This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 by Sady Doyle

Cover design & illustration © 2020 by James Curcio
Interior illustrations © 2020 by Benny Hope

Content Warning! This is horror. Worse, it’s about high school. Watch out for deadnaming, misgendering, casual ableism, r slurs, religious abuse, bullying, gaslighting, discussion of sexual assault, adults creeping on teens, bugs, rats, gone, death, and “Ace Ventura.” Not all of the good people are going to live.

Apocalypse 1999
Or
The Devil In Jenny Long
being
A Mall Gothic Novel
by
Sady Doyle
Table of Contents

Part One: The Last Day on Earth
   Chapter One: Nick 8
   Interlude 16
   Chapter Two: Jenny 17
   Chapter Three: Nick 28
   Interlude 36
   Chapter Four: Jenny 38
   Chapter Five: Nick 49

Part Two: The Day the World Went Away
   Chapter One: Jenny 55
   Interlude 64
   Chapter Two: Nick 65
   Interlude 72
   Chapter Three: Jenny 75
   Chapter Four: Nick 80
   Chapter Five: Jenny 87
   Chapter Six: Nick 101
   Chapter Seven: Jenny 110
   Chapter Eight: Nick 114
   Interlude 129

Part Three: Tennon Twilight
   Chapter One: Jenny 132
   Interlude 138
   Chapter Two: Nick 144
   Chapter Three: Jenny 151
   Interlude 157
   Chapter Four: Nick 158
   Interlude 166
   Chapter Five: Nick 167
   Chapter Six: Jenny 170
   Chapter Seven: Nick 175

Part Four: We’re In This Together
   Chapter One 188
   Interlude 194
   Chapter Two 202
   Chapter Three 209
   Interlude 210
   Chapter Four 217

Credits
NOTE TO THE READER
(if you exist)

There are three things you need to know that no-one has ever told you:

1) The apocalypse began outside of Columbus, Ohio in 1999.
2) The Devil rose to reclaim the Earth.
3) We started it. We’re sorry.

We assume you know about the apocalypse. The rest, however, has remained a secret until now.

We, the guilty parties, have assembled this collection of documents and witness accounts, detailing the how and why of the End of Days. I would like to tell you that we did this to give your suffering a rational explanation. For the madness that ensued, however, there is no rational explanation, nor ever shall be. Say, then, that we did it to unburden the lingering darkness of our souls.

— NICHOLAS A. CASINI

“Lingering darkness of our souls?” Jesus. This is how we summoned the Devil. If you read this, you’ll see it was a bad idea, and then you won’t do it. Also, there’s no way I trust Nick to put this thing together without being extremely dramatic and using the word “darkness” 1,800 more times, so I’ve added footnotes. Thanks for reading, and have a great day!

I mean. Relatively speaking.

— JENNIFER C. LONG

First of all: I barely ever use the word “darkness.” Secondly, we didn’t discuss footnotes. No-one’s going to read a bunch of footnotes, Jenny. — NICK

Please read the footnotes. — JENNY
CHAPTER ONE

NICK

It began in darkness. In a salt circle, on the floor, sigils were drawn. A certain arrangement of numbers and planetary signs was made, suitable to the purpose. Within the circle, a pentagram; within the pentagram, a triangle; within the triangle, the most forbidden tool of the summoner’s art, a black mirror. It gleamed with reflected candlelight, like a fragment of the starry void; an unholy portal, a hole punched through the fragile skin of our reality, a gate opened to the unthinkable, allowing the thousands of Hells beneath our world to seethe through.

You can make your own black mirror at home, by the way. It’s easy. If you read to the end of this, I’ll give you the instructions.

The room of the ceremony was pitch-black and clouded with smoke. In its center, huddled over the light of a black candle, were the summoners: A pale, frightened girl and a boy with a knife in his hand.

The second summoner, you’d worry about for different reasons. He was a skinny, wiry boy, all sharp angles, but handsome, with wild black hair and large dark eyes that glittered with quiet anger. He missed nothing, this boy, and he forgave nothing; fools on his watch were not suffered. His face was sharp and gaunt, the skull’s shape visible beneath the skin; his eye sockets were hollowed out with eyeliner that went past “emo” and on into “missing member of a KISS tribute band.” His eyes glittered with quiet anger, unless I’ve said that already, and also with quiet intelligence. His hair was super rad. He was handsome.

Oh, all right, you got me. That one’s me. This was me, age eighteen years old, still very deep in my Goth phase. The blonde is my best friend Jenny. My hair was gigantic. I still haven’t found a cool way to describe my eyeliner. There was nothing cool about that eyeliner; it was a tragic mistake that marred my childhood. But I loved it, at the time, and you’re going to find out more embarrassing things about me eventually, so please just accept it for
what it was. Pencil me into your mind, gentle reader. Give me eyeliner you can forgive. Make me handsome.

“Omphagor, seventh of Hell’s seven Generals, Fiend who givs’st glory,” the boy (I) intoned. “In thy name we gather, that thou mays’t arise.”

“Arise,” Jenny repeated.


I was working the ritual from memory; tracing my tongue along the curls of its strange, dangerous language. I’d spent hours learning the script — pacing back and forth in my bedroom all semester long with the pages I’d Xeroxed from an old library book, until it was so much a part of me that I sometimes woke up mumbling the lines. You can ask me why I bothered; it’s a good question. I never asked.


I raised the ritual dagger up and drove it, hard, into the floor. As I closed my eyes, I could feel it — the black swoon of magic, some irrational force rising through me, raising the hair on my neck, crackling the air around me like static. It could be a placebo effect, I tried to tell myself. I could be willing myself crazy. But it never felt that way. It felt like a tide made of oil and milk, slicking around me, carrying me off somewhere. I chanted and let a black door open in my mind. Soon enough, the door in our world opened, too.

I mean. It was my bedroom door. It was my mom, standing at the top of the stairs — my bedroom was, by most people’s definitions, our basement — letting the late afternoon sunlight spill down and wreck our ambiance. But a door did open! So there.

“Girls?” My mother called down the stairs. “Time to get a move on. Big day coming.”

Here’s where I stop and explain some things.

