missed. It seemed too good to be true. “*They’re glad to be rid of you,*” his voice echoed in the back of her mind.

“I feel so groggy. I can’t remember much.”

“Judging on your condition, that’s a blessing.” She spoke without

hesitation. “Who did this to you?”

“Raymond Flannary.”

“Can you help the police find him? What if he does this to another woman?”

“I think he’s dead.”

Annie lost her former concern. “Oh, well then. Good riddance. How did it happen?”

“I think I killed him. I can’t be sure. He was down and I had to get away...”

“I hope you did.” She stood and began examining her legs. “I think that’s enough of the details today. You’ll probably get tired of hearing about it before you’re released. Do you feel like company?” Annie gave the bandage on her foot a quick check.

“Company?” This was it. She was going to see if her dream was accurate. She couldn’t recall what Elizabeth looked like now. The only memory that survived waking was that of Raymond strangling her.

She swallowed hard. “Who is it?”

Annie smiled, “A handsome gentleman who has been waiting for over a month to see his wife.”

She couldn’t stop the tears that came. Jason? He was there? She was so certain she’d never see him again. He’d been there the whole time? What had happened? How was Raymond so persuasive against what she should’ve known in her heart? Jason was her husband and she wouldn’t abandon him if the situation were reversed.

She trembled as Annie left the room in an energetic stride. What would she say? How would she face him after so much? How did you talk about anything with someone after what she’d been through? He’d have questions. He’d have so many questions and she didn’t know if she could answer them. What if he demanded answers? Insecurity

bubbled forth from the recesses of her mind and she was terrified. What if he believed she wanted to be with Raymond? That she wanted to go with him and leave her family?

There was only one way to face him and she had no choice. She had to be brave and trust in him. They'd been married far too long for her to assume such horrible things about him. She was supposed to have shut Raymond's taunts out, but she hadn't really done that. She hadn't overlooked everything he said because she was looking for it. Somehow, his words had affixed themselves like a cancer in the dark parts of her mind. They would spread quickly if she allowed it.

She closed her eyes and said a short prayer. She hadn't prayed since the second week at the cabin. She still couldn't believe it was almost July. She'd lost May and most of June. She'd lost so much. She couldn't imagine what life would have been like had she lost July, as well.

"Hey." A familiar voice came from the direction of the door.

She looked and stared at him. It couldn't be real. He was there. Jason was standing in the doorway smiling at her like nothing had happened. Like her ignorance and stubborn arrogance hadn't just caused her family so much pain and suffering. Was it possible that he didn't blame her? Was it possible Raymond had pushed his lies and degradations on her for so long that she'd accepted them?

"Hi." She felt her chin quiver. Who was she kidding? She bawled like a baby as he ran to her. He hugged her and she felt her body collapse again. There was so much running through her head and no words would come out of her mouth. Words failed to describe anything she felt.

"Easy, easy. I'm here." He embraced her.

"I know. I just can't believe it."

He stroked her hair as she wept. She couldn't control her outburst.

Her despondency overshadowed her return. “What did I do to us?”

He put a hand at each side of her face. He lowered down and looked in her eyes. “You did absolutely nothing. Never even think that.”

She didn’t speak anymore and tried to hug him back. Her arms were still heavy. They felt sore and rubbery. Her muscle strength was slowly coming back. She pulled him back down to her face level and kissed his cheek. She wanted to kiss him, but her lips were still tender. The swelling felt like it had decreased, but she could still feel traces of it.

“How are the boys, Jason?” She took several deep breaths trying to calm enough to talk. “How are they?”

“The boys are wonderful, they’re with mom. Julia’s here.” He looked deep in her eyes. She could feel her body melt beneath his gaze. She never dreamed she would be gazing into his eyes again. Ever. She never imagined she could have such a beautiful opportunity.

A slight sigh breezed through the room from the door. The couple turned. Karen saw her mother for the first time since her return. As if hearing a silent cue, Jason stepped back and Julia ran to her daughter. “Karen, Karen, God how I missed you. I love you sweetie, I didn’t get the chance to tell you that before he took you.”

“You knew he took me?”

“I’m your mother. I know.” Julia hugged her a final time before she rose up. “Where is he?”

“I think I killed him.” She didn’t know how they would respond, but they had to know the truth. If it were true, they’d find out eventually. Someone would find that cabin one day. If she weren’t entirely truthful now she might risk losing her family yet again if she were convicted of criminal charges.

“That’s my girl.” Julia smiled at Jason. “See, she takes it after me.”

“I believe it.” He came back to stand with them. “You would’ve been amazed Karen. Your mother took over everything. After the first week, she brought in the state police.”

“State?” She didn’t know how to respond. She didn’t want state police, not yet. She didn’t want any police. It was too much like that horrific tragedy with Wade Daniels. She didn’t want to involve the authorities then and she certainly didn’t want any State or Federal officials involved.

“The county wasn’t doing enough, Karen.” Julia walked to the opposite side of the bed and sat in the chair. “I know they try, but they just weren’t very cooperative at that point. They seem to think you had some personal agenda with Raymond, but don’t worry. This is all the proof any of those doubting son-of-a-bitches will need.”

She had forgotten about her mother’s love. Raymond kept her attention from all other relatives and played upon her insecurities with her husband. He was good at it. He was a professional. In many ways, he’d even been able to distract her from the love of her children. What kind of mother was she? Did that make her horrible?

Julia and Jason made small talk while she listened. They seemed aware of her need to just listen and observe. She wasn’t ready to participate in lengthy discussion. It was so wonderful just to hear people talking and know that she was free and wasn’t bound by chains or handcuffs.

She lifted her arm to make sure the cuff was gone. She was so accustomed to her left hand being cuffed that she hadn’t noticed the metal gone. They’d removed it. Now, it was constricted with an IV tube. Her arm was clean and bandaged. She looked over at her other hand. It was clean, too. Someone had taken pity on her and bathed her.

She didn't feel as clean as she wished, though. She still longed for a scalding bath.

She wondered who bathed Aunt Eugenia. That was a strange thought. Her aunt had remained in her thoughts all this time. Who took care of her when she was found? She lived nearly two days longer than Harlan. Someone had to tend to her then. She didn't want to be like her. She didn't want to be broken. Aunt Eugenia was miserable at the end, physically and mentally. She'd let herself go, withdrew from family, she didn't want to follow in her great-aunt's footsteps.

She felt herself drifting off. She couldn't sleep, yet. She pushed herself awake. She had to see the boys. She started to speak, and stopped when Julia started, "Did you hear the news last night?"

News always perked her up. That was typical. She smiled at the brush of familiarity. She needed to hear some good routine news. Having her family with her was a surreal and dream-like experience. Some local news might help her return to them psychologically. She didn't have to expect life to end, or to wake up at the cabin, because she was really there. It wasn't wishful thinking. She was with loved ones.

"They got another letter from the Virginia Creeper, didn't they?" Jason spoke.

She paused. Raymond was the Virginia Creeper. "Raymond." She whispered.

Julia and Jason stopped talking and their faces went white. As if the mention of the monster would send her back to the cabin. The silence in the room was deafening, but she couldn't say anything more. Raymond was writing the authorities?

"Karen, honey," Julia walked to her bed and stroked her hair. "This was just yesterday. You fled Raymond almost two weeks ago. It's

impossible.”

“What if he survived?” It was a horrible thought. What if that bastard somehow survived his wounds through some sick miracle? “What if he comes back?” Her voice started to shake.

Jason came to her other side. “He wouldn’t dare,” he flatly spoke. “If he survived that, I will kill him. If I can’t do it, Julia will take a crack at it.”

“Yes, and if I can’t succeed, we’ll just torture him forever.” She smiled.

She couldn’t say anything. Their humor was gone and worry had returned. All attention was turned towards her at that moment. Raymond would be a fool to try and get anywhere near her now. He wasn’t logical or reasonable, but he loved himself. He wouldn’t risk something that might come back on him or his life. Even at the cabin, he hadn’t seemed that careless. He wanted to continue his activities too badly to stop for a worthless, “performer.”

Her heart sank. He survived after all. “What’s the news with the letter?”

The couple above her looked at one another before Julia continued. “The first letter came to the authorities months ago. They dismissed it because there was no evidence. They assumed it was just someone wanting attention. It mentioned a missing woman named Natasha, but there were no missing people in the region with that name.”

They relaxed and both pulled their seats closer to the bed. Julia continued. “Apparently, there have been several missing people around I-81. Victims are both men and women. Two bodies were found, but no one connected them until yesterday. They both died in different ways and were disposed of in areas hundreds of miles apart. Now, they’re connecting them.”

“But, in front of the camera... Raymond called himself the Virginia Creeper...” How could it be? Was Raymond a copycat? Did he want to be like the real Creeper? That didn’t seem likely.

Raymond was too arrogant to look up to another person. He ridiculed even the most notorious and frightening serial killers because, “they were so stupid they were caught.” She’d compared him to one. She’d accused him of trying to be Ted Bundy. That was when he gave her the bump on her left temple. He shoved her against a protruding rock in the fireplace.

There was a light knock on the open door to their left. A county officer stepped in, “Mrs. Hamilton?”

“Yes?” Wasn’t it too soon? She expected the authorities would have many questions, but now? So soon after waking?

“Hello, how are you feeling, ma’am?”

“I’m getting there.” She smiled. “I guess healing will be slow.”

The officer slowly stepped closer. Jason stood and offered him a seat, but the officer politely refused and asked him to return. “I’m Sergeant Bill Hickman. This is very early, Mrs. Hamilton, and I do not want to make you feel rushed or pressured. But, do you think you could answer just a few simple questions for me now?”

