

# **D R A C U L A S**

*a novel of terror by*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I grew up reading books where vampires were scary.

This novel is an attempt to make them scary again.

When I thought of the premise that became DRACULAS, I knew it needed to be a group project. Take four well-known horror authors, let them each create their own unique characters, and have them fight for their lives during a vampire outbreak at a secluded, rural hospital.

This is NOT a collection of short stories. It's a single, complete novel.

And it's going to freak you out.

If you're easily disturbed, have a weak stomach, or are prone to nightmares, stop reading right now. There are no sexy teen heartthrobs herein.

You have been warned.

Joe Konrath

October, 2010

*DRACULA'S SKULL UNEARTHED IN TRANSYLVANIA! A farmer in Romania discovered a skull with unusual properties while plowing his field near the town of Brasov. The relic, which appears to be ancient and human, has thirty-two elongated, razor-sharp teeth.*

**—NATIONAL TATTLER**

*VAMPIRE SKULL A HOAX? Discovered by a Romanian farmer, the humanoid skull with sharp fangs is considered by many to be a fake. Fueling this speculation is the farmer's refusal to let scientists analyze the discovery, claiming it embodies an ancient curse.*

**—THE INQUISITOR STAR**

*MILLIONAIRE BUYS DRAC'S HEAD! Eccentric recluse Mortimer Moorecook of Durango, Colorado, has apparently purchased the so-called "Dracula skull" for an undisclosed sum, from the Transylvanian farmer who unearthed it a week ago. It isn't known what Moorecook, who made his fortune on Wall Street during the late 80s, plans to do with the skull, though many are hoping it will be turned over to scientists for study. Moorecook, who was recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, couldn't be reached for comment.*

**—THE DRUDGE REPORT**

# HOUR ZERO

***Moorecook***

MORTIMER Moorecook opened the massive oak door of his hilltop mansion just as the FedEx deliveryman was reaching for the doorbell.

"Hi, Mr. Moorecook, I have—"

"You have my package."

"Yeah. Must be special. Only thing on my truck. Never been called out on a Sunday evening before."

Mortimer looked down at the two-foot by two-foot cardboard box covered in *FRAGILE HANDLE WITH CARE* stickers and some Romanian customs scrawl. His mouth went dry, and his already bowed knees threatened to stop supporting him at the sight of it.

Finally. It was here.

"Mr. Moorecook?"

The old man glanced up at the buff FedEx driver, thinking how he'd once been that young and vital. Never could've imagined how quickly and completely that sense of immortality deserts you. So much taken for granted.

"Yes, Robert?"

"Just need you to sign for it so I can keep my job."

Taking the proffered pen in his trembling grasp, Mortimer scribbled in the window of the electronic tracker. Then the box was in his hands. It scarcely weighed more than two pounds, but the magnitude of its contents made his arms shake.

"Shanna! It's here! It's here!"

Mortimer limped through the atrium as quickly as his thin, frail legs could manage, breathless by the time he reached the study. He set the box down on the coffee table in front of the hearth and eased back onto the leather couch a few seconds before his legs gave out.

His hospice nurses—a thick, forty-something woman named Jenny—rolled his IV bag into the study and plugged the line into his arm.

"Oh, stop it!" he yelled. "I ought to get a restraining order against you people. Everywhere I go, you're always stalking me with that thing!"

But even as he spoke, he could feel the morphine-push flooding his system like a good, wet

dream.

"Mr. Moorecook, you know what happens if there are any lapses between dosages."

"Yeah, I might actually feel something."

"Is writhing around on the ground in unimaginable pain the kind of *feeling* you want?"

*Of course not*, he thought. *That's the reason I...*

"Mortimer!" Shanna appeared in the doorway of the study. "It's really here?"

He nodded, eyes twinkling, then turning cold again as he sneered at the nurse. "Leave us."

Shanna walked past the nurse and came around the sofa. Mortimer could smell whatever body wash she'd used in the shower that morning as she sat down beside him, her brown curls bouncing off her shoulders like an honest-to-god shampoo commercial. She was thirty-five, had been single when she moved out to Durango at Mortimer's request, but in the eight weeks she'd been there, she'd met a sheriff's deputy and inexplicably fallen for him. It remained beyond Mortimer's comprehension how this gorgeous biological anthropologist had seen *anything* in that redneck, who, as far as Mortimer could tell, was the epitome of what made the world throw up in its mouth when it thought of Red State America.

Then again, he was old and dying, and maybe just a little bit jealous.

"Help me up, Shanna," Mortimer said.

With the morphine flowing, it felt like he floated over to his desk.

He opened the middle drawer, glancing out the big windows over a gaping canyon into the San Juan Mountains, the peaks all flushed with alpenglow and the snowfields pink as the sun dropped over southwest Colorado.

Mortimer took out the bottle he'd been waiting years to open, and set two tumblers on the desk. He fought a moment with the wrapper and cork, then splashed a little of the rosewood-colored liquid into each glass.

"I'm not really much of a whiskey drinker," Shanna protested.

"Humor me."

Mortimer raised his glass, already catching whiffs of the fierce dried fruits and peat wafting toward him.

"To you, Shanna," he said. "Thanks for spending these last few weeks with me. I haven't

been this happy since my Wall Street days, raiding companies. I ever tell you—"

"Many times."

They clinked glasses and drank.

"That's disgusting," Shanna said, setting her glass down.

Mortimer shook his head.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing, it's just that this is a fifty-five year Macallan. I paid \$17,000 for that bottle many years ago, knowing I wouldn't crack it until a night like this came along."

"You paid too much," she said.

"Some things are worth the price. Shall we?"

They returned to the couch, and Mortimer sat down and dug the Swiss Army knife out of the patch pocket of his linen shirt. It shook in his hands as he opened one of the smaller blades.

"Let me," Shanna said, reaching for the knife.

"No." He pulled his hand away.

Mortimer inserted the blade and gently pulled it through the tape. He put the knife away and opened the box, pulling out wads of crumpled, foreign newsprint until he felt the smaller box within the larger. He lifted it out, set it on the glass.

It was some sort of black composite, sealed with a steel hasp on each side. He'd had the box specially made, and had sent it to the farmer to ensure safe delivery of the item. The key hung around his neck on a gold chain.

He unlocked the hasps and flipped them open, gingerly lifting off the top half of the box, pulling it into his lap as Shanna leaned in. They could only see the back of the skull, the bone deep brown, heavily calcified, full of hairline fractures and several larger cracks, one square-inch piece missing entirely. He worked his fingers down into the hard black foam that had protected the skull on its journey across the ocean, and carefully lifted it out.

Shanna said, "Oh my God."

Mortimer stared into the hollowed eye sockets, and then the teeth, which more resembled the dental architecture of a shark than a human being.

Not at all what he'd been expecting, and it didn't match the artist conceptions in any of the

scandal rags. This wasn't a skull from an old Christopher Lee Hammer film. This was an affront against nature. Mortimer found it difficult to breathe. But he also registered something else, something he hadn't felt since his diagnosis.

*Excitement.*

"May I?" Shanna asked.

Reluctantly, Mortimer handed Shanna the skull. He didn't like it leaving his grasp, had to remind himself that this was what he'd been paying her so handsomely for.

Shanna examined one of the yellowed teeth.

"Coffee-drinker," she quipped, and then her eyes narrowed and Mortimer watched as her inner-scientist took over. "They're at least an inch and a half long, every one of them, even the molars. Huh, weird."

"What?"

"These canines are hollowed."

"What's the significance?"

"I don't know. It's not dissimilar to venomous snakes." She opened the mandible. "Look at the articulation. That range of motion is unbelievable. The jaw structure is more like a snake's. There's literally too many teeth to fit in this mouth. See how they overlap? They would've shredded the lips off, most of the cheek, exploded the gums, ripped apart the ligaments in the mandible."

"What are you saying? It's fake?"

"It looks real. No doubt. But it's just anatomically impossible."

Mortimer leaned closer. "Is it human?"

"Does this look human to you?"

Shanna's words hung in the air like a crooked painting.

"So... what is it?" Mortimer whispered.

"It's certainly hominoid. But unlike anything I've ever seen. Nothing like this exists in the fossil record. *This* shouldn't exist."

"But it *does* exist. It *must* be real."

"Look, we'll have it tested. It's possible the skull is authentic, but the teeth have to have

been implanted."

"Do you know what I paid for this?"

"No, what?"

"Just give it back."

Shanna handed Mortimer the skull and stood up, smoothing out her slacks.

"Mort, I'm really excited for you. Really. And I can't wait to get started studying this."

Mortimer's eyes went wide with surprise. "You're... *going*? Now?"

"I want to stay. But I promised Clay. He wants to take me—wait for it—to the Tanner Gun Show in Denver. We're supposed to hit the road tonight."

"Jesus Christ. He must have elephantine genitalia."

"Mortimer!" She gave him a playful bump on the shoulder.

"What? There's no other explanation. I mean, really...another gun show?"

"Maybe not."

Something in her eyes... trouble in paradise? He hoped so.

He held up the skull, cradling it in both palms. "This is the reason you're here, Shanna. This is what we've been waiting for."

The mandible was still open. The old man grazed one of his liver-spotted fingers across the points of the teeth—razor sharp. He was sure he was only imagining it, but they seemed to send an electrical current through his body.

"Mort? You gonna be all right?"

He looked up at Shanna. Beautiful, youthful, Shanna.

*To be young enough again to satisfy a woman like that.*

Mortimer smiled. "I hope so."

He pulled the skull into his neck, clamped shut the ancient jaw, and the last thing he felt before losing consciousness were those razor teeth sinking through the paper-thin flesh of his throat.

### ***Shanna***

JENNY, the hospice nurse, had acted quickly and professionally. Within two minutes, she

had bandaged the wound and controlled the bleeding, but that was the least of Mort's problems. Seconds after stabbing himself with those horrid fangs, he'd dropped to the floor in a violent seizure. Shanna had been ordered to stick something between his chattering teeth to prevent him from biting off his own tongue. She'd tried to use a ball point pen, but her benefactor had snapped it in half, blue ink mixing with the white foam that churned between his lips.

"Get something under his head," Jenny told her, her voice up an octave. Shanna removed her jean jacket—a gift from Clayton—and balled it up for Mort to use as a pillow. Mortimer's hand shot out, grabbing Shanna's shirt. She yelped in surprise, pawing at his wrist, trying to free herself, but Mort had a grip like stone.

The warm, acrid smell of urine wafted up as he wet his pajamas, and the convulsions intensified, his limbs banging against the hardwood floor with enough force to split his skin.

When the seizure refused to abate after two minutes, the nurse scurried off to call an ambulance.

When it passed the five-minute mark, Jenny shot Mort full of sedatives and anticonvulsants. At ten minutes, Jenny was practically crying in despair, Shanna right there with her. They each had their full body weight on Mort, trying to pin his bloody hands and feet, but he tossed them around like they weighed nothing, Mort choking and gagging on his own blood, coughing out bits of his lips and tongue which he'd chewed off.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the ambulance finally arrived, the nurse and Shanna had to assist two burly paramedics to get Mort strapped to a gurney, where they finally jammed a rubber bit between his snapping jaws.

