

**BONES
OF OUR
STARS,
BLOOD
OF OUR
WORLD**

AN EXCERPT
FROM THE
NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

CULLEN BUNN

A NOVEL OF TERROR BY

BONES OF OUR STARS, BLOOD OF OUR WORLD

Cullen Bunn

Description

For so many, this is the last week on earth.

A young woman plagued by surreal and harrowing nightmares whose immediate and distant futures are at a crossroads...a mysterious derelict who possesses knowledge beyond that of human understanding...a hard-edged sheriff who just may be in over his head this time...a local drug-dealing outcast whose role-playing fantasy aspirations are about to become all too real...These are only a few of the residents of Wilson Island, North Carolina, all of whose lives are about to converge and explode as a brutal masked killer and their heinous, seemingly ritualistic acts are shockingly exposed. For these atrocities are merely a grim portent of a terrifying, all-consuming evil about to descend upon this sleepy mid-Atlantic burg—a horrific force as ancient and cold as the stars themselves....

Excerpt from BONES OF OUR STARS, BLOOD OF OUR WORLD by Cullen Bunn

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The memory of witch's fire is burned into his skull.

That's what some locals call it, muttering to its existence with high tide in their throats, gazing out across the ocean on black nights, when even the stars are smothered by a blanket of darkness.

For old sailors and fishermen—and, Lord, there were plenty of them on this island—witch's fire was a shimmering blue or purple glow in the mist, around the mast of a ship or even all along the sides of Cape Jordan Lighthouse. It was also called it St. Elmo's fire (not so much around these parts), named after the patron saint of sailors, and it was said to warn of thunderstorms and lightning strikes.

But this is something different.

Something new.

Something old.

Witch's fire, like a slice in the night sky, dragging itself across the blackness like a blade through skin.

A cut.

Instead of blood, though, light spills out. Not lightning.

Not exactly.

And even once it's gone, once the wound has scabbed over, once the scar has faded, it leaves an echo.

His mind has imprinted upon the bright, searing light like a baby bird to its—

Mother.

It's a blister on his brain. He sees it even when he closes his eyes.

Which is odd.

Because he never saw it in the first place.

* * *

Monday

For so many, this is the last week on earth.

One beer, Barry thinks as he hobbles to the kitchen and yanks open the refrigerator door, would be the perfect way to flush this massive, stinking shit of a day right down the toilet.

Of course, he doesn't have any beer.

At least, not a *real* one.

Allie won't let him keep the stuff in the house, especially not after his last physical. Doc Maro had ordered blood work, and the blood had spilled Barry's dirty little secrets, revealing high blood pressure and bad cholesterol and a liver that simply didn't work half as well as it should.

"Too many years of hard living," the doctor had said, pausing to cluck out a *tut-tut-tut* that stung like a series of slaps, "and hard drinking to boot."

Kind of ironic, really, considering how much Dr. Glen Maro used to drink back in high school. After a day of tormenting freshmen, he'd peel out of his pre-patched letterman's jacket and blow off a little steam with a few Budweisers, or the hard stuff if his father forgot to lock the

liquor cabinet. Under the bleachers next to the football field, way out on the winding dirt roads nobody was watching, in the unused horse barn on Old Man Haney's overgrown farm on a Friday or Saturday night—the party was never too difficult to find. Going on damn near fifty years later, Glen, who would be called “Doc” when all was said and done, had once held the unofficial title of “Drunkest, Meanest Sonovabitch” on Wilson Island, North Carolina.

Now, though, he was a pillar of the community. Town physician. Deacon at the White Sands Christian Fellowship. Member of the board of aldermen. The local legend, the hellraiser who'd set the bar for all the shit-heels and delinquents to come, was a “fine, upstanding citizen.” Getting pickled in the public eye wasn't in the cards anymore. Neither was bullying others.

Or was it?

Maybe some of Glen's bluster, swagger, and cruelty remained, manifesting as prescriptions and meal plans and dietary restrictions.

And judgment, Barry thinks. Let's not forget that.

Tut.

Tut.

Tut.

Barry can't help but wonder if Doc gets a perverse thrill out of the humiliation his patients experience every time he orders them to turn their head and cough. Now, thanks to the prick of a needle and some numbers generated in a lab somewhere, Doc wasn't just checking for a hernia.