It was just a few questions. She could handle that. “I think so.” Her body was growing exhausted, but it was something she had to do. It was the only way to get it over with.

“Who did this to you? Do you know their name?” He pulled out a small notepad from his pocket.

“Raymond Flannary.”

“Do you know where he might be?”

“I left him at the cabin. I stabbed him to get away.”

“Do you recall where the cabin was?”

“No. I’m sorry. I know I drove on a gravel road for what felt like hours. It came out on I-70. Then, I took a ramp that went onto I-81. I can’t give you any road names though.”

“That’s just fine.” Hickman smiled. “Don’t push yourself. Are there any possible identifying details you can remember?”

Her mind whirled through the past few weeks. “He used web cameras. Cameras that broadcasted onto the Internet.”

Everyone in the room looked at one another in surprise. She ignored their initial shock, “he called it ‘Cabin Fever.’ It was some sort of game or show. He told me I was an actor, but everything he did to me was real. There were subscribers... He had the cabin fixed to hold people... He didn’t let me eat... I was so thirsty...”

She trailed off and thought a moment. “I stabbed him. I found a knife... it was on the counter by the stove where I was handcuffed...” Where did it go? The train of thought was gone.

“Wait, wait.” Hickman came a little closer. “He had a web site on the internet?”

“I think so. I didn’t get to see any addresses or anything like that. He hid them. I think I saw numbers in the internet address, but I can’t remember them.”

The officer looked at her for a moment. He took down a few more notes. “I don’t know how we can handle it, Mrs. Hamilton. If this is something that reaches beyond our area of expertise, we’ll be bringing in a number of other agencies. But, for now, I’ll get a team of detectives on this.” He glanced at his notes a moment longer. “That will do for today. But, if you remember anything else before I see you again, let me know. I’ll try to come back in a few days to see you. In the meantime we’ll investigate what you’ve given us so far.”

“Thank you, officer.” She smiled as best she could.

It was about time that she involved the authorities. She still felt sick from guilt over not involving them sooner. When would that residue leave? She was home and couldn't enjoy it. She was healing and still felt pain both inside and out. The bed was soft, but it didn't ease anything. She was going to have to get adjusted to normal life. It took so long to get accustomed to the cabin life and now she was going to adjust once again.

They didn't seem particularly convinced when she went into the web cameras and discussions of his activity. It wasn't fair, but how else would people react? It did sound fantastic. It didn't seem real. How could she get them to listen to her and not just her story? She would try it again when they were more open. They would probably be hesitant with her injuries. They would probably think much of it was hallucination. She couldn't help it. She would continue to tell it until someone did hear.

An older doctor entered the room as the officer was leaving. He appeared amicable, but firm as he shook hands with the officer. The older man was dressed in a white smock and carrying a mammoth folder. They seemed to know one another. The officer quickly left and the doctor walked towards her. "Karen, I'm so happy to see you awake. I am Dr. Rutherford."

"Hello, Dr. Rutherford." She accepted his outstretched hand, but he didn't shake her arm.

"Please call me Otto." He smiled. "I've been treating you since your arrival. You gave us quiet a scare."

"Annie told me some about it." She tried to rearrange her covers. She managed to shift them a little to the right, but comfort was not found.

Jason started towards the door. "I'll call mom and get her to bring

the boys. I'll use the phone at the nurses' station. I've already heard most of it."

"Oh, please, Jason." She smiled. "Yes, get them here as soon as they can come." It hurt, but she didn't care. Her boys, she had to see her boys.

He left and Otto looked back to her. "Karen, as your doctor, I want you to tell me exactly what you suffered. I don't want you to push yourself, just tell me what you remember off the top of your head. Just be gentle, there's plenty of time if you recall more later."

"I can remember quite a bit without pushing, Otto." She hated those hateful memories. She wanted to forget.

"I'll be as honest as possible." He pulled the seat over next to her and opened the file. "We have tested you for everything known. Luckily, all tests returned clean. We didn't really know what we were dealing with when you arrived. You were in terrible medical condition. Your body was physically depleted of food and water..."

"I still feel it."

"You will have repercussions from the weeks you were gone for some time." He put the file down in his lap and looked at her, "I want more tests ran."

"More? Why?" Would she ever get out from under the microscope? Why did she have to be tested so damned much?

"We ran numerous tests while you were either unconscious or very groggy. You weren't alert as you are now. Since you've woke up, I'd like to have an EEG and some more blood work done. I also want you to speak with a colleague of mine."

She waited. He wasn't finished. "He's a psychologist named Dr. Wendell Kelly."

"A psychologist?" That was all she needed. Now she had to submit

to having her head shrunk to heal from Raymond? What if that meant she was going to be stuck in the hospital even longer?

“Considering your situation, it’s just a precaution.” He was firm. “If there is any obvious psychological damage, it is better to know now. If we wait, it might manifest into a disorder or something like that.”

She sighed. It seemed hopeless. She was so tired. Now, there were even more tests and scrutiny awaiting her. “When?”

“I’ll schedule the EEG for tomorrow. Dr. Kelly can come in the day after.”

“Aren’t I getting discharged?” Her heart ached. She wanted to see home. It wasn’t fair that she was marooned in a hospital.

“You’ll get discharged within a week if all goes as well as it has.” Otto rose. “You are my responsibility and I don’t treat any of my patients as any less. I don’t know if you realize the scope of your trauma, Karen, but you would be dead if you’d come in just a few hours later. I’m not discharging you until I am certain you are ready.”

“But, I’m ready now.”

“I’m not trying to keep you any longer than you need to be here. There is just no way you can safely deal with children and living at home in your current state. I’m going to give you a few details on your injuries. This is why I’m keeping you here,” he opened her file. “You have had over one hundred stitches throughout your body.”

She looked at him in disbelief. He ignored her worry, “The first day you were here, we logged several instances of serious heart arrhythmia due to the injuries your body had suffered. It could’ve just as easily resulted in a major heart attack.” He paused a moment and glanced at her.

He returned, “You have suffered not one, but two concussions within weeks of one another. You have four cracked ribs. The black eye

you had almost gave you permanent corneal damage. An oral surgeon treated your mouth. Your gums were split in three places. We had to sew you up because you had similar tears to women who have just given birth.”

She felt faint. What had Raymond done to her? What did that bastard do to her body? Otto wasn't through, “We ran a bone scan when you were admitted and found cracks in both fibulas, your leg bones. We've kept you completely still to allow them to heal. We believed the fractures were so small a cast was unnecessary. We'll need to run another x-ray in a day or so to be certain.”

“I can't hear anymore.” She felt the first wave of tears. She could cry. That sparked some hope deep within her weary soul. Maybe if she already could produce tears the rest of the healing was steadily occurring. Maybe it wouldn't really be that much longer before her body had healed.

“I'm sorry, Karen.” Otto held her hand. “I'm not saying this to scare you or hurt you. I just want you to respect your body enough to heal. You deserve a long rest. You deserve to have all your strength back when you go home. Your family deserves it, too.”

He gently patted her shoulder. “You need to be aware of the severity of your injuries and not dismiss or belittle what you went through. You are an amazing person to have survived. With any luck, the police will find the person who did this and he will be punished without mercy.”

“I think I killed him, Otto.”

“Good.” He smiled and looked over her calves. He gently poked and examined. “I never want to see another person abused so severely by the same individual.”

Aside from his rigid tone, he was a very gentle doctor. His hands

never pressed enough to cause pain and he was able to maneuver the bandages aside without loosening or tearing them. “Your foot caused us some concern. You nicked a major vein when you cut it.”

“The cell phone...” she whispered.

“Pardon?” He looked up.

She remembered. “He kept a cell phone in the side pocket of the car door. When I escaped, I opened it and didn’t see the phone fall out. I stepped on it.”

“With bare feet?”

“Yes.”

“I see. You’re very lucky it didn’t go through the vein.”

“Will I ever be back to normal?”

“In time. I’m sure you’ll be back to yourself, in time. It won’t happen overnight, but that doesn’t mean it never will. I can’t stress how lucky you were, it just amazes me.” He shifted his position. “I’ve been practicing for nearly twenty years and I’ve seen so many people die from so much less.”

There was a shuffle of feet outside and her heart leapt. It was her children. She could sense them near. Otto smiled. “You have so many others depending on you, Karen. I saw them here every day. I don’t know if you can remember that or not, but they were here. You owe it to them, as much as yourself. Be good to your body and your mind.”

He started towards the door and turned. With a wave he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As he walked out the rush of feet came in around the exiting doctor and up to her bed. She felt breathless. Here were her beautiful boys. The angels had come to deliver her back into life. She ignored her pain and reached out to them as they climbed on her bed. She took them all in her arms and hugged them. She could hear Jason calling for them to

climb down and not be so rough. She didn't care. Anthony, Michael, and Peyton were all bright-eyed and ready for an adventure. If only she could play with them. She could barely hug them, but she couldn't let them know.

She held on to them until Jason started lifting them off and standing them by the bed. She felt guilty for not protesting, but she didn't have the strength. Her children needed her. But, that wasn't taking care of her body like Otto wanted. Whatever motivation or spirit she'd had earlier was gone. She felt depleted after speaking with Otto. The boys seemed to be happy just knowing she was there. Soon they were flipping through the channels on the television. They were so resilient. Perhaps if Raymond came into her life when she'd been in college, she could have bounced back much easier.

Her mother-in-law came in behind the boys and hugged her. She couldn't hug back. She could only sit her arm on Angela's shoulder. She was running out of steam. Everything was starting to become fuzzy and surreal. A woman walked in carrying a tray and pulled the table on casters to her. It was a tiny cup of Jell-O and a small bottle of water.

