

# **Darkness Under the Sun**

**by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-**

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*Darkness Under the Sun* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# Chapter 1

*I was Death, harvesting lives. I knew my destiny was epic. Yet I killed one at a time, one at a time, one at a time. If my killing spree had been music—and it was music to me—you could rightly call it the simplest folk song. But I had set out to create a symphony of death, an immortal opera of terror.*

*Then an unexpected encounter suddenly led me to understand that to fulfill my promise, to unleash my full potential, to compose truly memorable crescendos of destruction, I must kill entire families, use them first as I wished and then slaughter them. In killing any family, I was killing my own, which deserved to die.*

*Inspiration can come from surprising sources. A child showed me the way.*  
—from the journal of Alton Turner Blackwood

**1989**

A WEEK BEFORE HIS ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY, WHEN Howie Dugley climbed to the roof of the former Boswell's Emporium to watch normal people doing all kinds of ordinary things along Maple Street, he saw the monster for the first time.

Howie's family lived only two blocks from the building in which Boswell's had formerly done business. He could get there by crossing the cemetery beside St. Anthony's Church and then following a cobbled alleyway that seldom had traffic. Huge scarlet oaks, glossy green now in mid-June, shaded the graveyard. Howie liked the trees. They lived longer than people, and they seemed wise to him, wiser than people would ever be, because they had seen so much and they had nothing to do but think about what they had seen and then grow ever bigger. He wished he could just sit under them for a while or even climb them, climb up into the quiet wisdom of the trees. But that was too risky. That would be asking to have his butt kicked. He got plenty of butt-kicking without *asking* for it.

As he made his way through the cemetery, in addition to all the tree shadows, headstones and monuments provided some cover. He wore a baseball cap, kept his head down, and was prepared to avert the left side of his face from anyone he might encounter—and to run if he spotted any of the usual goons.

Nine months earlier, Boswell's moved into a new building a block north of its former quarters. The old brick structure would in time be remodeled for some new business; but that work hadn't begun yet.

Along the bottom of the back wall were five French windows, each two feet high and three long, which looked into the basement of the emporium. They had been opened from time to time to ventilate that lower space, to prevent mildew, in the

days before air-conditioning and dehumidifiers. All five seemed to be locked, but when Howie pushed hard on the middle one, the corroded piano hinge along the top moved with a dry grinding noise. He slid feetfirst through the opening, into the gloomy cellar, and then reached high to press the window shut.

Clipped to his belt was a small flashlight, which he used to navigate the former storerooms of the vacant basement. The narrow beam picked out his path, but it did little to brighten the musty chambers through which he passed. Menaces unknown appeared to creep and quiver in the darkness around him, but those phantoms were nothing more than shadows shuddering away from the traveling light and billowing back after it passed. Howie wasn't afraid of darkness. He had learned young that the dangers in bright daylight were worse than anything that might wait in the dark, that the bogeyman could have a kind face and a winning smile.

The elevator no longer worked. He climbed stairs to the fourth floor and then ascended a final flight, steeper and narrower than those before it. These last stairs led into the lid-service room, which was a kind of shed on the flat roof of the building. Here were stored snow shovels, push brooms, other tools, and products that the maintenance staff required.

Although Howie always engaged the deadbolt on the outer door when departing the roof, he found it unlocked. Apparently, he had forgotten the bolt on his previous visit. He opened the door and stepped out into sunshine, facing east toward the alley.

Paved with gray ceramic tiles, the roof didn't lie perfectly flat. A slight pitch in it allowed water to drain toward scuppers along the parapet. That perimeter wall came waist high to a grown man, higher to Howie. Every three feet, there was an eighteen-inch-wide crenellation like in a castle wall where archers would stand to defend against barbarians.

Howie doubted that barbarians had ever attacked Boswell's, which was only a small department store, or that Boswell's had employed archers or steely-eyed gunmen to defend the place. They had designed the brick parapet with crenellations just for looks, for the style, but it was nonetheless cool. No structure in town stood taller than the old Boswell building, not even the new Boswell building. Howie could kneel at one of the crenellations, lean into it, and peer down at people on Maple Street, watch them going in and out of stores and restaurants, and imagine what his life might be like if he weren't so different from them.

When he rounded the lid-service shed, he saw a sentinel sitting sideways to the parapet, gazing down into the heart of town through one of the crenellations. Although Howie had stepped quietly onto the roof, the sentry turned his head to see who had joined him, and it was then that the boy realized he shared the roof with a monster.

For a moment, about thirty feet apart, they were dead still as they stared at each other. In spite of his surprise, Howie sensed something familiar about the encounter, as though he had dreamed it once and had forgotten the dream, or as if he had known subconsciously, clairvoyantly, that one day it would occur. Other boys might have run, but Howie didn't run anymore because he knew running could get you killed. Step by slow step, the boy closed the distance between them

to fifteen feet before stopping with his face half turned away, studying the stranger mostly with his right eye.

The man's short greasy hair lay in snarls that looked so much like tangled spiders that Howie wouldn't have been surprised if some of them abruptly twitched, came apart from one another, and crawled to different places on his misshapen skull. His eyebrows were thick and bristly, but his face seemed to be as beardless as a boy's; in some places his skin appeared too pink, in other places ghostly pale, and everywhere as smooth and unnatural as the poreless plastic skin of a doll. Under the stony shelf of a crude brow, his deep-set eyes glimmered, black and alert like those of a crow, and his nose was a fierce beak. The proportions of the man's face were wrong, the bones too sharp in some places, too thick and blunt in others. His upper lip was thin and colorless, his lower lip purple and too fat, the teeth yellow, crooked.

"Don't be afraid," the stranger said, and his voice was deep and raspy like the voices of movie monsters. "There's no reason to be afraid. I'm not what I appear to be."

Closing to within ten feet of the man before halting again, in the grip of wonder, as though he had encountered a magical being, Howie said, "Where did you come from? What're you doing here?"

"Is this your roof then? Am I trespassing?"

"Not my roof," Howie said.

"Well, so I guess we're both trespassing."

"I guess we are."

Even though the man was sitting, Howie could see that he was tall, maybe six and a half feet, as thin as a scarecrow but strong. Huge hands. Bony wrists like the cumbersome joints of old machines. Long arms. His shoulder blades weren't formed properly, straining against his khaki shirt, so he looked hunchbacked.

"Don't be afraid," the man repeated. "My name's Alton Turner Blackwood. I wouldn't tell a person my name if I meant him any harm."

After a hesitation, Howie half surprised himself when he turned his head to fully face Mr. Blackwood and took off his baseball cap. "Don't you be afraid, either."

Mr. Blackwood studied the left side of Howie's face, noticed his three-fingered left hand and stared at that a moment, and then said, "Listen here, boy—if there was such a thing as a world-cup scare-'em contest with seven judges, I'd beat you seven votes to nothing."

"Maybe five to two," Howie said.

"You're either flattering yourself something terrible or being polite to me. It would be seven to zero, and don't you insult my intelligence by trying to argue the point. I'm going to do for you my ultimate freak-'em-out face, and *then* you tell me honestly whether you'd get a single vote."

Mr. Blackwood's scariest face was a big grin, and it proved to be such a fearsome sight that Howie gasped and shrank back a step. His reaction made Mr. Blackwood laugh, and that laughing face looked even more terrible than the grin.

Although the man's laughter was an ugly sound, like the gasp and gurgle of a half-plugged drain, his good-natured self-mockery made him appealing.

After a moment, Howie smiled and said, "All right, you win. I wouldn't get a single vote."

“So you’re an honest boy, after all. I knew you were, and good for you.”

Howie put on his cap again and went to the crenellation that was two away from the one where Mr. Blackwood sat, which left seven or eight feet between them.

“What’s your name then?” Mr. Blackwood asked.

“Howie. Howie Dugley. My middle name’s Mabry, but I never use it. That’s asking for trouble. What’re you doing up here?”

With a gesture, Mr. Blackwood indicated the street below. “Just watching the parade.”

“There’s no parade.”

“There’s always a parade, Howie. When it’s something you can’t ever join but only watch, then it’s a parade.”

Howie stared down at the street, down there where people were just being people, unaware that they were watched and envied, and then he looked at Mr. Blackwood again. “What happened to you?”

