

The Monster Comes

Hunger brought him to life. Swooping down from the mountains on the black rope of the highway, he awoke as though for the first time to the fierce and brilliant sky, to snow on remote peaks that burned but never melted and pastures that throbbed like green bruises in the crusts of arid foothills. It was like another planet. Around each curve another alien landscape unfolded, undreamt, spectacular, an angular cliff convulsing against the sky.

And in its shadow, his destination.

He pulled into the parking lot of Hidden Creek Lodge, descended from the Dodge Caravan, and locked the doors. The van still smelled new inside. It had belonged to a middle-aged couple camped in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. He gazed across the highway at the cliff. Near its summit an ancient stain marked the level of a prehistoric lake. At its foot a stream of liquid silver divided a grove of cottonwoods from a meadow of grazing cattle.

Rad walked to the entrance to the lodge, a rustic building with a pinewood exterior and a peaked roof. He caught a whiff of chlorine and gurgling water from a swimming pool shielded by a cedar fence. He knew from the brochure that eighteen guest cabins were scattered among the trees in back.

In the vestibule, oil paintings illustrated various myths of the American west—a trapper facing down a grizzly, Native Americans on horseback, Mormons pulling handcarts. On a table was a reproduction of Remington's iconic bronze cowboy atop his bucking bronco.

The lodge was vaulted. Air stirred above him, cool and subtle, like water in a pond. He got in line behind an elderly couple who were checking out with arthritic slowness. The girl behind the desk explained various items on their bill with the sweetness and patience of a dutiful grandchild. Finally they tottered off, satisfied they hadn't been robbed.

"I have a reservation," Rad said. "Jonathan Myers."

"One moment." The girl tapped her computer keyboard.

He imagined tapping her, pinning her plump neck against the graveled parking lot. She had a cowlike quality that angered and attracted him. "A one-bedroom cabin, smoking permitted. That's one-fifty a night plus tax, and it includes daily continental breakfast in the Down Home Café."

Rad slid a Visa across the desk.

"How long will you be staying with us, Mr. Myers?"

"Two weeks." He meant to be out of there sooner, but it was always wise to allow for the unexpected. "Long enough for you to call me Jonathan."

She glanced up at Rad through lashes heavy with mascara. Her makeup was like the primitive finger painting of a savage, all smudges and daubs.

"I'll have someone show you to your cabin."



Rad had decided Whistler would be his last victim. Whistler had died in Rad's foyer. The parquet floor had to be torn out and burned, and blood sanded off the underlayment. The wallpaper had to be steamed and scraped from the wall. Every trace of Whistler had to be erased before Rad could bring in workmen to redo his foyer.

When the cops showed up at his office at the university, Rad told them what they would have found out anyway. Robert Whistler had been his student. Yes, he and Whistler had a few beers together. He described an unhappy, confused young man whose disappearance was sad but hardly

surprising. "I don't know what he's looking for," Rad said, easing Whistler into present tense. "I don't think he knows."

He could have said anything, but clichés worked best on those idiots. He'd known both of them since third grade. Later they would refer to Rad by his childhood nickname, Radish, and snuffle with laughter.

"To your knowledge was he using drugs?" Dave Reynolds asked. Dave used to call Rad mama's boy and tit-sucker and taunt him for not fighting back.

"He talked about pot. I never actually saw him smoking it."

Facing his old schoolmates, their ugliness stark in the office fluorescence, he relished the paradox of his childhood weakness. It protected his strength. In a town like Richfield, where folks never change and you're only a stranger once, the cops know who the killers aren't.

Their questions turned to Whistler's friends. It became apparent they suspected those losers of operating a drug cartel and believed Whistler had met his end in a dispute over methamphetamine. Rad helped them along by implying Whistler had been afraid of their prime suspect. That got them going. Dave pumped his hand and thanked him for his cooperation.

Rad still wondered how Whistler found the article in *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. He couldn't have been a subscriber. And unless he was looking, he easily could have missed the generic homicide story or failed to recognize the girl he'd seen only once in a bar on Laclede's Landing. The blurry black-and-white photo negated her most striking feature, her cinnamon hair. It was a disappointment to Rad, who hadn't been able to take Polaroids of their encounter. All he had were yellowed newspaper clippings and a lock of that hair.