"This is it?" She was expecting a meal. Jell-O was for desert. Where was the rest of her food? She wanted steaks and baked potatoes. She wanted lasagna and Tex-Mex. The nurse grinned, "If you want more when you eat this, let me know."

The nurse left and Karen stared at her tray a moment longer. Was this a joke? This was supposed to be her dinner? She looked at Jason in doubt.

Before she spoke, he laughed. "I'm sorry, honey, doctor's orders. You haven't had food in a while and they want you to be prepared for eating again."

It was no meal worthy of what she'd been through. The boys found

a cartoon on the television and Jason brought them snacks from the vending machines outside.

She ate the food and her stomach protested as she nearly finished her desert. She rubbed it with her hand in amazement. It was painful. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Easy, honey.” he reached down and scooted the tray away. “Otto has already told me. This is your first solid food since you were admitted.”

“What have I been eating?”

“You had a feeding tube for the first week.”

The concept of being fed through a tube was alien. She couldn’t feed herself? She had been that helpless?

He watched the television for a moment and returned his attention to her. “We can only all be with you for an hour.”

“Just an hour?” She lay back on the pillow. “I’ve been away from you for so long.”

“Otto said one hour. You may not know it, but you’ll be exhausted when the hour is up.” She couldn’t argue. She was already exhausted. She fought to keep her eyes open. “Julia said she would take the boys to the house and stay all night with them.”

“Mom can’t handle all the boys at once.” Julia wasn’t able to handle her three. When combined, they were a tornado waiting to happen.

“She has watched them many times.” He grinned. “You’d be surprised at what she can handle.”

She was wrong in so many places. She had returned to her life and her family, but everything was backwards. She was the one who couldn’t handle her own children, not her mother. She was the one that was too sickly and injured to keep an eye on them. She didn’t like the feeling. Had she been treating her mother this way? Had she taken it so

emotionally in secret?

The hour seemed to fly by. She just wanted to stare at her boys. They were oblivious to what happened at that cabin. The only fact they knew was that a bad man had taken their mommy. She didn't want them to know more.

One day, they would know what words like "rape," and "bondage," meant. The less they knew when they were young, the better it would be when they were older. Every now and then, the boys would take turns talking to her. Once, Peyton crawled upon the bed and lay beside her for a few minutes. She hoped he didn't notice her trembling arm. It hurt so much, but she didn't care, she ignored it. Raymond would not keep her babies any longer.

At five o'clock, the nurse returned. "I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over."

She couldn't suppress the tears that came. No one seemed disturbed that she cried. It was a relief. She didn't want people noticing and asking questions with obvious answers. Julia stood in the doorway, "I wanted to give you some family time so I waited in the hall. It's time to go boys." She quickly wiped her own eyes with the back of her hand.

The three stood and went back to the bed. She reached out and held their hands for a moment. She wished them goodnight and playfully warned them to be on their best behavior. They smiled at her. She had made them smile by just being their mom. Maybe she really was getting better. If she could escape those odds, who was to say she wouldn't be feeling normal within a week or two? It might be much sooner.

After they left she cried harder. She didn't have to maintain the thoughtless air she did with her children. She would not let them see her break down. They'd seen too much because of her. She grabbed

some tissues and it was Jason's turn to sit beside her on the bed.

He leaned back and hugged her. "What did I do to my family?" she whispered. He didn't answer, but somehow she felt an answer wasn't needed. The only thing that mattered was that he was holding her.

A nurse walked in with several pill cups and another bottle of water. "Take these. They will make you feel better." She was so thirsty. She raised up long enough to take her medicine and returned to Jason's shoulder. She couldn't drink as much as she wanted with the bottles. She requested a pitcher of ice water just before the nurse left. She was so thirsty.

She was home. She couldn't stop the phrase from repeating in her mind. It had become a mantra. She was *home*. She didn't care if she ever recalled anything else. Nothing mattered aside from being home.

The six o'clock news came on and Devon Lee reported. "Today the Tri-Cities witnessed Karen Hamilton's miraculous awakening." Her heart stopped. She was on the news? What was this all about? It was unsettling to see her photo to the left of Mr. Lee's head. "Mrs. Hamilton was found nearly two weeks ago and remained in critical condition at an area hospital for days. We have just heard that she is awake and seems to be rapidly improving. Our thoughts and best wishes go to the Hamilton family."

It was comforting to see her ordeal had made the news, but it felt bizarre. How long had they been broadcasting her photo? She had so many questions to ask Jason, but couldn't. She couldn't force her mouth to move. She felt so tired. She would take a nap and ask him about it. Maybe publicizing her ordeal would prevent another person's abduction. She needed to sleep for a little while. Just rest and close her eyes. Her awareness faded and it felt so good to let everything go.

Her energy seemed to return for a moment. She opened her eyes

and stood in the middle of nowhere. A long two-lane strip of asphalt stretched out to either side. It was so familiar. Where was she? She should know where she was, but she didn't. In front of her, a dirt road went back and across a ridge far away from the pavement. Everything looked faded and sepia toned, like an ancient silent movie. The tall grasses and grains swayed in the gentle breeze.

She looked to her left and right, but there was no traffic. Everything was silent. Her vision returned to the dirt road and a woman stood to the left. "Hello, Karen." She smiled. "I'm Natasha." She was a tall, slender woman with short blonde hair. She had icy blue eyes and a beautiful face. "Come with me."

Natasha stretched out her right arm. She was missing the ring fingers on both hands. Karen took her hand. Natasha felt so cold. What was on her clothes? Large splotches of something marred her front and back. She wore what appeared to be a dark blue sundress, with sandals. The straps on her shoes were broken, and scraped against the gravel and dirt with each step. Spatters of dark liquid covered her feet and visible legs.

"Where are we going?" Karen tried to ask the ghostly figure. She felt it was a dream, but that she was missing something that should be obvious. There was something she couldn't quite grasp.

"We're going to find a monster." Natasha's voice sounded flat and emotionless. "I'll take you there if you don't forget me." They walked down the gravel road, hand-in-hand. Karen needed to ask Natasha so many questions. It was easy to see she had been a previous performer with Raymond. "We'll all help you as much as we can, Karen." She spoke back without looking at Karen. "We need to stop the circle. It's going to happen again. One monster does not do it all."

She couldn't hear gravel crunch beneath their feet or feel herself

walking. She could hear something somewhere, but it was never fully audible. Was it static? An engine rumbling? An airplane? It was something that both hissed and thundered at the same time. She looked around where they stood. There was no noticeable source for the noise. She looked back to Natasha. The dark stains on her dress were now bright red. They seemed to be slightly glowing. Blood was seeping out of her mouth, nose, and eyes.

“Don’t forget, Karen.” She spoke, but her mouth didn’t move. Her voice grew faint and distant. “Don’t forget.” With a whisper she faded away. Karen was stranded on a familiar road. She should know it, but she didn’t.

She faded away from the scene and into peaceful darkness.

Chapter Six

She opened her eyes back in her hospital room. Warm, bright sunlight shone through her window and didn't hurt her eyes. Finally, she could have a normal response to a blessedly normal situation.

She looked over to the counter where the sink was. A nurse was preparing a bowl of water. She had towels, soap, and various bottles clustered beside her. She smiled over her shoulder, "Good morning."

"Morning." Could she sit up? She tried and almost laughed. She could go further than the day before. She was sore, but she could move.

"It's almost time for your bath. I'm just getting everything ready. I'm Sheila."

"Bath? I haven't given myself a bath since my return?"

"Nope, not yet. But, Otto wants to try that in the morning. He should be by here in just a few minutes. He said he wanted to remove some of your stitches. It's been over ten days. Also, we need to remove your catheter and I.V. drips. Your body is functioning with almost no assistance from us at all. You should be proud of your accomplishments."

"I am. A catheter?" She hadn't needed one of those since Peyton was born.

"Well, you haven't been able to go to the bathroom."

She didn't want to think about how the previous weeks had been in regards to her hygiene. It turned her stomach. Raymond had reduced her to the physical abilities of an infant. It didn't seem like it would be so horrible if it were a medical issue. If she'd suffered some disease or illness that kept her bedridden, that would be so much less humiliating. She had to suffer the mortification because of another person.

Someone intentionally inflicted it on her.

Sheila began humming as she placed several bottles on the bedside trolley. She had a sweet singing voice. Karen wondered aloud, “Why don’t I feel more pain than what I do?”

The nurse gave a slight chuckle, “Sweetie, be glad you don’t. We infused your I.V. with a very mild pain medication. Just enough to keep you out of serious pain, you probably still feel some discomfort.”

“I’m a little sore.” She gently shifted her limbs.

“That’s to be expected. We need you awake now. It has to hurt if it’s going to heal.”

Otto came in quickly and sat his clipboard down. “Karen, my dear, how are you doing today?”

“Better.” She really did feel better.

“I’d say the majority of the pain you felt yesterday was your body waking up. It’s time to return to life and get you better as soon as possible.”

“How long will it take to remove the stitches?”

“Not long. We used catgut sutures as much as possible.” He scooted the chair towards the foot of the bed.

“Catgut?”

He paused and smiled. “Sorry, they are stitches that dissolve. We’ll only need to remove stitches from your foot and from the vaginoplasty.”

“The what?”

“Where you were torn on your bottom.” He paused and looked at her a moment. “Normally, in childbirth and delivery, catgut sutures are applied. However, you weren’t torn from childbirth, but from abuse. I wanted to take extra precautions. Not to mention your immune system was nearly non-existent. A serious infection would have

crippled your body's attempts to heal elsewhere."