“Birth happened to me. Birth defects. I came into the world like this. Birth and death—it’s hard to say which is worse. Of course when I came into the world, I wasn’t so big as I am now, but even uglier in my infant form, so they say. I’m guessing... with you, it was fire of some kind.”

“Some kind,” Howie acknowledged.

“When did it happen?”

“I was five. Almost six years ago.”

“You must’ve had a few surgeries.”

“Eleven. The last was two years ago.”

“I’m sorry—I mean, how it must have hurt.”

Howie shrugged as if the pain hadn’t been anything even though for a while it had been everything. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Mr. Blackwood shook his head sympathetically. “Well, medicine, you know—they’re always making progress. Someday, they’ll be able to do a lot better by you.”

The longer Howie listened to the rough voice, the less it seemed like that of a movie monster and the more it sounded like the voice of a cartoon bear or something.

“You had surgeries?” Howie asked.

“Nope. Don’t want any, either. I’ve got a thing about knives.”

“You’re scared of being cut on?”

“Not scared,” Mr. Blackwood said. “I just have this thing about knives. You come up here often?”

Howie shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“To watch Maple Street. The people down there. You know.”

“The parade,” said Mr. Blackwood. “Boy, you’ve got a fine half of your face, and the other half won’t ever scare anyone. There’s a place for you in the parade.”

Howie disagreed. “People stare.”

“Stare back at them, they’ll stop.”

“I don’t like what I see when I stare back.”

“What do you see?” When Howie didn’t reply, Mr. Blackwood said, “You see pity, and you don’t like being pitied. Don’t let pride keep you out of the parade, Howie. You don’t want a lonely life.”

“They call me names. Sometimes they push and shove and trip me. They laugh.”

“That would be other kids,” Mr. Blackwood said.

“Mostly, I guess.”

“Listen, a lot of cruel kids grow out of their cruelty. A few don’t. You can’t let the few decide what your life will be like.”

Only Howie’s mother had ever talked to him like this, and for some reason the same words didn’t mean as much coming from her as they did when they came from Mr. Blackwood.

“Why haven’t I ever seen you before?” Howie asked.

“I only came to town last night. Just sort of blew here on the breeze, you might say. Found the basement window that isn’t locked. Camped out downstairs on the ground floor near the back door. I’ll be leaving maybe tomorrow night.”

“What’re you here for?”

“For a place to be,” said Mr. Blackwood. “It’s a place between two other places, that’s all. I never stay long anywhere.”

“What do you do? For work. What’s your work?”

“I drift. It’s my job and my pleasure. Always moving on, seeing what I can of the world.”

Surprised, Howie said, “You get paid to drift?”

“It pays. I get everything I want.” Mr. Blackwood licked his lips, as if he’d just thought of something sweet. “What about you—have you lived here all your life?”

“Except when I went away for surgery at the burn center.”

“You live nearby?”

“Two blocks east on Wyatt Street. Are you a hobo?”

“Some people think so. But I’m something else. You have any sisters? Brothers or sisters?”

“Just Corrine.”

“Is she older than you?”

“A lot, yeah. She’s sixteen.”

“That’s a nice age for a girl,” Mr. Blackwood said.

“Is it? Why is it nicer than any other age?”

Mr. Blackwood closed his eyes and rocked his head from side to side. “Young enough to be still tender, but old enough to be ready for the world. What’s your mom’s name?”

“Nora. She’s really old. She’s thirty-five. What else are you, since you’re not a hobo?”

“I know all the hobo ways and tricks. But what I am most of all is a dreamer.” He opened his eyes. “What about your dad?”

After a silence, Howie said, “I don’t have a dad anymore.”

“I’m sorry, boy. If he died, that is.”

“He didn’t die,” Howie said.

Mr. Blackwood seemed genuinely interested. “But he doesn’t live with you. So was it divorce then?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s still your dad, though.”

“No.”

“You still see him, don’t you?”

"I can't. I wouldn't."

Mr. Blackwood was silent. Then: "How long ago was this divorce?"

"When I was five."

"The year you were burned."

Wanting to get away from all that kind of talk, Howie said, "What's a dreamer do?"

"Right now I'm dreaming of doing something special. But I don't have all the details dreamed out just yet. When I do, I'll tell you all about it. No dad all these years—that's tough. Maybe your mom has a boyfriend lives with her, he could be a kind of dad."

"No. She doesn't. It's just the three of us."

As he stared down at the street, Howie was aware that Mr. Blackwood watched him with interest. "You're the man of the house."

"I guess so. How do you drift everywhere? You have a car?"

"Sometimes I get a car and drive. Or I hitch a ride in an empty railroad boxcar. I even take a bus from time to time."

"Don't people stare at you on a bus?"

"I sit right up front so they can get a good look."

"I wouldn't like them gawking at me."

"If they gawk too much, I give them a spooky stare, and that cures them of it."

"I wish I had a spooky stare," Howie said.

"You see, it's just like I told you—there's nothing scary about you, Howie Dugley."

"Do you always sleep in empty old buildings like this?"

"Not always. Sometimes in whatever vehicle I'm driving. Now and then under a bridge or in a field with my sleeping bag. Sometimes in homeless shelters, and sometimes in a house I like."

"You have a house somewhere?"

"I have houses all over, any place I like," said Mr. Blackwood.

"Then you're not poor?"

"Not me. I've got everything I could ever want. I do what I want. I do anything I want." From one of the many pockets in his khaki pants, he fished a thick roll of folding money. "Does this town have a respectable take-out joint that makes great sandwiches?"

"There's a place or two."

Peeling a twenty and a ten from the roll, holding them out toward Howie, Mr. Blackwood said, "Why don't you go buy us lunch? Two sandwiches for me, one for you, some Cokes. Don't bother with the cellar window. Go out by the back door. It won't lock behind if you set the latch lever straight up."

The hand was so big that it could have covered Howie's entire face, heel under his chin and fingertips past his hairline, thumb hooked in one ear, the little finger in the other. Even the little finger was large and, like all the others, had a freakishly big pad at the end, bigger than a soup spoon, almost like the sucker pads on the toes of a toad.

That hand looked so strong, maybe it could tear off your face and wad it up like Kleenex. If Mr. Blackwood wanted to hurt Howie, however, he would have done it already. Another thing to think about was that if Mr. Blackwood changed his mind

about drifting, if he decided to stay here because he made friends in town, he would be a great friend to have. Bigger kids, no matter how big they were, no matter how mean, wouldn't lie in wait for Howie and knock him around anymore, wouldn't pull down his pants and laugh at him, wouldn't call him Scarface or the Eight-Fingered Freak or the Claw, if they knew that he was a friend of Mr. Blackwood's.

"I don't usually go in places like restaurants unless my mom makes me go with her, and I never go alone."

Still offering the money, Mr. Blackwood said, "Then it'll be good for you to do it. You'll see how they'll take your money as quick as anyone's, they'll give you what you want like they would any customer. And if someone stares at you—just smile back at them. You don't have a Frankenstein smile like me, but a nice smile will work as well, maybe better. You'll see."

Howie approached Mr. Blackwood and took the thirty bucks.

Dark muddy-red stains marred the bills. "They're spendable," Mr. Blackwood assured him. "Let them think you're buying sandwiches for your mom. If they know we're up here, they'll chase us off before we have our lunch."

"Yes, sir."

"That's a lot of money—thirty bucks. But I trust you to do the right thing, Howie. There can't be friendship without trust."

Whether in the sunlight or in the occasional cloud shadow, Mr. Blackwood appeared so strange that he didn't seem entirely real. But his eyes—so coal-black you couldn't see any difference between the iris and the pupil—his eyes were as real as anything in the world, and they drilled right through you, seemed to look into your mind and read your thoughts.

Mr. Blackwood winked. "If they have any tasty-looking cookies, get a couple of those, too."

## Chapter 2

HOWIE RETURNED WITH PAPER PLATES, PAPER cups, paper napkins, four cold cans of Coke, and a Ziploc bag full of ice in addition to thick sandwiches, big dill pickles, a bag of potato chips, and a package of chocolate-chip cookies. He also had twenty-three dollars in change from the thirty bucks. The sandwiches were roast beef and Swiss cheese on egg bread, with mayonnaise on one slice and mustard on the other, lettuce, and tomatoes.

As they sat on the tiled roof with their backs to the parapet, with the potato chips and cookies between them to be shared, Mr. Blackwood said, "These are really good sandwiches. That is some fine sandwich shop. What's it called? Howie's Sandwiches?"