Whistler hadn't seemed suspicious before he showed up that night in late January. "Yo," he said when Rad opened the door.

"Robert. It's been a while."

Whistler shuffled in without waiting for an invitation. He reeked of beer. He stopped in the middle of the living room and thrust the folded newspaper at Rad. "Recognize her?"

Rad thought of her raw whisper, her lips reduced to meat, begging him. *Please kill me, please just kill me.* She still turned him on. "It's late, Robert. What's this about?"

"The girl in St. Louis, she disappeared that night you hooked up with her."

Rad glanced at the photo. "It's not the same girl."

"It's her. Could be you're the last one to see her. You better talk to the cops."

Rad scanned the article. Before their St. Louis excursion, he'd dreamed of making Whistler his protégée, but the moment for revealing himself had never come. Now he saw how dangerous the dream had been. "The body was found in Illinois, Robert."

"So?"

"She must have gone out again after our—encounter."

"I went to your room at four in the morning. Guess what? You weren't there."

"I was sleeping."

He had no one to blame but himself. Sometimes he savored the loneliness of his life, but when the darkness was more than he could endure, he yearned for another pair of predator's eyes to confirm its harsh and absolute reality. His friendship with Robert had grown from his own weakness. Now he was paying. The dumb redneck would go to the cops sooner or later.

"I've still got her number," Rad said. "Let's call and ask her if she's dead."

Whistler looked at him with dull suspicion.

“Come up to my office. I’ve still got her number.”

Leading the way upstairs, Rad considered the situation. Whistler was fifteen years younger, two inches taller, and outweighed him by twenty pounds. He might be drunk, but he wasn’t afraid to fight. If he got the chance.

Halfway up the stairs, Rad spun and slammed his forearm into Whistler’s face, then delivered a sharp kick to the knee. Whistler tumbled down the stairs and sprawled in the foyer, motionless. Then he stirred and raised himself onto his elbows.

A jackknife open and ready, Rad straddled him, leaned one knee hard into his spine and yanked a fistful of hair to expose the scrawny throat. Whistler’s ponytail made it easy. Rad wore his hair like a Roman soldier, cropped, so it wouldn’t give the enemy a handle.

He ditched the jackknife afterward. For years he’d carried it around to cut rope or trim an occasional branch, never dreaming his life would depend on it someday. The four-inch blade was long enough for slitting throats, but it could have been sharper. Its edge seemed to bounce off Whistler’s resilient flesh. Rad was forced to keep pressing and sawing deeper until the skin gave way to sinew underneath. Then came a mess of blood, the dark smell.

Whistler thrashed. Clawed and plucked at the knife. Lunged with his heels, pummeling Rad’s thighs and swiping at his groin. Several times the blade was knocked from its track or lost traction and slipped. Rad wrenched Whistler’s head further back and twisted until the tortured neck groaned. The dying body has a thousand voices.

Rad kept sawing at the carotid artery. He wasn’t enjoying himself. It wasn’t like doing a girl — slow, elegant recreation. It was work, like chain-sawing tree stumps or hacking holes in rocky ground. Afterward he needed

ibuprofen for the bruises and abrasions. His left wrist, wrenched during the struggle, had to be wrapped in an elastic bandage.

Then came the cleanup, all night and the next day without sleep. After emptying Whistler's pockets he wrapped the body in old shower curtains that he kept in the garage to use as drop cloths. He taped the edges so that no trace of death leaked into his car trunk.

Whistler's Pontiac was blocking the driveway, so he dealt with it first. He wasn't worried about anyone seeing the car. The yard was cloaked by trees, and students visiting their friends in the neighborhood often parked where they didn't belong. Rad stowed his mountain bike in the Pontiac's backseat, then drove across town to Whistler's Automotive, the garage where Robert worked for his father and uncle. The peaked hood of a parka shielded his face, but nobody saw him. Nobody was walking around in the freezing night.

The car reeked of beer and marijuana. Empty aluminum cans rattled in the backseat. Rad began to shiver, his jaw twitching and molars drumming. It wasn't fear. Just cold and aftershock. The rush of killing, usually pleasurable, had gone bad.