"I see."

"Well, Sheila, shall we get started?" The nurse closed the door and pulled the curtain around them. She had to give them credit for respecting her privacy. She laid back and tried to relax.

"Everything is ready, Dr. Otto." Sheila pulled the long, white lamp away from the wall and over next to the bed. She aimed it where they would be working.

They pulled the blankets back from her legs and she felt the mattress split. They deftly propped her legs up on the padded stirrups and draped a sheet across her knees. Sheila began talking to reassure her. "You may feel a chill. We had to place you on a birthing bed so we could keep an eye on how you were healing all over. You ran a high risk for infection with your immune system so low."

It was amazing. She could feel the chill and the breeze from their movements, but not what they were doing. "Am I supposed to feel what...?" She caught herself when they removed the catheter. She felt that stinging.

"Well, you shouldn't feel pain. Maybe discomfort." He disappeared again beneath the thin sheet covering her at the knees and she felt a slight tug, then another.

After four or five, she braved a question. "What's the difference?"

The two laughed and continued working. It was a valid question. Why did they always equate pain with simple "discomfort?" Discomfort was wearing pants the wrong way or accidentally slipping shoes on the wrong way, not a surgical procedure. Sheila grabbed a white tube and returned to her position by Otto. "Wonderful, Karen. It looks marvelous."

"Dr... Otto?" she asked staring at the ceiling. "Why did I need to

be sewn? Wasn't my body healing on its own?"

After a few swipes of the cold ointment, he began looking through the supplies. She could hear plastic bottles moving and supplies being scooted around. "You were torn badly. We got Jason's permission to reconstruct. That meant cutting you again and using stitches so it would heal properly. It was starting to heal on its own, of course. But, you were literally torn from front to back. There is no way you could have resumed the intimate life you were accustomed to if it healed in that way.

He reappeared to look at her to emphasize his words, and then he went back to his work. "In order to restart the healing process, we had to create a fresh wound. You should follow the same rules as from childbirth. I recommend that you abstain from intimacy for about six weeks and avoid feminine products such as tampons. Remember inflammation can lead to infection. "

He grabbed a pair of white surgical cotton underwear and placed a cold pack in the crotch, "This is absorbent and will numb any pain, if there is any, from the removal of the stitches. Nurse?"

Sheila pulled the panties up her legs before she could lift herself. They were so fast. As soon as they had the garment positioned she was back down on the bed with the mattress back together. Otto was removing the gauze from her foot. "Now, once we get the stitches out of your foot that will be all." The cold pack made her backside icy as she moved to accommodate the bed coming back together.

A wave of euphoria started in her heart. No more stitches. She would eventually walk again, too. No more humiliation of someone else bathing her or dressing wounds she wanted to keep private.

She gasped when Otto uncovered her foot. He made her take a deep breath and calm down. "It looks much worse than it really is. We

used the catgut sutures inside your foot so they are most likely dissolved by now..." It looked horrible. Her foot was hideously swollen and bruised. Even though she could tell it had healed, there were blackened places around the wound and streaks of fading yellow through those. Most of the serious bruising was black and dark purple. Her foot looked rotten. "It went all the way through?"

Otto patted her calf. "The discoloration would have faded much sooner if your body hadn't been in the shape it was. It's still healing. It will just take a little longer than it normally would. Technically, it impaled your foot. But the sliver you stepped on wasn't large enough to create big gash on both sides. See?"

He motioned for her to look closer. He was right. The top of her foot only had four stitches. The bottom appeared to have around ten.

He took a pair of surgical scissors and began snipping away. He worked equally as fast as he had earlier. The nurse seemed to know instinctively what to hand him. As they began concentrating, there was little conversation between them. Otto began pressing around the wound and she flinched, but he never inflicted serious pain.

"I am so proud of you, Karen." Otto smiled and patted her leg above the ankle. "This is marvelous. I'll bet we can even try some walking later on this evening. Your wounds are firmly together."

Finally. Some type of independence was coming to her. She'd never realized how horrible it was not to be able to do anything for herself. It might take a while, but she was getting there. She just needed to stay positive and look forward to independence. It felt so new.

"Where is Jason?" She woke up feeling like something was missing. She realized she was missing him.

"He went home to change his clothes and bring you a change."

"I can get out of this gown?"

“Yes, you can.”

She almost started crying again. She was so close to being healed. She could’ve screamed with joy. She ventured further. “What about the bones in my legs?”

“There is no longer any swelling whatsoever. Considering the amount of time you’ve been confined to your bed, I see no reason why you shouldn’t at least try walking. We need to know if you have any unusual pain or discomfort. Also, we need to see if being on your feet causes any abnormal swelling. The cracks we found were slight. They were more surface injuries than anything that actually went through the bone. You’ve been completely off your feet for nearly two weeks.”

“When can I try walking?”

“We’ll let you rest up a bit from all of this and we’ll see. I may wait and see if Jason wouldn’t mind helping you. You need bonding time together. That will help more than anything I can do to bring you back to normal psychologically.”

He removed his latex gloves and began washing his hands. The nurse finished wiping off the trolley. She placed the metal instruments in the biohazard container and the paper waste in the lidded container in the corner. They quickly went from one spot to the other organizing and tossing used materials.

Otto picked up his board. “Everything looks great, Karen.” He grinned. “You are healing much better than I expected. You are a very lucky woman. Breakfast is coming around so you can eat and watch some television or rest. I’ll check back in on you later.”

“Thank you, Otto.”

He quickly exited the room with a smile. The nurse followed, and left a fresh pitcher of ice water behind. She was awake, alone, and felt good. She flipped on the television and skimmed through channel after

channel of mindless morning discussion. It was good to be back and even better to be bored.

A young nurse stepped in. “Hi! Feel like breakfast?”

“Absolutely.”

“We’re trying a little more this morning. You have some orange juice and a small coffee with your meal. For breakfast, you have dry toast, oatmeal, and a cup of sugar-free fruit cocktail. If you feel you can stomach sweet foods, there’s a packet of jelly you can try. I’m not sure if you want many sweets.” She looked questioningly at Karen.

Sweet food. How had she taken it for granted? “I’ll try it and see.”

“My name is Charlotte. I manage the food detail on this floor. If you run in to any problems, let me know and I’ll fix it.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte stepped back out into the hall and Karen stared at her food. It still seemed so surreal. She had honest-to-God food sitting in front of her and could only look at it. It didn’t feel like it had been nearly two weeks since the ordeal at the cabin, it felt like a day or so. She had to adjust to normal life. There was no constant pain in her stomach. Her wounds were healing and her body was returning to normality. Yet, she had to poke her food at first.

She would have eaten everything at the cabin, if she’d had the chance. She had been so hungry. She would have gorged herself. She never dreamed she would have food again. She picked up a plastic spoon and toyed with the fruit. It looked so good. After a few moments, she was eating and watching the news. It felt so familiar. She was sitting down, watching the television, and enjoying food. Everything was so new and wondrous.

A knock came at the door and she smiled. Jason had returned. “Hey!”

He walked in and kissed her. She had missed that. He stirred such love in her and she was too weak to tell him what she wanted to. “I got your clothes.”

“Did you eat?”

“Yea, I did while I was out.”

“I hate sleeping so much.”

“You need it.” He said flatly without a hint of resentment. Maybe he didn’t hate her for her stubborn ignorance. Maybe she could hope he wouldn’t hold that grudge against her.

He started unpacking the bag, “Did Otto remove your stitches?”

“Yes. He’s good at that.”

“Do you feel like putting some real clothes on?”

“Absolutely. I can’t really move without an icy arctic wind going across my backside.”

“It’s a hospital, honey. You know it’s a freezer.” He dumped the contents onto the foot of the bed.

“I can’t wait to get home to our nice warm house.” She could tell more about his motives if she got him to talk more. Wouldn’t there be indications in his speech or body language to note any hostility he had? They’d been married so long, how could only a month hinder her ability to read him?

“You will. You just need to get better.” He was so damned cheerful. She loved and hated him for it. She wanted to be cheerful. She wanted to be downright perky with the morning and life. She pushed the tray cart away and carefully scooted over to the edge of the bed.

He pulled the curtain closed before he came to her. She tried untying the bow that held her gown together at her neck and only managed a tight knot. He loosened the string and the gown fell from her shoulders. She didn’t want him to see her naked. What if he ran?

What if he hated how she looked? What if it turned him forever away knowing what she had done to herself by way of stupidity?

Her inner turmoil was silenced by his gentle touch. He pulled her bra out of the pile of clothes and began to dress her. He inserted her arms in the appropriate places and pulled it loosely against her chest. He closed the clasps at the largest setting. It actually felt good to wear a bra again. She looked down and winced at the visible black marks. "I look hideous." She wanted to cry and couldn't. She couldn't do anything, but look at herself, painfully aware of what happened to her and how she looked.

"No, you don't." He kissed her bare shoulder. "I think you're gorgeous any way."

She'd forgotten what a single kiss could do. Her heart fluttered and she slowly turned to hug him. She pulled him close and laid her head on his chest. He was so warm and she felt so cold. That kiss could do more than any spoken words ever could.

He gingerly massaged her back for a moment. He pulled her shirt from the foot of the bed. She raised her arms as high as she could and he slipped the garment over her in the same manner as the bra.

She noticed her baggy cotton pants and dreaded trying them. Her legs were not as healed as her body above the waist. Her foot still hurt and her bottom still felt tender even though the stitches were gone. Jason pulled the pants up on her legs and helped her to stand. "Today, we'll see how you are at walking."