The ride to the hospital was a blur, Shanna physically and emotionally drained. She managed to call Clay, leaving a monotone message on his voicemail that Mort had had an accident. She was on her way to Blessed Crucifixion Hospital, and he'd have to pick her up there.

Then she wept.

Arriving in Durango two months ago, Shanna had thought she'd landed her dream job. Being paid—and extremely well—for pure research. While many of her contemporaries loved field work, Shanna got off on studying what others had found. She was an expert on the

evolution of primates, and when the so-called "Dracula skull" had been discovered four months ago, she'd regarded it with the same blanket skepticism as the rest of her colleagues.

When Mortimer had hired her to research the Dracula skull, searching for its pedigree, she'd had no idea he'd actually bought the thing. For the past two months, Shanna had been poring over research materials, trying to make a case for a human skull with vampire teeth. Other primates had oversize canine teeth, but within the Homo genus, from australopithecine to modern humans, evolution had reduced tooth size with every subsequent speciation. She'd followed various fossil trails, even the barest and flimsiest of leads, but kept coming back to that same conclusion.

Mort had taken her failures in stride, encouraging Shanna to follow historical and genealogical lines, even though that wasn't her expertise. Between bouts of sitting with Mort and enduring his endless stories, she had managed to find a few more leads. The latest and most promising dated back to the Middle Ages. The Wallachian Order of the Dragon and its founder, Otto von Wolfenstein. Supposedly, Otto had a son with severe birth defects, which might have included dental deformities. But there was scant historical evidence to support that rumor.

Mort jerked against his restraints, making the cart rattle. The paramedics had pumped enough drugs into him to kill an elephant, but the convulsions hadn't abated. Shanna wiped away another tear, wondering if she should have seen this coming.

How could he have done something so ghastly? Senile dementia? Reduced mental capacity because of the morphine? Or had the old man planned to bite himself all along?

The whine of the ambulance siren faded as the vehicle shuddered to a stop. An intern opened the rear doors and slid out the gurney with one of the paramedics. Jenny, Shanna, and the remaining paramedic stayed behind.

Jenny touched Shanna's hand. "You okay?" she asked.

Shanna nodded, regarding the plump, matronly nurse.

"I've been doing this for a decade," Jenny said. "Never saw anything like that before. You did good."

Shanna took little comfort in the older woman's words, but she managed a weak smile. "Did I have a choice?"

"You could've fallen apart." Jenny looked around. "Deputy Dawg coming to pick you up?"

"His name is Clay."

"No offense. That's just what my ex used to call him. No love lost between those two, I tell you."

"I had no idea."

"Before your time. Randy used to get drunk and start breaking things and I'd have to call the mounties. Think Clay'll give me a lift back to Mort's? I need my car."

"I'm sure he will."

*And then what?* Shanna wondered. She'd been planning to break it off with Clay tonight. He was a good guy and they connected—really connected—on a visceral level. But once the heady rush of novelty waned, reality set in. The more time they spent outside the bedroom, the more she realized how little they had in common.

But she felt so drained right now. She didn't know if she had the energy to tell him. Or was she just making an excuse?

Maybe. Because Clayton Theel was one of the good guys, and she knew he genuinely cared for her. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt him. But their heads were in such different places. The gun thing, for instance. Guns frightened the hell out of her. But Clay loved them—*lived* for them. If he wasn't shooting one, he was modifying one or inventing one. She could *not* take another gun show, and she might claw her own eyes out if she had to watch *Dirty Harry* or *Unforgiven* again.

"Son of a bitch."

Both women turned to the paramedic, who was squinting at his finger.

"What's wrong?" Jenny asked.

"I think the old bastard bit me."

# **HOUR ONE**

## *Jenny*

JENNY Bolton entered the ER through the automatic doors which displayed the sign *NO CELL PHONES*, four steps behind the paramedics pushing Mortimer's gurney. Though she knew she was tough, she hadn't yet steeled herself to Mortimer's eventual demise. Being a hospice nurse meant losing patients—it was how the story ended every time. Much as she tried not to get attached—and then have to deal with the inevitable depression when they passed—Jenny wound up admiring, and even liking, most of the terminal people she cared for.

But seeing Mort near death, weeks before his diagnosed time, brought a lump to her throat. This lump was made even bigger by her uncomfortable surroundings.

Once upon a time, Jenny had worked in this facility, in this emergency room. She'd loved the job, and since Blessed Crucifixion was the only hospital within sixty miles, it had been her only option for being a fulltime caregiver.

But last year, she'd gotten into a disagreement with one of the holier-than-thou physicians on staff, and his lies and bullshit had led to her dismissal.

*Boy, I hope that prick Dr. Lanz isn't working tonight.*

*"Dr. Lanz! Code red!"* the intercom blared.

*Shit.*

Jenny kept her head down as the six-foot, broad-shouldered Doctor Kurt Lanz, M.D. paraded past, looking every bit as self-important as the day he'd gotten her fired. She knew he would have her escorted out of the hospital if he spotted her.

While Lanz barked orders at his cringing staff, Jenny slunk over to a nearby house phone.

She reached for the handset, then paused.

*Should I call him?*

Her ex-husband, Randall, had left no fewer than thirty-eight messages on her cell phone since being admitted two days ago for a job-related injury. Her brain-deficient, former significant other—a lumberjack—had somehow managed to cut the back of his own leg with a chainsaw. She hadn't seen Randall since their divorce was made final two years ago, aside from the occasional glimpse of his bright red Dodge Ram Hemi while driving through town. Jenny had been ignoring his messages, even though they were increasing in frequency and urgency. But

now, stuck in the hospital with Randall only two floors above, she figured avoiding him would just be cruel.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the automatic doors opened and a clown entered the ER. At first, Jenny assumed it was a candy striper come to entertain the ill. But then she saw he had a child attached to his left hand, which dripped blood onto the floor. The girl was screaming through clenched teeth.

A distressed woman followed the clown and the child, patting the girl's back, and when she locked eyes on Jenny, she said, "There's a nurse!"

Jenny glanced down at her white uniform. She was about to correct the woman's assumption with an, "I don't work here," but noticed the entire ER staff had surrounded Mortimer, who was coding.

"You have to help my daughter," the mother demanded.

Jenny looked down at the little girl, whose teeth were embedded in the skin of the clown's left hand.

"Oasis' braces are stuck," the woman said.

"Oasis?"

"Oasis. My precious little girl. This horrible clown ruined her eighth birthday party, and now he's going to ruin five thousand dollars' worth of orthodontia."

Jenny appraised the clown. A very sad clown, despite his painted-on red smile and matching rubber nose. He stood six feet tall, six-six with the green fright wig. His green and red polka dot clown suit bulged at the middle—a pot belly not a pillow—and his size twenty-eight shoes squeaked like a chew toy when he walked. A large, metal button, opposite the fake flower on his lapel, read Benny the Clown Says 'Let's Have Fun!'

In a low, shaky voice barely above a whisper, Benny the Clown said, "Please help me."

Jenny fought to conceal her smirk. "What happened?"

"This terrible clown squirted my little girl and she defended herself. Now she's stuck on his filthy clown hand."

The little girl said something that came out like, "Mmmhggggggggg."

"I was making the birthday princess a balloon pigeon," Benny the Clown said, "and she

reached up and squeezed my nose. That activated the flower." Benny the Clown pressed his rubber proboscis and turned his head. A stream of water shot out of the center of the flower, sprinkling onto the tiled floor. "When the birthday princess got squirted, she locked her precious little birthday chompers onto my hand." Benny the Clown leaned closer to Jenny. "You can't tell because I have a smile on my face, but I can feel the wire digging into my bone."

Jenny nodded, trying to appear sympathetic. "I wish I could help, but I don't work at this hospital. I'm just here with one of my hospice patients." She pointed toward the gurney where doctors and nurses swarmed around Mortimer. "You'll have to check in at the front desk."

Even with the painted-on grin, Benny the Clown looked impossibly sad.

Jenny hated to turn away any patient in need, but she could be sued for administering care in a facility she'd been fired from. She watched them trudge off, then turned her attention back to the phone.

*Just do it. Get it over with.*

Jenny picked up the receiver and dialed Room 318. She knew it was 318, because every one of the thirty-eight messages she'd received from Randall had begun, "Hi, Jen, it's Randy, I'm in Room Three-One-Eight."

Before the first ring ended, Randall was on the line. "Jen, is that you?"

The last thing she expected to feel was comfort at the sound of his voice, especially with all the chaos going on around her. It was so familiar, like they'd just spoken yesterday.

"Hello, Randall. How are—"

"You coming to visit?" Randall interrupted. "I'm in room Three-One-Eight."

Jenny sighed. She watched Dr. Lanz charge the defib paddles. "Yeah, I know. You said it on every message you left for me."

"You listened to them? All of them?"

"There were thirty-eighty, Randall."

"I wasn't sure you were getting them. Have you had a problem with your phone?"

*Yeah, you keep calling me.* "I've just been busy. So how are you doing?"

"I got seventy-seven stitches. Everyone thinks it's real funny that I cut the back of my leg." Duthie—the head nurse and a wisp of a woman—squirted conductive gel onto Mortimer's

bare, hairless chest. Jenny's patient was convulsing—v-fib or v-tach. Even from across the room, she could see that Mort's eyes had rolled up into his skull, the whites protruding like two eggs. Flecks of foam and blood still sprayed from her patient's mouth, dotting Dr. Lanz's face and his pristine, white lab coat. Lanz's expression twisted in disgust as he wiped his sleeve across his lips, and the pristine, meticulous doctor actually spat over his shoulder.

Everyone in the ER looked on as Lanz applied the paddles, even Benny the Clown, Oasis, and her mother.

"Jenny? You there? Hello?"

Jenny only turned her eyes away for a second, trying to gather herself, not ready to see Mortimer die. Rude and self-important as he was, she'd found things about the old man to like, and even admire. Selfishly, she also wondered when she would work again. This was a small town, and hospice nurses weren't in constant demand.

Full of shame at the thought, she forced herself to look back, to say a final, silent goodbye.

Mortimer was *standing*, on top of the gurney, restraints broken off and dangling from his ankles and wrists, his mouth wide and—

*Is he hissing?*

The sound came from deep in Mortimer's throat, less like a threatened cat, more like a tea kettle coming to boil. It kept rising in pitch until it became a shrill whistle, the noise unlike anything Jenny had ever heard. Inhuman.

"Jenny? What's wrong?" Randall said.

"Oh my God."

"What? *What, Jen?*"

Mortimer's teeth. Something was happening to them. They were falling out—no—he was spitting them out, spitting them at the doctor and the nurses who were frantically trying to coax him off the gurney.