He parked behind the garage among the cars waiting to be picked up or serviced. Searching the Pontiac's interior with his pocket halogen flashlight, he gathered up another section of *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and stuffed it inside his parka, then checked the ashtrays for cigarette butts that weren't Whistler's brand. He imagined Robert cruising with his buds, smoking weed and running his mouth. But nothing in the car suggested any confidential parties lately.

He skirted a floodlight to reach the garage's rear entrance and tried several of Whistler's keys. In a minute he was inside an office redolent of metal and grease. His flashlight skittered over a desk sloppy with piled-up work orders, coffee cups, and stacked boxes of auto parts. He drew a

breath. No lingering odor of beer or recent smoke here. Whistler hadn't partied in the garage that night, as he sometimes did.

It took more than chance to account for Rad's luck. Events fell into place like expressions of his will.

Drinking with a friend, Whistler might have talked about Rad and the missing girl. But everything pointed to his being alone — driving somewhere and parking and downing several cans of beer while he brooded. He probably had mentioned the St. Louis trip to some of his buds and maybe his parents. But Rad was safe as long as nothing connected him to the girl with cinnamon hair.

His muscles howled with exhaustion as he cycled home. Blasts of frigid air stung his face. It was three in the morning when he finally pulled his own car out of the driveway. In the next eight hours he stowed Whistler's body in his farmhouse outside Richfield, returned home and scrubbed the foyer, then showered and drove to campus in time to teach his first class at eleven.

Rad's farmhouse was half a mile from the nearest paved road, isolated by brush-choked ravines, a wide crescent of meadow, and fields of corn and soybeans where deer came to graze. Friends and strangers pestered Rad for permission to hunt there, but he always said no. The place was his refuge in hunger and rage and black depression. He loved its smell, moldy to the core, already a grave when he buried Whistler in the dirt cellar two days after killing him. He imagined the corpse decomposing, feeding the carnivorous roots of his house.

Nothing much happened in Richfield, so Robert Whistler's disappearance was news. The local paper ran stories featuring his distraught family and his reputed ties to drug dealing. The cops claimed to be following up clues. Dave and his partner never returned to ask more questions, but Rad knew he'd pushed his luck far enough. After eight sweet captures and Whistler, it was

time to stop. He would succumb to fate and become what he was meant to be, an anonymous loser. He would treasure the memories.

He let his hair grow.

Then Lisa had crossed his path. The moment he saw her, Rad had known he would follow her anywhere. Even to Utah.



Lisa **threw back** the covers. The room smelled of clean laundry. Debbie must have washed the bedding and ruffled eyelet curtains just before she came. And redecorated, too. The stuff was all color coordinated in puky shades of apricot and green. Even the teddy bear reclining against her pillow had an apricot bow around its neck. Teddy was supposed to be her bed partner for the next month and a half.

Obviously Debbie thought she was five years old, not fifteen.

Her aunt and uncle had no kids, so they were grabbing this chance to live their fantasy, which had its upside. She'd been there only four days, and already Hank had taken her hiking and horseback riding and Debbie had taken her shopping in Salt Lake.

Lisa had emailed her best friend Katie with descriptions of her room and the lodge and the fun activities. Katie had emailed back with a funny story about her and Timothy sucking face in the living room while Timothy's dad was upstairs doing it with his girlfriend. But email just wasn't as good as talking, and Lisa wasn't allowed to have a phone or even instant message her friends from home. She would break the rules and IM Katie anyway — if she ever got a chance. Debbie was always hovering in the evenings when Katie went online, and Lisa was forbidden to use the computer after nine o'clock.

She hoped things would loosen up once she'd been there awhile.

Lisa padded into the upstairs office, sat at the computer, and accessed her Yahoo account. She installed instant messaging and dashed off a message to Katie, who would read it after her shift life-guarding at the Rotary pool. She opened the configuration utility where startup programs were listed and unchecked the Yahoo box to keep instant messaging from loading when the computer was turned on. Her aunt and uncle wouldn't find the new program. They only used the computer for business and email.