*  *  *

Girls? You’re thinking. What girls? He said there was only one! Surely Nick Casini, my good friend who’s been narrating this book for over 800 words now, would not lead me astray!

First of all, yes, I would. I’m a necromancer, a summoner of demons, and worse than that, I’m a Gemini; I talk a lot, but you should never assume you know what I’m thinking. Second: Even though all this is true, I did not actually lead you astray this time. I simply gave you the proper context in which to process what my mom said, that context being: Me.

I will get this out of the way now, and then we can stop talking about it,¹ but one thing you should know about me is that I’m trans. That means a lot of people mistook me for a girl until I was in my twenties. People will mistake me for a girl in this story, several times. My friends won’t, because they know me — Jenny over there, she knows me; she was the first person I told, back in freshman year.

¹ He’s not going to stop talking about it. — Jenny.
when neither of us even knew there were words for it, or other people like me in the world — but in suburban Ohio in the late ‘90s, it was dangerous to even be gay. The only thing anyone knew about transgender people came from the end of *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, in the scene wherein Ace, whose previous life accomplishments included talking through his ass cheeks, threw up because he’d met one. I’m a brave man, but I was not about to subject myself to four years of non-stop Jim-Carrey-inspired violence if I could help it. So that was my situation: Safe people knew, most people didn’t, and I was stuck that way, dangling halfway out of the closet, until college. Fortunately, Goth girls and Goth guys don’t look that different, so I could make myself surprisingly comfortable without anyone noticing. A lot of dudes at our school wore too much eyeliner.

I mean, there was one other dude. His name was Trevor, and he despised me. Trevor spent all his time talking about the distinction between *real* Goths (him) and *mall* Goths (me), between real Goth music (the kind from the ‘80s) and stuff that was “just, like, heavy metal” (anything I liked). He said the phrase “that 4AD sound” more often than any non-forty had any right to. He had been on the wrestling team until he bought *Disintegration* in junior year. He claimed to have gotten high at Outlands with Damon Zex, this dude who ran an all-Goth public access show in Columbus, and whose two claims to fame were that he might have inspired an SNL skit and that every single Goth in Columbus claimed to have gotten high with him.2 It wasn’t fun to share a subculture with Trevor Murphy, nor was it fun to share a gender with him, but I comforted myself with the knowledge that I was already better at both than he was, and once I got out of high school —

Right. Where was I? I’m trans. Let’s move on.

* * *

“It was going to work this time,” I said, as Jenny clicked the light on in my bedroom.

“It really, really wasn’t,” she said.

In the lamplight, all the familiar wreckage came back into view: Rob Zombie CDs and *The Crow* posters, concert shots of Trent Reznor covered in mud taped to the corner of a mirror; Marilyn Manson, in his new apocalypse-space-man outfit, with red hair and tits, glaring out at me from my nightstand. The walls were covered in Sharpied pen-tagrams and song lyrics and the snarling, unfortunately distorted face of Jonathan Davis, from the year I took AP drawing and got a little too confident. Yes, that’s Jonathan Davis of Korn, by the way. When I told you that you’d learn embarrassing things about me, I didn’t mean trans stuff. I was a huge Korn fan. For, like, years.

God, I loved that basement. My parents never made me clean it; Jenny insisted we have all our sleepovers at her place because she was afraid she’d get typhus. There were whole meals rotting in odd corners. Clothes under my mattress had developed mold colonies complex enough to make vaccines, or really expensive cheese. My parents had tried to make one corner of it the “computer room,” and

2  *Claimed! Don’t sue us, Damon! — Jenny*
my filth had just grown around it, so I was the only member of the family with a strong enough stomach to use AOL. I think of that basement so often, so sadly, because it’s all gone now, and so is the house around it; my home was one of the first places we destroyed.

“I’m telling you, we’re getting better at the summoning,” I said, picking carpet lint off my black jeans as I stood up. “I finally memorized the whole thing.”

“So you can summon Hell later,” Jenny said. “We have the rest of our lives.”

We’d done the ritual maybe a dozen times that semester. Jenny had been humoring me at best. Today, I could feel some special impatience radiating off her, a louder-than-usual undertow of grow up already. I sensed that in her more and more often these days; a sharp, stinging little edge that I nicked myself on every time I got too enthused about magic or played a Korn CD in my car. Every girl reacts this way when you put on a Korn CD.\(^3\) That was on the days I could get her to hang out at all. It got to where I stopped telling her things. I was afraid of that new, mean, paper-cut voice of hers. Some days, I wasn’t even sure we were friends.

Today wasn’t one of those days. She slipped on her shoes, throwing an arm around my shoulder to steady herself, and suddenly I could see her again; that soft-faced, soft-hearted girl, my shy little sister, my sidekick. Jenny, who lived across the street from me, who I’d seen every day since third grade; Jenny, who I would know forever. I felt bad for even thinking we could grow apart. Though, of course, we would, and on the floor next to her was the reason: My graduation cap and gown, and hers. This — Friday, May 28, 1999 — was the day high school ended. We were being set loose, out of childhood, into our grown-up lives.

Also, pretty much everyone we knew would be dead within twenty-four hours. This was the last day before the apocalypse. I’m sorry I hadn’t mentioned that yet, but the thing about our friendship seemed more important.
**INTERLUDE**

**GRAMPA NICK’S CRAFT CORNER**

*How to Make a Black Mirror*

You will need:
- A standard-sized, glass-fronted oval picture frame.
- Black spray paint.
- Courage.

1. Open the picture frame, temporarily removing its backing. For a cleaner look, remove the glass as well, and place it on some newspaper for painting.
2. Cover one side of the glass with black spray paint, being sure to completely coat the surface area.
3. DO NOT paint both sides of the glass; spray paint is matte. Keep one side unpainted for that all-important mirrored finish.
4. When paint has dried, restore the glass, unpainted side out, to the frame, along with the backing.
5. Kneel over the black mirror and mutter words of imprecation.
6. Uh-oh: A demon came through the mirror!
7. Oh, no! What’s that you say? It’s angry? It has a thousand teeth?
8. Stop screaming! I can’t make this out! It seems you’ve been killed by a demon. Is that correct?
9. Okay. That guy’s dead now. I assume the rest of you were too smart to start a craft project without reading all the instructions first. Here’s the important one:  
10. Never make a black mirror.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Jenny**

If you saw our high school sitting there, on the green lawn in the summer sunlight, you would assume it was a place where only good things happened.