She was ready. She wanted to walk. She stood there for a moment, cold feet against the sterile floor, and took a deep breath. She had to try. "What if I fall?"

He put his hands around her waist. "You won't."

She brought her legs up and tried to softly march in place. She

couldn't bring them up very high, but she could move them. She held on to his arm with her hand. "I hope I can do this."

"You can." He grinned. She'd missed his support. She kissed him on the cheek. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The injured one didn't feel nearly as painful as she expected. Maybe Otto was right and it just appeared worse than it really was. She decided to use the good foot for the first step.

Her leg muscles hadn't been used and she could immediately tell a difference. It was worse than at the cabin. She wanted to walk, she remembered how to walk, but it was so hard. Her legs felt like they had weights tied to them. She managed a few baby steps. She couldn't manage any form of adult strides. Her gait was sluggish and wobbly. He let go of her waist and stood behind her.

"You're doing it," he excitedly called.

"Sort of." She nervously giggled. She was doing it. It wasn't the speed she wanted, but it was a speed. She was mobile. She was independent for the first time in weeks. She giggled as she walked. It was all coming back. Her physical abilities were returning to her. It was wonderful. She came to the edge of the room. "I think you should go back and rest a little, Karen."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, honey. That's quite a bit of work."

She whirled too fast and started to fall. She gasped, but he caught her and lifted her up. "See? I won't let you fall."

"You never let me down." She kissed his cheek again. "Thank you." Her foot was hurting. At least she didn't have to walk back to bed.

By the time he sat her down on the mattress, she was exhausted again. "Wow," she sighed. "I'm beat."

“Otto said not to let you over-do it.” He seemed to enjoy taking care of her. She couldn’t understand it. But, she had been so certain he was going to hate her. He was so sweet and kind, so caring, and completely unlike what Raymond had said...

That *bastard*. Raymond had warped her perspectives. Jason wasn’t anything like him. How would he know what Jason was like? His words were still fresh in her mind, “*No one will want you after this. You will be disgusting. Why not just let it all out...?*” Jason wasn’t anything like him. She had to focus on what she knew in her heart and not what she heard at the cabin.

The WCHB news broke through the morning programming. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have an urgent message...” Reece Hawthorne glanced down at his papers and back up. “Felina McDavid, a resident of Greenville, did not report for work four days ago. Authorities are asking everyone to report any information immediately.” The screen went to a photo of Felina. She looked around Karen’s age. Hawthorne came back, “Everyone fears it is yet another attack from the Virginia Creeper...”

Creeper. The word screamed through her brain and pushed all the images she’d tried to forget to the forefront of her mind. The bondage, the humiliation, the pain, it couldn’t be. It wasn’t. In her heart she knew Raymond was dead. She could remember wanting to scream so badly in the cabin. It was all gone. Her life was lost. Her body was wreckage.

“It can’t be, Jason. It can’t be,” she frantically pleaded. “He’s dead, I killed him, it can’t be...”

“Whoa,” he sat by her on the bed. “How do you know he was the Creeper?”

“Raymond was the Creeper. He said so in front of the camera-“

“It could’ve been an act for him. Why was he the ‘Creeper?’”

“He filmed what he did with a web camera and broadcasted it online. It has to be a copycat. It can’t be Raymond. It just can’t.” She erupted in tears and tried to talk through her sobs, “He did everything and no one online would help. No one would do anything.”

“How do you know people were watching, Karen?” He intently studied her. “How do you know there were others?”

“I saw the visitor counter. I watched it grow. It can’t be him.”

“I think you need to lay back and rest, honey.” He looked sympathetically at her. She was infuriated by his concern. Damn it, he was patronizing her. “Jason, I’m serious.”

“I know you are, just rest and relax. Why don’t you take a nap?”

“I can’t sleep. I can’t.”

“Shh...” She laid her head back onto the pillow and he smiled. “No more. You just rest and gather your thoughts for a little while.”

She didn’t want to sleep. He left the room and she couldn’t call after him. Why did she have to try to walk so much so quickly? If only she’d reserved some of her strength, she might be able to help them find Felina. Why did she always screw things up? She had expected reluctance the day before. She had just woke and it was probably easy for people to assume she was groggy or remembering hallucinations of some sort. But, that was over. She’d been awake a day. They should be listening to her.

She made it out of the cabin and had no idea of how to return. She came back to civilization and couldn’t stay awake. She plowed into a policeman’s car and dodged being charged with reckless endangerment. After all she’d suffered; she wasn’t going to be heard.

Maybe she should close her eyes. Maybe that would give her a little rest while she waited on Jason to return.

Chapter Seven

She was standing outside Raymond's cabin when she heard him. Thick, billowy fog shrouded everything and the only visible shapes were those of the tall pines around her. The cabin was a gray shadow, there was no road on this side of the cabin, and she couldn't escape the feeling the fog was resting on her bare arms. She was in the hospital gown.

"Hello, Karen." A cheerful male voice called to her. The fog thinned near her and she began looking for the person speaking. She looked left and he stood about ten feet away. A small man with a stocky build waved at her like he was in slow motion. He was missing an eye and his brown suit was bloody. The empty cavity where his left eye should have been was dark and the eyelid had sunken in. His thin hair barely covered a deep and painful indentation in his skull. "Look here," he slowly called and pointed downward.

A perfect crystal ball sat on the ground. It was clear and sparkled even in the dense mist. As she stared at the glass, it appeared to have a bluish tint. The pines overhead seemed much less ominous as she turned and walked towards him. "I'm Edgar. You needn't fear the Creeper anymore, just look for this..." He slowly pointed down to the ball. "It will show you the way."

Her eyes slowly returned to him and they were in an open field. Everything was still gray and scratchy. It had the appearance of a silent film. The landscape looked like a stretch of dirt road in the Midwest. There weren't any mountains and the field she stood in had no visible boundaries. The land went into the horizon, unhindered by the fences and gates of man.

Edgar was a few hundred yards ahead of her. He was standing at a gravel intersection that went four ways. "Go this way, Karen." He

gradually pointed straight. “Go on. You will find all you need.” He slowly reached down and then raised his arm up. He held the crystal ball up with one hand, “Don’t forget this...” Edgar faded into nothing as she stood in the field.

She heard twigs pop and weeds rustle behind her. There was a dark glade at the bottom of the knoll with a shadow emerging. It looked like a person, but even in the gray sunlight, she couldn’t distinguish any features. The shadow was out of the forest. It was just a black silhouette nearly crawling towards her. It was Raymond. It had to be. She started running away from the figure and following Edgar’s instructions.

She reached the intersection and continued straight, however as she started the new road, she tripped. Suddenly, the world went black and she fell faster and faster. She couldn’t find anything to hold on to. With a gasp, she awoke in the hospital bed. She could hear Jason, but he wasn’t in the room. She listened closer and realized he was talking to Otto. She hit the button on the television and saw it was after lunch. She’d slept far too long. She was sick of sleeping.

The two men came into the room and both greeted her at once. Otto pulled up a chair and Jason sat on the foot of her bed. “Glad to see you’re awake,” Otto smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“I guess I’m okay.”

“I heard you went for a walk.”

“Yes,” she had to grin. She was mobile. “A short one, though.”

“Good. Don’t over do your new strength. You still have a lot to heal from.” Otto sat his board down and cleared his throat. “Jason said you had some information to discuss. About your ordeal?”

“Yes.” Maybe Otto wouldn’t be so condescending. Jason didn’t remark in a negative way at all, it was just the fact that she wasn’t taken

seriously. She looked from one man to the other before starting. They were both watching and waiting. She took a breath, “The Virginia Creeper. Raymond used that name with his audience.” She’d said everything to Bill the day before. Apparently, no one was paying attention. Didn’t they remember? Maybe they just dismissed it all as nonsense from someone who was waking up.

“What kind of audience was it, Karen?” Otto leaned forward. “Where were they supposed to be?”

“He had everything rigged up to his laptop at the cabin. It was all conducted through the Internet.” She recollected memories slowly and forced them to stay until called. If she had another outburst of them, as she did earlier, she would look hysterical and no one would believe her.

“He had equipment installed around the place to keep a person in bondage. Once or twice a week, he would broadcast his abuses and people would pay to watch. He claimed his visitors were from all around the world. I don’t know if they believed it was real or just a game.”

“Are you sure he worked alone?” Otto’s eyebrow lifted in question.

“Not completely. He said he didn’t involve his relatives because he didn’t want them knowing what he had. He might have accomplices who weren’t related to him, though.”

Otto sat in silence. “Do you want me to call Bill Hickman back in? I could arrange a visit as long as it didn’t upset you.”

“Of course.”

“How do you think this relates to what happened in Greenville?”

“He didn’t work that way, Otto.” Could she really explain Raymond in human terms? Could she rationally convey his mentality without sounding as if she were unstable, as well? “He watched his victims. He

didn't rush into abducting them. He studied and waited. He didn't abduct someone without keeping an intense eye on them for a period of time."

"Why do you think that?"

"That's how he did with me. He bragged about pursuing people."

Jason remained silent and seemed much more troubled. Otto didn't pay attention to him. "Aside from that, are you doing okay?"

"Sure. I've slept too much."

"No, don't think that. You deserve it." Otto patted her hand above the bandages that held the IV tube in place.

He left the room and Jason sat back down in his seat. His face was drawn from worry. "I hate to hear what happened to you," he lowered his head. "I couldn't protect you."

"You did." She reached out and touched his shoulder. "Thinking of you and the boys kept me alive."

Conversation came slowly and she listened to him. He had to love her so much. She couldn't believe he still cared for her like he did. "He said you wouldn't care." She finally braved more discussion of Raymond.