She headed for the kitchen, thinking of a late breakfast, but halfway down the stairs she froze, suddenly aware of the empty house. The ticking of the grandfather clock made her think of bored skeletons tapping their fingers. The picture of Jesus above the electric organ gazed into a spacey heaven. At home Lisa had her mom and stepdad and brother. She wasn't used to being alone. The empty house gave her the weird feeling that any second she might stop existing. She had to get out. She decided to skip breakfast and go straight to the pool. Afterward she would look for her aunt and uncle, and maybe they could eat in the café. She wanted another Reuben sandwich with fries.

She stuffed her swimsuit and a towel in a tote bag and slipped into the shoes she'd left by the back door. Then she remembered that she was supposed to lock the house if she went anywhere. She fetched the key from its hook beside the microwave, then bolted the front door and locked the back on her way out. Even Mom would have to admire how responsible she was being.

The house sat on a scrubby foothill off to one side of Hidden Creek Lodge. You either went down the driveway and walked along the highway to the lodge, or cut through the trees and picked up one of the trails from the guest cabins. Lisa went for the trees. Right away she felt drowsy. Sounds were muffled. Cars whispered from the highway. Grasshoppers chattered in

the spindly weeds and leapt up in front of her, their wings scraping the bright air. Soft wind sighed through the pine trees up ahead.

Higher on the mountain there were quaking aspen. They were called quakies, according to Hank, because of how their leaves shivered and twinkled, more golden than green. They had slender, pale trunks with dark seams in the bark. He said bunches of them shared the same gigantic root system, so in a way they were all one tree. Lisa thought that was amazing.

By the trees a clearing had been bulldozed and four trailer pads built. Lisa hadn't seen it before. From the house, it was blocked from view by a bulge in the hillside. The pads looked brand new, the cement clean except for smears of dried mud, the turned earth still pinkish and raw in spots. On one pad sat a white trailer with turquoise trim. A rusty blue pickup was parked nearby. There wasn't an actual road to the highway, but she saw tracks in the ground where the trailer had been pulled in through the trees.

As she started across the clearing, a door banged and a voice snarled, "So you better start making other plans."

"Look here, Norlene. You agreed to moving up here. You agreed. Ain't that right?"

Lisa halted behind the trailer. The harsh voices were coming from in front. She wanted to run, but they would hear and there was no place to hide.

"I ain't cleaning toilets the rest of my life."

"Cleaning toilets is a hell of a lot better than some ways of making a living."

"What that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, Norlene. Not a damned thing."

Their voices got fainter as they walked away. Lisa glimpsed them before they entered the dappled shade of the trees. The man looked ordinary in jeans and T-shirt. The woman had on cutoffs so skintight that her thighs

bulged like sausages from beneath them, and her platinum hair flopped up and down like a goofy Halloween wig.

A prickle crawled up Lisa's neck. She looked at the trailer. The sky was reflected in a window that cranked out from the bottom, and behind the screen a girl in nerdy glasses peered at her. Lisa waved and grinned. The girl raised her arm and solemnly waved back.

Lisa went around to the front of the trailer. She stepped onto the stoop, which was just a box made by nailing planks together, and knocked on the cheesy metal door. She heard the girl moving around inside and knocked again. Obviously the girl wasn't answering. Lisa was about to leave when the latch clicked and the door opened.

The girl stood in the doorway and said nothing. She was about Lisa's age and already had grownup breasts that were slightly daunting.

"Hi. I'm Lisa."

The girl squinted through heavy lenses. "I'm Lu."

"Wanna come to the pool with me?" The question popped out of her mouth before she realized it.

"I'm not allowed."

"You are if I invite you. You'd be my guest."

"You staying at one of the cabins?"

"No, I'm visiting my aunt and uncle." Lisa pointed in the general direction of the house. "They're the owners. So you can come swimming if I invite you."

Lu scowled as she thought it over. "OK. Come on inside while I put on my suit."

The trailer was just as cheesy inside, with a ratty carpet, shiny nylon drapes, cheap pine paneling, shelves of bizarre knickknacks, and the kitchen cabinets with pretend-wood paper peeling from their corners. But everything was neat and clean, no dust anywhere. A satellite TV programming guide lay

on top of the TV. Lisa hadn't noticed a dish, but she guessed it could be on the roof.

Lu came back wearing the same clothes as before.

"I thought you were changing into your swimsuit."

"It's underneath."

"Bring a towel too. You can put it in my bag."