Nick and I were lucky to go there. That’s what they told us. At some point, our suburb, Darbyton, got too big for just one high school. It was split along the center into West and East. Or, if you want to be super pointed about it, the “good” parts of Darbyton and the “bad” ones. Nick and I lived on the block where East turned into West, where good became bad, because I guess the world works by drawing those distinctions. Nick and I weren’t good, but we weren’t bad either. We lived right on the line.

In the end, we got sorted west. That’s why they called us lucky; we could have gone down with the rest of the neighborhood. But Nick and I weren’t West kids. West kids lived in giant houses that still smelled of fresh paint; they had private swimming pools and violin lessons; they went to Ivy League schools and won internships. Nick and I went to one West party, freshman year, and we kept getting lost, because somehow the house we went to had three separate kitchens. Maybe we would have gotten used to it eventually. I don’t know. We were never invited to a second party.
Nick and I had one kitchen apiece, and we looked like it. My mom had been single since I was in second grade. It wasn’t a loud divorce, no thrown dishes, no restraining orders; he just moved out of the house, then out of the state, then stopped paying child support and vanished altogether. So we wound up in the neighborhood she could afford, just me and her and a rotating cast of eight hundred boyfriends. Nick had both parents, but neither one was rich. His mom was a part-time receptionist. His dad was the deli manager at Big Bear. Normal people; the kind of people we grew up expecting to be. Who needs more than one kitchen, you know?

Maybe things would have been better if they’d sent us to the “bad” school, if we’d grown up around other kids who shopped at Salvation Army, whose homes still had bad shag carpet, whose “gap year” was working at Tim Hortons. Maybe. I’ll never know. Maybe this is what people do, try to think of ways their lives could be better, instead of accepting the lives they have.

I just wanted to say: If you saw our high school — our beautiful, rich high school, with its huge green lawns, its glittering trophy case, its gigantic, expensive glass atrium — you would think it was a place where good things happened. For Nick and me, it never, ever was. It was a bad place, a dangerous place on the best of days, and that was before we filled it with blood.

* * *

Inside the auditorium, people were still milling around, waiting for the ceremony to start. Parents were ushered to the upper level balcony, so they could watch the ceremony. Students were shoved down close to the orchestra pit and the stage, so we could rise when our names were called. No-one was in their assigned seat yet. They were running around, chatting, hugging, making crocodile tears at kids whose phone numbers they wouldn’t know next summer.

No-one was sitting down, except Hardy.

I’m telling this story because it’s my story, too; I was there for things Nick didn’t see, I know things he couldn’t tell you. I’m also telling it because, knowing Nick, I figured you could use a break. Nick is Nick’s favorite comedian, if you hadn’t noticed. He’s also his own favorite philosopher, male model, professor, clergyman, and sex partner. But the real reason I agreed to do this, the thing that convinced me to finally tell this story, is that someone has to explain Hardy.

He was a boy made for taking cruelty. You couldn’t miss him; he was gigantic — six foot five, I heard once, though that seemed like a low number — and wide to match. It ought to have been scary, how big he was, but on him, the bulk didn’t look forbidding. It made him look helpless, a gentle circus elephant stranded with abusive carnies who flicked lit cigarettes at its hide all day. His hair was messy and wiry and curly, his glasses were never quite level on his face. He wore the same short-sleeve button-up basically all twelve months of the year. Hardy had wide blue eyes, like a newborn, perpetually goggling out at the world, amazed

4 Bite me, Jenny. We’re editing the same document, by the way. I read your Korn footnote. — Nick
by how awful the people here had turned out to be.

That amazement was the closest he came to protest. What was strangest about Hardy, what really got people riled up about him, was his serenity. His expression never really changed. His voice never got louder. People destroyed him, all day long, and he just floated above it; not angry or defensive, just quietly, gently disappointed. I think he’d tried to fight back a few times, back in grade school, but the teachers always punished him worse than the kids who picked on him. If you throw things at a giant, you’re playing a prank on him. If the giant throws those things back, he’s a threat.

That was Hardy, the only boy in school less popular than Nick and I, and now that you know him, you’ll know why I didn’t want jokes in his introduction. There were a lot of jokes about Hardy, and they were all awful. He had to survive our sense of humor every day, including this one, because, right as Nick and I pulled up to our seats behind him, Debra McAllister’s pet football player Chris was throwing a half-full Big Gulp cup at his head.

The lid dislodged on impact; a slush of ice and Sprite and spit poured down the back of Hardy’s seat, soaking his neck. If he reacted, I didn’t notice. Debra dissolved into laughter. I saw her leaning in to whisper something at her other guy friend, Billy, her dark, gleaming hair brushing his face like a silk curtain. I heard the phrase “mentally retarded.”

Do I have to explain Debra McAllister? Do I have to explain her goons? Every town has a set. I feel bad for even including them; it makes my youth feel generic. Debra was incredibly beautiful in a way that says “I peaked in high school,” and somehow, it said this even though she was in high school at the time. Chris was her boyfriend, unless her boyfriend was Billy; both were football players, and though they weren’t identical, or even related, if I told you they were, you’d buy it. Debra trailed both boys after her like Secret Service agents, letting them hurt her enemies and compete for her favor. Nick always insisted there was some sort of polyamory going on, but “amor” means “love,” and Debra loved no-one.

Nick had seen the cup hit Hardy, too. Unlike me, Nick thought he could do something about it. Before I could stop him, he was charging toward Debra, down the aisle.

“Hey,” Nick said.

He was head down, shoulders forward, his whole skinny body one knot of tensed muscle. I hurried to catch up, like always, trying to keep my breathing slow and my expression friendly, hoping I could de-escalate things before Nick got punched in the neck and died at his own graduation.

“Hey, Columbine,” Debra said.

She’d taken to calling us that in the past few weeks. All those kids dying had really upped her comedy potential. Billy laughed in a way that reminded you he got hit in the head a lot.