"He would." He looked up. She motioned for him to sit beside her and he scooted next to her on the bed. The small mattress creaked with the weight of two people. He stretched his arm out and she gently placed her temple on the side of his chest. She listened to his heartbeat and smiled. There it was. That was a beautiful song she'd missed.

She paid attention to his heart rate. "What was Cabin Fever, Karen?" He finally braved questions himself.

"I don't know." She sighed. "All I know is it was some sort of game and he held 'performances.' I think everyone who watched believed it was just some strange movie or something that wasn't real. I don't

know if they were aware it was real.”

“I hope so.” He kissed the crown of her head. “I can’t imagine people paying to watch something like that knowing it would be real.”

“I doubt they did.”

She tried to explain everything to him, but it was fruitless. There was too much to accept when all evidence pointed away from any remote possibility of truth to the story.

Raymond had frequently reported computer problems when he’d been working at the consulting firm with her. As if he couldn’t repair any computer problem himself. He typed slowly at work. His professional behavior was calculated and a stark contrast to his real skills on a keyboard.

He drove an older car, lived in a dumpy apartment, and her version of the story was incredibly lacking. Why hadn’t she tried harder to get into the basement? If only she’d grabbed his laptop. She looked around the hospital room, and, for a split-second, she was back at the cabin. She could see the warped floorboards, the primitive fireplace, and even the wrought iron ring protruding from the floor. Yet, in all the detail what could she give to back her story up? She didn’t know where the cabin was. She didn’t know how to tell others to get there. She couldn’t provide any Internet information to support her story. What did she have?

What if they thought she was crazy? She hated that word. She lived in constant fear that they would all label her as disturbed or anxious and stop trying to find answers. Since Felina had been abducted, it was going to be even harder to tell them everything. It wasn’t Raymond. Somehow, she knew he wasn’t the one to grab her.

They had said Eugenia was crazy after she did what she did. They were going to institutionalize her. Everything she’d said about Harlan

had always sounded crazy. Jason stood when a nurse came in and brought fresh water. He sat in the chair next to the bed.

“I’m sorry if it didn’t seem like I was listening.” Jason mumbled from his chair. The nurse exited with a wave and the room was quiet.

“I know what I’m talking about, Jason.” She calmly spoke from the bed.

“I know. It just makes me so damned uneasy just to think about it. It’s too much.”

“But it’s true.”

“It makes me feel paranoid. I mean, who all is in it? Are we even safe in a hospital?”

“I think so. Raymond’s largest concern had been himself. Literally. He wasn’t going to do anything that might jeopardize his life.”

“But what if he had apprentices?”

“That would still be too risky. They could be linked to him.”

“I guess. I still want to keep an eye on everything. If you see anyone strange here, tell someone.”

“Of course I will.” She sighed. “I’m just tired of worrying about them. I can talk about them, I know everyone will have their questions and I expect that. I am just sick of being scared.” She was sick of fear. It didn’t mean she felt it any less when she thought of what the future could hold.

She hated feeling it. She hated wondering what was going to happen next or what was going to happen to her family. It was a relief to acknowledge it. She didn’t feel like a coward for admitting her trepidation, she felt alive.

Jason seemed lost in thought as they watched the television. Family hour was finally approaching. She was looking forward to seeing her boys. Maybe they wouldn’t have her on the torturous limit for much

longer. One hour was nothing; she needed to spend days with her boys.

The room was silent for a time. She still couldn't completely accept Raymond was dead, but she knew he was out of her life. Even if, by some horrible miracle, he survived the incident, he would know better than to come looking for her. His self-preservation would be top priority, not seeking vengeance on someone surrounded by hospital staff and authorities.

In the hallway, someone was yelling. "It's my duty to report to the public."

"Not at the expense of my patient." Otto sounded gruff. "You will receive a statement when one is made. At this time, please remove yourself from these premises and do not return. If you ignore this warning, I will personally see you receive a restraining order." A voice that sounded strange, but familiar echoed Otto's hostility. There were two of them against the guilty party. Who was that with him? It wasn't a relative. Who could it be?

Otto knocked on her door. "Hello, again."

She perked up at his return and felt a sense of relief when Bill Hickman followed. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton."

Jason stood and shook the officer's hand. "Please, call me Jason."

She reached out and shook his hand. "I'm Karen."

"Thank you. You both can call me Bill."

Otto gently pried the edge of the bandage on her foot up and peeked at her injury. "I just thought I would check back. Are you experiencing any pain or difficulty?"

"No. I think I'm fine considering..."

"Good. I'm finishing up my rounds and wanted to tell you both I'll be back in the morning. I'm on a swing shift right now and this is my week of working the day shift. We're a little short on doctors." He

sighed. “Anyway, I wanted to make sure Bill arrived and I wanted to speak to you both for a moment on what is happening outside.”

“The yelling?” She was extremely curious as to what happened.

“Well, yes.” Otto cleared his throat. He seemed embarrassed, “There are two reporters trying to get in here to interview. We have repeatedly asked them to wait until we issue a notice, but they have been persistent. I don’t think they’ll return since Bill reminded them of what it would mean. Just in case, be aware of strange people outside your room.”

It was not a settling thought. If reporters could sneak in, anyone could. She shook her head. No, Raymond was not one of them. He wouldn’t do that to himself. If there was one single thing she could count on, it was his love for self. He wouldn’t dare endanger himself over someone else. Let alone an expendable, “starlet.”

After Jason and Otto spoke a moment, the doctor left. Bill came over and sat in the chair to her right while Jason took the one to her left. After some small talk, he started, “I’m afraid we’ve hit some problems with your story, Karen. I wasn’t sure of what to do yesterday. I knew you were just waking from a long sleep. But, please repeat anything from yesterday. I might have missed some details. I was expecting much less.” He smiled.

“What problems?” Was Raymond alive? Did he survive the injury? Did they have him in custody? That would be a nightmare if he could manipulate the situation against her. That might be something he would return to do.

“We can’t locate any information on Cabin Fever. Nothing. We have hit all search engines, the WHIOS databases; everything we find comes out completely unrelated.”

“I see.” What else could she say? There wasn’t anything.

“Can you think of anything else that might help?”

“I was not the first person held there.” She laid her head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. “And he said I wasn’t going to be the last.”

“Do you think he got Felina McDavid in Greenville?”

“In all honesty, Bill, no. I don’t think it was Raymond.”

“Okay. Then we’ll explore that. Why do you feel that way?” He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. He watched her.

She looked down at the blanket across her bed. “Raymond said he observed me for a time. That he chose me out of all the women around us. He seemed to take great pleasure in looking for his ideal victim. I don’t know how he could’ve been at the cabin like he was and have time to search for another.”

“No. He couldn’t have.” Bill paused for a moment. “What is this about the Virginia Creeper? Did Raymond know them?”

“No. Raymond claimed, when he was on camera, that he was the Creeper.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I do.”

“Do you remember anything about his business, if that’s what it was? Logos, member information, profiles, or any details?” He pulled out a pad of paper and a pen.

“The logo was a cartoon. There were hillbillies dressed in stereotypical clothes. You know, cut off jeans, overalls, and one old man...” she remembered the apparent patriarch of the group. “He carried a bazooka-looking weapon with a moonshine jug on the end of it. The words, ‘Cabin Fever,’ were bright red and at the top of his email correspondence. I didn’t see any member information. He started his letters with the sentence, ‘Come out and play.’ He called them

‘invitations’ like it was a party.”

“Do you think the members knew what it really was?”

“I don’t know. I hope they were just under the assumption it was fake, like a bizarre play or performance art, something innocent. He had a few hundred to a few thousand visitors at each session. He loved to point out the counter and try to say they were my ‘fans.’ They were his and he knew it. He loved it.”

“Okay. I have a logo and more description, that’s a good start.” Bill sighed. “I do wish there was more. Do you remember more about the cabin?”

“I remember I drove straight the night I left. I don’t know what the roads were named or if they had names. They were dirt and gravel until they exited onto the highway.” She could see the bleak landscape in her mind. Why did she feel like she was missing something?

“Do you remember any signs or any directional indicators?”

“No. I can’t. The gravel road exited onto a paved highway, it looked like it had recent paving. I drove for a time before reaching the interstate. That back road I was on seemed to go on forever. I remember it was so desolate. There weren’t any houses or barns in use, everything was abandoned.” She could remember the feeling that she was never going to escape. She was never going to get off the road.

She shivered as she recalled it. She quieted and became lost in her thoughts. They kept growing and getting bigger, she felt like she was being sucked into the memories.

Bill finally spoke, “I know three men who handle the forensic needs in electronics and computers with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. I think I’ll give them a call. This is a little out of our expertise. We see online harassment, threats, and things of that nature. But, we aren’t staffed or capable of investigating the more advanced

technologies.”

“Good.” She smiled. “Raymond knew far more about computers than he ever let anyone know about. That was part of his charade. Self-preservation meant more to him than his work record. I’ve never saw his place, but he told me it was in terrible condition. It was all for a purpose.”

“He seemed like he was intelligent.” Bill flipped the pad closed. “Too intelligent. Even the most brilliant criminals get found out in one way or another. Sometimes, they might go their lives eluding suspicion, but it eventually comes out. His apartment was tattered and dumpy. That is true.”

Bill stood and started towards the door. “Thank you, Karen. I hope he is in a place where he can’t do this to anyone again.”

“Bill, can I ask you a question?” She had to brave it.

“Sure.” He paused.

“What evidences are there?”

“We have the evidences from you. We found DNA from the same person all over your body. We assumed it was Raymond at first and after searching his apartment and collecting DNA samples, we found they match. You are very lucky you didn’t bathe no more than you did.”