"Randall, I have to go. There's something happening in the ER."

"You're here in the—?"

She hung up the phone and started toward Mortimer. No doubt Randall would be trying to call her back on her cell, but she had the ringer turned off—the hospital took its no cell phone

rule seriously.

Mortimer abruptly stopped hissing, and Jenny could hear Dr. Lanz ordering him down off the gurney.

Stiff as a plank, Mortimer fell face-first onto the floor.

Jenny rushed to him. She didn't care anymore about hospital protocol, or Lanz having her thrown out. *Mortimer needs me.* Jenny had never seen anything like this in twenty-five years of health care.

She pushed her way through the nurses surrounding Mortimer and knelt at his prone body.

"Jenny? What the hell are you doing in my hospital?" Dr. Lanz demanded.

"This is my patient," she said, touching Mortimer's neck and seeking out the pulse of his carotid. To her surprise, she didn't have to press hard. His entire neck was vibrating, his artery jolting beneath her fingers like a heavy metal drum solo.

The only thing she could compare this to was a crystal meth OD, the heartbeat raging out of control.

Jenny patted the old man's back, checking to see if he was conscious.

"Mortimer, can you hear me? It's Jenny. I'm right here. We're gonna help—"

"I'm going to help him. Somebody get me security."

She felt Dr. Lanz's hands grip her shoulders, dragging her away from Mortimer just as her patient grabbed her hip.

Jenny felt instant pain, and not only from the pressure of Mortimer's grip. Something sharp was digging into her skin through her nurse's uniform.

*That can't be Mortimer's hand.*

It was more like a claw. A bloody, ragged claw. Jenny stared, mouth agape. Mortimer's finger bones—the phalanges—were extending out through his fingertips, splitting the skin and coming to five sharp points.

The old man hissed again, a high-pitched keen, and when he turned his head to look at Jenny, calm, stoic Nurse Duthie said, "Oh, sweet Jesus."

His cheeks exploded like a grenade had gone off inside his mouth, white points bursting through his lips, shearing flesh, digging rents into his face.

*Oh my God. Fangs.*

*He's growing fangs.*

His new teeth began to elongate—an inch, two inches, bursting through his bleeding gums in rows that ended in wicked, dagger-like tips. They shredded his mouth into jagged strips, and he began to snap his jaws, chewing through the inside of his mouth, grinding off his cheeks all the way back to his earlobes, making room for his monstrous new dentata.

Then Mortimer's lower jaw unhinged, thrusting forward and hanging open like some perversion of an angler fish. He stared at Jenny, his eyes wide, pupils dilating beyond anything human, spreading until they eclipsed the whites.

For the first time in her life, Jenny screamed a scream of abject, primordial terror.

She jerked back, trying to pull away from Mortimer's grip, but his sharp, bony fingers had embedded themselves into the meat of her hip. She watched her skin stretch through the holes in her clothing—stretch, but not tear—and realized that the bones protruding from Mortimer's finger tips were barbed like fish hooks.

Then he jerked his hand back, taking Jenny with it, knocking her onto her butt, her face inches from his snapping jaws.

Mortimer rolled on top of her, like a lover, blood and saliva dripping onto Jenny's face and neck. She reached up to push him away, but even as terror-stricken as she was, Jenny couldn't bring herself to touch him. It was like willingly sticking your hand into a box of angry rattlesnakes. Even as his jaws drew near, Jenny's revulsion wouldn't allow her to fight back. She stretched out her hand—her face imploring—to Dr. Lanz, who stood within reach. But he shrank away from her beckoning fingers, retreating into the safety of the nurse's station.

*This is it, Jenny thought. I'm going to die.*

"Get the FUCK away from my wife!"

Jenny turned, watching her bear of an ex-husband limping toward her, his hospital gown flapping from the speed of his approach. He raised something large and red over his head.

"Smile, mother fucker!"

Mortimer's misshapen head jerked up as Randall swung the fire extinguisher, connecting with the jagged nest of teeth. A *CLANG* resonated over the screams of the onlookers, and

Mortimer flew back, his terrible claw disengaging from Jenny's hip, several of his fangs breaking free and tinkling to the floor like icicles.

Jenny found herself being dragged across the floor, Randall's hard, calloused hands under her armpits, pulling her to the water cooler.

"You okay, babe?"

She started to respond, but then saw Mortimer, or whatever he had become, rising to his feet. His head swiveled on his shoulders one hundred eighty degrees, taking a quick, predatory scan of the emergency room.

His eyes locked onto Oasis and Benny the Clown as they retreated through the opening automatic doors.

Mortimer crouched, then leapt after them, soaring five meters into the breezeway.

As the doors slid closed, Jenny heard the most God-awful screaming and Benny the Clown shouting, "No! I'm getting bitten! Again!"

His shoes were frantically squeaking and blood sprayed the automatic glass doors, which opened and closed over and over again.

As Mortimer feasted on Benny the Clown's neck, little Oasis was desperately pulling on the Benny's arm, trying to disengage her braces from the clown, shaking her head like a rabid dog, while her mother tugged on her waist. Suddenly the child broke free, falling backward onto her screaming parent.

Mortimer's eyes zeroed in on the movement, and his head jerked up, blood draining out of his mouth and down the front of his shirt like a sieve.

He dropped Benny the Clown, and hissed.

Oasis' mother was trembling. "Please," she begged. "It's her birthday."

Mortimer attacked Oasis, biting her arm, and tossing her back into the ER.

Then he burrowed his ravenous jaws into her mother's stomach, pulling out a glistening loop of intestine and snacking on it like a bratwurst.

Randall stood in front of Jenny. "What is that goddamn thing? A fucking dracula?"

Mortimer abandoned Oasis' mother and moved back into the ER, lured by two large men in softball uniforms, one with a terrible black eye—probably a casualty of playing the game while

drinking beer. They'd been screaming at Mortimer to leave the woman alone, and now the monster had obliged them. Apparently realizing their mistake, they turned and ran through the ER, pushing through a pair of double door and disappearing into the bowels of the hospital.

Mortimer pursued, bounding after them on all fours, his body stretching out like a cheetah.

Then the ER stood silent except for the groans of the dying and the injured.

Jenny turned to ask Randall something, but he was already moving away from her, limping toward the automatic doors.

She grabbed his arm. "No, Randall," she pleaded. "Please. Stay with me."

"I'm just going out to my truck."

"Why?"

"I need my chainsaw."

He pulled his arm free, starting toward the doors again.

"For what?" Jenny called after him.

"I'm gonna cut that sumbitch in half."

### *Shanna*

SHANNA turned away as she saw the prissy doctor, poised over Mortimer's exposed chest, smear some sort of gel on the defibrillator paddles. She'd spent the last two months studying some of history's worst atrocities. In fact she'd often perused accounts of mass impalings while eating lunch—no problem.

But this? Uh-uh.

She headed into the hospital proper. She'd been here once before, when they'd thought Mortimer had OD'd, and remembered a snack bar in the lobby. A cup of coffee would hit the spot, especially after that Scotch. She wasn't used to hard liquor.

The short middle-age man with "Ernie" embroidered into his shirt hung by the coffee kiosk at the end of the snack bar.

"Latté?" he said as she approached.

"Just a regular coffee, please. Black."

She glanced around the nearly deserted lobby. By this time the day's surgeries were done,

the second shift was ensconced, the doctors had left for their offices, the kitchen was readying to serve dinner, the day visitors were gone and the night visitors weren't home from work yet.

Quiet. Like a morgue.

She smiled. Probably not the best analogy for a hospital.

She paid Ernie for the coffee and pulled out her cell. She had to call Clay. She and Jenny needed a ride back to Mortimer's for their cars.

And then what?

Clay was expecting her to spend the weekend with him in Albuquerque. She didn't see how she could do that without losing her mind. Another gun show. When *not* at the show, however... her pelvis tingled with warmth that coursed up through her abdomen and settled in her nipples. The non-show activities would almost be worth it.

Almost.

The sex... she'd miss the sex. They were so good in bed. But the parade of gun shows and all the machismo... she'd had her fill. She had to call a halt.

She checked her phone's display: no bars. Then she saw the sign: *No Cell Phones!*

Did they really need that exclamation point?

She glanced back along the lengthy hallway to the ER, then toward the lobby entrance. That looked closer. She pushed through the heavy glass doors to the outside, found a bench, and sat down. She tried a sip of her coffee and winced as bitterness stabbed her tongue. Yuck. When had this been made? This morning?

She'd have to have a word with Ernie. But right now...

She stared at the cell display. Still no bars. But tucked in the corner of the room was a pay phone.

So call.

And say what? How could she tell that big cuddly bear that it wasn't working? That she needed more than the best sex she'd ever had in her life. She needed a life of the *mind* as well.

She knew what would follow: protestations that he'd change, he'd go to school, he'd get a degree, become an *intellectual*—all for her.

At least she assumed that would happen. This was all new to her. What if he just said,

"Okay. See you around."

She almost wished he would. It would shake her to know she'd been that wrong about him, but at least she wouldn't be hurting his feelings.

God, I'm such a coward.

Do it, Shanna.

She found some change in the bottom of her purse and plunked it into the payphone. Four rings and then his voicemail came on. Oh, no. She hated his outgoing message. She gritted her teeth and listened once again as Clint Eastwood said, "*Go ahead... make my day. BEEEEEP!*"

She definitely had to break this off.

"Clay, it's Shanna. Jenny Bolton and I had to rush Mortimer to the hospital. Our cars are still at his place. Could you swing by the hospital and give us a lift back?" She bit her lip. "And Clay... about his weekend..." No. She couldn't. She owed him a face-to-face explanation. "Talk to you later."

She hung up the receiver and thought about that. Face to face. How could she look into Clay's warm brown eyes and tell him it was over.

A woman came out of the lobby and lit up a cigarette. The smoke drifted Shanna's way. She wanted to say something about moving downwind but decided to move herself instead. She dumped her coffee and returned to the lobby. Ernie smiled at her as she passed. She wanted to tell him to brew some fresh coffee but decided against it. She wasn't looking for conversation. She needed a quiet place to think, to rehearse what she was going to say to Clay.

She checked the time on her phone's display. She'd give the ER staff another ten minutes to deal with Mortimer, then she'd return. Poor guy. Such a kind man. He'd been so good to her. Why on Earth had he jabbed himself with those fangs?

As she passed the elevator she saw a plaque: *CHAPEL 2<sup>ND</sup> FLOOR.*

Not a bad idea. She wasn't religious, but it would be quiet and no one would be smoking.

She hit the UP button and a pair of doors slid open immediately. She rode one stop and was stepping out onto the second floor when three sharp reports echoed faintly through the elevator shaft from somewhere in the hospital. She froze. They seemed to come from below. They almost sounded like...

No... couldn't be.

The elevator doors pincered against her and retreated. Puzzled and curious, she stepped back into the cab and punched the LOBBY button. On the way down she heard two more reports, much closer now, and immediately wished she'd stayed on the second floor. Because she knew that sound—knew it all too well from all the shows she'd been to where dealers and collectors demonstrated their wares.