“We have ten more minutes of high school left, Debra,” Nick said. “What’s wrong? Worried you’ll leave without causing any teen suicides?”

“The ceremony is about to start,” I said. “Can you just leave Hardy be until it’s over?”
“Why?” Debra said. “Did Marilyn Manson tell [SOUND OF ANGRY SWARMING BEES] to kill anyone who bothered the special ed kids today? Is the Trenchcoat Mafia going to take out a hit?”

“Come on, Debra,” I said. “Just leave Hardy alone for a while so you can go say goodbye to your friends. That’s easy, right? Everyone here will miss you.”

Debra nodded, accepting my tribute. It wasn’t glorious, my way of dealing with Debra — she felt like she was better than me, and I let her, until the rush of superiority drowned out her bloodlust — but it got the job done. At least it worked better than Nick’s methods, which usually wound up with him getting pushed into a wall at high speed by football players.

“You know, the Columbine guys were Nazis,” Nick said, pulling up to Debra.

These were Nick’s methods. Debra loomed over my very punchable friend, powerful and unimpressed.

Nick, I should specify, weighs about fifteen pounds after a heavy meal. Debra could bench-press him, and she looked like she might try. Debra was pretty, but she played volleyball. She wore four-inch heels to homeroom, possibly to sleep. The girl took up space. She also had two large almost-adult men behind her, ready to dole out punishment if anything offended her delicate feminine sensibilities, which it turned out that standing up to her always did. Nick glared up at her anyway, one muscle popping in his bony jaw, radiating crazed David-and-Goliath energy.

“There’s no Trenchcoat Mafia,” he said. “People just made that up.”

“Oh, so you study them,” Debra said, dripping the words out like sugar syrup. “They’re like your heroes.”

“They’re not my heroes. They weren’t Goth,” Nick said. “They just believed some people mattered more than others. They thought your worth depended on what you looked like.”

“What you ‘look like’ is a tragic accident on the set of Rocky Horror Picture Show,” Debra said.

“That’s true,” Nick said. “I’m different. Some people look different. The Columbine guys hated that. They wanted the people who looked right to be in charge. They wanted to hurt everyone who wasn’t like them. Who didn’t look like them, didn’t act like them. They thought being on top gave them the right to punish everyone else.”

Nick cast a glance over at Hardy. Debra, involuntarily, followed suit.

“The Columbine guys wouldn’t like me, Debra,” Nick said. “They would really like you.”

He turned and walked away. She didn’t stop him. She was supposed to have a comeback, to call him ugly or gay again — it didn’t have to be clever, she just had to get the last word in — but he’d thrown her. She’d run out of things to say.

I saw him receive her silence; there was a quiet lit-cigarette flicker in his big dark eyes, a cruel, happy glow. At the end of the day, after years of abuse, she’d flinched. And, at the end of the day, he hadn’t. Nick walked away from yours truly. It was the end of the world.
Debra without looking back, and she didn’t sic her boys, and that was the end of high school, and they both knew it. I walked away with him, head held high.

When I tell you I loved Nick, I want you to know I mean it. I loved his belief that things could always be set right, and that he was always the one to do it; the way he charged into the world, on six different kinds of fire, trying to slay every dragon he saw. It was just that I also believed — I knew — that one of Nick’s dragons would eat him. I thought he would eventually pick a fight he couldn’t win, wake up something too big and ugly to deal with and refuse to back down while he had the chance. Nick never did a thing without overdoing it. He never told a joke without taking the joke too far. I thought that he’d eventually take a risk he couldn’t walk back, try to prove himself against the wrong enemy, and that when he did, he would get someone killed. Which, you know, is exactly what happened.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon passed by in a blur. Names were called; we got up, we sat down, and when we stood up, we were still kids, and when we sat down, we would never be kids again. I remember stumbling out onto that green lawn in my cap and gown, taking lots of photos. I still have some. Nick is standing, stone-faced and spooky, next to his parents, who are ruffling his hair and beaming at him as if he’s made of winning lottery tickets. Debra is in the background somewhere, posing between Billy and Chris. Hardy wandered through half of mine, so you can’t really see me, but I don’t mind it. Hardy also blocks out my mother’s boyfriend Timothy, and Timothy is someone I prefer to forget.

This was the last normal afternoon of my life; it was the last afternoon of most of these people’s lives, period. I should remember it better. I didn’t appreciate it, I guess. All I remember is collapsing on the curb next to the parking lot with Nick, ripping our stupid polyester robes off in unison. Everyone had finally left us alone — even our families; they were used to us wandering off together — and we could talk.

“So that’s it, then,” Nick said, looking off into the distance.

The sunlight revealed the full horrors of his outfit: The long mesh sleeves of his undershirt, the threadbare black NIN t-shirt so baggy he could use it as a tent in an emergency, the tremendous black JNCO jeans billowing around him like a dirtbag cassock. When he moved, he jangled; chains, buckles, cheap pewter pendants engraved with sigils that were probably made up in the grody strip-mall office of the company that sold them. I could never figure out how high his boots went, I guess because some part of me knew I couldn’t handle that information, but I know they had elevated soles and rows of buckles along the sides.

“That’s it,” I agreed. “There goes high school.”

“Best years of our lives. Some would say,” said Nick.

“Some went to better high schools.”

I stood up, smoothing my cargo skirt as I went. Yes, I said cargo skirt: It was 1999’s biggest skirt trend, like cargo pants, for if you wanted to preserve your femininity, and
if your femininity could only be expressed via the world’s least sensual pants. It went all the way to the ground. It made me look Amish. I said Nick looked bad, but I never told you I looked better.⁶

Nick stayed on the ground. He was chewing his lip, grating it back and forth between his teeth, and squinting off into the parking lot. He looked as if he’d lost something out there, as if he was waiting for some important object to spark a glint in the sun and reveal itself.

“That’s it,” he repeated, quietly. “That’s the end.”

“It’s what we were waiting for, right?” I said. “In fall, when college starts, you can do what we talked about. Go to a doctor or something and start getting... what is it, actually? Shots? Pills?”