“He didn’t let me bathe at all.”

Bill looked down and avoided their glances for a moment. “It was a lucky thing. You would imagine he would keep you clean in case you escaped.”

“He wasn’t going to let me go. If anything, he was going to kill me on camera. He mentioned that he’d ‘given’ people away before instead of killing them, but I couldn’t tell you what that meant.”

Bill looked back to her. He nodded, “I’d considered that he wasn’t

going to let you go. I was afraid to ask too much detail of your ordeal because you are still hospitalized. ‘Giving,’ people away? That can have many different connotations.” He paused and examined his note pad before continuing. “We also found some splintered wood on different parts of your body. There were fibers from other clothing that we’re examining.”

It seemed like an invitation for more detail. She swallowed a drink of water and began, “He was going to kill me. He joked about it often. He joked about all the others he’d killed.”

“Others he’d killed?” Bill wrote more. “How many others?”
“I don’t know. He said he always killed or got rid of them or gave them away.”

Bill pulled his pad back out of his pocket. “Hmm... Got rid of them? What did he mean by that? I wonder... Do you think he stranded them in the woods?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I didn’t ask.”

“I’ll take this in and see if anyone can get anywhere with it.”

“Thank you, Bill.”

“Thank you, Karen. Hopefully, we’ll get this wrapped up before too long. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help.”

The officer left and the room again fell silent. It was so frustrating, if only there were more to remember. Didn’t she know anything of any importance? Had the merciless time flown by and out of memory?

She felt a migraine developing and dismissed the memories. She didn’t need to force herself into recollection just yet. She needed to do something aside from dwell on everything. She couldn’t become so engrossed in her thoughts that she’d forget everything else.

She started to sit up and Jason stood, “Are you sure you should walk more?”

“I have to.” She stood up, surprised at the new stability. How had she walked before and taken it for granted? Almost two weeks earlier she hadn’t given a second thought to walking across the room. Now, it was a great accomplishment that made her feel more human.

“I want to surprise the boys.” She walked from the bed to the door.

“They will be happy, honey.” He walked to her and held her hand. They strode the wing together and the nurses smiled as they walked by the station. She tugged the IV cart as she went along. She wouldn’t miss that when it was gone. She couldn’t suppress her own grin even though her gums were still tender. She was regaining everything she’d lost. It was all returning even if it was a slow process. Her injured foot was losing the initial sharp pain and now felt bruised.

She felt a shadow nearby. Something was sending her instincts into a frenzy. What was it? Jason was here, the staff clustered at the station, everyone was safe, and there was no reason for her trepidation. She felt like Raymond was close. No matter how she admonished herself for being paranoid, she felt his presence. It was a slithering evil feeling that crept forth from the back of her mind.

She started walking back towards her room and smiled at Jason, “I don’t want to over do it. I want to be able to walk when the boys arrive.”

He nodded and kissed her on the cheek. “That’s a good idea.”

They walked back into her room and the feeling left her. What was going on? Was this the psychological residue Otto feared? Was she going to start sensing Raymond everywhere?

“Do you want a drink?”

“Sure.” She was parched. “Wonder if they’ll let me have soda?”

“I don’t know. I’ll run down to the cafeteria and get a big cup of iced tea. That might be a little better for your kidneys than soda.”

She watched him leave and her heart rejoiced. Take that, Raymond, she smiled to herself. Jason loved her enough to help her, to walk with her, and take care of her.

She flipped through the channels and there came a light knock at the door. “Excuse me, Mrs. Hamilton?”

“Yes?” She wasn’t expecting company. Who was this? An attractively dressed woman in a neutral burgundy business suit stepped in her room. She wore a white doctor’s smock over it and the badge dangled from the left breast pocket. The suit looked expensive. She walked with poise and grace towards the bed, “I’m with the Patient Advocacy program here at Johnson City Memorial. I am Dr. Dana Lewis.”

She shook the woman’s hand. “Hello. What can I help you with?”

“I just have a few minor questions regarding your care and your progress.”

“Okay.”

Dana began asking general questions about the quality of care she’d received and if there had been any problems. She carefully scribbled notes down as they discussed everything. She began feeling the twinge of unease when Dana began, “Now, if you don’t mind my asking, what do you remember from your ordeal? Have there been any breakthroughs?”

Why would she ask about breakthroughs? What would she know about recollection? She was getting paranoid. Dana was not Raymond and couldn’t have knowledge of him. Why did she feel so paranoid? She was in a hospital. It was preposterous to think that Raymond would venture near the area with the authorities searching for him. If he survived, he was probably in Mexico or Europe. He wouldn’t remain in the region.

“Well, what type of breakthroughs are you speaking of? My physical healing?” How could she question the doctor without seeming suspicious?

“It’s part of the questioning. We offer this to improve future patient care. You received injuries due to another person who has not been apprehended. I’m just making notes for your file.”

Her reassurance wasn’t comforting. Karen’s instincts were screaming from the depths of her gut. Something was not right. As if to be summoned by psychological distress, Annie walked through the door. Karen felt at ease the minute the nurse stepped in. Dana appeared just the opposite. She was pale and kept glancing at the door. “Dr. Lewis?” Karen asked.

Annie glared at the woman. “Yes, Dr. Lewis.” Annie briskly strode around to the opposite side of the bed and picked up the telephone. “Security...” She began.

Suddenly, Dr. Lewis bolted from the room. Annie ran after her. The older nurse was surprisingly nimble and quick. Karen smiled as she nearly caught Dana. She hadn’t been the only one to sense something disturbing. It wasn’t imagination or suspicion. There was a legitimate ground for her distress. Maybe the doctor was butting into Otto’s field.

Annie came quickly back to the room. She seemed nearly out-of-breath, but spoke plainly, “What did she want?”

“She said she was with the Patient Advocacy Program and had to ask me some questions.”

“Karen.” Annie stood by her and gently put her hand on Karen’s. “I don’t want to alarm you, but that was not Dr. Lewis. Dr. Lewis has been working the obstetrics floor for twenty years. I know her personally.”

“Why? Who was it?”

“I think the imposter was a reporter. We’ve had a terrible time with them trying to get to you. Even when you were in intensive care, they were calling the hospital.”

Annie was probably right. But, she didn’t feel it. Karen looked back at the door. She didn’t feel at all confident that the woman claiming to be Dana was a reporter. There was something else she wasn’t putting together. Something she missed. It gnawed at her even after Jason returned. When Annie told him what happened, his jaw clenched and his mouth thinned.

She couldn’t say anything to comfort him. She wasn’t at ease herself. A man in a security uniform stepped through the door a few moments later. “Nurse Annie?”

Annie followed him into the hall and Jason sat beside her. “They could’ve gotten you again.”

“Who?”

“What if that had been Raymond, Karen? What if it had been someone he knew? I didn’t protect you at home and I’m doing little better here.” He somberly looked down at the floor.

“Don’t say that,” she defended. “Don’t say that. Raymond would have found another way, if it hadn’t been that one.”

His eyes didn’t move even when she reached for his hand. She clasped his fingers within her own and lay on her side facing him.

Annie came back, “They found the smock and the clipboard laying on the floor just before the emergency exit in the stairwell. We’ll be certain that never happens again. We’ve posted a security person outside your room until you are discharged.”

“Did they catch her?” Jason stood.

“No. Almost, but no.” Annie began pouring fresh ice water into Karen’s pitcher. “We have her on camera.”

“Good.”

Annie walked to Karen, “Don’t talk to any unfamiliar people, Karen. There is no such thing as a Patient Advocacy Program here. Everyone who is to come in contact with you will be notified of this. Also, we’ll have to implement photograph identification, so look for that. If someone approaches you and simply has a tag without a photograph, call a nurse.”

“Is the situation that dangerous?” Her previous joy soured.

“Not physically dangerous, but a danger to your privacy and mental well-being. You do not need reporters harassing you right now. Your family doesn’t need it, either. Just keep an eye out along with the rest of us. If someone you don’t know approaches you, tell them to come to the station first.”

Annie could rationalize the situation out to being that of zealous reporters, but she couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t accept it was merely local paparazzi in search of a story. There was something else. Whether or not the staff admitted it, she could feel it.

What could it be? “*You’ll never escape me or my shadow...*” Raymond’s words echoed through her mind. What did he mean? The trauma he inflicted or was there more to it? What was the “shadow?” Was it a person?

Annie wiped the counter off and started to leave. “Oh, I almost forgot! Karen, Otto said since you are improving at the rate you are, you can start having longer visitation times. He asked if you would like to have visitors from lunch through dinner tomorrow?”

“Yes!” Thank God she could get away from the rigid requirements of the single hour visitation. “Please.” She finished with a smile.

“I’ll be back in later to check on you.” Annie left in a much more amicable mood.

“Do you think she was a reporter, Karen?” Jason ventured when the room was void of staff.

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t. But, I don’t think it was the same threat as Raymond, either.”

“I hope not.” He sounded unconvinced as he watched the door. “Maybe I shouldn’t leave you alone until you get home.”

“Now, Jason,” she soothed. “Really. You heard about the precautions they were going to start enacting. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

She wasn’t as afraid as she had been. Maybe it was her body over-reacting to an unknown threat. Maybe her reflexes were too clouded by her healing. Maybe the ordeal with Raymond hardened her. She watched the news come on. Her boys would be here soon.

She caught her breath when the announcer began, “A letter arrived at the Sullivan County Police Department that has the authorities panicking...” The dramatic introductory music faded and the anchor continued, “A letter from the Virginia Creeper arrived, postmarked in Knoxville, Tennessee, that discusses the disappearance of Felina McDavid. This has authorities baffled because it arrived shortly after the last.”