Gunshots.

Somebody was shooting up the lobby.

Her heart began to thud as she hammered her palm against the button bank, pushing them all, any floor, she didn't care, just not the lobby. Wasn't there a way to stop these things? No sooner had the thought cleared than she saw the red STOP button. But as she reached for it the cab stopped and the doors slid open.

Ernie looked up at her from the floor just outside the doors. No, not Ernie. Just his head. She screamed and began banging on the floor buttons again. She caught a flash of movement beyond Ernie's head. Someone racing for the elevator.

No—*something*. It was shaped like a man and dressed like a man, though its shirt was in tatters. But there the resemblance stopped. Splattered head to toe with blood and its face... a horror of bloody jutting fangs and red eyes.

And it was charging her!

Shanna screamed again. As the elevator doors began to slide toward each other, she pressed her palms against them and tried to speed their progress. Through the narrowing opening she saw the fanged horror with its arms extended, its taloned hands scoring the air as it raced toward her.

The doors... just a few more inches... an inch...

Steel met steel just as a heavy weight slammed against the other side. The cab began to rise. Shanna sobbed with relief and slumped to the floor.

That *thing*... its wild, insane teeth resembled the skull Mortimer received earlier... the teeth that had pierced Mortimer's throat.

And despite all the blood, Shanna had recognized the belt buckle on its pants.

She sobbed again, this time in disbelief.

"Mortimer?"

**Lanz**

KURT Lanz, MD, rose from where he'd crouched behind the nurse's station.

What...what had just happened?

He surveyed the carnage of the ER—*his* ER—trying to comprehend what he'd just witnessed, but his mind kept balking. All he saw was the blood. God, you so quickly got used to blood in an ER, but this...the sheer quantity. It had sprayed everywhere, Pollacking the walls and soaking the privacy curtains and sluicing down to join the pools—*pools*—on the floor.

And that thing...it had come in as Mortimer Moorecook in cardiac arrest, as good as dead until he'd applied the paddles. No, not as good as dead—way dead. But he couldn't bill for a resuscitation without at least one defib jolt, so he'd hit him with 300 joules and he'd come off the table like some wild—

The screams reached him then, and a woman's voice, close by, shouting, "Kurt! Kurt!"

He looked and saw skinny little Janine Duthie at his shoulder, nurse's uniform splattered with red, eyes bulging, skin chalky, chattering away at ninety miles an hour.

"That's *Doctor* Lanz, Duthie."

Hell, he didn't even think of *himself* as "Kurt." He wasn't about to let this mosquito of a woman do it, even if she had given him head a couple of times when he first arrived. Proper respect was integral to proper functioning.

Not that you could expect proper anything at Blessed fucking Crucifixion Hospital. How the hell had he wound up here?

Oh, right.

Money.

Nobody with decent chops wanted to practice out here in the middle of nowhere. So hick hospitals like Blessed Crucifixion put a lot on the table—nearly twice what big metro hospitals offered. Lanz had owed six figures worth of education loans coming out of training. This was an offer he couldn't refuse.

He knew what the hospital was thinking: Get the sucker out here, seduce him with our

country charm, let him put down a few roots, and he's ours for life.

No fucking way. He'd suffer in silence and sock away for a few years, then get the hell out of debt and the fuck out of town. To tell the God's honest truth, Blessed Crucifixion was lucky to have him. He was way overtrained for a hick community ER. Like hiring Picasso to teach a ladies' auxiliary art class.

Duthie kept going. "Oh my god! Oh, my god! What do we do? This is awful! I've never seen—"

He grabbed her bony shoulder and shook her. "You shut up and get a grip, that's what you do!"

That seemed to break through and she quieted. Good. Now...time for *him* to get a grip. He looked around again, focusing.

The good news was that the thing that had been Moorecook was gone; the bad news was that he'd escaped into the hospital instead of the parking lot. But at least he was out of here.

An inpatient, a big guy in a hospital gown, was limping out the exit. Smart guy. If Moorecook came back, Lanz would be right on his heels.

The little girl was kneeling on the floor by her mother and screaming. With good reason: Not only had her left arm sustained a deep gash, but her Mom lay flat on her back with her intestines spread over her torn abdomen like a wormy apron. She stared blindly at the ceiling as one leg gave a weak kick or two.

The clown lay unmoving in a huge pool of red. His torn carotid had stopped pumping.

The EMT who'd brought in Moorecook stood behind Duthie. Two orderlies—Ralph and Benjamin—and a new LPN stood behind him. All awaiting instructions. That insubordinate bitch-nurse Jenny Bolton stood back, looking horrified. He'd deal with her later.

Okay. This was his ship and he was captain. He pointed to the orderlies, then to the mom and the clown.

"Get gurneys ready to move those two to the morgue."

"But they haven't been pronounced," one said. Ralph? Benjamin? He never could tell them apart.

"They will be in a minute." To the LPN: "Get the little girl's wound cleaned up and set for

suturing." To the EMT: "Help her."

"Hey, I don't work here."

"Then get lost."

The EMT held up a finger, showing a puncture that had already stopped bleeding. "But the old guy bit me. I need a tetanus. And penicillin. And hepatitis. And rabies. You see that goddamn guy? Fucking give me every shot you got!"

"You've got a forty-eight-hour window to get boosters. Make yourself useful or get lost." He turned to Duthie. "Call security and get everyone down here, then call the sheriff. I need to speak to him."

He wanted armed guards here in case Moorecook returned. He'd have them kick Jenny Bolton out too.

He stalked over to the clown. Glazing eyes stared out of his white-face makeup. His throat was a gaping, red ruin. The stump of his carotid artery protruded, filled with stagnant blood. His costume was soaked but Lanz could still read Benny the Clown Says "Let's Have Fun!" on the big button.

Not a lot of fun going on here.

He closed Benny's eyes and motioned to the orderly. "To the cooler."

He heard the little girl start to scream and saw the EMT and the LPN dragging her away from her mother to the treatment room. Her kicks and screams grew more frantic the farther she was moved from her mother.

*Sorry, kid, but that wound needs closing.*

He looked down at the mother: as dead as Benny.

He still wore the latex gloves he'd donned at the start of Moorecook's code red. Ignoring the fecal smell from the torn intestines, he parted the loops. The abdominal cavity was filled with blood.

"Good lord," said a woman's voice. "Did he get the aorta? How could he bite that deep?"

He looked up at Jenny Bolton. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Private duty for Mister Moorecook. What happened to him?"

"You tell me."

"I have no idea."

"Then you're of no use to me. You're a GOOMER."

Even though the acronym referred to annoying, unwanted patients—Get Out Of My Emergency Room—he figured she'd catch his meaning.

"I'm waiting for my husband—*ex*-husband."

"Then wait outside. I—"

The doors flew back and Lanz almost screamed, fearing Moorecook's return. But he managed to bite it back when he saw the two fat softball players stagger into the ER. Both were blood soaked. The bearded one was limping as he half carried the younger blond guy.

"Oh, God!" Jenny said.

Then Lanz saw why: The blond guy's left arm was missing up to the elbow. He was squeezing the stump, trying to stanch the hemorrhage.

"He bit his arm off, doc!" the bearded one said. "That animal bit his fucking arm off! And he bit *me* in the ass!"

As the pair struggled past, Lanz saw that the man's ample right buttock was missing a sizable chunk—mostly fat, but a little of the gluteus was exposed.

Talk about a half-assed injury.

Lanz looked around to find Bolton staring at him. "Still want me to wait outside?"

He was about to tell her exactly what she could do when Duthie called from the nurse's station.

"Doctor Lanz! Sheriff's on the phone!"

*Shit!*

If he turned down an offer of skilled help, fired employee or not, and anyone died, some lawyer would have his ass.

He pointed to the ball players. "Get a tourniquet on that arm."

He stripped off his bloody gloves and took the phone from Duthie.

"Sheriff, we've got one hell of a problem here."

"Well, doc, I've got one hell of a problem myself. Let's compare. You first."

Bet you mine is bigger than yours? Was that how they were going to play this? Fine. He'd

lay it on with a trowel. Christ, he hated these hicks.

"We've suffered what can only be described as a terrorist attack. I've got two dead and three wounded, one of whom has lost an arm. The terrorist is still loose in the hospital wreaking God knows what kind of havoc. I need a SWAT team here."

The sheriff put on an aw-shucks tone. "Now, doc, I'm sure it ain't that bad, and you know we ain't got no SWAT team—"

"Then call in the fucking National Guard! This is no joke!"

"Well, even if I did call in the Guard, no way they could get to you. One of Joe Loveland's cows wandered onto the tracks and got hit by the four-seventeen freight."

"Who cares *whose* cow it is! It's a fucking *cow*! I've got dead and wounded *people* here, and maybe more on the way!"

"Now hold on. You're not letting me finish. The collision occurred in such a matter of fashion that the train jumped the tracks and came to a stop flat on its side across the highway."

*The collision occurred in such a matter of fashion...who talked like that?*

"Sheriff—"

"Thank the Lord, nobody got hurt, it being a freight train and all, but let me tell you, we've got one hell of a mess out here."

"Just send me some deputies, goddamn it!"

"Well, that's just it. Dave Howard's off on vacation to Navajo Lake and Clay Theel's got the weekend off and he's on his way to a gun show in Albuquerque. You got security there at BC. I know those boys. They're good. Turn 'em loose and they'll keep the lid on till we can get somebody over. Gotta go."

"But—"

The line clicked dead.

*You got security there...was he kidding?* Blessed Crucifixion security was some good old boys who got off on wearing uniforms and carrying guns. They might, just might, have the cojones to eject Jenny Bolton, but they weren't going to handle the Moorecook thing.

Okay...stabilize these people, get them admitted, then get the hell out of here. First, the softballers.

He turned to Duthie. "What orthopedist and general surgeon are on tap?"

She checked the call list. "Manetti and Schwartz."

"Get them. Tell Manetti we've got a traumatic amputation for him and a major avulsion laceration for Schwartz."

He walked over to the softballers. Jenny had a tourniquet in place on the arm. Bleeding had stopped but the guy was as white as his uniform used to be and looking shocky.

"Want me to start an IV?" she said as she cleaned the butt wound on the other softballer, prone on a gurney.

He wanted her out of here but needed the help.

"D-five in NS. Open it up. Type and cross-match him." He was going to need a transfusion. "I'll be sewing up the kid." He jabbed a finger at her. "Don't do one goddamn thing without checking with me first. Understood?"

"Loud and clear," she said with a defiant look. Then it crumbled. "What if Mortimer comes back?"

His worst fear, but he hid it. "We'll handle it."

"Oh, like before? Hiding behind the nurse's station?"

He was about to tear her a new one when three rapid gunshots sounded from somewhere in the hospital. A heartbeat of silence, then two more.