“Shots,” Nick said absently. “So, it’s got sharp metal and blood and pain involved.⁷

She looked like what would happen if beige were a person. You can question my aesthetic choices — and some do, JENNIFER — but at least I made them. Jenny’s outfit was a series of choices not made, a half-dozen paths of least resistance, all conglomerated onto one very white teen girl. She was human Wonder-Bread. She was vanilla’s last stand. If she stopped moving, she would blend into the background, like a stick insect. I can go all night with these. My boots weren’t that high. — Nick.

Things were not remotely that easy — they made you wait forever, and go to a bunch of therapists, and it blew chunks — but we’re going to blow right past that, because: It’s none of your business. We’re not going to stop and spend 500 words explaining how Jenny figured out her bra size, either. We were teenagers, you weirdos; if you can’t stop wondering what our bodies looked like, you might need a couple dozen therapists yourself. — Nick

That’s probably a bonus for you, right?” I said.

He didn’t laugh. I settled back down next to him on the curb, feeling the warmth of the summer-baked asphalt coming up through my eighteen pounds of cargo fabric.

“You made it,” I said. “You can show up at college next year and just be Nick. No-one will even remember your other name. The hard part is over.”

Nick still wasn’t looking at me. He bit his lip hard enough for the olive skin around it to go white.

“The hard part,” he repeated. “The hard part is never going to be over, Jenny. Not for me.”

I wonder what would have happened if I’d asked him what he meant. If I had paid attention to the squint or the lip-chewing, if I’d realized how sad he sounded and hadn’t just written it off as Nick being Goth again, things might be different. We might have prevented what was coming, saved all those people’s lives. Or maybe not. This is what people do, what I do, try to imagine that with one different choice everything would be better. But we don’t get to go back and make those choices. All we get is the apocalypse we have.
CHAPTER THREE

NICK

The horror didn’t begin until we hit the mall.

Not that our mall was horrible. It was the tits. The Easton Town Center was brand new the year we graduated; Les Wexner, our local evil billionaire, wanted to put all the stores he owned in one place. There was an outdoor courtyard where bands played, a bunch of restaurants, a big glass-vaulted central building with a Planet Hollywood movie theater at one end of it. They’d bring in costumes and props from movies, so you’d get to walk past Darth Vader’s original suit on the way to Star Wars, or something. Arnold Schwarzenegger cut the ribbon at the opening. More than a mall, the newspapers said, a lifestyle center!

It’s been a long time, since they built Easton, so I know this was bullshit. Telling you how big the free-standing Virgin Megastore was (real big!) is not going to blow your mind. You might not even know about Virgin Megastores. Kids are young these days. But Easton certainly was a lifestyle center, in that Jenny Long and I spent our entire lives in it, when we were not at home or school. It was where you saw movies. It was where the Hot Topic lived. It had Starbucks. We were little children, pure of heart, and this was all we needed.

You probably want to know what I was thinking back there on the curb. Not much, is the answer. I was looking at Courtney Scheiber, this horrifically tough girl I took shop class with. She was lighting up in the parking lot. Camels. My Mom smoked Marlboros. I was thinking about how weird it would be not to live in a house that smelled like cigarettes, how my whole life to date had that one baseline stink of old, stale tobacco. I was wondering what I would feel on Christmas, walking into that house again. How the smell would hit me.

Jenny was right, by the way. If I’d said any of this, back then, a lot of people would still be alive.

* * *

Most of that last afternoon — after the necessary logistical finagling, finding the parking spot, rolling through Starbucks to pick up our Frappucinos; they were chocolate mint, and they each had about a can of whipped cream on them, and though masculinity is wonderful, and I am secure in mine, I will tell you the worst thing about it is no longer being able to order those drinks without being stared at — was spent discussing the Timothy Problem.

Specifically, Jenny was discussing it. Timothy had been dating Jenny’s mom for most of our last semester, and in that time, Jenny had racked up the hatred of a thousand lifelong enmities. Everything he said or did made her glow with rage. I mean, I didn’t like Timothy either. He had ve-
neers and said “see you later, tater;” he would stand there and stare at you, angrily, if you didn’t pretend to laugh. Yet no-one could hate Timothy more than Jenny. God doesn’t hate Satan as much as Jenny hated Timothy, because Timothy was a stranger to her, whereas God and Satan used to hang out.

“So proud of you for graduating,” Jenny said, repeating Timothy’s latest unforgivable insult. “So proud of me! He’s known me for seven weeks! How proud can he be?”

As I say, this had been going on for a while. Jenny was a gentle and unassuming person, most days, but she had that Midwestern white-woman rage that comes out in gushes; you could tell she would grow up to be the lady who bakes twenty pies for the PTA bakeoff and poisons ten. All you could do with that anger was witness it. Or duck it. In an emergency, you could just take the last phrase Jenny said, and repeat it back to her. She would believe you were being profound.

“How proud can he be?” I said. Jenny nodded, fiercely. “I mean, he’s just so weird,” she said. “My mom’s dated guys before. But they had shame. Timothy, like, walks around my house in his boxers.”

It was true. He did. I’d seen it. I may give you the impression Jenny was overreacting, which she sort of was — people have lived through POW camps without reacting as strongly as Jenny did to Timothy — but it was also true that the man had unconventional ideas of personal space. I’d seen his thighs up to a high-water mark that I’m pretty sure met the legal qualifications for child abuse, and I didn’t have to live with the knowledge that he’d banged my mom.9

“He showers,” Jenny continued. “He showers?” I said.

“He stays in my house, when my mom goes to work, and he showers. Like he lives there,” Jenny said. “I have to be like, ‘oh, well, there’s a full-grown man in my house, naked, and I can’t make him leave.’”

“You can’t make him leave,” I said.

“He’s going to move in, you know,” Jenny said. “When I move out, bam. He’s just going to slide right in there. He’ll be there on Christmas. Can you imagine what my first visit home is going to be like?”

That’s when it started; that’s why I’m the one who saw it. Jenny mentioned Christmas, and I suddenly had a immense, overwhelming need to look at the ceiling. She kept ranting, not noticing where my eyes were, and high above us, a single bird plunged out of the sky and broke its neck against the glass of the ceiling.

* * *

“I hope I’m dead,” Jenny said. “I hope we all are.”