They ambled toward the lodge, Lisa swinging the tote bag so it bounced rhythmically against her thigh. It was cool under the trees. Gnats swarmed around animal turds clustered like chocolate Easter eggs, just waiting for somebody to step in them and — squish! — experience the wonder of nature.

"What's your last name?" Lisa asked.

"Jakes. What's yours?"

"Duncan. Have you always lived around here?"

"No. My parents started working here a couple weeks ago. My dad and your uncle go way back."

Hank hadn't talked about hiring an old friend. Lisa wondered why not. "I'm on vacation, kind of."

"What's kind of mean?"

What happened had been totally stupid. She and Katie had been driving around with Chase and Timothy. The others were drinking beer, but Lisa just had a Coke. When Timothy announced he had smoke, Lisa thought he meant cigarettes. That's how naive she was.

They left town and cruised the county roads that crisscrossed the cornfields. You could get totally lost on those roads unless you'd driven them your whole life. Chase had just moved from California, so pretty soon they were rolling aimlessly through black fields dotted with a few lonely farmhouse lights. Mom wouldn't believe her, but she hadn't smoked pot. Neither had Chase. He yelled at Timothy for lighting up then pulled off the

gravel road and made them stand outside until they finished smoking. He kept the engine running, opened the windows, and ran the heater full blast.

“Yo, genius,” Timothy said. “Scared it’s gonna zap your brain?” He was such a loser, it threatened him that somebody could be smart without being a nerd.

“If my dad smells pot in the car, I’m dead,” Chase told her.

Lisa wished he would kiss her, but he thought of her as Randy Duncan’s kid sister, just one of the neighborhood brats. He talked about psyching up for soccer season.

After Timothy and Katie piled into the backseat, giggling, Chase revved the engine and started back onto the road. But the car’s right-side wheels had sunk into the muddy shoulder, and the left-side wheels kept spinning on the loose gravel. Chase muscled the steering wheel and punched the gas again. Lisa wasn’t sure what he meant to do. What happened was the car slid backward into the cornfield soupy with rain and melted snow, and sank bumper deep in mud.

Nobody realized at first how stuck they were. The guys talked about scattering rocks or jamming a board under the wheel. Timothy shoved the door until it plowed up mud and got stuck partway open, then he stepped into the field and sank up to his shins in gunk.

“Forget it, we need a tow truck.” Timothy whipped out his cell and called his dad. Mr. Eggars never imposed curfew and wrote letters to the newspaper saying marijuana should be legal, but he wasn’t around to answer the phone when his kid needed help. “He’s bumping Carla,” Timothy said in disgust. He hated his dad’s girlfriend. Next he tried the Marathon station, but when the guy asked directions to their car, he couldn’t give any. None of them had a clue where they were.

They hiked to a farmhouse back up the road, Katie moaning how much her foot hurt. She’d lost her shoe in the mud. Lisa’s feet hurt too — her

shoes were wet inside and rubbing blisters — but she didn't whine. After waking up the farmer they waited outside on the porch, slimed and shivering, while his two little kids gawked at them through the window.

The farmer was supposed to call the Marathon station and give the guy directions, but half an hour later the county cops showed up.

The cops laughed at them all the way to the station. But Chase's dad wasn't laughing when he got there after midnight. The cops told him about the empty beer cans and suspicious odor. Nobody was arrested, but Chase had his car taken away for six months. Lisa was grounded and then sent off to spend the summer in Utah with her aunt and uncle. She hadn't even smoked pot, and she got the worst punishment. It was unfair, totally. Katie had been grounded a few days until her mom got sick of having her around. Timothy, whose dad gave him the pot, hadn't been punished at all.

The whole thing was pathetic and none of Trailer Girl's business. "*Kind of means staying with your aunt and uncle's not exactly a vacation,*" Lisa said.

They tramped past the rear of a guest cabin. An oldies song drifted from its window. Lisa started toward the wide trail that looped in front of the cabin, but Lu stopped.

"I don't like walking that way," she said.

"Why not?"

"I don't like running into Guests." Lu made them sound like extra-terrestrials.

"Whatever." Lisa could hardly wait to tell Katie about Trailer Girl.



Lu dredged her toes through the water. The pool smelled of chlorine and she could see to the bottom, but it was still teeming with bacteria. Two little boys splashed in the shallow end. She knew they were peeing in the pool.

