

MARLA

By Jonathan Janz

Chapter Three The Outsider

2

The sound of the TV—Animal Planet—was vaguely audible as Carl mounted the porch steps. As he turned the knob, he heard the clatter of toenails, and Elle swept into the mudroom, body-blocking his shins and licking his pant legs before he even got the door shut.

“Okay,” he said, laughing. “Come here, girl.” He grasped her around the sides, and when he hoisted her and made to kiss her, he felt hot liquid dribble on his forearm.

“Aw, man,” he said, hustling her toward the back door. He managed to place Elle on the deck before she unleashed entirely.

Elle finished peeing and scuttled back to him. “Good girl,” he said, scooping her up.

Poor dog. She was nowhere near potty-trained, but how could she be? It was like he’d told Janine, RJ’s wife: A cop was ill-suited for a puppy. But Janine’s friend was a breeder, and when one of her mini Goldendoodles didn’t sell—Elle was the runt of the litter—the breeder, whom Carl had helped when her car sprang a flat in the middle of nowhere, insisted he take it. RJ and Janine had joined in, telling Carl he’d be crazy to say no, but still Carl hesitated. Long hours in the house alone, no kids to roughhouse with. He worried Elle would grow depressed.

He kissed her forehead and set her loose. She raced around the house, skidding through the kitchen and banging into a cabinet, then recovered and galloped into the next room. Smiling, he flipped on the lights and surveyed the carpet for droppings. He counted three mounds of poop and who knew how many patches of urine before he retrieved his cleaning supplies. It was unpleasant work, but he refused to keep her penned up while he was gone.

He sensed Elle watching him as he picked up after her and spritzed the carpet with odor eliminator. “Watch any good shows today?”

Elle tilted her head and regarded him with those eloquent brown eyes.

The messes gone, he toted her to the bedroom, where he peeled off his uniform and twisted on the shower. Despite the guilt he felt at leaving Elle alone for so long, RJ and Janine had been correct about one aspect of dog ownership: Elle was a marvelous distraction.

Too bad she couldn’t keep him distracted all the time.

He tested the shower and climbed inside. He knew what was coming but still attempted to forestall it. He leaned under the steamy spray

(the scent of sheared copper in Jason Karr’s foyer)

... rinsing the oil from his face, the clammy sweat from his hair ...

(the click of the crime tech cameras, the lowered voices of the town policemen mingling uneasily with the county cops)

... turning around to let the showerhead assault his neck, his shoulders ...

(RJ eyeing him as he moved nearer, RJ waiting for him to see it)

... Elle bumping against the shower curtain ...

(the unbelievable details, the gruesome state of the body)

... Elle nosing the curtain aside and poking her head through ...

He smiled. "Not now, sweetie. I'll give you a bath tomorrow."

In another ten minutes, Carl was in bed, Elle positioned between his pillow and the headboard, his body weary but his mind repeating an endless loop that no amount of fatigue could derail:

He steps into the Karr family room and spies the body between the recliner and the couch. He can't see the body yet because a state cop obstructs his view. What draws his attention, however, isn't the body.

What draws his gaze is the gory crimson blotch on the ceiling.

Carl's seen blood on ceilings before. Ceilings, walls, floors, windows. Blood could jet in all sorts of directions. It's one of the few details movies get correct. But this ...

This is different.

Because the ceiling of the Karr residence is twelve feet high.

Carl has seen heads blown apart by shotgun fire, limbs torn off in farm accidents, bellies split open, and bodies roasted in car crashes. But as disturbing as these are, they're at least logical.

This is the stuff of horror movies.

Carl kneels over the body and can't help associating Karr's expression with Haddon's. They aren't precisely the same—Jason Karr's head is a lot more damaged than Haddon's was. Yet Carl can't escape it: both men look mind-shatteringly afraid.

With Karr, it's harder to see, the top of his head a bloody ruin and one of his eyes dislodged from its socket, but to Carl, it's as plain as day. Jason Karr has been scared to death. Both his eyes are blood red, the one dangling over his cheek showing no white at all. *Double subconjunctival hemorrhage*, he remembers the coroner calling it.

Try as he might, Carl can't ignore the truth: whatever killed Karr slammed him headfirst into the ceiling.

Stop, he thinks. *Don't even go down that road.*

But what other explanation can there be?

He lies in bed with Elle chewing his hair. He isn't sleepy at all, despite a double dose of melatonin.

Carl stares at the ceiling and wonders how Jason Karr's head could have smashed into something that high.

And how it could have done so violently enough to eject an eyeball from its socket.