The bird was high up, far away, so you could barely see it. Still, I could see the glass reddening around it — its little body exploded by the impact, bones shredding out through the feathers and dripping blood.

Another one hit, right next to it. Two in a row, I thought. That’s weird.

“I mean it,” Jenny said.

9 This was gracefully said. Thank you, friend. — Jenny
Two, then six, then a dozen. The web of blood was radiating out around them clearly by now, leaking down both sides of the vault. It was a whole flock; a family, all getting lost in the same direction. I hoped there weren’t too many of them. It was getting to be like birdie Jonestown up there.

“I hope that thing happens where the computers stop working, and all the planes fall out of the air,” Jenny said. “And I don’t have to spend Christmas with Timothy, because a plane crashed on our bathroom, and he was in it.”

“Wait. Is he in the plane, or the bathroom?” I said.

I could feel Jenny’s glare burning holes in my exposed neck. I turned back to her, and as I did, the sky got darker.

“Sorry,” I said. “Maybe Omphagor will kill him.”

“Omphagor’s not going to kill anyone, Nick,” she said, in her paper-cut voice. “We’ve been over this.”

“Yeah, well, Y2K doesn’t happen until New Year’s Eve, dummy,” I said.

She was about to fight me on that one when it happened. The whole world filled with the sound of splintering glass. Metal groaned and bent and twisted. Thousands of birds — hundreds of thousands, a sky of them — fell through the glass ceiling and into the ground floor of the mall.

They hit the food court, mainly. That was the worst thing. People were diving and shrieking and still unwittingly holding yogurt cups filled with bird guts. Glass splintered and ricocheted in pieces as long as an arm or as little as a bullet. I saw blood, I heard screams, but I’m not sure how much of the blood was human, or how many of the screams were pain. I stopped looking, at a certain point, dragging Jenny under the arch of the Planet Hollywood entrance, trying to get us clear of the damage.

Her eyes never left the catastrophe. They were wide and fixed, and her body felt stiff, like dragging a mannequin. I was lucky; I’d seen them coming. So I knew to look away, when it got really bad, but she didn’t, and couldn’t, for a long time.

After a while, it got quieter. I cast about, looking for something to say. Some way to snap her out of it.

“Do you want to go see Star Wars?” is what I came up with.

Jenny shook her head, still staring at the food court.

“No,” she whispered.

I mean, she made the right call. It was The Phantom Menace. Still, I felt bad.

* * *

After the mall evacuated, we sat out in the courtyard, drinking emergency Frappucinos. People were hurt, some of them badly. Some were dead. Ambulances were being loaded out by the entrance. The broken glass glittered in the pale yellow summer sunlight, and it seemed strange for anyone to be dead on such a nice day. I slurped up my second can of whipped cream, feeling the sugar fizz through my bloodstream and dissolve my bones, and to an extent that appalled me, I felt normal.

“What do you think caused it?” Jenny said.

Jenny did not feel normal. She would keep tugging at
this thread forever, I could tell, unless something worse happened — although, lucky for her, something worse soon did.

“Birds have those magnets in their nose they use to navigate, right?” she asked. “Do you think that’s what happened? Did their magnets break and steer them into a building?”

“Or they were blind. Or they were overcome by despair. Or they just really hated food courts,” I said. “I’m not a bird scientist, Jenny. I don’t know how they work.”

“Something has to have caused it,” Jenny said.

She did this with upsetting things, worrying at them like a loose tooth. She had a soft heart, and ugliness sank into it, sometimes so deep she couldn’t pry it back out. It was my job to get her buoyant and trivial again. I tried for a distraction.

“I mean, the ritual…”

She whipped her head around, suddenly all the way present.

“Stop that,” she said. “We didn’t kill a bunch of birds. We didn’t kill people. And if we did, you shouldn’t be happy about it.”

She was angry. How could I not realize she would be angry? She was always angry at me these days. Suddenly, I was angry back. Sick of her mean grown-up voice, sick of being scolded, sick of being told what a child I was by someone who was in fact three weeks younger than me, someone I’d actively watched out for my whole life. Who would Jenny even be, without me? Who was Jenny now, that she acted so far above me all of a sudden?

“I don’t know why you do these things,” she said.

“We do them,” I said. “Ever since we were kids. Remember?”

“Little kids,” Jenny said. “Ouija boards at slumber parties. It was fun, Nick. I just don’t know why we do it now. You know?”

She was trying to be nice, and I wanted to lean into it, just let her be nice to me. Still, I recognized the tone in her voice. It wasn’t affection. It was pity. No matter how sad I get, I’m never going to be enough of a sucker to forget the difference.

“Maybe the world is bigger than what’s right in front of us,” I said, stiffly.

“What’s in front of us is an American Eagle and a P.F. Chang’s,” Jenny said. “I don’t think Satan is going to manifest in an American Eagle next to a P.F. Chang’s.”

I didn’t get the chance to argue. The doors of the American Eagle opened, and the worst man alive — the source of the change in her, the cause of all our problems — walked out into the light of day.

10 Not Les Wexner! — Jenny.
Extracurricular Attendance Record
Jennifer Campbell Long
Grade 12
Darbyton West High School

Oct. 31, 1998: Snuck out of house at midnight to attend graveyard seance; spooky.

Nov. 12, 1998: Tori Amos concert at the Palace Theater; cried.


Feb. 14: Joint evaluation of school’s (outdated, offensive) policy requiring students to bring dates to all (boring, dumb, shallow) school dances. Principled stance taken to boycott all such (awful, homophobic, not Goth, sexist) functions, especially (boring, dumb, sexist, anti-trans, did we say dumb yet, fascist????) senior prom.

February 27, 1999: Sleepover and demon-summoning ritual; spooky. Plan of going to mall next morning submitted and approved.

February 28, 1999: Easton Town Center; attended. Wandered off while chaperone was in Hot Topic. Located twenty minutes later talking to full-grown man in line at Cinnabon.

March 4, 1999: Spirited discussion of CNN article “Are We Headed For A Global Y2K Crisis?,” located while looking for current event to bring in to Civics class. Judgment from respected colleague that Y2K is not a “current event” because it is “not real;” other parties maintain that it “could happen any day now.” Vigorous dispute on logistics cut short by phone call.