"Oh, God!" Jenny said.

And then the doors burst open and two burly security guards backed in, each dragging two bloody bodies.

"What the fuck is going on?" one of the guards screamed, wide eyes showing white all around. "There's some kind of creature going crazy in the lobby. We walked in and it was behind the snack bar. It ripped Ernie's head off!"

Sure enough, one of the corpses had been decapitated.

The other guard said, "I shot that fucker five times—I know I had at least three killshots—but they hardly even slowed him!"

Lanz felt his knees go rubbery. He tried to speak but words wouldn't come.

"We've got to evacuate." Jenny said.

He glared at her as he found his tongue. "Evacuate where? We're in the American equivalent of Outer Mon-fucking-golia. Plus the highway's blocked. What do I do? March or carry a hundred and fifty patients out into the woods?"

That shut her up—almost.

"Okay, then. If the patients can't leave, neither am I. When my ex comes back, we're going up to pediatrics and make sure nothing happens to those kids."

"Like hell you—"

And then he saw one of the guards start back into the hospital.

"Where are you doing?"

"To get Ernie's head. I ain't leaving his head out there!"

Lanz wanted to scream not to leave him and that Ernie didn't care, but bit it back. He was the captain of this ship and he had to hold it together, despite the fact that this corner of the world had gone insane.

#

"Her name's Oasis," the new LPN said from the head of the gurney.

Her nametag read *Rodriguez* and she was all dark eyes and mocha skin and black hair. Not bad looking if you went for the Hispanic thing. Lanz preferred blondes.

He shook his head. *Oasis*...was that who her mother was listening to when she conceived her? He brushed the question away and tried to focus on the girl's arm.

Not an easy thing. But at least the ER was secured. The guard had returned Ernie's head to his body, Duthie was escorting the orderlies and the four new corpses down to the cooler, and two gun-toting uniforms were ready for trouble.

Okay. Now to Oasis. The kid was sedated with a little diazepam but strapped down anyway. She had five tears in her forearm where she'd been bitten. The EMT stood by to help restrain her if she started struggling.

Lanz held out his hand. "Lido."

Rodriguez placed a syringe of local anesthetic on his palm. He was about to begin injecting when the EMT backed away.

"Ooh, man."

Lanz glanced up at him. He wore a strange look.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of needles."

"No, man." His voice was slurred. "I stick 'em in people alla time. I just feel like shit alla sudden."

He rubbed a hand across his face and Lanz noticed that one of his fingers was red and swollen to twice its size. Hadn't he said he'd been bitten by Moorecook? Cellulitis already?

"Sit down before you fall down."

Christ, was the EMT going to wind up a patient too? What else could go wrong?

He turned back to the kid. She began squirming as he injected the local—burned like hell for a few seconds going in, then the area went numb. He heard a hiss off to his right and glanced over to where the EMT slumped in a chair with his head lolling back. His mouth hung open and he was breathing funny.

Lanz had heard that sound before...just a little while ago—

Suddenly the EMT choked and bent forward. He hacked and spit. Not mucous.

Teeth.

He looked up at Lanz, his eyes tortured...and *red*. "Doc, I feel like sh—*aaagh*"

A claw exploded from his infected fingertip, and then his other fingers followed.

Just like with Moorecook.

And then huge fangs extruded from his jaws, ripping through his cheeks and lips.

Just like Moorecook.

Oh, Christ, is it contagious?

Another hiss, closer. He looked down at the girl. Her eyes were wide open, and blood red, and she was spitting teeth, but rows at a time, the braces linking them like bloody little fence posts.

Lanz backed away. Both bitten, both changing. It *was* contagious.

Oasis ripped her clawed hands free of the restraints as fangs ripped through her face. The EMT was up now, approaching the gurney as Oasis sat up. Both had their eyes fixed on Lanz and Rodriguez. The LPN was backing away too. She bumped into Lanz. Instinctively he grabbed her and shoved her toward the gurney. She screamed horribly when the claws pulled her forward and

fangs tore her flesh. As blood sprayed, Lanz turned and ran.

Out of the treatment room, into the ER proper. Ignore the terrified, questioning faces. Find a place to hide. A door—*SUPPLIES*. The handle won't turn. Locked. Of course. But he has a key. He fumbles it free, unlocks the steel door, ducks inside, closes and locks it behind him.

Safe! Oh, good Christ, safe!

Lanz slumped to the floor and leaned with his back against some shelving. Gradually he controlled his breathing, felt his heart slow.

He got a grip. He had control.

Okay. Assess the problem.

Some sort of contagious agent—viral, chemical, whatever—had invaded the hospital. Moorecook seemed to be patient zero. The two who'd changed had been bitten by him, which was a good indicator it was blood or saliva borne.

He quickly checked himself for cuts or scratches. None. Good. He was infection free. He had a steel door between him and the contaminated. He—

Something in his mouth. He spit it out.

A tooth.

*No!*

### ***Randall***

AS Randall marched down the corridor, it occurred to him that limping out to his truck to retrieve a chainsaw in order to cut up a feral beast that gobbled intestines was exactly the kind of "acting without thinking" behavior that had caused so many problems in his marriage.

He was in no shape to be walking around like this—he was, after all, hospitalized with a severe leg injury. He didn't actually *need* his chainsaw—it was a hospital, so they probably had giant bone saws or other tools for dismemberment that were closer than the parking lot. Not to mention that by the time he actually limped out there, got his chainsaw, and limped all the way back, somebody else probably would have already dealt with the dracula creature issue. And hospital security was probably not inclined to let a gown-wearing stitched-up lumberjack enter the facility with a chainsaw, even in a time of crisis.

But when Randall got set on an idea, he saw it through. No matter what. He wasn't going to turn around and sheepishly say, "Ummmm, changed my mind." Jenny had little enough respect for him as it was. When he started something, he finished it, whether it was building a treehouse for the son that he hoped to have someday or sitting through an entire wedding for somebody he didn't know because he'd gone to the wrong church.

And if he *did* manage to protect his ex-wife with his chainsaw, maybe he'd regain some of his dignity. He loved his chainsaw. Loved being a lumberjack, even if other people liked to sing that cross-dressing song by those British assholes. Loved the sound of falling trees smashing into the ground. Loved the outdoors. Even loved the word "lumberjack," despite the fact that a couple of his buddies insisted on being called "arborists."

But the day before yesterday, he'd been humiliated. Oh, sure, he could see where it would be funny to the other lumberjacks—he would've been laughing his ass off if it happened to somebody else—but his face burned red just thinking about it. It wasn't his fault. He hadn't done anything stupid or careless. He'd been happily chainsawing away, and as the tree started to wobble a squirrel was dislodged from the branches, landing on his hard hat and then scampering down his back. He hadn't shrieked like a girl or anything, but *anybody* would yelp if a goddamn squirrel dropped on their head from thirty feet. Randall flinched, twisted around, and his chainsaw blade hit the back of his leg.

He couldn't hear his buddies laughing over the chainsaw motor, but oh, they were in hysterics. Blood was gushing from his shredded flesh and they were having themselves a great big ol' guffaw. Again, he would've laughed too...but still, *fuck* those guys.

He refused to let them drive him to the hospital. He'd drive there his goddamn self. He only needed one good leg to drive, so those giggling bastards could burn in hell for all he cared.

Of course, he'd started to get dizzy as he drove, and realized that because of his stubbornness he was bleeding all over his own truck instead of somebody else's. But he didn't pull over. He drove all the way to the hospital (while Jack and Frank drove behind him, presumably to make sure he didn't pass out at the wheel) and had checked himself in.

Randall desperately wanted to make peace with his chainsaw.

Putting it through the head of a dracula would do just fine.

He picked up his pace as he walked through that big room where they made you wait. A nurse covered in blood was having a panic attack while a doctor shook her. Randall didn't like seeing that kind of shit—you didn't put your hand on a woman like that even if she *was* freaking out—but he had to focus. Ignore the chaos. Think only of Jenny and his chainsaw.

He walked out of the hospital, half-expecting somebody to say "Hey! That gown is hospital property!" He wished he had some pants. His chainsaw-the-monster redemption would be a lot better if his ass wasn't hanging out.

Unfortunately, he hadn't parked close. By the time he'd driven to the hospital, woozy from blood loss, he'd misjudged the distance to the building by over a hundred yards. He had a vague recollection of Jack and Frank helping him get into the ER, but couldn't for the life of him remember where he'd left his Dodge. The lot was full, and apparently every other driver in the county owned a red pick-up. He weaved through the rows, wishing he had one of those little clicky-things he could press to make his horn honk.

When he finally caught sight of his Dodge, he picked up the pace even more, but that seemed to pull at his stitches and he slowed his pace again to something that wouldn't rip his leg back open.

It never occurred to him to just get in the truck and drive away. It occurred to him that maybe he *should* think about that, but no way in hell was Randall going to abandon Jenny. He had more flaws than he had stitches in his leg, but fear was not one of them. Jenny could be a complete bitch to him—and probably would be—but he'd make sure she got out of there safely.

*Of course, you could have done that better by staying with her, instead of limping out here to get a chainsaw...*

*Fuck you, brain.*

Thirty-eight calls. Wow. He'd thought it was more like ten. He could blame about thirty-five of them on the heavy-duty painkillers, but the last three...well, he'd just really wanted to talk to Jenny. She would've been sympathetic. She wouldn't have laughed about the squirrel.

Focus. He needed to focus.

He walked up to his truck. The chainsaw rested there on the seat where he'd left it. (Normally it went in the back, but it hadn't been a normal day. And would Jack and Frank have

brought along their chainsaw if it cut open their leg? Hell no, they wouldn't have. They could laugh all they wanted, but the proof of his manly nature was right there.)

There was dried blood all over the seat. It was going to cost a fortune to have that cleaned, assuming it *could* be cleaned. He might have to just rip the seat out and have it replaced. Shit.

He focused again.

Then he cursed as he realized that the truck door was locked. His keys were in his hospital room on the third floor. Son of a bitch.

He let out an angry sigh. No possible way was he returning to that hospital without a chainsaw. Not a chance. He walked to the back of the truck and picked up his metal toolbox. There were plenty of other tools in the back, including a wonderful hatchet he'd named after Jenny, but he'd rather have a broken window and his chainsaw. If he were wearing actual pants, he could've wedged the hatchet into the waist, but the gown left little opportunity to...

No, wait. He had a utility belt. He quickly lifted his gown and put on the thick belt, which had a nice assortment of tools, then slid the hatchet in there. Cool. He looked absolutely ridiculous, but he had lots of toys now.

He returned to the passenger-side door, turned his head to avoid getting glass chunks in his eyes, and used the toolbox to smash through the window. He unlocked the door, opened it, and grabbed the chainsaw. Yes!

It still had his blood on the blade. He kind of liked that.

He limped back toward the building.

Screams from inside. Lots of them.

What the hell was going on?

He'd seen that *Dracula* movie when he was a kid, but that slick-haired guy didn't do anything like this.