He was grabbing hold and squeezing tight.

Betrayed by my own blood, Barry muses, and some asshole who used to give younger kids wedgies and swirlies but now dishes out heart medication and condescending glares with equal abandon.

And so, no beer.

None of that cheap bourbon that Barry likes so much.

No alcohol of any kind.

Not in the house and not in his gut. If Barry stops at the ABC store, steals off to the Tugboat, or so much as sneaks a peek at the beer aisle at the grocery store, his loving wife will know.

She'll smell it on me.

And then there would be hell to pay.

And he can't even get drunk to dull his senses during the dressing-down.

Instead, Allie keeps root beer on hand. *Root beer.* As if that somehow makes this easier, comforts the cravings, relieves the frustration, soothes the insult brought on by age and a failing liver and a rat-bastard doctor. Sometimes on really tough days, when Barry's thoughts go grim, he thinks maybe his loving spouse of forty-two years is taunting him.

Barry is an old man.

Wearing slouchy pajama bottoms and a baggy T-shirt.

Staring down the barrel of a 9 p.m. bedtime.

Not an ounce of fight—of fire—left in him.

Searching the fridge for a beer that doesn't exist.

Something reeks within the refrigerator, though. Leftovers that have gone forgotten for a little too long, maybe. Not his concern. He'll let Allie deal with it tomorrow. Pushed all the way to the back, behind cups of probiotic yogurt and Tupperware containers of tuna casserole, stand six tall bottles of brown glass.

At least they look like beer, Barry thinks. If anyone peeks through the window, they'll see me taking a swig and think to themselves, "There's old Barry, still throwing them back like he used to! There's a guy who knows how to take life by the horns and live it up!"

One bottle clinks against the others as Barry drags it out.

"You love root beer," he mutters to himself, casting his voice high and shrill, mocking his wife.

But not loud enough that she could possibly hear.

The glass is cold in his hand.

"It's caffeine-free," he whines in his godawful approximation of Allie's voice, "so it won't keep you up all night."

He shoves the refrigerator door closed.

"Don't forget to put the bottle in the recycling bin!" he singsongs through curled lips.

He turns the bottle over in his hand.

Diet root beer. Oh my God.

She's definitely fucking with me.

Barry twists the cap from the bottle, tosses it onto the counter. It's bedtime, and the alarm clock will be shaking him awake before he knows it. He's three steps out of the kitchen before he realizes he forgot to turn off the lights. Grumbling, he shuffles back through the door and snaps the switch.

The house is dark.

Midway down the hall between the kitchen and the bedroom, a nightlight is plugged into an outlet. It casts a feeble orange glow along the walls.

Dark.

And quiet.

He takes a swig of the root beer—correction, the *diet* root beer—as he shuffles toward the bedroom. He holds the cold, fizzy, artificially sweetened liquid in his mouth, savoring it. He has to admit, it tastes pretty good. Not good enough that he'd ever say as much to his beloved, of course. And definitely not good enough to make up for the day he's just had.

Not hardly.

His boss, Mr. Winslow at Surefire Pest Solutions, is just a kid. But he likes to throw his weight around. Enjoys yelling. During the best of times, yeah, but even more so when the sailing is anything but smooth. At the moment, with the crew unable to keep up with an ever-increasing glut of assignments, the water is choppy. And Mr. Winslow has made it obvious that he doesn't care for Barry. Why? Who knew? Sometimes one person just didn't like another, rhyme or reason be damned. One thing is certain: Mr. Winslow has no respect for Barry's thirty-five years of killing termites and cockroaches and carpet beetles.

Mr. Winslow has barely been alive that long.

When Surefire Pest Solutions isn't living up to its online customer reviews, it's Barry who weathers the full force of the boss's wrath. And today had been one of those days. It didn't matter that the company was painfully understaffed to handle the number of jobs they were receiving. It didn't matter that Barry shouldered half those jobs, late though they might be, all by his lonesome. It didn't matter that Mr. Winslow could stop riding a desk chair and kill a few bugs himself to help the company get caught up on service calls. It only mattered that Surefire's reputation—one built, at least in part, on Barry's back—was suffering. Bad Yelp reviews piling up. And that likely meant young Mr. Winslow was getting an ass-chewing of his own from the retired founder of the business, the *real* Mr. Winslow, a man "Li'l Winslow" called "Daddy."