"How'd you know?"

"The sandwiches didn't give you away. They're of the finest professional quality. It was the Ziploc bag of ice, too thoughtful a touch for any commercial sandwich



shop. And twenty-three dollars change. You can't buy all this for seven dollars or twice seven, for that matter."

"Now that you know, I guess you'll want your seven bucks back."

"No, no, you've earned it. This is a bargain. You did so well, I'm of a mind to make you take at least another ten. What did your mother say, you packing up a picnic like this?"

"Mom's at work all day. She works hard. She wants me to be with a sitter. But I don't want a sitter, and she can't afford one. And anyway, I know how useless a sitter can be."

"Corrine? That was your sister's name, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. She has a summer job over at the Dairy Queen. She's gone all day, too. Nobody saw me making lunch."

"The chips are good," Mr. Blackwood said.

"Sour-cream-and-onion flavor."

"It's like having the dip built right into the chip."

"I like Cheetos, too."

"Who doesn't like Cheetos?"

"But we didn't have any," Howie said.

"These are perfect with beef sandwiches."

For a while, neither spoke. The chips were salty, the Cokes were cold and sweet, and the sun pouring down on the roof was warm but not too hot. Howie was surprised by how comfortable silence was between them. He didn't feel the need to think of things to say or the need to be careful of what *not* to say. Ron Bleeker, Howie's nastiest and most persistent tormentor among the kids in town, taunted him with a lot of names, including Butt-Ugly Dugley, and said that he was the president for life of the Butt-Ugly Club. Mr. Blackwood had probably been called butt-ugly more times than he could count. So you could say that a meeting of the Butt-Ugly Club was now in session—and it was a cool event, up here on the roof, above everyone, with good eats and good company, and nobody better than anyone else just because of the way he looked.

Eventually Mr. Blackwood said, "When I was a kid, my father told me never to talk to anyone, and when I did, he always caned me."

"What's caned?"

"He beat me with a bamboo cane."

"Just for talking to people?"

"It was really because I was so ugly and he was ashamed of me."

"That's not fair," Howie said, and for the first time, he felt sorry for Mr. Blackwood, who until this moment had seemed to be still a little scary—though Howie couldn't say why—but who was mostly someone to envy because he was so big and strong and sure of himself.

"When your father does something mean," Mr. Blackwood said, "you think it must be partly your fault, you disappointed him somehow."

"Is that what you thought?"

"The first few times he caned me, yeah. But then, no. I saw he was just a bad man. If I was the most obedient boy in the world—and the handsomest—he would have beaten me for some other reason."

A large black bird circled over the roof twice, then landed on the northwest corner of the parapet, where it stood solemnly.

“That’s not just a crow,” said Mr. Blackwood. “That’s my raven.”

Howie was impressed. “You have a raven for a pet?”

“Not a pet. He’s my guardian. He always stays nearby. He gave me something once... showed me the night, its secrets. But that’s a long story. I’ll tell you some other time. These pickles are good. They have snap.”

“They’re crisp,” Howie said.

“That’s right. That’s the exact word. Crisp.”

The bird didn’t appear to have been drawn by their food. It remained at the distant corner of the building, preening its feathers with its busy beak.

When they finished eating and were packing up the debris, Mr. Blackwood said, “Was it that your dad didn’t want your mother to have custody of you?”

Howie was rendered speechless by the insight that the question revealed.

Into the boy’s silence, Mr. Blackwood said, “If he couldn’t have his son, nobody could have you. That’s pure jealousy, and it’s a sin. There’s envy in it, too. And pride and murderous hatred. Nothing you did or could have done would have changed what happened. My father and your father, with the cane and the fire, they were the same—except yours worse than mine. I assume there was a court order, he couldn’t come near you. So how did he get hold of you?”

After a while, Howie decided he would be better off sharing than holding it inside. “He took me from a babysitter’s house while Mom was working.”

“Took you where?”

“He said an amusement park. But it was this motel. He waited till I fell asleep.”

“Was it gasoline?”

“I woke up.” Howie drew a deep breath, then another. “Couldn’t breathe.” The memory of the gasoline was suffocating. He found it almost as hard to breathe now as then. He said, “Because of the fumes. Gasoline fumes.”

Mr. Blackwood was patient, as though somehow he knew that Howie had never talked about the burning with anyone, not even with his mother.

Watching the raven as it tucked its head under its wing and seemed to sleep in the sun, Howie finally said, “And then the match. Later he told people... he said he meant to burn himself, too. Him and me together. But then he couldn’t do it to himself.”

“He never meant to,” Mr. Blackwood said. “Don’t you ever believe for a minute that he meant to.”

“I don’t. He lies. He’s a liar.” Funny—how it could be true and still hurt to say his father was a liar.

“You saved your vision with your hand, pressed it tight against your left eye as the fire leaped up. You lost fingers, but otherwise, you’d be blind in one eye.”

“All the gas... it was on my left side.”

“You’re a smart boy and brave, to think so fast, keep your self-control in spite of the pain.”

“I’m not brave. I was scared bad. Sometimes I still am. When I think... he’ll get out one day.”

“I’ll bet all I own, he dies in prison, one way or another.”

Howie didn't want to wish his father dead, but he took some heart from what Mr. Blackwood said, especially since he sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

"The motel guy... he hears me. He comes fast. I'm burning. He has this extinguisher. My dad tries to stop him. He knocks my dad down. The stuff from the extinguisher—it smells cold. He saved me. I passed out. I woke up blind. But it was just wet pads on my eyes. Mom holding my good hand. The hospital, see. No pain at first. So I thought, *It's over*. But it was only just the beginning. It was the beginning of... of everything."

All the lunch trash was stowed in one bag, and they had only their cups of Coke and ice. Leaning against the parapet with their cups of Coke and ice. With the three gnarled fingers of his left hand, Howie held the cold cup against his scarred face.

The raven's head remained tucked under its wing.

The light traffic noise rising from Maple Street sounded like a lot of people whispering together.

After a while, Mr. Blackwood said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay."

"You're one tough boy."

"I wish. But I'm not."

"I know tough when I see it."

Embarrassed but also pleased, Howie said nothing at first. And then he was surprised to hear himself say, "See, there's this little apartment over the garage. Mrs. Norris, she moved out three days ago. Mom hasn't found a new renter yet. She'll have to find one, we need the extra money. But you could stay there a couple days. You don't have to bunk in this old building."

"Once your mom gets a look at me, maybe she'll turn out to have found a renter whether she has or not."

"My mom's not like that. She's not prejudiced about anybody. Anyway, she's always telling me I can have friends, I should make friends." When Mr. Blackwood didn't respond, Howie said, "We are friends, aren't we?"

"I'm honored to call you a friend, Howard Dugley. Howie is for Howard, isn't it?"

"It's Howell." Howie spelled it. "But nobody calls me anything but Howie. You'd like the apartment. It's a living room, bedroom, and kitchen all in one, plus there's a bathroom. You need a bathroom. Everybody does."

Mr. Blackwood was quiet, evidently thinking about the offer. His head wasn't just strangely shaped but also big. He was probably very smart because of his head being bigger than average.

At last, Mr. Blackwood said, "Maybe it would be nice to settle down someplace for just a while, rent a place for a spell."

Howie could hardly believe what he was hearing. He was prepared for his new friend to move on, to drift on, in a couple days, but now there was a chance he might stay.

"But I don't mean permanent or even a year," Mr. Blackwood said. "I'm too much a dreamer for permanent roots. But maybe a couple of months, see how it goes."

*A couple of months!* Howie knew that if he had a friend like Mr. Blackwood for a couple of months, after that he would be okay on his own. After a couple of months with Mr. Blackwood at Howie's side, Ron Bleeker and his like would have lost all interest in taunting him and pulling his pants down. They would never dare do that kind of thing again. And even if they did dare to do it again, by the time that Mr. Blackwood drifted out of town, Howie would have learned how to handle it, how to deal with the bullies the way they deserved to be treated. Mr. Blackwood was extremely sure of himself, he was a real presence, there was some power in him, like true courage but even bigger than that, some tremendous power, and surely by being around him, Howie would learn how to take care of himself.

"Do you have a picture of this house of yours," Mr. Blackwood asked, "so I could see just the kind of place I'd be committing myself to?"

"Come with me," Howie said, scrambling onto his knees. "I'll show the apartment to you."

