

MARLA

By Jonathan Janz

Chapter One The Widower

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Carl Lancaster believed in evil. After eleven years as a police detective, how could he not?

He'd investigated a nursing home director who tormented his residents for kicks, a dad who'd bludgeoned his toddler to death because the kid wouldn't stop crying. He'd testified at trial, the words surreal coming out of his mouth, how a dog owner had left his basset hound tethered to a stake while vacationing in Florida, the dog only able to slip free of her collar when she'd reached an advanced state of starvation. The dog had been coaxed back to life by the disbelieving farmer who'd found her, but when the owner was asked why he'd abandoned his pet to an unspeakable fate, he'd calmly replied, "It's not like there wasn't grass in the yard."

Yes, Carl had encountered evil.

But all of it was nothing compared to his first glimpse of Marla Gorman.

He was steering his cruiser down River Road when he glanced at the Gorman House. A two-story Gothic, the facade a listless bluish-gray, no other neighbors within a mile. And though there were plenty

of trees nuzzling the property, the westering sun was still high enough to backlight the home and cast cadaverous shadows over the road.

The story went that twelve years ago there'd been a pickup full of teenagers out hell-raising on Halloween night, vandalizing houses and generally being pains in the ass. When they reached the Gorman property, they piled out of the truck and pelted the house with eggs. That hadn't been enough for a boy named Rodney Karsten, who'd hurled a rock through a window.

When the boy had turned around, there stood Marla.

Homeschooled her entire life, Marla was a rarely glimpsed oddity. Her mother never let her out in public, so understandably, folks speculated why.

Was the mother abusive?

Was something wrong with Marla?

Or had Marla done something so reprehensible that her mother had sequestered her in the creepy old house to keep the citizens of King's Branch safe?

Maybe it was this last question that flashed through Rodney Karsten's mind as he beheld the young woman staring at him in the moonlight.

By the time Rodney rejoined his companions, his face had been bleached of color, and he was raving about Marla being in his head. Three days later, he hanged himself. So naturally, Marla was blamed, and a monster was born.

Carl didn't believe a word of it.

He was doing less than twenty. No need to push it on this tortuous stretch of road, and what was there to hurry home to anyway? His puppy would be ecstatic to see him, whether he showed up at dusk or after midnight. At the thought of Elle's sweet cinnamon face, he recalled the neglected basset hound who'd been left for dead, and he was thinking of that emaciated dog when his eyes swung past an upstairs window of the Gorman House.

Marla was leering at him.

Blood drained from Carl's extremities. Acid boiled in his throat, his mouth leached of moisture.

"What the fuck?" he murmured.

When the road swung left, and Carl completed the curve, the physical Marla disappeared, but the mental afterimage of her hung suspended, indelibly tattooed on his retinas.

Carl contemplated what he'd seen.

The room from which she'd stared had to be a bedroom, and to further that impression, Marla had worn what looked like a nightgown, ivory filigreed with navy blue.

River Road dimmed, the trees thickening, and Carl remembered Marla's face.

God, that *face*. Rumor was that the young woman was attractive, and he supposed she might have been, had her expression been different.

But her expression ... he closed his eyes for a moment and sought the word ...

Accursed. Her expression was accursed.

Her eyes blazed with gleeful wisdom. The eyebrows were hideously arched, like Marla had told the world's sickest joke and dared you not to laugh at it.

He rolled down the window to admit the damp May air.

In repose, he guessed Marla's lips might have been full and pink, but when he glimpsed them, they'd been attenuated by the hellish grin, the corners upturned to an unnatural height. The straight white teeth were like tombstones, glistening ivory tombstones—

A horn blatted. Carl jolted in his seat and discovered the oncoming van. He wrenched the wheel, veered back into his own lane, and as his heart thundered, the blast of the van's horn sounded again and again, the driver so shaken by the near-death experience that his only recourse was honking his way back to town.

Sweaty all over, Carl guided the cruiser to a halt. He felt foolish, but there was no way around it: the sight of Marla Gorman had scared the shit out of him.

He'd just about gotten his heart under control when the radio sounded. He detached the handset and said, "This is Lancaster."

"Hey, Carl," their dispatcher, Jasmine Lowe, said.

"Hey, Jasmine. You sound like you're about to give me bad news."

A pause. "I know you just got off, but ... something's happened."

Carl frowned, Jasmine's trepidation somehow centering him. "Go on," he said.

Jasmine sighed, which came through as a throaty crackle. "I know your shift just ended, but RJ asked for you."

"Don't worry about that." Carl squinted through the windshield at the junipers and firs crowding the road. "Jasmine, what's this about?"

"A body," she said.