Randall walked back inside. The room (it was the Emergency Room, right? Or did they take people to the Emergency Room after they waited in this room?) was absolute chaos. He could barely process it all. People were screaming and panicking and *getting ripped apart and eaten*. He'd known that things were bad when he left...but he'd only gone to the parking lot for a couple of minutes!

"Jenny!" he called out.

A small, scrawny teenaged kid in a hospital gown noticed Randall. His chest was covered with blood as if he'd just enjoyed a messy meal, but the blood seemed to be his own, the result of the lower, non-pimplly half of his goddamn face being mangled. He had huge, sharp teeth, and it looked like they'd ripped right through the skin.

Okay, maybe Randall was feeling some fear now. That was fine.

The dracula smiled—as well as you can smile when the lower half of your face is a pulpy, bloody mess—and rushed at him.

Randall tugged the cord of the chainsaw. It roared to life.

He raised the tool—now a glorious weapon—in front of him, absolutely loving the feeling.

The chainsaw sputtered and died.

Out of gas.

And then the teenaged dracula was upon him, mouth open wide. Randall screamed with rage and *bashed* the chainsaw into its face as hard as he could. Randall, who was lumberjack-sized, had a good eighteen inches and a hundred pounds on the little monster, and the impact was severe. Blood sprayed.

A second hit and the creature dropped to the floor.

Randall dropped to his knees, a move that hurt like hell, and then smashed the chainsaw into its head, over and over, as the dracula kept thrashing and trying to grab him. The chainsaw held together fine—Randall didn't buy cheap chainsaws—and after a good dozen or so blows the dracula stopped moving.

Randall wiped the gore from his face. He hoped the hospital security cameras had caught that.

There was still chaos everywhere, and people who needed help, but once again Randall had to focus. He stood back up, wincing, and forced himself to getting moving again. Though there were probably much better options for bashing draculas to death than his chainsaw and it would just weigh him down, he couldn't bear to leave it behind.

Time to find Jenny.



*A headache descended, like someone driving an ice pick through his frontal lobe.*

*Something stung his shoulder. He jumped up onto the snack bar, fire blooming down the corridor toward the doors to the ER, men screaming at him, the gunshots distant, like he heard them from underwater, and with some of the lights came a brief but violent sting, and he could smell their blood, still muted under their clothes and skin but it was there, calling to him, and he was moving toward them before he realized what he was doing, the men retreating, yelling, more points of light opening and dying like fireflies.*

*He stopped.*

*These men would fight him.*

*He didn't want to fight.*

*He just wanted to drink, and there must be a hundred or more of these blood containers on the floors above him.*

*Sick. Drugged. Helpless.*

*He leapt off the snack counter and bounded through the lobby toward the elevators.*

### **Jenny**

RATHER than dwell on why this was happening—which wouldn't help things make any more sense than they already did—Jenny fell back on her training. She administered a cryoprecipitate IV to a softball player with a transradial amputation of the forearm, and put a Celox compression on the stump to control bleeding. Jenny repeated the procedure with his friend who was missing half his ass, and also gave him a shot of synthetic morphine because the guy was screaming so loud it made her ears ring. Once both patients were stabilized, she allowed herself a bit of pride at her efforts.

*This was the reason she'd become a nurse. To help save lives.*

Focusing on that, she turned her attention to the hallway, remembering how close the pediatric ward was. Jenny Bolton had no idea what Mortimer had become. But if he got to the children...

Screams, from behind her. She spun around and stared in disbelief. The ER had become a war zone.

Somehow, Mortimer's affliction had spread, infecting others. Jenny counted three—no, four—of the fanged creatures, and a fifth in mid-transformation, spitting out teeth as longer ones grew in. Those still human tried to make it to the exit, but the EMT Jenny had ridden here with was blocking the doors, snapping and slashing at anyone who came close.

That a-hole Lanz was nowhere to be seen, but bending over one of the infected, smashing its head in with a chainsaw, was...

"Randall!"

"Jen?"

Her ex-husband's neck craned up at the sound of her voice, and he caught Jenny's eyes and smiled at her, big and stupid.

That's what Randall was, at his core. Big and stupid. But seeing him there, amid the horror and the chaos, gave Jenny a warm burst of hope. More than anything, she wanted to rush into his big, stupid arms so he could spirit them both out of there.

But they couldn't leave. Especially now. With more of these... *things*... in the hospital, someone had to protect the children.

Randall limped over to her, that familiar, lopsided grin on his face, as Dante's Inferno raged around them. She met him halfway, and when his huge, hairy arms closed around her in a hug, she endured it.

Hell, she welcomed it.

"We got ourselves a dracula outbreak," he said. "Time to make like trees and leave."

Jenny pulled away. "I can't leave. There are kids in this hospital. Sick kids. They won't have a chance alone."

Randy's brow furrowed, and he pursed his lips. "Okay. I'll take you to the truck, then I'll come back and—"

"No time. I have to go now."

"It's too dangerous for you, Jen. Let me do it."

"Do you even know where pediatrics is, Randall? Can you even spell *pediatrics*?"

Randall frowned. "That's low. You know spelling ain't one of my strengths."

Jenny wanted more than anything for Randall to come with her. But she couldn't ask that of

him. She'd already put him through enough. Divorcing Randall had been the single hardest thing Jenny had ever done, because he was so loyal. Loyal and caring and obedient and loving. She knew her leaving had crushed him.

In their marriage, he had loved her more than she'd loved him. But she *had* loved him. Still did. She'd just wanted more out of life than a big, stupid, loyal puppy dog for a husband. It bothered her, at a core level, that she could do the New York Times crossword while Randall couldn't even spell *crossword*. Jenny divorced him because she knew she could do better. The fact that she *hadn't* done better wasn't the point.

"Get out of here, Randall. Save yourself."

"I ain't goin' nowhere, Jenny-pie. Let's go save those sick kids."

Jenny shook her head. "Don't do this for me," she heard herself say. And at the same time, part of her hoped he was doing it for her.

"Of course it's for you. But it's also so those little diseased children don't become dracula snacks. We need to get them safe so they can be sick and die in peace."

A dracula launched itself at the duo, and Randall pushed Jenny away and swung the chainsaw at its head. Though the saw wasn't running, the blade hit with such force Jenny heard the creature's neck snap as it fell to the side. When the dracula hit the floor it thrashed and kicked and screamed, its head gyrating at an odd angle.

"Come on!"

Randall grabbed Jenny's arm and marched her through the double doors into the depths of the hospital. After a few steps, Jenny took the lead, pulling him to the stairwell, tugging open the door.

"Maybe an elevator?" Randall said. He stared down at his leg, which was dripping blood from torn stitches.

"Aw, Randall..."

Dropping to her knees, Jenny tore at the hem of his hospital gown and began to wrap it around his leg to stop the bleeding. As she was tying off the cloth, she noticed Randall's gown begin to extend in front. He was becoming aroused.

"Randall!"

"Sorry," he said, turning red. "Ain't been with anyone since you left."

Jenny remembered the sex. How good it was. Though he wasn't her intellectual equal, Randall had almost been able to compensate for that in the bedroom. She had a sudden, completely irrational urge to reach up under his gown and grab him.

Or maybe it wasn't so irrational. In times of stress, humans often regressed to base behaviors.

"Have, uh... you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Been with anyone since the divorce?"

"That's not your business, Randall."

"Yeah." He looked away. "Sorry."

Jenny stood up. She hadn't been with anyone, and wasn't sure why she couldn't admit that to him. "We need to get to pediatrics. The elevator is this way."

He moped along behind, and when they reached the elevator, Jenny pressed the call button. For all the commotion in the ER, the hall was disproportionately quiet. Perhaps some people had already evacuated, despite Dr. Lanz's proclamation that there wasn't anywhere to go. Though this area of Durango was currently under development, with lots of new construction up and down the highway, the only other inhabited building within three miles was a gas station. But at the current rate this disease was spreading through the hospital, even the uninhabited woods at night would be preferable to staying here. Unless they were able to stop the infection, Jenny predicted everyone would be either dead or turned within a few hours.

The elevator dinged, and when the doors opened a dracula darted out, tackling Jenny.

She fell backward, the creature atop her, snarling and gnashing its horrible teeth. Jenny caught a quick glimpse of the nurse's uniform, and the nametag, *Fortescue*, as she reached up to grab the dracula's shoulders, keeping its terrible fangs away. The SNAP SNAP SNAP of the jaws, like mousetraps going off, flecked blood and spittle all over Jenny's face. She turned away, scrunched closed her eyes and mouth, worried more about getting the infection than being devoured.

Then, as quickly as she'd been pinned down, Jenny was free.

Randall had jerked Nurse Fortescue off Jenny and pinned her to the floor, his bare foot on her chest, his chainsaw tearing at her neck. He moved the saw up and down, a combination of weight and brute strength causing it to tear through the dracula's throat, blood spraying out three-hundred and sixty degrees like a lawn sprinkler.

The thing that was once Fortescue thrashed and hissed, and Randall dropped his big knee onto the monster's ribcage, pressing on the edge of the blade with both his palms, shaking it back and forth until Jenny heard the audible POP of the spinal cord severing.

Still, the teeth gnashed and feet—claws bursting out through the gym shoes—continued to kick and writhe. It wasn't until Randall had the head completely severed, and pushed away from the body, that the monster was finally still.

"You okay?" he asked, staring up at his ex-wife.

"Wouldn't it be easier if you turned the saw on?"

"Outta gas. Still works pretty good, though."

Jenny carefully wiped some blood from her face, avoiding getting any in her mucous membranes, and then walked over to Randall.

"Nurse Fortescue is from pediatrics," she said. "We need to move. Now."

### ***Lanz***

SINGLY and in pairs, all but two teeth had fallen out of Dr. Kurt Lanz's gums. He cupped them in his hands. He'd counted them.

He knew.

How? Why? He'd been racking his brain for a reason. He hadn't been bitten or cut. He—

Oh no! Moorecook had been seizing when Lanz arrived, spraying bloody saliva everywhere. Some had landed on his face. A fleck must have reached his lips. He'd been contaminated through his mucous membranes instead of directly into his blood. A tiny inoculum. A delayed reaction. A slower transformation.

Screams erupted on the far side of the door, followed by gunfire. He rose and pressed his ear against the steel. Sounded like chaos out there. Good thing—

Something *slammed* against the door. He jerked back as fists began pounding the other side

and someone screamed to be let in.

No fucking way, Jose.

The pounding and screaming stopped abruptly. Shaken, Lanz sat again. If he could just hold out here till the cavalry rode in, he'd be—

The faint sound of a siren filtered through the door. Had the sheriff sent someone?

Okay...he could control this. Maybe not the physical aspects, but he refused to become a bloodthirsty beast like the others. He was a *doctor*, for fuck's sake. He was *educated*. And he was certainly more intelligent than any dozen of these yokels combined.

His last two teeth dropped from his gums.