"Coming in?" Lisa shouted from under the diving board.

"In a minute."

Lu took off her glasses. Without them she was almost blind, but she could see Them. She found Black Claw first, on the roof of the cedar hut at the pool's entrance. Like a bird, Black Claw always sought a high perch. Her long hair and loose robes flowed around her like dark water, and she held her arms away from her body, palms open and turned outward as if floating. She surveyed the swimmers and sunbathers with contempt. Delatar winked playfully from a chaise longue where the moment before a stranger was lying. He mimicked the shapes of other beings and was sometimes hard to see.

She kept searching. She didn't want to believe Talion had gone, but she knew he might go, anytime. He'd warned he wouldn't always be with her. The familiar coldness took root in her chest.

Then he emerged from the doorway of the hut where the changing rooms, showers, and toilets were. The gauzy material of his shirt and pants rippled against his muscular body. His skin and hair were illuminated where the sun touched them, not so much reflecting or containing the light as merging with it. The silver of his eyes darkened in the radiance of his face, and the instant she connected with his gaze, she felt serene and perfect.

I love you, she said.

And I love you. Now your trial is beginning. The monster is here.

Norlene.

Talion vanished when Lu put on her glasses. She peered into the shadowy doorway, wishing she hadn't come to the pool without permission.

She felt someone watching. She turned and stared into eyes as blue and transparent as the swimming pool, only there was nothing at the bottom. They opened down and down into emptiness. The man they belonged to lifted his eyebrows and smiled. His hair was combed in a swoop across his

forehead, and a book lay open across his thighs. He looked like the kind of Guest Norlene called a dickless wonder.

"Hi there," he said.

"Hi."

"My name's Jonathan. What's yours?"

Lu turned away. She felt him still watching while Lisa dog-paddled over.

"Are you gonna swim or not?"

"I have to go now"

"Whatever." Lisa's tadpole body seemed weightless as she lifted herself from the water. "Get me my towel."

The tote bag was leaning against the cedar fence, and Lu had to walk past Jonathan to reach it. She took care not to look down. The concrete warmed her wet feet.

Lisa accepted the towel without saying thank you and used it to dry her hair. She scowled down at Jonathan. "Are you checking us out?"

"Not really. Would you like me to?"

"Leave us alone, creep." Chin high, she walked off toward the hut.

Lu grabbed the bag and hurried to catch up, glad to get away from Jonathan.

In the changing room Lisa plopped on a bench and started giggling. "Did you see his face?"

"Uh-huh." But Lu can't remember the face, only the eyes.

"It's weird, but I had this deja vu feeling. Like I'd seen him somewhere, you know?"

"Maybe you did."

"Nah, I don't think so. It was probably just someone that looked like him."

Lu hoped Jonathan didn't complain about their rudeness. She imagined Lisa's aunt lecturing Norlene and Daddy about their kid using the pool and mouthing off to Guests. Lu would get the beating, not Lisa.

He doesn't know who you are, Talion said.

No, of course not. How would he?

But he wants to know.

Lisa peeled off her swimsuit, dropped it on the floor where hundreds of people had stood with dirty feet, and strolled into the shower. Her clothes were wadded and stuffed in the bottom of her bag, Lu noticed as she retrieved her own neatly folded things. If she could afford nice clothes, she wouldn't treat them like rags. A gold chain was tangled up with Lisa's T-shirt. Lu took it in her hand. Attached to the chain was a heart-shaped locket, smooth and heavy, solid gold. She pushed a tiny button and it sprang open. Inside was a photo of a man with scrunched-up eyes and bared teeth.

She snapped the locket closed and dropped it in the bag as Lisa stepped out of the shower.

"Were you looking at my locket?"

Lu was terrified Lisa would accuse her of trying to steal the locket, then she looked at Lisa's face and realized the idea hadn't even occurred to her.

"Did you see the picture inside? That's my real dad."

"You see him much?"

"His job keeps him really busy."

Lu guessed the man in the photo didn't care about his kids. She felt sorry for Lisa. She knew the hopeless feeling of searching for a parent in old photographs.

Shrieking and splashing noises echoed from the pool while Lisa toweled off and the two of them got dressed.