She looked over at Jason to find he was watching her. They glanced back to the screen. “There are several details in the letter that discusses events similar to those of the recuperating, Mrs. Karen Hamilton, who is currently in a local hospital.” Images of Felina flashed up with the police department telephone number beneath. “Mrs. McDavid was on her way to work when she was last seen. She is married with two children and did not come into work at her scheduled time...”

She was a married mother that went missing. It was just before work when she was abducted. Yet, something was different. “I just

don't feel like it's the same," she thought aloud.

"You survived, Karen. The Creeper's victims don't."

"But Raymond was the Creeper."

"He probably said it to scare you. They've been searching for the Creeper for months."

Of course it was a possibility that he wasn't the Creeper. Many things were *possible* and not one was true. He was the Virginia Creeper. The concept that others just like him were out there was too much for her to bear. No, it couldn't be true. There would be far more deaths in the area if there were more than one.

But, how could she prove what she knew in her heart when there was no physical proof? If only she'd been able to get through the door on the floor of that closet. She spent the rest of the evening with Raymond on her mind. His shadow was his mystery. It was a great puzzle and she feared its answer. Something in her gut told her it was right in front of her and there was no way of distinguishing it.

Visiting hour came and both Angela and Julia arrived with the boys. Even Jason's brother Luke visited. They all celebrated when Karen walked out in the hall to meet them, and it felt like home. The warmth of affection and closeness brightened her evening. Even if shadows were lurking everywhere else, they didn't have an opportunity to creep into the loving atmosphere around her.

Angela took the boys back to her house and company faded when visiting hour was over. She ate supper with Jason and was delighted to be returning to normal food. Miracles were all around them, how could she believe that darkness could return?

She was thoroughly satiated and exhausted. Jason lay on the bed next to her. She rested her forehead on his chest and listened to his heart. It was getting more difficult to hold her eyes open. There was so

much to consider and question. If the people trying to get to her weren't reporters, who could they be? If Raymond wasn't really the Virginia Creeper, who was? Without any solid proof, how could she substantiate any of her claims? Why wasn't "Cabin Fever" mentioned somewhere? Would a team of computer forensic experts invade Raymond's lair? Or would they return as empty as Bill?

Her thoughts came back to Eugenia as she drifted off to sleep. How many times had she needed to heal and couldn't? She had run the gauntlet from Harlan for twenty years, not just a few weeks. How had she done it? In the end, Harlan still won.

Chapter Eight

She was in a stark glade. The colors of everything were off; it was too much of a contrast. It was difficult to see in the harsh tones, the blacks were deep, the browns were dark, and the color red always looked like blood.

“Karen!” An angry woman commanded.

She looked around in the forest, but there wasn’t anyone to see. The greens were bright, their color clashed against the grays and blacks. She turned around and a woman stood behind her.

“How can you not see?” She yelled.

“Who are you?” Karen asked the shouting woman.

“I’m Grace.” She had long red hair and porcelain white skin. Her eyes were so green they glowed. Her face and body was covered with what looked like a web of blood. Tendrils had dripped so perfectly it looked like red lace covered her visible body. Her throat was cut from ear to ear. Her hands were battered and deformed. She wore a long silk skirt that was covered in grime and gore. Between the stains on her clothing, she could see a light blue background with tiny pastel roses on her blouse. “You’re not listening.” She screamed again. It was an unearthly shriek that made Karen cover her ears.

Grace slapped her. “Stop being a fool. Help us.”

“What can I do?”

“Remember, damn you. Think. Look for the signs around you.”

“But, I have. I can’t connect anything.”

“Then you are an idiot. Wake up. You have a family to think of.”

“What is wrong? Why are you so angry?”

“We can’t help you again like before” The woman gained her composure. “We did once and can’t anymore. Pay attention. Look for

the others. Listen to your instincts. Look for the shadows, don't wait for them to come to you."

Grace started fading with a sob. She pointed to the ground, "Watch..." It was the crystal ball that Edgar held. She was supposed to look into it? She hadn't looked into it with Edgar. She stared deep within the recesses of the sphere and heard humming. A woman was humming. She saw a swatch of silvery hair and heard a familiar melody.

She tried to reach down and touch the ball, but her other hand was stuck. She jerked and whimpered at the familiar feel of what held her. She tried to pull harder and the metal clanged and jingled. She looked down at her wrist. She was handcuffed to a tree? She looked back to the crystal and it was now a dense black. She looked up for Grace and watched the beautiful forest slowly transform into the cabin. She was back. She was cuffed to the oven.

She started to scream and Grace spoke, "Look at the laptop."

Raymond was lying on the floor. The trail of blood had gone past her. Everything was as it had been, but the laptop was angled differently. It was facing her and the screen looked more vivid. She could see the Internet address bar. Her heart leapt, could this be what she'd missed?

She stared at the LCD screen. It was a numeric URL. She strained to see more and read: 127.3.7.489.

She repeated, "127.3.7.489," to herself. She had to remember it. There was no choice. It might be a figment of her imagination, but then it might not. She had to check everything out.

He had been using the Internet Explorer browser, his laptop was a Dell, and it had been a Yahoo messenger trying to get his attention. She remembered those details. But, things were more visible now. Was that a camera on his laptop? A tiny box was mounted to the top of the

screen that she hadn't noticed. It had a small circle of glass in the center of it. The startling thought rushed forward. Did someone watch her with Raymond? Did they see her kill him?

She gasped and everything changed. She found herself in a hospital bed. Shelia was shaking her arm, "Karen, honey, its breakfast time. You need to have your EEG this morning."

Shelia checked her foot while she ate. She wanted to have it all over with. She felt worse than the day before. She couldn't eat anything they had given her. She didn't feel hungry. "Where's Jason?"

"He went home to change his clothes and visit with the boys."

She didn't feel like talking. It was probably better that he had gone home; she wasn't in a good place for conversation. She grabbed a piece of paper and the pen from the table beside the telephone. She wrote down the numeric sequence from her dream, "127.3.7.489." What did it mean? Did people really use such addresses?

Sheila pushed a wheelchair back into the room. "Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"It'll be over with before you know it."

That was a soothing thought. She didn't want any medical procedures. She wanted to be left alone. She hated the nightmares that followed her around. She hated feeling like something was right in front of her and she was just too stupid to figure out what it was. Grace was so angry. She hadn't been screamed at in years. Even Raymond, in the height of his rage, didn't verbally lash out.

They measured her skull first. The medieval instrument calculated the shape and width of her head. The technician brought out a purple pencil and started drawing. She was gentle and seemed to calculate everything faster than a computer could. After she had finished making the marks, she lifted up what appeared to be a million electrodes. She

used something that looked like concentrated petroleum jelly and attached the sensors to Karen's scalp. She used surgical tape to adhere them to her forehead. Karen laid back on the bed as the technician finished placing sensors on her temple.

"Now, relax." The technician soothed, "I'm Mary. Call if you need me."

Mary left the room and she laid there in silence. She could hear the computer give off a light hum as she stared at the ceiling. After twenty minutes she was fighting sleep again. Mary returned to the room and moved a narrow lamp over beside her. "This is a strobe light. It helps us to look for signs of any type of seizure activity or potential."

She left the room again and continued typing on the machines in front of her in the next room. The light flashed and flashed again. Suddenly, it began rapidly flashing, faster than a strobe light. The bright white light hurt her eyes and made her feel dizzy.

For a split-second between the flashes, she could see Edgar, Natasha, and Grace all standing beside her bed. She couldn't acknowledge them. They just watched her. Just when she thought she couldn't stand another flash, it stopped. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Mary walked out, "All done." She smiled and walked around the bed and to the sink. She was running water for a moment and came back with a warm, damp washcloth. "You did very well." She began removing the sensors and cleaning the areas where she'd marked and used the jelly. "As soon as I finish cleaning, you can go back to your room. Dr. Rutherford will have the results shortly and can explain them to you."

She sighed as Mary worked. It was relaxing to feel such a delicate touch. It was almost like a facial massage "How's my girl?" Sheila had returned and was standing in the doorway.

“Excellent. She’s an ideal patient,” Mary beamed.

Karen climbed back into the wheelchair and Sheila pushed her to the elevator. “I think you’ve about done your work for the day, already. How about some television?”

“I’ll probably watch some later. I want to walk some first.”

“Good. The exercise will ease some of your soreness. You probably feel a little more pain today than yesterday. It’s just from walking so much. You really need it, though, even if it hurts.”

“I can’t stand lying down, it just doesn’t feel comfortable.”

“That’s understandable. But, you have to rest a little.” Sheila curtly added. “You’re very close to being healed, but not there, yet.”

They came back to her room and Sheila let her out, “I’m going to take this back to the station. Do you need anything else?”

“No. I’m fine.” She smiled. She could get used to being treated so well. Her heart felt a little melancholy. As much pampering as they gave her, it wasn’t home. She missed her carpeting and the creaking floorboard in the kitchen and the tiny water spot on the bathroom ceiling.

She stood for a moment longer and walked back to her bed. Everything felt so different. She couldn’t get accustomed to the changes as easily as she hoped. She sat on the bed and toyed with the paper she’d written on. Should she give it to Bill? If it didn’t help, would they think she was crazy?

“One more thing.” Sheila poked her head back in the door. “I need to take your IV out.”

“Good.” She would be glad to get rid of that thing. Trying to walk and push the cart at the same time was aggravating. Sheila placed a dry washcloth on the bed and sat her hand on top of it. She put a cotton ball over the insertion point and gently lifted the tape from her hand.