Didn't matter. He was better than the rest. He'd beat this.

Sudden blasts of agony shrieked from his fingers and drove him to his knees as hooked claws burst from the tips.

And then indescribable pain from his jaws as the fangs erupted and tore through his cheeks and lips—like he'd forced his face into a wood chipper.

His vision blurred, then cleared. He saw everything in such detail now, like switching from a blurry black-and-white TV to hi-def. Same for his sense of smell. A delicious, mouth-watering odor was wafting through the door. He recognized it: blood. Beautiful, warm, red, delicious blood. He had to—

No! He was better than this. The cops were here. He'd heard the sirens. He'd stay in here and explain through the door what had happ—

*Hungry!* So hungry! That smell was driving him crazy.

His hand seemed to move of its own volition. Hard to turn the knob with those claws, but he managed. And when the door swung open the blood smell enveloped him, banishing every desire but to feed, every feeling but hunger.

He saw a pair of wary EMTs—fat woman pulling in front, middle-age guy pushing from behind—hesitantly wheeling a stretcher through the door. The siren hadn't been police, it had been an ambulance.

Blood! Fresh blood!

Lanz leaped up on the nurse's station and launched himself at them. The claws of his left

hand pierced the side of the fat, lead EMT's face as Lanz sailed by. The hooks caught and set. Lanz felt a tug and then a give as the face ripped free.

By then he was upon the second, sinking his fangs into his exposed throat, tearing the flesh, chugging the hot gush of blood as it rushed into his mouth. The guy went down, kicking and trying to scream but he had no throat so how could he scream? And then he stopped struggling and the blood stopped flowing.

So soon?

More!

Lanz turned and saw the fat EMT on her knees, screaming as she held her ripped face in place. He lunged at her and ripped into her throat.

Again, the rush of the gush. For the first time in his life Lanz truly felt alive. He couldn't stop. He *wouldn't* stop!

### ***Nurse Duthie***

THE two big orderlies emerged from cold storage into the autopsy suite where Janine stood by one of the tables, gripping the stainless steel so her hands wouldn't shake. She'd been head nurse at Blessed Crucifixion for seven years, and nothing had rattled her up until now, not even the ten burn victims who'd come through her ER several years back when the Doubletree Hotel had gone up in flames.

But she'd just watched Ralph and Benjamin roll a man past her on a gurney whose head had been ripped off, and she didn't have a filter for that. They'd set the victim's head in his lap with his hands positioned so it appeared as though he was holding his own noggin, one of them cracking a joke about Ichabod Crane as they wheeled past, and she would've dressed them down right then and there, but it was all she could do to keep standing, her legs threatening to give out at any moment.

Nothing about this was right. They'd brought that rich old man in several weeks ago on a morphine OD scare, and he'd barely had the strength to get himself around without a walker.

She looked up. Ralph was standing in front of her.

"Anything else, Ms. Duthie?"

Low, booming voice. Bloodshot eyes suggesting a healthy marijuana habit.

"No, but go check with Dr. Lanz."

She followed the orderlies to the entrance of the morgue. "I'm going to lock myself in," she said. "Call me when they've caught the old man."

She closed the door and turned the deadbolt, knew she *should* feel safe now—there was no opening that door from the outside unless you had a key—but something about being down here in the basement with six corpses still unnerved her.

Janine drifted over to the coroner's desk and eased down into the metal folding chair. God, she was tired. Her shift should've ended an hour ago. Couldn't wait to get home, crack open that four-pack of Bartles and Jaymes Strawberry Daiquiri wine coolers, and watch the newest episode of *House* she'd TiVo'd last night.

Hugh Laurie.

Yum.

Even now, she felt that warmth between her legs. House would know how to handle a situation like this, no doubt. She'd never admitted it to anyone, but she often imagined that Lanz was House, and she was Dr. Cuddy, took the whole fantasy quite a bit farther than she was comfortable admitting, even to herself, especially after two or three wine coolers and her lounging in a bubble bath with her Natural Contours Personal Massager.

It had suddenly grown very quiet. She never liked coming down here. Not even in the middle of the day with the medical examiner and his team buzzing around. The chill that radiated out of cold storage just plain creeped her out.

She rubbed her arms, gooseflesh spreading across her skin.

Her navy scrubs wouldn't keep her warm down here.

A sound perked her head up.

Soft, muffled. Sourced from cold storage.

Temperature gradient, she figured. The metal doors of the refrigerated morgue drawers contracting and expanding.

She glanced at her watch: 9:12 p.m.

She should be home by now, dammit, already into her second—

Another sound. Unmistakable. Like someone had thumped one of the drawers. She stood up. If Ralph and Benjamin were fucking with her, she'd make certain they were drug-tested next week. Would bet her next two paychecks they'd both come back with hot UAs.

She walked through the autopsy suite toward the large door to cold storage, which stood wide open.

From what she'd heard, practical jokes were a common occurrence down here, but she couldn't believe even those two stoners would try to pull something on a night like this.

She stepped through into cold storage and put her ear to one of the drawers.

Sounded like fingernails scratching against metal.

The scratching stopped.

*BANG.*

She jumped back.

*BANG. BANG.*

*What the hell?*

*BANG. BANG. BANG.*

Janine stood facing the refrigerated nine-drawer cabinet, and she could see the metal vibrating.

The body in there was still alive.

Duthie rushed to it, fingers locking around the stainless steel handle.

Then she paused.

The woman was in there. The mother, who had her entire intestinal tract torn out. The orderlies had used a snow shovel to scoop her insides back into her body cavity.

How could she be still alive? There was no way.

The banging had stopped, and Duthie wondered if she'd somehow imagined the noise. Fear and stress could make the mind play tricks. After what she'd seen in the ER, Duthie might even be exhibiting symptoms of shock. Or post-traumatic stress disorder. Auditory hallucinations weren't unheard of.

*BANG!*

The loudest yet, the handle vibrating so hard it stung her palm.

And it was accompanied by a scream. The loudest, rawest, most agonizing scream Duthie had ever heard in her entire career.

*My god! How can that poor woman still be alive?!*

Heart thumping, throat dry, Duthie tugged hard on the handle, putting her entire hundred and ten pounds behind it, the drawer sliding out with a metallic ring.

Yes, the poor woman was alive, her eyes wide, the pupils dilated. Her guts were strewn all over her body, and her head thrashed back and forth in obvious, unbearable pain.

No... not pain. It wasn't pain at all.

The woman's head shook because she was trying to chew her way through her own intestines.

She held a loop in both of her hands—her twisted, clawed hands—and her mouth tore at the tough, stretchy tissue of her transverse colon, which was still attached to the gaping hole in her abdomen.

The woman screamed again, her wide eyes locking onto Duthie's.

Then she spat out her digestive tract and reached her horrible hands out for the nurse, her hideous, fang-filled mouth yawning open to an impossible size.

Duthie reacted instantly. She pushed the handle, leaning into it, her rubber soled nurse's shoes squeaking against the polished tile floors as the drawer slid closed.

The mother creature rolled onto her chest, sliding off the drawer on a pool of her own blood, slipping out and plopping, face-first, onto the ground just at the door slammed shut.

Duthie backpedaled, tripping over her own feet, falling onto her butt. The mother creature shrieked at her, scrambling across the floor, closing the distance between them. Janine opened her mouth to yell for help—the orderlies might still be near. But her throat had locked in fear, and she could only manage a soft squeak.

Crabwalking backward, Duthie felt and saw one of those horrible claws lock around her shoe. Its grip was a vice, and its pointed finger bones dug into the thin flesh of Janine's ankle. She kicked out with her other leg, trying to break free, her rubber soles bouncing harmlessly off the creature's hand. Then it began to pull, its jaws snapping so hard and fast it almost sounded like a tap dancer.

Against her every impulse to pull away, Janine Duthie leaned *forward* instead, pawing at the Velcro straps on her shoe, ripping them free, then yanking her foot out of the mother-creature's grasp and crawling into the corner of the room, by the desk.

Catching her breath, filling her lungs, Nurse Duthie let loose with the loudest scream of her life.

"HEEELP!!!!"

The mother creature had Duthie's shoe in its mouth, chewing up the leather and rubber to shreds. Its wide nostrils flared, and it began to scurry toward Duthie once again.

Ten feet away.

"HELP ME!"

Five feet away.

"JESUS CHRIST HELP!"

Two feet away, its wicked claws reaching out, Duthie curled up fetal in the corner, her knees tucked into her chest.

Then the creature jerked to a stop and hissed. It writhed for a moment, its whole body shaking, but it didn't come any closer.

Duthie saw why.

*Its intestines. They're caught in the drawer.*

They stretched out the length of the morgue, a slimy, bloody rope, keeping the creature away like a dog on a leash.

"Ms. Duthie? Holy fuck!"

Ralph. At the door, peering in through the small, square window. Duthie watched the knob shake, but not turn.

*Locked. I locked myself in.*

"Get the key from Kurt!" Duthie cried out.

Ralph nodded, then disappeared. Duthie faced her attacker, which had stopped trying to reach for her. Instead, the mother creature was chewing on its own hand, eyes bulging out, scarfing it down like it hadn't eaten in weeks. Duthie watched the blood spurt, listened to the tiny bones crack and splinter, and then turned herself away from the horrible spectacle, turning her

attention to the desk.

*A weapon. I need a weapon.*

She yanked open a drawer, pencils and desk supplies raining down on her. A stapler. Some Post-It notes. Paper clips. She picked up some child's safety scissors, with blunted tips, and stared at them incredulously.

*It's a morgue, goddamn it. Where's a goddamn scalpel?*

A choking sound, from the creature. Duthie dared a glance. It had bitten off and eaten all of its fingers, and was jamming its own stump down its throat, gagging obscenely. Then, suddenly, it twisted around and began gnawing at the taut loop of intestines tethering it to the drawer.

Duthie got onto her knees, opening up another drawer.

*There. A trocar.*

It was heavy. Sharp. Formidable. A hefty metal tube, hollow and pointed on the end, used for aspirating body cavities. This was a large model, wide as a garden hose and close to eight inches long. Duthie gripped the base and faced the monster, which had gnawed its way through its own intestines and was pouncing on Duthie, its mouth so wide it could swallow Duthie's whole head.

She thrust the trocar upward, using both hands, punching the razor tip through the creature's ribcage and into its heart.

Blood immediately sprayed out the base like a spigot, drenching Duthie's clothes as the monster flopped onto her. But rather than those hideous, snapping jaws latching onto Duthie's neck, instead they kissed the floor, a mangled tongue lapping at the tile.

*Blood. It's licking up its own blood.*

The creature hovered it up as the red stuff pumped out of its own chest, smearing it across its ruined face, sucking it in with a sound a lot like slurping soup from the bowl.

But it wasn't quick enough. Duthie watched, horrified, transfixed, as the creature's blood output overtook its input. The trocar was too big, pumping out blood faster than the mother could take it back in. The crimson pool grew ever wider, even as the thing's frenzy increased.