"Well, but I've got some things to do here, I can't delay them. If you could bring a picture, that would be more convenient. And then I'll think it over some."

"Sure. Okay. I can come back in like half an hour with pictures of it all. The house, the apartment above the garage. It's a nice clean place. You'll see."

"You have a picture of your mom and Corrine? I'd like to see the kind of people I'd be renting from, while I make up my mind should I do this."

"That's easy," Howie said, springing to his feet. "I'll be back in half an hour. This is great."

"Now, don't you get excited and run to tell your mom you have a renter. If I get the feeling things are being decided for me, I'll just drift on to the next place. That's the way I am. I have to feel free."

"I won't say anything. I promise."

"For the moment, we're secret friends." Mr. Blackwood held out his right fist. "Secret friends. Swear and seal it with a bump."

Howie's balled-up hand looked like that of a little girl next to Mr. Blackwood's enormous bony fist, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that they were friends now, sworn and sealed.

As Howie turned away from his magical new friend and started toward the service shed that housed the stairhead, the raven swooped off the parapet, to the roof. With its sharp gray beak, the bird plucked a scuttling beetle from the tiles, cracked its hard shell, and while the insect's legs still jittered, tilted its head back and choked the bug down into its craw.

## Chapter 3

THREE PHOTO ALBUMS AND SEVERAL BOXES OF loose photos were kept in the hall closet. Howie didn't touch the albums because they dated back to the days before the divorce and the burning, when he loved his dad and thought his dad loved him. Looking at those old snapshots drained something from him, a

quality he couldn't name but without which he felt gray and cold inside for days after. They affected the way he saw the world, which seemed flat and dull and less colorful for a while after he spent time with those photographs. He suspected that if he looked at them often enough, the pictures would drain him entirely, and he would never get his world back the way it had once been.

Howie sat on the living-room floor with just two shoeboxes of photos, quickly sorting through them until he found one that showed the house from the street, another that showed the garage shaded by the probably hundred-year-old beech tree. There were pictures of his mother and pictures of his sister, but he chose a recent one in which they were together, their arms around each other's shoulders, because in that one they were smiling so big that Mr. Blackwood would be able to see how nice they were, how special, and he would know that they wouldn't be bad people to rent from. Mrs. Norris, who had moved out three days ago, to go back to Illinois to live with her sister, said Howie's mom wasn't just a landlord, she was also a friend. In this photo, Mr. Blackwood would be able to see that not just Howie could be his friend, that Mom and Corrine were also the kind of people who wouldn't care about how he looked, who would be his friends, too.

He returned the shoeboxes full of snapshots to the closet. From the desk in the small study, he got an envelope and he put the three pictures in it. Happier than he had been in a long time, he locked the back door as he left and hurried through the graveyard, where a raven sat on a tombstone, watching him, working its beak but making no sound, probably not the same bird but one that just looked similar to Mr. Blackwood's. He returned to the old Boswell building, where he had left the latch switch straight up on the alley door, so he could enter without having to go through the basement window. He locked the door behind him.

On the roof, Mr. Blackwood waited in the late-afternoon sun, once more peering through a crenellation in the parapet, watching the people on the street below. At first sight, just for an instant, the misshapen man reminded Howie of the large beetle that the raven had snatched up and crunched in its beak: his unusually smooth skin as glossy in places as a beetle's shell, stretched over blunt jawbones that made his malformed mouth resemble the mandibles of a bug. But this comparison was so unkind that it shamed Howie, and he forced it out of his mind as he hurried across the roof and knelt beside his friend to give him the envelope.

Mr. Blackwood liked the picture of the house on Wyatt Street, and he said it appeared to be a cozy place, maybe the coziest place that he had ever seen. He liked that there were neighbors on only one side, the cemetery on the other, the quiet and the privacy. He liked the address number, too, which was visible on one of the front-porch posts: 344. He said that was a lucky number, which Howie didn't understand until Mr. Blackwood pointed out that it added up to eleven. He noted that the big beech tree shading the garage would keep the apartment cooler in summer and would give him something nice to look at from his front window.

He stared for a longer time at the photo of Howie's mother and sister, for so long in fact that a sick sinking feeling overcame Howie. He wondered if maybe his mother or Corrine resembled someone who had been mean to Mr. Blackwood. But at last his new friend said they looked like "nice ladies, good church-going ladies. Do they go to church, Howie?"

“More Sundays than not,” Howie said. “Mom makes me go, too, though she lets me wear a cap to hide the part of my head where hair won’t grow anymore.”

“She’s a good woman,” said Mr. Blackwood, taking one more look at the snapshot. “I can see how good she would be. She would be very good. And your sister no less than your mom. The two of them, very good, very sweet together.” He tucked the photos in a pocket of his khaki shirt.

“Will you come to see the apartment, then?”

“I need to think on it till tomorrow. It’s a big decision. I’m leaning toward staying in this town awhile, but I need to sleep on it first. I don’t sleep well at night. I mostly sleep during the day, but we’ve had such a good time, I haven’t gotten so much as a nap. I’m going downstairs now and have a good snooze. You remember, I’m a dreamer. I’ll sleep maybe till nine o’clock this evening, and when I wake up, maybe what I should do about the apartment will have come to me in a dream. Things come to me in dreams. If not, I’ll know by morning, sure enough. You come see me in the morning, my faithful friend.”

Howie was disappointed not to receive a positive answer right then and there. But he remained hopeful that Mr. Blackwood would dream about how fine it would be to live in the shade of the beech tree, at the house with the lucky number. Howie could not remember anyone ever calling him a friend, let alone a “faithful friend,” which was like something one of the three musketeers might say to another, or one soldier to another, like in the French Foreign Legion, and it was a positive sign that suggested Mr. Blackwood might rent from them.

Mr. Blackwood got to his feet, and for the first time Howie saw him standing. He knew that his friend must be tall, but Mr. Blackwood seemed gigantic, even though he wasn’t as tall as any professional basketball player. His thick and weirdly shaped shoulder blades were more prominent when he was standing, and his shirt stretched so tight across them that Howie thought it might rip; it seemed almost as if there were great wings folded on Mr. Blackwood’s upper back, under his shirt. His arms appeared longer, too, when he was standing, and his hands were like shovels.

As they crossed the roof, their shadows preceded them. Mr. Blackwood’s shadow was three times longer than Howie’s. The sight of their elongated silhouettes moving side by side made Howie feel small, but at the same time it also made him feel safe. No one would be crazy enough to mess with Mr. Blackwood. And if Howie was his friend, no one would mess with Howie, either. No one would dare.

For the first time, he noticed a special detail of his friend’s black boots. The toes were capped with brushed steel, like boots that a mountain climber might wear. They were supercool.

As Howie switched on his flashlight, Mr. Blackwood opened the door to the shed at the head of the stairs. He put a hand on Howie’s shoulder—“Be careful, son, that first flight is steep”—and Howie was impressed that the man’s big hand seemed even bigger when it touched you.

“Where’s your flashlight?” Howie asked.

“I’ve got one with my gear downstairs. But the few windows are enough light for me. I see pretty good in the dark.”

At each floor, multipaned windows were set high in the walls, but not many, and they were opaque with dust. Howie figured that maybe being a dreamer and sleeping in daylight might save your eyesight and help you to see better in the dark. Maybe he would become a dreamer, too, and sleep by day.

On the ground floor, at the rear of the empty building, as Howie opened the deadbolt and put his hand on the lever-style doorknob, Mr. Blackwood said, "Come back in the morning, and we'll have breakfast together. I'll tell you all about this famous movie star who was my great-grandmother."

"What movie star?" Howie asked, surprised that his friend had kept such an amazing secret even though they had talked most of the day, talked more than Howie had ever talked with anyone but his mom and Corrine.

"She was in silent movies a long time ago. You wouldn't know her name, but it's an amazing story. I love telling it."

"Okay, sure, wow, that'll be great," he said, and he opened the door into the alleyway, blinking in the brighter light.

Before Howie could step across the threshold, Ron Bleeker rushed him, shoving him hard backward: "Butt-Ugly Dugley, you little creep, why're you going in and out of here, what're you up to, freak boy?"

Bleeker was four years older than Howie, fifteen and muscular. He wore sleeveless T-shirts sometimes so you could see his biceps better, and he knocked Howie off his feet.