That notion makes Barry smile and offer a cheers to the man upstairs.

Approaching his partially open bedroom door, he sees that the room beyond is filled with shadow. He sighs. Allie's already turned out her bedside lamp, which means she's sound asleep. He'll need to move carefully in the room to avoid stubbing a toe or waking his wife. And he'll have to fumble with his CPAP machine, another form of torture imposed upon him by the Allie/Doc Maro tag team, to make sure the damned thing is filled with water and ready to—

The smell stops him cold.

A foul stench.

For a split second, Barry wonders if he left the fridge open, if the rank scent of leftovers is following him.

This is worse, though.

Much worse.

A sickly sweet aroma, not unlike spoiled milk.

But also not unlike the stink of an overwarm butcher shop.

Meat.

Blood.

As Barry pushes the door open and steps into the dark room, his toes brush against something crinkly on the floor. The curtains are drawn, but there's enough moonlight filtering in from behind the fabric, enough of the nightlight-glow coming in from the hallway, that Barry can get a feel for his surroundings. Looking down, he sees a white trash bag, dark and slimy fingerprints leaving smeared trails across the plastic. He nudges the bag with his foot. The contents are murky and dark, soft and wet.

Barry wonders if Allie has been fussing about, collecting trash to be taken out for tomorrow's garbage pickup. Leaving the spoils of her work on the bedroom floor like this, though, is not her style.

And what the hell has she been cleaning anyway? What's in the bag?

He looks to the bed where she sleeps. Still. Unmoving. He's about to risk waking her, about to ask her what's going on.

The words catch in his throat.

Allie sleeps on top of the covers. And she's not wearing a stitch of clothing. Her skin is pale in the gloom. Except where it's not.

From her throat to her groin, her skin is dark, almost black, deeper than the shadows of the room.

Not dark.

Hollow.

Someone stands in the corner. Not far from the bed. Lurking in the gloom. A man. Tall. Thin. He is dressed in light-colored clothing, almost blending into the eggshell-white bedroom walls. But an apron of black leather—also glistening—covers his chest and stomach. A belt around his waist is studded with implements of glittering metal. His arms are covered, up to his elbows, in black leather gloves. In one hand he holds something meaty, about the size of a softball. His face is impossible to discern, not because of the darkness, but because—

Is he wearing my CPAP mask?

The man most certainly wears a face covering of some sort, and a long, whipping hose hangs from it, trailing all the way to the . . .

. . . bloody . . .

. . . floor.

The stranger drops the hunk of wet meat.

It plops to the floor, splattering blood, and rolls a couple of inches, falling to a stop in a wedge of pale moonlight

Is that Allie's heart?

And the masked figure is now racing across the bedroom, quickly, silently. The hose from the mask whips back and forth, clicking strangely. His gloved hand darts down to his belt—a *utility belt, just like Batman*, Barry thinks—comes back up grasping something metallic and sharp.

Where the hell are his eyes?

Barry should be able to see them, even in the darkness, this up close and personal, right?

Root beer arcs through the air in an undulating spray as Barry, now holding the bottle by its neck, swings with all his might. The brown glass shatters against the stranger's head in an explosion of foam and shards. The assailant grunts, stumbles back, bumps into the bed's footboard, rocking the mattress, shaking Allie's lifeless flesh, because it *is* lifeless, she's *dead* Allie's dead Allie's *definitely* dead—

As the broken bottle thumps to the floor, Barry lunges at the stranger with a roar of horror and rage. His hands—arthritic though they may be—clench into fists. He punches the man in his apron-covered stomach. He brings a fist down against the mask that covers the man's face.

Barry feels his fingers break against the unexpected hardness of the eyeless mask.

The intruder comes up, shouldering Barry in the gut, staggering him back, but Barry hasn't had enough, and he moves in, punching at the man who has just butchered his wife, feeling the agony of cracked bones, his ruined fingers shifting and crunching against one another. He drives a knee into his attacker. He claws at the strange, eyeless face with his good hand. He flails. He can't get to a phone, but he can yell his ass off, and maybe one of the neighbors will hear the disturbance.