Eventually, it flopped onto its face, limbs splayed out, tongue still licking feebly at the sticky floor, until finally even that was still.

*BANG.*

Duthie's head spun at the sound.

*Another drawer. Something alive inside.*

*BANG!*

*BANG BANG!*

And another one.

*BANG BANG BANG!*

*BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG!*

*BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG!*

All of the drawers were shaking, rattling, the cacophony so loud it drowned out her wail of fear. Then the hissing started, spliced with that horrible shrieking, Nurse Duthie's brain telling her to move, get out, but by the time her legs received the message the first door had burst open, and along with a blast of cold air, a clown popped out onto the floor, landing on all fours. Awful teeth, black eyes, fright wig, its teeth already chomping as it stared up at Duthie.

Now, finally, Janine's legs were moving, and she was sprinting toward the exit. She collided into the door and jerked on the handle out of pure instinct, but it didn't budge.

Behind her—

*SQUEAK.*

*SQUEAK.*

*SQUEAK.*

The clown, on its feet now, its comically oversized shoes fitted with joke squeakers, which got louder as it plodded closer.

Duthie's fingers found the lock, and as she turned the deadbolt, pulling the door open, she heard a flurry of squeaks as the monster ran at her, crushing her with its bulk, and her last thought as its terrible fangs sunk into her face...

*I've always hated clowns.*

### ***Benny the Clown***

FOUR hours earlier, Benjamin Jamison Southwick had been sitting in a cheap motel room, a

gun in his mouth. Most clowns were crying underneath their painted-on smiles, and Benny the Clown was flat-out suicidal under his painted-on frown.

After deciding that, yes, he was finally going to do it this time, Benny the Clown had spent a while trying to figure out if he should do it in his clown costume. It would get a lot more attention if he did. *Local Clown Blows Brains Out, Declared Unfunny*. But he came from a long line of clowns, and did he really want to disgrace the Southwick name?

He'd thought about it, weeping much of the time, and then decided that yes, he would kill himself in his clown suit.

But he couldn't do it. Couldn't pull the trigger.

Just like the last three times.

Finally he'd checked his watch. He was scheduled to do a birthday party in half an hour. Might as well keep his commitment.

Getting bit by the birthday girl made him sad.

Having her braces get stuck on him made him sadder.

Sitting in the hospital with the girl and her awful mother, Benny the Clown had never been so sad in his life. If he'd had the gun with him, he thought he could have pulled the trigger, no problem.

He didn't remember any of that now. Because now, with the taste of blood in his mouth and much of the nurse's cheek between his teeth, and no thoughts beyond how to get *more more more MORE MORE MORE*, Benny the Clown was happier than he'd ever been.

### *Oasis*

WHY had Mom never told her that people were filled with delicious red candy? It was better than jelly beans. Way better. She'd only gotten a taste of it, but she needed more. Right now. That mean, brown-skinned nurse had punched her in the face when she'd bitten her arm, and then everyone had rushed out, leaving Oasis alone in the treatment room.

She looked down at her hands—they weren't really hands anymore. They looked like monster claws.

The pain in her face was going away.

She could hear a lot of screaming on the other side of the door.

Screaming meant people.

People meant warm red candy.

Oasis jumped down off the gurney and opened the door.

Candy everywhere! On the walls, the ceiling, people covered in it, and straight ahead, two monsters were licking it off the floor by the nurses' station.

She bounded over and crouched between them, but she hadn't even touched her long, spongy tongue to the puddle when one of the monsters hissed at her and swung its claw at her face.

The blow knocked her back into the wall, and Oasis screamed, *It isn't fair, you stupid dumbhead!* But the words came out as a loud hiss, and now that monster was moving toward her.

She leapt away and exploded through a pair of double doors, sprinting now—faster than she'd ever run before, faster than she imagined possible—down a long corridor.

She came around a corner and skidded to a stop.

A man in pale blue scrubs stood before the closed elevator doors, pushing the UP button over and over and saying bad words.

When he noticed Oasis staring at him, he said, "Holy fucking shit," and backed away.

Oasis asked him if he would share some of his candy, but again, her words came out hissing, and the man screamed, "Get the fuck away from me, little girl!"

She was moving toward him now. He was so tall and big she figured he probably contained more red candy than most. She could smell it through his skin, and the odor made her legs crouch down, and before she'd even considered it, she was jumping toward him, her claws outstretched, screaming with pure joy at the thought of sinking her pretty new teeth into the man's—

A metal trashcan connected with the side of her head and she slammed into the elevator doors.

She cry-hissed. Why was he—

The trashcan crashed into her head again.

She screamed, "Stop hurting me!"

The man hit her again.

Why was he beating her? She only wanted his—

The third blow was the hardest. Felt her skull crack open.

She blacked out and came back as the elevator doors were closing, the big candy-filled orderly gone.

All she could think about was her thirst for that candy, her head throbbing with her need for it.

She leapt to her feet.

Heard noise coming from the emergency room, and she wanted to go back, but it was full of adults.

Adults were strong and mean. They would fight her, maybe hurt or even kill her.

Her black eyes fell upon a placard between the elevators:

3<sup>rd</sup> FLOOR

Cardiovascular Services

Endoscopy Registration

The Birthplace

The words were too big for her to read except for the last line.

*T-h-e B-i-r-t-h-p-l-a-c-e.*

She smiled, and her huge teeth split her cheeks the rest of the way to her earlobes.

Maybe there would be babies there. Smaller, yes, not as brimming with red candy as adults, but...

How could they fight back?

#

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[Jack: Secret Circles](#) (young adult)

The Adversary Cycle

[The Keep](#)

[The Touch](#)

[Reborn](#)

The LaNague Federation series

[An Enemy of the State](#)

[Dydeetown World](#)

[Wheels Within Wheels](#)

[The Tery](#)

[Healer](#)

Other works

[The Select](#)

[Implant](#)

[Deep as the Marrow](#)

[Sibs](#)

[Black Wind](#)

[Virgin](#)

[Midnight Mass](#) (vampires)

[DNA WARS](#) (with Matthew J. Costello)

[Mirage](#) (with Matthew J. Costello)

[Sims](#)

[The Fifth Harmonic](#)

[Aftershock & Others](#) (short fiction)

### **Jeff Strand's Works Available on Kindle**

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Other works

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[Pressure](#)

[Dweller](#)

[Gleefully Macabre Tales](#)

[How to Rescue a Dead Princess](#)

[Elrod McBugle on the Loose](#)  
[Out of Whack](#)

### **J.A. Konrath's Works Available on Kindle**

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[Bloody Mary](#)

[Rusty Nail](#)

[Dirty Martini](#)

[Fuzzy Navel](#)

[Cherry Bomb](#)

[Shaken](#)

Banana Hammock

[Jack Daniels Stories](#) (Collected Stories)

[SERIAL UNCUT](#) with Blake Crouch

[Suckers](#) with Jeff Strand

[Planter's Punch](#) with Tom Schreck

[Floaters](#) with Henry Perez

Other works

[Afraid](#)

[Origin](#)

[The List](#)

[Disturb](#)

[Shot of Tequila](#)

[55 Proof](#) (Short Story Omnibus)

[Crime Stories](#) (Collected Stories)

[Horror Stories](#) (Collected Stories)

[Dumb Jokes & Vulgar Poems](#)

[Endurance](#)

[Trapped](#)

### **Blake Crouch's Works Available on Kindle**

Andrew Z. Thomas thrillers

Desert Places: a novel of terror

Locked Doors: a novel of terror (sequel to Desert Places)

Other works

[Abandon: a thriller](#)

[Snowbound: a thriller](#)

[Luminous Blue](#) – a novel of warped celebrity

[Perfect Little Town](#) – horror novella

[Serial Uncut](#) – with J.A. Konrath and Jack Kilborn

[Bad Girl](#) – prequel to Serial

[Four Live Rounds](#) – Collected Short Thrillers

[Shining Rock](#) (short story)

\*69 (short story)

[On the Good, Red Road](#) (short story)

[Remaking](#) (short story)

## BIOGRAPHIES

**BLAKE CROUCH** is the author of *DESERT PLACES*, *LOCKED DOORS*, and *ABANDON*, which was an IndieBound Notable Selection last summer, all published by St. Martin's Press. His newest thriller, *SNOWBOUND*, also from St. Martin's, was released in June 2010. His short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Thriller 2*, and other anthologies, and is forthcoming in the new Shivers anthology and Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*. Last year, he co-wrote "Serial" with J.A. Konrath, which has been downloaded over 250,000 times and topped the Kindle bestseller list for 4 weeks. That story and *DESERT PLACES* have also been optioned for film. Blake lives in Durango, Colorado. His website is [www.blakecrouch.com](http://www.blakecrouch.com).

**JACK KILBORN** is the pen name for J.A. Konrath, author of seven books in the Lt. Jack Daniels thriller series, the latest of which is *SHAKEN*. Under the Kilborn moniker, he wrote *ENDURANCE*, *TRAPPED*, and *AFRAID*, all structured the same as *DRACULAS*, but decidedly darker. Konrath currently has twenty-six ebooks available on Kindle, most of them inexpensively priced. In 2011, Ace Books is releasing *TIMECASTER* and *TIMECASTER SUPERSYMMETRY*, two sci-fi ecopunk novels written under the nom de plume Joe Kimball. You can visit all of his personalities at [www.jakonrath.com](http://www.jakonrath.com).

**JEFF STRAND** used to be best known as the creator of Andrew Mayhem, whose insane adventures appear in such horror/comedy novels as *GRAVEROBBERERS WANTED (NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY)*, *SINGLE WHITE PSYCHOPATH SEEKS SAME*, and *CASKET FOR SALE (ONLY USED ONCE)*. But now he's probably best known for his first "serious" book, *PRESSURE*, which was a Bram Stoker Award finalist for Best Novel. He's written other comedic books (*BENJAMIN'S PARASITE*, *THE SINISTER MR. CORPSE*) and other serious books (*DWELLER*), and a couple that kinda blur the lines (*WOLF HUNT*, *KUTTER*). You can visit his Gleefully Macabre website at [www.jeffstrand.com](http://www.jeffstrand.com).

**F. PAUL WILSON** is a *NY Times* bestselling author of forty-plus novels who has won the Stoker, Inkpot, Porgie, and Prometheus Awards. His work spans science fiction, horror, adventure, medical thrillers, and virtually everything between. He has written for the stage, screen, and interactive media as well, and has been translated into 24 languages. His most famous novel, *THE KEEP* was adapted into a perfectly awful film by Michael Mann. His latest thrillers, *GROUND ZERO* and *FATAL ERROR*, star his urban mercenary, Repairman Jack. *JACK: SECRET CIRCLES* is the latest in a young-adult series starring a fourteen-year-old Jack. Paul resides at the Jersey Shore and can be found on the Web at [www.repairmanjack.com](http://www.repairmanjack.com)