The flashlight flew out of Howie's hand, and Bleeker came through the door fast, dropped on top of him, grabbed Howie by his ears, by his good one and his ugly one, threatening to jerk his head off the floor and slam it down again to crack his skull. The wedge of daylight narrowed as the swinging door closed, and in the gathering darkness, Bleeker said, "You little puke-face shit, what're you—"

His voice cut off with a wordless sound of surprise and pain, and in the same instant, as if Bleeker suddenly took flight, his weight lifted from Howie.

From the darkness, Mr. Blackwood said, "Get your flashlight, son."

Howie crawled to the Eveready, which was the source of most of the light now that the door had closed. With the flashlight in hand, he thrust to his feet and turned in confusion, trying to locate his friend and his enemy.

They were together, and they were an amazing sight. One of Mr. Blackwood's hands was tight around Ron Bleeker's throat, and the other hand clutched the boy's crotch. He held Bleeker off the floor, letting his feet dangle in empty air. Old Bleeker rolled his eyes in terror when the flashlight revealed his captor's face.

"You try to take one punch at me," Mr. Blackwood told Bleeker, "and I'll crush everything I'm holding in my left hand, crush it and tear it off, and then you can wear girls' clothes the rest of your life."

Bleeker didn't look like he had either the intention or the strength to take a punch at Mr. Blackwood. Tears rolled down his face, which was as white and greasy as the belly of a fish, and the most pathetic kittenlike whimpers escaped him.

"You go on home, son," Mr. Blackwood said. "I want to have a few words with your friend here. I want to set him straight about a couple things."

Howie stood transfixed, astonished at the sight of Bleeker, so long a figure of terror, abruptly reduced to helplessness, looking so small, like a half-broken doll.

“If that’s all right with you?” Mr. Blackwood said. “Is it all right with you if I just explain the new rules to this young fella?”

“Sure,” Howie said. “That’s okay. So I’ll just go now. I’ll go on home.” He went to the door and glanced back at them. “The new rules.” He opened the door, stepped outside, and glanced back once more. “In the morning, maybe you’ll tell me the new rules, too. I guess I’ll need to know them. So I can be sure everybody is, you know, living by them.” He pulled the door shut.

Dazed and amazed, he followed the alley through the afternoon light and shadows. He was most of the way across the cemetery beside St. Anthony’s when his half-trance, like a veil, slid off his mind and the full importance of what had just happened became clear to him. The rest of the way home, he couldn’t stop grinning.

## Chapter 4

PERHAPS HOWIE WAS BECOMING A DREAMER who would sleep by day and stay awake all night. In his room, in his bed, in the dark, he could not shut his mind off. He kept replaying the entire special morning and afternoon, and those memories were as vivid to him as any movie.

Because his mom got up early for work, she went to bed at nine-thirty. Corrine was already in her room, doing whatever girls did in their rooms; he had no idea.

All was quiet and dark when, at nine forty-five, Howie dressed and went silently downstairs. He damped the beam of his flashlight by pressing two fingers over the lens. The house smelled of furniture polish, faintly of lemon-scented air freshener, and here and there even more faintly of potpourri that his mom made herself from flowers she grew and from kitchen spices. Mr. Blackwood would like the quiet, good-smelling house if he agreed to come visit and look at the apartment. If he could wait until Saturday, when Mom was off work, maybe he could have dinner with them. Howie’s mother was a great cook, and being a dinner guest in the main house now and then was another advantage of renting the apartment.

Howie left the house by the back door, locked it behind him, and stuffed the key in a pocket of his jeans. He switched off the Eveready because the full moon frosted everything.

He walked rapidly toward St. Anthony’s graveyard, but he didn’t run. Running could get you killed because it fanned the flames. He wasn’t on fire, of course; but for a long time he had not been able to run also because of the skin grafts, which were delicate. Scars were tougher tissue than ordinary skin, and here and there, where scars and skin met, sudden extreme stretching, like what occurred when you ran flat-out, could cause dermal cracking and maybe a deadly infection.

Mr. Blackwood said he would probably sleep until nine o’clock. Howie didn’t want to risk waking him, so it was a few minutes before ten when, in the alley behind the old Boswell building, he knocked on the door through which Ron Bleeker had earlier attacked him. The first thing Howie would do was apologize for not being able to wait until breakfast. He was usually very patient. Having to



recover from serious burns taught you patience. But if Mr. Blackwood had dreamed a decision about the apartment, Howie just had to know. If the big man stayed in town for a couple months, above their garage, it would be the second biggest thing that had ever happened in Howie's life, and certainly the best.

Mr. Blackwood didn't respond to the knock, so Howie rapped his knuckles harder against the door and said, "It's me, sir, it's Howie Dugley."

Maybe Mr. Blackwood was sleeping deeply. Maybe he had gone out for a walk or for a late dinner from some take-out place.

Howie tried the door. It was locked.

He walked back and forth in the moon-washed alleyway, trying to decide what he should do next. Going into the building without an invitation from Mr. Blackwood didn't seem right. On the other hand, it wasn't Mr. Blackwood's building, even if he was camping out there. Besides, that morning, Howie entered without an invitation and encountered his new friend on the roof; and that had gone well. Mr. Blackwood had been glad to see him.

The corroded piano hinge protested, but the basement window pushed inward, and Howie slid feetfirst into that darkness. He switched on the Eveready and made his way toward the stairs, calling out as he went, "Hello? Mr. Blackwood? Are you here? Hello? It's me, it's Howie."

When he reached the ground floor, the large room with all its columns felt bigger at night than in the daytime, immense, vast, as though the darkness stretched on for miles in every direction. Even with the light of the full moon, the dust-covered high windows were barely visible, and looking up at their pale panes, Howie felt as if he were in a dungeon.

His small flashlight didn't penetrate far into the pitch-black realm of the former department store. In fact it was less effective than usual because its batteries had lost some of their charge, which he had been too excited to notice until now. The beam was less white than yellow, no longer crisp but fuzzy.

"Mr. Blackwood? I'm sorry to bother you. It's me, Howie."

His voice wasn't right, so changed that it almost might have been the voice of another boy. It seemed smaller now than earlier, thinner, and it echoed off the distant walls differently from the way that it sounded in this same space before.

Because Mr. Blackwood had said he kept his gear near the back door, Howie moved in that direction. He no longer called out to his friend because the smallness of his voice made him uneasy.

He found the gear a few steps to the right of the back door. A sleeping bag rolled tight and secured with straps. A backpack with the top-pocket flap unzipped and standing open. Two fat, half-melted candles were fixed to the floor in puddles of hardened yellow wax.

Beside the candles were the photographs that Howie had brought from home earlier in the day. The photo of the house and the one of the garage shaded by the ancient beech tree had each been torn into four pieces.

Only the picture of Howie's mother and sister remained intact, and it lay next to the extinguished candles, as if Mr. Blackwood had been studying it in the flickering light. Howie picked it up. He slipped it into a hip pocket of his jeans.

He wasn't a snoop. He respected other people's privacy, but he couldn't help noticing that the top pocket of the backpack, from which the flap was peeled back,

contained packets of photographs held together with rubber bands. They were those thick, white-bordered snapshots taken with an old Polaroid.

In a half-trance similar to the one that had overcome him when he had stepped through the nearby door into the alley, leaving Ron Bleeker to learn the new rules from Mr. Blackwood, Howie reached for one of the groups of photos. Strangely, the hand with which he picked up a packet of Polaroids did not look like his hand: It seemed thin, insubstantial, like the ectoplasmic hand of a ghost in one of those stories about séances that Mrs. Norris, their tenant, had liked to tell. Howie felt as if maybe he were dead already and just didn't know it, the way that haunting spirits sometimes didn't realize they were ghosts.

He stripped the rubber band from the Polaroids. In the jiggling beam of the flashlight, he saw that the top picture was of a pretty girl with blond hair and green eyes. She looked very unhappy. No. Not unhappy. She looked frightened.

The second photo was the same girl wearing scary makeup for Halloween. Her face was supposed to look as if it had been slashed several times, and the makeup was convincing.

In the third picture, a pretty girl with brown hair looked scared, too. The fourth shot was of the same girl stripped naked and lying on her back. Things had been done to her body that were not makeup.

The loose photos slithered through Howie's fingers and spilled across the backpack. The flashlight shook loose of his hand and struck the floor with a hard, cold sound.

An instant later, he thought he heard something elsewhere on the ground floor, off in the gloom, a metallic sound, perhaps the steel toe of a boot scraping across a floor tile.