At first his screams are inhuman and incomprehensible, raw, terrified bellows and shrieks, but the words eventually form in his head, coalesce on his lips.

"Somebody—!"

Something cold slashes across Barry's throat.

Something warm washes down his baggy T-shirt.

He feels a sliver of iciness—of metal—still jutting from his neck. Panting, the masked intruder grips it tightly by the handle, twisting, sawing through bone and digging up meat. Barry's arms fall limply at his sides. His legs begin to buckle.

One last thought races through Barry's mind.

One damn beer.

That's all I wanted.

Then it's lights out, promptly at 9 p.m.

* * *

Moonlight dances across the water, turning every ripple and crest into a jagged silver blade, flickering across the endless dark. Somewhere out in the distance, a buoy bell clangs rhythmically, reminding anyone who's listening that there's still something—*anything*—beyond the shore. Waves rush in, sizzling across the sand, seaweed and bits of shells and driftwood tumbling in their wake.

Willa Hanson stands on the beach, just barely within reach of the oncoming waves. By the time the water arrives, it has turned into bubbles and froth. Her sandals discarded a few yards behind her, she digs her toes into the wet sand, flexing them, as she watches the ocean. So vast and empty that it might swallow her up just because she dares to stare into its depths.

What's the old saying? If you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

Willa chuckles.

Trust me, you wouldn't like what you'd see, abyss.

In her hand, pinched between her index and middle finger, is her last cigarette. Her final smoke for some time to come. The Marlboro Light is lit, the cherry aglow, ashes trickling into the sand in which she's buried her toes. A curl of smoke rises into the cool night air. She doesn't remember lighting it. Habit, she guesses. She wants to bring the cigarette to her lips, to take a long, deep drag. But despite what everyone has always said about her, what they will almost definitely say about her in the very near future, she's not completely irresponsible.

She flicks the cigarette out across the surface of the water, watches the pinpoint of red flare through the darkness.

Like a streak of witch's fire.

The blazing cherry spins and vanishes into the rolling waves.

Snuffed out.

Like her future.

Maybe.

It all depends on what she wants to do, on what she and Kenny decide. Even though she's pretty much already made up her mind. She's self-destructive that way.

Waves roll in, ceaseless, foamy and white, and her sodden, unsmoked Marlboro tumbles in the surf, along with smooth pebbles, broken shells, and shattered sand dollars shining in the moonlight. A couple of fiddler crabs, leaving crisscrossing tracks on the wet beach, investigate the cigarette. One of the crabs picks the butt up and dashes away with its prize. The second crab zigzags away in a *wait for me, wait for me* kind of pursuit.

Willa's hand falls to her stomach, lingers there.

It doesn't feel any different. *She* doesn't, anyway. But everything *is* different now.

All because I peed on a stick.

She knows better, of course. The at-home pregnancy test hasn't condemned her to a certain fate. Willa did this to herself, her and Kenny. Behind her, she sees her Honda CR-V parked several yards back, nestled in the dunes of the Point. This was the scene of the crime—just two months ago, she and Kenny rolled around in a tangle of sleeping bags in the back of his F-150 with the roar and sigh of the surf as their mood music.

It was all very romantic.

Shooting stars and everything.

Now the wind off the water is cold and bitter. The beach is quiet. You'd never know that the summer season is upon them. Tourists. Fishing charters. Bonfire parties. Part-time jobs.

For some of us.

Keggers at Mitch Bently's summer house.

For some of us.

Camps. College tours.

For some of us.

Somewhere out there, across the water, stand the ruins of the Cape Jordan Lighthouse. The old structure hasn't been in operation for decades, but Willa wishes it would flare to life just one more time and guide her through the predicament she's in.

Willa pulls the folds of Kenny's letterman jacket tighter around her frame. Her father is going to shit a brick. Or maybe suffer a heart attack. Or, more likely, shit out his still-beating heart while it goes into cardiac arrest. And, as his heart sprouts spider legs and scurries around the floor, he'll try to stomp it to a pulp to end his impossible pain and disappointment and misery.

And then he'll commence stomping on Kenny.

Or he'll have Scraps or Bear do it for him.

Where is Kenny anyhow?