March 5, 1999: Coffee; cancelled to have coffee with the Cinnabon creep.

March 11, 1999: Phone call; cut short to call pastry eater on the phone.

March 22 - 28, 1999: Spring break. Some portion of every day spent calling or socializing with random food-court man, whom she is now, I guess, dating?


April 9, 16, 23, 24, 1999: Seeing The Matrix again at Planet Hollywood; cut short, cut short, postponed, cancelled.

May 8, 1999: Guess who has a prom date?

CHAPTER FOUR

Jenny

I just loved Dave so much.

How to explain Dave? The world went into slow motion when I saw him. Sunlight became his halo, shimmering off his white high-tops, his perfect teeth, his messy hair. The Goo Goo Dolls started playing on my mental soundtrack. It probably shouldn’t have been the Goo Goo Dolls, it should have been some weird indie band whose last record sold four copies and that only Dave knew about, but that was the power of Dave. Your own soundtrack was always a little too tacky to capture his mystique.

Dave was my boyfriend, my actual boyfriend, my first one, and even more unbelievably, Dave was cool. Nick had hated Dave on sight.

As Dave approached, I felt Nick sigh, and sneer, his whole body contracting into a cranky little fist beside me. It was a familiar routine, and frankly, it was one I had learned to stop paying attention to. I knew Nick thought Dave was old. — Nick

Because Dave was old! He was a full-on adult man in his twenties, at best, who should not have been hitting on high school girls in food courts. Jenny acts like hating him was some irrational whim of mine, but you, my intelligent and evolved reader, would not be mystified by my reaction. — Nick

of me as a little kid, his baby sister, his sidekick. For better or worse, he had always been better than I was at attracting attention. Now I had something he didn’t have; I had someone who treated me like the interesting half of our friendship. Nick couldn’t stand it.

This whole past semester, Nick had been going nuts over the Summoning of Omphagor, insisting we do the ritual over and over; making me play pretend, like a little kid. It was such an obvious reaction to the Dave thing. He was drawing a circle around me, penning me up inside our shared childhood. He was ordering me not to leave.

I would love to tell you I thought all this as Dave entered the courtyard, but my mind was very elsewhere. I was looking at the ripple of bicep through his band t-shirt, the glints of red the sun drew out of his hair, his jawline. Something tremendous played in my brain, “Iris” maybe, that one song that basically dares you not to make out to it. Then Dave was next to me on the bench, throwing his arm around me, and I was out of my body, looking at how lucky I was, the handsome man’s girlfriend I’d suddenly become.

* * *

“Wild scene in there,” Dave said.

Yes. Yes! How could I not have seen it? There was blood and glass, people got hurt, but I didn’t need to lose my mind about it. It was a wild scene, something to react to.

His oldness, his agedness, his oldness; his aura of great age, and elderliness, due to being old. — Nick
with amazement. Not the end of the world.

“Did they tell you what caused it?” I asked.

“Birds navigate by magnetism,” Dave said. His voice rumbled through me as I leaned on his chest. “All the TV broadcasting stations and power lines can throw it off sometimes. Drive them a little crazy.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“Does it?”

At the far end of the bench, Nick was looking at Dave like he had just seen him shoot, and eat, the family dog.

“It’s been fifteen minutes,” Nick said. “How did Dave here find time to consult the Bird Science division?”

“It’s called the ornithology division, actually,” Dave said.

Dave’s tone was pleasant, but he locked eyes with Nick, having some weird silent wrestling match: I am happy to entertain this insignificant weirdo’s intrusion, said Dave’s face, and I will personally bury you alive just so I can spit on your grave, said Nick’s face, and please stop fighting so I can have sex once before I die, said my face, but neither of them ever looked at my face once this part started.

“[BRAKES SCREECH TOO LATE AS THE STEERING COLUMN PLUNGES THROUGH YOUR CHEST] must have liked it, huh?” Dave said. “She¹⁴ likes the dark stuff.”

“Ed Gein’s dark,” Nick said, his face tightening. “This is just nature.”

¹⁴ Watch how many times Dave says “she.” It’s not a normal amount! Dave would talk about me in the third person while talking to me, like he did right there. I am telling you: Something was wrong with Dave. — Nick

“So’s Ed Gein,” Dave said.

Dave had the ability to do this, keep smiling, keep his tone reasonable and friendly, no matter how hard Nick tried to offend him. I knew that Nick hated it; Dave made him feel powerless. Dave knew it, too. I should have told him to stop, but I didn’t want to. What would it cost my friend, my best friend, to just be happy for me? How hard was it to be nice to my boyfriend?

Well: Nature might have Ed Gein and dead birds in it, but it did me a favor. A line of ants, nearly a dozen of them, began marching down my arm, and I jumped up and shrieked. Dave followed me up, brushing my arm off carefully. It wasn’t new, but I never got over it — having someone treat me that way, touch my body like it was the most expensive thing he owned.¹⁵

“They’re after my drink,” I said. My voice was shaking. I hoped that I just sounded scared of ants.

“No wonder,” Dave said. “That thing’s mostly sugar. You should let me take you out for real coffee some time.”

I nodded, mutely.


Yes, Dave. Yes. Take me away from these malls and milkshakes. Give me adult beverages, lest I die of thirst.

“Jenny and I had plans, actually,” Nick said. “For graduation?”

But we didn’t have plans. Or rather, we’d had the same plan for most of high school, which was to go off together and wander aimlessly through some mall. This mall was
closed, and Dave was right next to me, radiating summer sunlight and boy smell, and Nick had been making me pretend to believe in magic for months, which is why I did what I did. I ditched him. I made some vague noises about it — oh, you can come with us; come with us! — but Nick knew the score, and so did I, and when I walked away from that bench, holding Dave’s hand, Nick was still on it.

I cast a look back at Nick, as I reached the parking lot. He turned his head to the side and pretended he didn’t see me. Beneath his feet, I could see the ants. They were seething out from under the bench in a dense black cloud, so thick they looked like one wriggling, twitching animal; pouring up from a hole someone ripped in the world.