Heart knocking hard against his breastbone, breath caught in his throat, Howie snatched up the flashlight and backed away from where he thought the sound might have arisen. But sound was tricky in such a big dark space, and after he took a few steps, he thought maybe he had misjudged the source. He changed direction—and within a few steps, he bumped into something, someone, spun around. With the flashlight, he found Ron Bleeker's body suspended from a huge knife that pierced his throat and pinned him to the wall, his chin held high by the handle. Something had been jammed into his mouth, something big enough to make his cheeks bulge grotesquely. Duct tape pressed his lips shut. His eyes were open wide, he still had his eyes, but his ears were missing.

In memory, Howie heard his voice and then Mr. Blackwood's:

*You had surgeries?*

*Nope. Don't want any, either. I've got a thing about knives.*

*You're scared of being cut on?*

*Not scared. I just have this thing about knives.*

Suddenly Howie was at the rear entrance, although he didn't remember stepping away from Ron Bleeker's corpse. He disengaged the deadbolt, yanked open the door, and plunged into the alley, certain that one of those shovel-size hands must be digging toward him through the dark air, inches from the back of his neck.

In the night, under the moon, he staggered three steps, turned, and though no one loomed behind him, he cried out because he had at last gotten his breath and

found his voice. He almost screamed for help, but realized at once that he couldn't afford to waste a moment explaining this to anyone. He was the only help that his mother and sister could count on, small as he was and as ugly as he was, he was nevertheless the motel manager with the fire extinguisher, Blackwood was the fire, and fire was fast, fire could change everything in one bright screaming minute.

He was halfway across the graveyard, dodging around headstones, when he saw the raven fly across the full moon. He hurried under the sheltering limbs of the immense oaks, and in an autumn memory he saw the cemetery in drifts of scarlet leaves, but in his mind's eye, the leaves rippled like a lake of blood. He said, "No, no, no," because he feared, he knew, he would find his mother and his sister as blood-red as the autumn ground under a scarlet oak.

He had to resist the urge to sprint full-tilt. His pounding feet and his ragged breathing might alert Blackwood. Running could get him killed.

His footsteps were soft and swift through the moonshadows of the old beech, past the garage, across the yard, to the back-porch steps. As Howie fumbled his key from his pocket, he saw that one of the French panes in the kitchen door had been cut out.

He didn't need his key. The lock wasn't engaged anymore.

Howie quietly opened the door, started to cross the threshold, but hesitated. The kitchen was as dark as the old department store from which he had fled moments earlier. There was no sound, real or imagined, no phantom scrape of a steel-toed boot, but the silence seemed unnatural. He felt that Blackwood was listening for him just as he was listening for Blackwood. Intuition told him this was not the way to go, this was equivalent to the moment, back in the day, when he woke to the cold wetness and the smell of gasoline, the instant before the match was struck. Death was in the kitchen or in the hallway beyond, and there was no motel manager this time, only Death and Howie, and Death was big and strong and meaner than a million Ron Bleekers.

With all the stealth that he could manage, he eased the door shut and backed across the porch to the stairs. Still relying on intuition, he hurried around the house.

He made noise only when he passed too close to a Japanese maple in the front yard and raised a soft clatter from the loose ornamental river stones that encircled its base. He halted, snatched up two of the stones, each about the size of a lemon, and then continued to the front porch.

He glanced at the house next door, at the houses across the street. If Howie shouted for help, if Blackwood realized he wouldn't get a chance to do to these women what he had done to others, then the killer might nevertheless risk staying just long enough to stab them, slash them, and then run.

The frosted-glass sconce beside the front entrance was on a timer, lit now, denying Howie the cover of darkness as he approached. Holding both stones in his left hand and the key in his right, he unlocked the door. The sliding deadbolt made a whispery scraping noise as it retracted. Howie silently eased the door open, pocketed the key, and transferred one of the stones to his right hand.

The porch light dimly revealed the foyer but not the pitch-black hall beyond, which led past other rooms to the kitchen. To the left lay the archway to the lightless living room, and to the right were stairs ascending from shadows into

inky gloom. He realized that he was backlit, that every second he stood there, he was exposed, yet he hesitated. Taking a chance that Blackwood was still on the ground floor, toward the back of the house, Howie intended to sprint for the staircase, yelling for his mother to get her gun, which she kept in a bureau drawer.

Fearful of going forward, furious with himself for not taking the plunge, at last he crossed the threshold, into the foyer.

A tall figure stepped out of the hallway, darkness moving in darkness. "Hello, son."

With a mortal thunk, the thrown knife embedded in the door frame, two inches to the left of Howie's head.

He threw the stone in his right hand, heard it thwack something even as he turned to flee, heard Blackwood grunt, shouted—"Mom, get your gun!"—crossed the porch, plunged the stairs, spun around, threw at a window, which shattered as he raced to the maple and snatched up two more smooth stones. He had lost his baseball cap somewhere, but he scored a hit on another window and rearmed himself as on the second floor lights bloomed bright and as Blackwood rushed down the porch steps, the throwing knife in his hand.

Howie expected Blackwood to come at him as fast as a bullet, snatch him up, slice him open, and spill his steaming guts on the lawn. But the big man's nose was bleeding, his blood black in moonlight, and at any moment some neighbor might appear. He couldn't kill the whole neighborhood, though he looked like he wanted to, so he hung back, pointing at Howie to emphasize his threat. "You tell them *anything* about me, I'll return some night, tear off your mama's face. I'll spend a month cutting Corrine up alive. Keep your mouth shut, and I'm gone forever. There's a world of bitches like them. I don't need them unless you rat on me and make me *have* to come back."

Blackwood turned and seemed to fly across the lawn, through the night, faster than any man could run, magic-fast toward St. Anthony's and the graveyard, and Howie ducked as a large bird—a raven?—flew so low over his head that he felt its talons comb through his hair and graze his scalp.

He almost wet his pants then, it was a close thing, but instead he ran toward the house, throwing one stone, then another, shattering two more windows. He reached the top of the porch steps as his mother appeared in the open doorway in her pajamas, holding a pistol that she pointed at the floor.

"Howie, what're you doing, what's happening?"

Although Howell Dugley was only one week short of his eleventh birthday, he'd known more pain than most grown men ever would, more loss than was right for any child to suffer, more humiliation more humbly endured than might be sufficient to ensure the beatification of a saint, and although he had still been naive until this terrible night, he was naive no more. He realized things that other boys his age would not, including that life was hard but sweet, that life was a long series of losses and that you had to hold on tight to what you loved as long as you had any strength left. He knew that evil dwelt behind kind and familiar faces but that not all evil was hidden, that sometimes evil was brazen because it knew you didn't want to believe it existed, and it mocked you by its brazenness. He realized that no one could save the world because the world didn't want to be saved, that

all he could hope to rescue from the fires of this world were those who were most precious to him, his family and—if he ever had any—his friends, and that it was prideful in the extreme to think he could do more, just as it might be damning not to try.

Those things understood, he made his choice there on the porch with his mother. If he couldn't at that moment clearly see the full consequences of his decision, he had a sense of what they might be, and he perceived that remorse might be a weight he would have to carry in years to come. Believing Blackwood's threat and the big man's ability to fulfill it, still feeling the talons that had grazed his scalp, Howie decided to leave the world to its self-destruction and save those he might be able to save.

To his mother, as sirens rose in the distance, he said, "It was just stupid kids, those kids that always rag me and knock me around. I was still awake, reading in my room, when I heard them and came down. I didn't see faces, I can't name names, but it was them, all right, throwing rocks at the house, and I chased them off."

When the police arrived moments later, Howie told them the same story. He told it well and sincerely. Howie's history of being an object of torment for the cruel of heart lent credibility to his simple tale. Furthermore, he understood that good policemen could read your eyes to detect whether you were telling falsehoods and that when you looked away from them, you made them suspicious. He met their eyes directly and did not once look away, because he knew that his eyes were harder to meet than theirs. They would worry about him seeing the pity in their eyes and would be concerned that they might glance at the ravaged side of his face and be caught staring at his scars. Therefore, they would spend more time looking at their notepads as they took down the basics of his statement, would not allow themselves to doubt anything he said, and in the morning would hold their own children tighter than usual.