He should have been here by now, standing on the beach with her, his tangled hair blowing in the sea breeze, that charmingly goofy grin on his lips, probably slipping and falling into a disbelieving frown as she tells him how the pee-stick has eternally cursed them.

Maybe he's already figured it out.

Could he have read Willa's uneasy silence and distance—the unspoken worry written all over her face—over the past few days? If he had, was he standing her up? Avoiding her? Retreating like the waves, rushing out into the nothingness?

No.

That isn't his style, not by a long shot.

No matter what, Kenny wouldn't cast aside his responsibilities. He wouldn't turn his back on Willa, even if it meant kissing all those athletic scholarships good-bye. And he wouldn't even bat an eye over it, wouldn't hesitate. He's a solid guy, stands up for the people he cares about, would do anything for anyone if it's the right thing. It's one of the reasons Willa loves him.

Gag.

Turning to look toward the sand-swept road that cuts through the dunes and the patches of tall sea oats, Willa sees no sign of his F-150's headlights in the night.

Her stomach flip-flops.

Fishing her cell phone out of the letterman jacket pocket, she thumbs the screen, scrolling through a list of her favorite contacts—Sarah, Mom, Dad, finally Kenny. She presses the tiny picture of his handsome face and waits for the line to connect.

"Hey, babe," Kenny says, answering on the second ring, and she can hear the silly, disarming smile on his face.

"Where are you?" she asks. "I thought we were meeting up."

"I know, I know. Sorry. I lost track of time at Charlie's, but I'm on my way now"

"How far out?"

"Couple of miles. You want me to stop at Rudy's? Pick us up some snacks? If the Warlock's hanging around, maybe I can grab some smokes or a six-pack"

Willa laughs self-consciously.

“*What’s so funny?*” Kenny asks.

“Nothing,” she says, and she’s glad he’s still a couple of miles out, because it might give the wind a chance to dry the tears from her cheeks. “I uh, don’t need anything. Just get here, all right?”

“*Miss me that bad?*”

“Something like that.”

“*On my way. I should . . .*” His voice trails off for a second. Then: “*What the hell is that? Oh, shit!*”

His sudden full-of-shock voice competes with the warbling, whining sound of tires swerving on pavement screaming over the line. An explosive crashing sound fills her ear.

“Kenny?!” Willa cries. “*Kenny?!*”

The call is still connected, but there’s no answer, no sound from the other end.

Willa grabs her sandals and races toward her car, the beach trying to pull her down. She tightly grips her phone, keeping the line open, hoping Kenny’s voice will crackle back at her and tell her everything’s going to be all right. Not just tonight, not just right now, but forever.

But he doesn’t.

He’s far too responsible to start lying to her now.

* * *

All things considered, Kenny Smythe is very lucky.

Primarily because he didn’t have the chance to stop by Rudy’s Mart and visit the Warlock.

Along Killdeer Avenue, sleeping houses spring to life. Interior lights brighten living rooms. Porch lights flare. Curtains are pulled aside so residents can see just what the hell made all the racket—which is Kenny’s pickup, jumped up onto the curb, crunched over the twisted remains of a stop sign, and crumpled around a creosote-coated telephone pole.

Almost certainly calls are being made right now. Sheriff Buck or Deputy Fines will be on their way to survey the incident.

If Kenny had stopped by the Warlock, they might find beer or a bag of cheap weed or even a few of those red-and-blue pills in the truck. And that would be, as Kenny’s dad likes to say, all she wrote. No trifecta of high school basketball, football, and baseball fame would spare him, especially not with the sheriff, an alumnus of Vickersville High just fifteen minutes up the highway, conducting the investigation. Buck was an all-star himself back in the day, and still indulges those old rivalries. Wilson Island High students like Kenny get more speeding tickets, have their parties roused more often, are busted with booze or pot more frequently, and get assigned more community service than students from Buck’s alma mater. That’s just a local fact.

And if Kenny was arrested for possession or driving under the influence thanks to already kicking a few back at Charlie’s house, then his athletic scholarships might be in jeopardy. Without them, college would be out of the question. Kenny would *never* get off the godforsaken island.

All. She. Wrote.