"He's rich," Lisa said. "He paid my mom about a million dollars when they got divorced. And he pays child support."

"My mom died."

"That sucks." Clasp the locket around her neck, Lisa met Lu's gaze in the mirror. "What did she die of?"

"Pneumonia."

"I thought just old people died of that."

In Lisa's world, people could see the doctor when they got sick. They never went without. Lu felt a jealousy and longing so intense it knocked the air right out of her.

"Here," Lisa said. "Let me give you your towel before I forget."

Outside, Lu blinked into the sun touching the cliff across the road. Bugs made tracks in the already cooler air. It was later than she thought. She should be home starting dinner.

"Uh-oh. Looks like you could be in trouble." Lisa pointed toward the wide door in back of the lodge where mountain bikes were rented.

Norlene was waiting.



Rad pulled on a terry cloth shirt and ambled across the pool enclosure. Everything about her was vulnerable — the stunned look in her eyes, the jiggling of her thighs as she trotted after Lisa. Simple creatures, they had no idea of their role in nature.

At the gate he stood aside to make way for a family with two toddlers. The hubby grunted a thank you. The mommy's puckered belly hung over her bikini panties, a reproductive husk. Rad cut across a patio, entered the trees and hiked far enough in to watch without being seen. It would be easy following the girls along the forested paths. He already knew Lisa was staying with her aunt and uncle, whose house was nearby. The new arrival must be staying in a cabin, perhaps one close to his own.

A woman with a snarl of bleached hair was pacing near the lodge. A cartoon slattern, she stomped back and forth as though charging the batteries of her rage.

The girls emerged from the cabana and trailed into the open, cute little Lisa bouncing a tote bag off her leg as she walked. The other one caught sight of the slattern, and suddenly it wasn't just her eyes that were stunned. She was paralyzed from head to toe. The woman's voice, distorted by wind and distance, sounded like the croaking of a hideous bird. The girl shambled toward her and stopped. Then cringed through another halting step. Rad imagined her fear. Savored it. She knew the punishment would be worse if she ran away. Lisa watched, spellbound. The slattern raised her arm and waited, and the girl walked straight into it. A roundhouse slap to the face knocked her flat on her ass. Slumped forward at the waist, legs sprawled, she resembled a discarded doll.

Rad's lips stiffened in a grin. She was conditioned not to fight back. She would lie there passively as he took her apart.

Like Crystal, his first.

It had been a while since he thought about Crystal. Her silver cross on a flimsy chain lay at the bottom of his lockbox, buried by more recent trophies.

She'd lived in a trailer court several blocks north of Richfield High School, where the wrong side of town began. Rad never ate lunch in the school cafeteria. If he was hungry, he got takeout from the nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken and wandered around alone while eating. One day she was standing outside a trailer as he walked past, casting her bewildered gaze all around as though waiting for someone. Beside her on the grass was a small TV. He detoured from the sidewalk before any decision had formed in his mind. "Need some help with that?"

Rad carried the TV inside the trailer and positioned it on a stand. She followed with his box of half-eaten chicken. He plucked a napkin from the box and wiped his greasy fingerprints off the TV. Not to erase evidence, he wasn't conscious yet of wanting her. She asked when someone would come to hook up her TV. He was a high-school student in sweatshirt and jeans, but this woman thought he worked for the cable company. He studied her grubby face. She was no older than thirty, but deep creases cut from her pocked nostrils to the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were devoid of intelligent life. "You live by yourself?"

"Course I do!" she gushed with the burbly voice of an idiot.

For thirty hours straight, waking and sleeping, he dreamed of what he wanted. Then he knocked on her door and made the dreams come true. The biggest rush of his life. Just like every time since.

His excitement lasted weeks as the Richfield newspaper gorged itself on his leavings. Her name was Crystal Ann Stanton. At twenty-seven she'd just graduated from a group home for the developmentally disabled to a small trailer owned by her parents. Her mother had a message for "the animal that raped and killed my Crystal. You're a coward for preying on my helpless baby. When they stick that needle in your arm, I'll be there to see it." The old biddy was so confident that Rad dreaded his arrest from one moment to the next. But the cops never found him and he learned how fear can fuel excitement.

Jack it up higher.