Howie was lying, and he loathed having to lie, in part because he didn't want to be a liar like his father. He told himself that his falsehoods were not meant to spare himself, that they were intended instead to spare his mother and sister, but maybe that was mostly—rather than entirely—true.

Later, after the police left, Howie found the square of glass that Blackwood cut from the back door, where it had been set aside on the porch. He cracked it into pieces underfoot and put the fragments on the kitchen floor with a stone. He could not—and didn't need to—explain the divot in the front-door frame where the throwing knife had embedded after missing his head by two inches.

## **Chapter 5**

RON BLEEKER WASN'T REPORTED MISSING BY his parents until the following morning, because they had been out drinking all evening at a place called the Drop Inn. When they got home, past midnight, they assumed their son must be safe in his bed. Blackwood had left no other trace of his stay in the old Boswell

building—not the bag of trash from their lunch, not the unfinished chips or cookies, not the torn photos of the Dugley house and garage—but he did leave the alley door ajar, evidently by intention. Mere hours after a missing-child alert hit the wire, a patrolman spotted the door and moments later found the body, which was not pinned to the wall but crumpled on the floor. The murder weapon was not left behind. The victim's ears were found clenched in his fists, which the killer had tied shut using twine. With each ear was a black feather, though no one knew why.

They buried Bleeker not in the cemetery beside St. Anthony's but in a public graveyard. Carved on his headstone, in addition to the name and dates, were three lines:

OUR BELOVED SON  
TOO GOOD FOR THIS WORLD  
NOW AN ANGEL IN HEAVEN.

A photograph of the deceased had been transferred to a ceramic oval embedded in the dark-gray granite; his handsome face and sweet smile were much like the faces and smiles of angels in movies.

Two months after the funeral, when Howie rode his bike to the graveyard shortly after dawn, a big bouquet of plastic flowers stood in the recessed urn in the base of the headstone; sun and weather had faded them. Bird crap streaked the granite, and the grass close around the base of the stone needed to be hand-trimmed. Howie came to say that he was sorry, that he wouldn't have left Bleeker to his fate if he had known that Blackwood intended something worse than laying down new rules. He should have said his piece the moment he dropped to his knees on the grass, but at first embarrassment and guilt knotted his tongue. He knelt there in silence long enough for the engraved words and the ceramic photograph and the faded plastic flowers and the bird crap to work on him, which they did, worked like gasoline residue in a third-degree burn long after the flames were out. By the time that he could speak, he *wouldn't* because he was unable to tolerate the falseness of it all, just could not *stand* the falseness—whether it was deception or delusion—that was everywhere here. He had never seen Bleeker smile like that, not innocently like that. ANGEL wasn't true. The bird crap and the faded plastic flowers and the untended grass put the lie to BELOVED. Howie knew that if he tried to speak, he would only scream in frustration and abhorrence, and so he got to his feet and stood there until the shaking stopped, until his heart quieted. Then he walked his bike across the grass to the cemetery lane and rode home.

In another summer, on the one-year anniversary of the day that he had spent with Blackwood on the roof of the old department store, when Howie was one week short of his twelfth birthday, he received a letter postmarked from a town half a continent away. He was home alone when the postman delivered, and because he thought his grandma Alice, his mother's mother, might send him a card with money for his upcoming birthday, he sorted through the mail as he walked from the curbside box to the house. He was surprised to see his name on a white business-size envelope, which bore no return address and was clearly not from his

grandmother. It contained a single sheet of paper that enfolded a raven feather, which fluttered to the porch floor at Howie's feet. The simple six-word message was in handwriting so neat that it almost looked as though a machine had produced it: *I still remember your delicious sandwiches.*

He tore the letter into small pieces and buried it at the bottom of the trash in the kitchen waste can. He took the glossy feather into the backyard, flung it up into the breeze, and watched solemnly as it sailed away toward St. Anthony's and the cemetery.

Since the day at Ron Bleeker's grave, ten months earlier, Howie understood what penance he must perform: For the rest of his life, he must never tell another lie, not so much as a little fib; he must never engage in even the most innocent deception of any kind, for any reason, no matter how justifiable it might seem. A pledge of truth was his only armor against the horrifying consequences that surely would result from his having made his deal with Blackwood. If his mother or sister found the feather and the mysterious message about sandwiches, he would have been honor-bound to explain it, to tell them all about Blackwood—and thereby rob them of their peace of mind forever.

## Chapter 6

THAT FOLLOWING OCTOBER 25, ALTON TURNER Blackwood made the news posthumously. Howie was in the kitchen, helping his mother by setting the table for dinner, when the story came on the small TV that stood on a counter. In a far city, Blackwood had over a few months murdered four entire families, raped the girls and the women, tortured and mutilated some, before he was killed by the last surviving member of the fourth family, a boy of fourteen named John Calvino, who shot the monster in the face. The news provided no photo of Blackwood because none existed, but there were pictures of the victims. All the young girls reminded Howie of Corrine, and all the mothers reminded him of his own. Flatware rattled in his hands as he laid down the forks, the spoons, the gleaming knives at three place settings on the dinette table.

Blackwood had kept a journal in which he wrote of others he had killed throughout the years, all across America. Over the next day, Howie waited to hear Ron Bleeker's name and then to be identified as an unwitting accomplice. But the killer's journal didn't include the names of the victims or the locations where they were murdered—not until Blackwood began to slaughter entire families. He had felt that his numerous one-off homicides were in some way beneath him, and he believed that he had achieved greatness as a killer only when he began annihilating whole families. Howie was folding napkins to put on the table when, on the second evening that the story topped the news, he heard that Alton Turner Blackwood had been inspired to murder families by someone whom he described only as “a young boy who made good sandwiches.”

Here were the consequences that Howie dreaded, and they were so terrible that during the next few weeks they gradually laid him as low as any disease might

have done. He began to sleep most of the day and to lie in listless distraction when not sleeping. He had no appetite, and sometimes when his mother insisted that he eat, Howie vomited soon after. By mid-November, he had lost five pounds, and although he had no fever, the doctors began to suspect an exotic virus of some kind. Depression was the only virus afflicting him, depression like murky waters into which he sank and sank and seemed sure to drown. Days passed without him being much aware of them, so numbed by sadness that he half heard voices as if through muffling fathoms. He saw little more than shadow and light, as a dying boy might see the world with his back pressed in the mud of a pond and his lungs full of water. His sadness was so deep that even in his all but constant sleep, he experienced neither good dreams nor bad ones, and thus escaped Blackwood, who would have raged through his nightmares if catatonic sorrow had not spared him from them.

The next time he knew what day it was, he had lost more than two weeks, and it was the second of December, a Sunday, though he didn't at first know the date when his mother's weeping began to call him back from the darkness. Through slitted and crusted eyes, he found himself in a hospital, his right arm connected to an intravenous drip. He could tell that he had lost more weight. He felt like a creature of straw and paper. He heard some man say "dehydration from the vomiting and the night sweats. But also willful dehydration, not something you see often." When Howie tried to raise his left arm, he didn't possess enough strength to move it off the bed.

His mother's weeping was a wrenching sound, the wretched sobbing of a woman beyond all consolation, and it so pained him to hear her that he couldn't retreat into darkness again but felt compelled to comfort her. As his thoughts clarified, he heard her say, with such terrible anguish, "Howie saved my life, he saved me from despair by the way he coped with his burns." The man's voice seemed to belong to a doctor. Howie didn't care about the man, what he said. He wanted to hear more from his mother, and in a while he did: "I bought a gun. To kill my husband. For what he'd done, the fire. But by the time they set bail and he found a way to post it, I saw Howie wasn't just going to live, he was going to thrive. I had to control my rage for Howie's sake. Day after day, year after year, he's been my hero, such courage for a little guy like him. He has such strength, and he's always been the source of mine."

Howie had never thought of himself as his mother's hero, not anyone's hero. He was just a bad-luck boy, someone a father couldn't love, Scarface, Eight-Fingered Freak, Butt-Ugly Dugley, determined to live only because he was afraid to die. In a voice as dry as burnt toast, he said, "Mom," and had to say it twice again before she heard him and came to his bedside. Her eyes were bloodshot, her nose rubbed red by Kleenex, her pale cheeks glistening with tears, but she was as pretty as ever. Howie had always been proud of how pretty his mom was. He sometimes wondered if any pretty girl would ever like him, but he didn't waste much time wondering about it because his mother and his sister were pretty enough to last him a lifetime, just knowing they liked him. Now, as his mother leaned close, he said, "I'm all right now," and he was.