What would he do then, stuck living out his days on Wilson Island like so many others? Follow in Dad’s footsteps and run charter fishing expeditions? Join the Warlock in peddling beer, weed, and pills to underage kids behind Rudy’s Mart? Pull shady odd jobs for Willa’s old man

doing God-knows-what? Become a sheriff's deputy himself and, years from now, take out his bitterness and frustration on every athlete from every rival school in the county?

Kenny's head spins. He might not be too drunk or high, but he's shaken. By the adrenaline. By the collision with the telephone pole.

By . . .

. . . the *thing* . . .

. . . he saw.

Still, the thoughts of his future collapsing around him cement as fixed points in the turmoil of his thoughts.

"*Kenny?! Kenny?!*"

He is dimly aware of Willa's voice, distant, calling out to him.

"*Are you okay?*"

He shoves the driver's-side door open and hops out on shaky legs. A flood of dizziness washes over him. He places a hand on the truck's frame to steady himself.

"*Answer me!*"

He notices his phone now, glowing on the passenger-side floorboard. A photo of Willa is on-screen. She's smiling, wearing a white dress and cowboy boots, sitting in the shadows of a rickety barn. Maybe she should be holding an acoustic guitar and sporting a cowboy hat, but instead she embraces an electric Fender, and a jean jacket covered in rock 'n' roll band patches is thrown over her amp. It's a picture she might have used as an album cover. If she still played music.

Leaning into the truck, through the shadows, stretching, Kenny feels another dizzy spell. Maybe the collision was a little harder than he originally thought. His fingertips touch the phone, find purchase, and slide it closer. Rising back to his wobbly legs, he brings the phone to his ear.

"I'm h-here," he says, quietly at first, then more loudly. "I'm here."

"*Oh my God!*" Willa says.

"I'm here," Kenny repeats.

"*What happened?*" Willa asks. "*It sounded—*"

"I had an accident."

"*Are you all right?!*"

"Ran right off the road. Not sure if my truck is just sorta fucked or totally fucked."

"*You're okay, though?*"

"I think so. Dizzy, maybe. B-but I don't think I'm hurt."

"*Where are you now?*"

"On Killdeer."

"*Just hang tight, okay? I'm on my way. Did you call the sheriff?*"

Kenny looks around the neighborhood. More lights glow from stoops and living room windows. On some porches, men and women and children in house robes and pajamas are shuffling out to see what's going on. A few of them have phones in hand.

"I'm sure someone did," Kenny says.

"*Okay,*" Willa says, and again, "*I'm on my way.*"

Willa disconnects and Kenny slides the phone into his jeans pocket. He pulls himself away from the truck's door and moves toward the front to survey the damage. It doesn't look as bad as he expected, but he winces anyhow. The hood is crumpled. Underneath, something leaks onto the street, spreading out in rivulets across the pavement. Steam spews from under the metal.

But Kenny imagines that if someone would just step on the edge of the bent, fallen stop sign, he might be able to back the truck off the curb and even drive it home without a problem.

He glances around—at the street, at the illuminated houses, at the rubbernecks.

He sees no sign of the . . .

. . . *thing* . . .

. . . that caused the accident.

Not a *thing*, he tells himself, but a *man*.

Kenny didn't get a good look at him. The guy—he had to be a guy, based on his height and build—had dashed out into the street right in front of the truck. He was wearing a white shirt, a black overgarment of some sort, a belt covered in dangling and glittering metal adornments, long gloves, and . . .

. . . *a mask*?

It had all happened so fast—

Kenny crying out. Dropping his phone. Swerving. Bouncing onto the curb, rattling across the stop sign, crunching into the telephone pole.

—that he can't be sure what he saw.

Kenny almost hit the guy. That much he knows. For a moment, as the sign wrenched out of shape and thumped against the underbelly of the truck, he thought he *had* run him over. In that instant, Kenny had felt an avalanche of horror roll over him. But, no, he hadn't hit the man. There he went, scurrying off into the shadows—without even looking back—just after the collision.

But there's a smear of blood on the street.

Black under the streetlights.

But blood just the same.

Maybe I clipped him, Kenny thinks.

Or perhaps he was hurt before he threw himself right in Kenny's path. Maybe he was confused, suffering, not thinking straight.

Even though his head is still tilting and whirling, Kenny turns in place, scanning the houses on both sides of the street and the faces of their residents, some of whom are drawing closer, asking if he's all right, if he needs medical attention, and he sees no further sign of the strange man he almost flattened, and there are no bloody footprints leading away from the scene, just the slash of crimson wetness, trailing toward—

—a plastic bag.

A trash bag, stuffed maybe half full, tied in a knot at the top. It rests on the street, up against the curb. Droplets of black blood sprinkle the plastic. More blood decorates the ragged edges of a tear in the side of the bag. Thick fluid oozes from within.

The feeling of horror and dread swells within Kenny again, almost strong enough to shove his vertigo aside. *Almost*. Instead, it all does a spinning dance—he thinks he might puke, but he forces his nausea down as he approaches the bag.

“Should we call an ambulance?” somebody asks.

“Sheriff'll be here soon,” says someone else.

“What happened?” another voice asks from the gathering crowd.

Kenny nudges the trash bag with the toe of his sneaker.

A heart spills across the pavement.

A human heart.

The rip in the bag grows, widening, more blood oozing out.

A piece of meat, dark and curved like a giant bean, tumbles to the street. A length of intestine slithers out of the expanding, seeping tear. A fatty chunk of flesh.

A second heart.

Kenny violently reacts, vomiting, falling to his knees and losing his dinner and whatever remained of lunch. He pukes up his feelings of luckiness along with all the beer he drank at Charlie's and lets it boil in the spreading blood. Everything comes out—he throws up until he's sweating and trembling but strangely no longer dizzy.

He's still in a state when the red-and-blue lights finally pulse across the tiny houses of Killdeer Avenue.

* * *

Careless, careless, careless!

From his hiding spot across the street, crouching behind a rusting, rattling, leaking air conditioner unit, the man watches and curses his own stupidity.

Ran right out into the street! Right in front of a pickup! Like a fucking toddler!

It's not all his fault, he tells himself. The mask makes it difficult to see. Like looking through a fog-veiled and rain-slicked window. Only it's not water washing down the glass in sheets. It's more like Vaseline. Like his plans, oozing and semisolid, clinging to some sort of vague shape but somehow still formless and shifting.

Mutating.

In a way, Barry and Allison Hadley were part of a mutation to what he'd done up until this point. Out of character, maybe. And a mistake. Necessary. Required. But a mistake anyhow. He hadn't been ready. Hadn't been prepared the way he should have been.

Sloppy.

Mrs. Hadley had been easy enough. Quiet. She hadn't made a sound, hadn't even opened her eyes until he made the first slice. By the time the blade slid sluggishly through skin and tissue, it was too late. Done and done. The old woman, wide-eyed and gasping, was finished before she realized what was happening.

If she realized what was happening.

He hopes she didn't. He liked Mrs. Hadley. She'd always been kind to him.

On the other hand, Mr. Hadley—Barry—had caught him off guard. The old guy fought back, and was stronger than expected. The back of the man's head still pounds where the bottle cracked across his skull. His cheek throbs where Mr. Hadley whaled on him, crushing the hardness of the mask into his face. He hopes the attack hasn't left a bruise. That would draw undue attention when he finally takes the mask off. Mr. Hadley had fought tooth and nail, giving everything he had, punching, kicking, and—at the end—scratching.

Mr. Hadley had screamed.

It was the sound, cut short with a series of stabs into the ragged meat of the old guy's throat, that had been startling. Mentally, the man had been preparing for the Harvest, but somehow had never anticipated the screaming. It was louder than expected, filled with agony and anger and fright that took him by surprise.

Someone must have heard that.

The thought had taken root in his brain and he couldn't shake it, not as his victim had crumpled to the floor, not as he started cutting, and certainly not now as he hid in the narrow alleyway between houses.

The houses are so close around here.

Normally, with the animals that had come before, he would have taken the time to dispose of the bodies, keeping only the meat that was necessary. These hadn't been animals, of course—livestock, actually. He had expected it to be more difficult, but—

Someone heard, someone heard!