The following summer, a week short of his thirteenth birthday, on the second anniversary of the episode with Blackwood, Howie woke in the morning to the



sound of wind whistling in the eaves. When he looked at his bedroom window, a single black feather, about four inches in length, with a gray quill, danced against the glass. He watched it for more than ten minutes before at last the warm June wind carried it away.

Year after year, on that day, although Blackwood was dead and gone, a night-black raven's feather came to Howie by one means or another: spiraling out of a tree to brush across his face, sliding out of a newspaper when he opened it to read, stuck to the bottom of his shoe along with a bit of tramped-on chewing gum, under the driver's-side windshield wiper when he returned to the car from a trip to the mall, once inexplicably in his jacket pocket when he reached for coins to feed a vending machine... Each time, although he came to expect this curious apparition, the sight of the feather sent a frisson of terror through him, a shiver that was almost convulsive, though it never lasted more than a few minutes.

Howie grew up, shaved off what hair he had because shaved heads were now stylish, became a Realtor, and eventually opened his own successful brokerage even though he was scrupulous about revealing every property's flaws to every potential buyer. Medicine advanced, but not in any way that would allow a minimization of his scars; but he had settled into his looks and did not brood about them. He sold a starter house to a pretty woman named Felicity Callaway, and when she got her license as a Realtor, she marketed properties through his brokerage. They had worked together almost a year when, much to his surprise, she said, "What the hell does a girl have to do to get asked on a date by you? Or isn't there any interest?" Months later, when she accepted his proposal of marriage, she said, "You're the most honest man I've ever known. I've never heard you tell a lie, not one, I feel so safe with you."

Still the raven's feather came each year, and Howie wondered somewhat more about it when he and Felicity had children. But he figured that if he worried excessively about the feather and what it implied, he might be inviting something into his life that he would regret. Someone once said that if you painted the devil on the walls often enough, you got the devil on the stairs, his footsteps approaching.

## **Chapter 7**

ON AN AUTUMN EVENING, WHEN HOWIE WAS thirty-two and the father of three beautiful children, as he sat in his favorite armchair, reading a novel, he felt a sudden relief, as if a burden had been lifted from him that he hadn't known he was carrying. The curious sensation, not related to any apparent cause, was so extraordinary that he had to put his book aside and get at once to his feet. For a moment, because his life had been going so well for so long and because he knew how abruptly good fortune could pivot to bad, he imagined that this new buoyancy of spirit was instead light-headedness, the first—and only benign—symptom in a series that would grow rapidly worse until something catastrophic, like a stroke or a heart attack, felled him. But he was not pessimistic by nature, and as the sense

of relief persisted, he went looking for Felicity. He found her in the kitchen, and he kissed her more than once. He discovered the kids—Mia, Leo, and Josh—watching TV instead of doing their homework, but he did not scold them.

In his study, he sat at his desk, staring at the phone, certain there was someone with whom he must speak, though he could not think who that might be. One of the desk drawers contained hanging files that held copies of various insurance policies, among other things. Howie didn't at first realize why he opened the drawer—and then he knew. The final file contained a sealed envelope. He slit it open and removed a five-dollar bill and a pair of ones, the seven bucks that he had kept from Blackwood's thirty, for the sandwiches. All these years, he had felt that this money could buy him only bad luck, and he had even been reluctant to give it away for fear that it came with a curse that he would be passing to someone else. He didn't know why the money should suddenly be clean, but he felt that it was, and he decided to drop it in the poor box at church.

The following day, one of the lead stories on the television news concerned several bizarre murders in a distant city, culminating in an attack on the home of a homicide detective named John Calvino, the same person who, twenty years earlier, at the age of fourteen, killed Alton Turner Blackwood. These new murders were of families and seemed eerily reminiscent of Blackwood's killing spree two decades earlier. Howie realized that the inexplicable feeling of relief that overcame him while he was reading in the armchair had occurred at the very hour that Calvino's wife and children were targeted in their own home. He followed the story for a couple of days, both on TV and in the papers, with a growing conviction that the most important aspect of the case was not being reported, perhaps because no reporter was aware of the full truth.

Six days later, Howie placed a call to the homicide division of the police department in which Calvino worked, and in a few hours the detective returned his call. Assuming Calvino must have read the journal of Alton Turner Blackwood that was available on the Internet, Howie said, "I am the boy who made good sandwiches for him. Because there's no photo of Blackwood, you'll know it's true if I describe him."

After listening to the description, John Calvino said, "All he says in his journal is that yours was the first family he intended to kill, but you saved them."

"It's more accurate to say they almost died because of me."

"My family *did* die because of me, Mr. Dugley. Thank God you were spared that."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for your losses. All your losses. But... may I ask, Detective Calvino, if in any way, any way whatsoever, the case just in the news—all those deaths—is it related to Blackwood?"

John Calvino's silence was long enough to mean yes, but when at last he spoke, he said only, "I killed Alton Turner Blackwood more than twenty years ago."

"Yes. I know. I heard about it at the time. Yet... all these years, I've been waiting for... something." Howie realized he had put his hand protectively on his throat, and he thought of Bleeker pinned to the wall. "Even though I knew Blackwood was dead, if ever someone could come back... I think it would be him. I guess that sounds irrational at best."

After another silence, Calvino said, “All I’ll tell you is that for twenty years, I’ve been waiting for something, too.”

A phantom finger, spatulate and cold, traced a line down the back of Howell Dugley’s neck.

After a silence of his own, he said, “Is it over at last?”

“In my work, Mr. Dugley, I’ve seen that good usually triumphs. But I’ve also seen that evil never dies. It’s always wise to remain vigilant.”

Later that afternoon, Howie decided against dropping the seven dollars in the poor box at his church. He took the three bills into the backyard and put a match to them.

By the following June, the pall of Blackwood had so lifted from Howie’s life that, at play in the park with his kids, he did not even realize this day marked the twenty-second anniversary of his rooftop lunch with the murderer. They were playing Frisbee with Barney, their dog, who jumped and caught the disc again and again with exuberance. The sky was cloudless, the velvet-green park dappled with the cool shadows of the trees. In the pleasure of the moment, Howie had almost forgotten that life had ever wounded him, and if someone had held up a mirror to him, he might have been surprised, just for a moment, that he was scarred.

Mia took a break from the game, but Howie and the boys were indefatigable. Minutes passed before he glanced at his daughter—and froze. Seven years old, petite and as pretty as her mother, Mia perched on the edge of a wooden bench, unaware that behind her and to her left, a raven sat on the head-rail of the bench back. Its inky eyes were as hard as buckshot and seemed to draw a bead on Howie. As if in response to his attention and apprehension, the bird spread its wings, craned its head forward, cracked its beak, but made no sound, as silent as Death himself is silent when he glides in for the kill.

Howie was holding the Frisbee, and he flung it with a snap of the wrist. The disc whizzed past Mia, grazed the bird, and sent it squawking into frightened flight, to the surprise of the girl and to the delight of her brothers. Barney barked, and Howie took a bow.

When they returned to play, he didn’t once search the sky for that bird or any other. Howell Dugley, survivor, hero to some and butt-ugly freak to others, did not fear either the darkness of the night or the darkness under the sun that can sometimes crowd in upon us when we least expect it.

He knew the bird circled above. Twice it came so low that he saw its shadow swoop across the grass. He never looked up.

That night he woke and lay listening to the distinctive calls of a raven: the hollow *brronk*, the deep resonant *pruck*, interspersed with bell-clear notes. Judging by the proximity and the direction of the voice, the bird must have been perched on a telephone wire in the nearby street. Howie did not get out of bed to look.

The next morning, he was the first downstairs to make coffee and to let the dog out to toilet. On the breakfast table in the kitchen lay a single black feather. He buried it at the bottom of the trash can and mentioned it to no one.

When the coffee was brewing, he stepped outside to get the newspaper from the front lawn. Something swooped low overhead, not so low that its talons stroked his

scalp, but low enough that he felt the wind of its passage, and it entered the beech tree, causing the leaves to stir noisily.

On the way back into the house, Howie never raised his eyes from the weather report in the paper. Clear and sunny.

In this world of ours, there is always a chance that a day of fire will come, but there is nothing to be gained by extending an invitation to the arsonist, no matter how persistently he hints that he would like to have one.

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