And he hadn't so much sliced the vital organs as ripped and dredged them out. He had to work fast. Before a neighbor, roused by the sounds of struggle, came snooping and caught him in the middle of his sacred task. He'd thrown the meat into the bag, didn't even bother cinching it up properly. He'd left the bodies where they lay, on the bed and on the floor, hadn't got rid of them carefully, and fled the house, across the yard, and into the street.

All because—

Mr. Hadley had screamed. And someone heard.

They *must* have. They *must still* be hearing the screams. Because they're most certainly still echoing in *his* skull right now.

His heart slams. Sweat coats his skin, soaks into his clothes. He can't catch his breath, not under the mask.

People gather in their yards. Clad in pajamas and robes, they shuffle out to gawk, to see the pickup truck that had smashed into the telephone pole and now sits right out in front of their houses, hissing and steaming, to see why the driver—Kenny Smythe, of all people—is vomiting his guts onto the pavement.

Doesn't matter if they actually heard or not, because they damn sure know what I'm up to now.

The precious contents of his bag have spilled out for all the world to see. His hard work, the Harvest, has been ruined. He'll be empty-handed when he returns home. And that, he knows, will not suffice.

I'm not cut out for this.

Cut.

Not hacked out for this. Not slashed out. Not ripped out.

A nervous giggle rises in his throat as he stops himself. Now is not the time for childish jokes, especially not at his own expense. If he screws this up—

Something moves in the shadows behind him.

Shuffling. Rustling. Sniffing.

A dog, a little black-and-white beagle mix, trundles his way. It moves in a carefree pattern, nose to the ground, searching for something—anything—interesting. A tag jangles from the collar around its neck. A rambling, roaming dog-about-town making his nightly rounds. When the dog smells the blood on the man, it tenses. And when it spots him, squatting in what must be one of its favorite pissing spots behind the AC, it jumps back. The hair along its spine sticks up like a Mohawk. It growls, not quite barking but letting out six low, warning chuffs.

Not too loud. Yet.

Instinct guides the man's hand to his belt, his gloved fingers finding the handle of one of the ritual blades.

He reconsiders, pulls his fingers away from the weapon, clenches his hand into a tight fist. The glove's leather creaks.

The killer extends his empty hand, slowly, cautiously, gently. "It's okay," he says.

Speaking under the mask is strange. Uncomfortable. It's the first time he's tried to do so. Drool spills down his chin, down his neck. The words are muffled and slurred, but hopefully his soothing tone comes across.

Wagging his tail, the dog approaches, sniffs the gloved hand, and licks the fingers.

The killer runs a blood-and-saliva-slicked glove over the dog's head, roughs him up playfully.

He grabs at the tag on the dog's collar, leans in closer for a better look.

Through the haze of his mask, he sees that the tag reads *BUSTER*.

He exhales, his breath under the mask pluming over his face in a rank, humid cloud. He is thankful. Glad he doesn't need to kill Buster. It would be easier, yes. Everything has been up until this point. But he doesn't want to kill this dog any more than he wants to kill his friends and neighbors.

Want, though, has nothing to do with it. He only does what he must. What's required.

He can't stop now, even though his actions are no longer as secretive as he would like.

Will he need to be more careful? Yes. More efficient? Yes. More ruthless? Yes.

Can he dream of ever being able to stop?

No. Not ever.

He squints at the red-and-blue lights of the approaching vehicle. The colors, the brightness, even muted through the mask, hurt his eyes.

Maybe they sting more *because* of the mask.

Now that the sheriff is here, now that one of his bags—his bags of treats—has been found, it won't be long before they find the murder scene. The blood soaked into the bedsheets, into the carpet, spattered on the walls and even the ceiling. Mrs. Hadley's body, what's left of it, on the bed. Her husband's, ripped apart, bones cracked and spread out from its flesh, sprawled on the floor.

Buster shakes his head. His tags jangle. Still wagging his tail, the dog suddenly darts off.

Oh, shit.

Too late, he realizes Buster's owners might notice blood smeared on the little dog.

What's it matter?

They wouldn't find fingerprints.

Buster isn't going to be able to tell them about the masked figure he met in an alley between houses.

The killer follows the dog's lead, creeping farther into the shadows, knowing he's failed and there will be hell to pay.

The screams no longer echo in his head. Instead, one nagging thought rolls over repeatedly in his gray matter: *The job's gonna be a real bitch from here on out.*