* * *

Courtney Scheiber spat on me once. It was the day I made friends with Nick. We were in the elementary school cafeteria, third grade, and I was eight years old.

What have you learned so far? You’ve learned that I have a best friend, or someone that I call my “best friend;” you’ve learned that we kept secrets from each other, that we disappointed each other, that we hurt each other’s feelings and seemed to spend most of our time bickering. You don’t see it yet: How every moment of this was soaked in lost love and history, how I could not look at Nick without remembering a thousand thousand moments when Nick Casini was all I had.

So start there: Courtney spat on me, in third grade, and nobody minded. I was the class joke. I had books with maps and imaginary language glossaries in the back, and I had a VHS box set of Carl Sagan’s Cosmos, and I had a Star Trek communicator badge that I got at a theme park. I wore it pinned to a yellow sweater so I’d look more like Lieutenant Data. If you’re imagining something cute, some little whiz kid, stop. I wasn’t good at science. I wasn’t good at anything, except reading, which was why I snuck my own books into my desk and read them in class. One day, I brought in my favorite, The White Dragon by Anne McCaffrey, and the teacher took it away and ripped it in half. Just ripped it, right down the spine, to teach me a lesson. I cried for hours. Everyone saw.

So that was me, for the next ten years of my life: I was the dumb, crying reject who liked dragons. Once they knew I was a safe target, every kid in my class went in. It was only a week or two after the White Dragon incident that Courtney — this big, blonde wrecking ball of a girl, a clenched fist in pigtails — walked up to me in the cafeteria and spat in my food, so I couldn’t eat it. She was a messy spitter. Half of it hit the plate. The other half landed in my hair.

Nobody flinched or looked around or said you can’t do that to her. You have to have friends, if you want someone to stick up for you, and I didn’t have any. So I just sat there, staring at a tray full of chili I couldn’t eat. I could feel the tears welling up again. I knew I would cry, and I knew I would make things worse by crying, and I couldn’t stop it. Then, suddenly, so fast it shocked me away from tears, Nick slammed himself down in the seat in front of me and shoved half of his sandwich toward me from across the
I recognized him; he was the kid who lived across the
street from my new house, the one who used to take his
Barbies and put them in greasy McDonald’s bags and set
them on fire. They melted and bubbled into puddles on
his sidewalk. Sometimes a lone hand would stick up from
the ooze, unmelted, pleading. Sometimes the doll puddle
would have eyes. I’d asked him what he was doing, once,
and he’d just said *they’re witches*. After that I stayed away
from him. He scared me. I mean, everyone scared me, es-
pecially Courtney Scheiber, but Nick scared most people.
Still does.

Then Courtney spat on me, and Nick was there, hand-
ing me his food. I didn’t know why he was staring at me
so intently, arms folded across his puffy sweatshirt, and I
didn’t ask. I thought maybe it was a trick, another mean
thing someone was planning to do to me. Maybe, if I took
the food, something bad was next.

“You going to eat that, or not?” he eventually said.
“It’s yours,” I said.
“Don’t have anything to eat,” Nick said, slowly and
patiently, as if he suspected (he did suspect) I was stupid.
“We have to share this now.”

It was the way he said it, we **have to**, like he’d been as-
signed to watch over me by some agency. Like he had no
say in the matter. I took a bite of baloney and Kraft cheese
and Wonder-Bread, and I thought about how nice it might be
to have a friend who scared people. When he told me
to come over to his house after school — again, didn’t ask
me, **told** me; took charge of my afternoon like someone
seizing a kitten by the scruff of its neck — I said yes.

That was it. I just kept saying yes for ten years. We lived
so close to each other that we basically lived together; in
sixth grade, when his mom was so sick, he used to just
come over to my house with his blanket and pillow under
his arm, barking *I’m sleeping at your house, Jenny*. His parents
let him, because he wasn’t more than a few feet away from
his own bedroom.

I know Nick and I were an odd couple, or at least we
looked like one; maybe other kids found friends who
dressed like they did, who liked the same things they did,
kids with whom they had something in common. What
Nick and I had in common was that there was no-one
exactly like either of us. We were together because we
were so alone.

*  *  *

“I just don’t see the value in that,” Dave said. “It seems
like it’s not really friendship, you know? It’s codepen-
dence.”

I was on Dave’s fire escape, under the hazy, champ-
pagne-buzz glow of the paper lanterns he’d strung along
the railing. Dave lived in the real city, Columbus, right on
High Street. Below us, I could see the neon glow of night-
life and street signs, college students stumbling in and out
of bars, sequined going-out tops flickering like fireflies.
Little bits of other people’s conversations, shouts, soror-
ity-girl squeals, floated up to us. This was grown-up life
and I was in it. In my hand was a mug of coffee.
We hadn’t come straight back to his place. We’d gone to see a movie first, something with Reese Witherspoon. She was a suck-up kid and the guy who played Ferris Buehler was her teacher. He wanted to sleep with her. It was the kind of thing you could never sell to Nick, who wouldn’t see a movie unless he’d been promised someone would die. He would have tried to go see The Matrix for the fifth time in three months, studying the leather trench coats like they were literature. We would have wound up in his basement, watching people rip their own eyes out in Event Horizon. There was always a lot of Laurence Fishburne involved in letting Nick choose the movie, for some reason. But I liked Dave’s movie. I mean, it made me feel weird, unpleasant, everyone in it was a jerk, but they were supposed to be; the movie made you feel that it was childish to want to see stories about nice people, that the real point of stories was complication and unpleasantness, the difficulty of Ferris’s life, wanting things that made him a bad person.

Girls and their teachers; girls and men who could teach them things. That’s what I thought love was, in those days, and I was in that, too, with my terrible skirt hiked up and my bare legs swinging over the iron railing.

Still, it was amazing how Nick managed to work his way into every conversation.

“There’s good there, too,” I said, not selling it even a little. “You just haven’t seen it yet.”

“I wouldn’t see you, if [ROACH SKITTERS OUT OF 16 Because Laurence Fishburne rules, Jenny, that’s the “some reason.” I was probably a worse movie partner than Dave, though. He had that senior citizens’ discount. — Nick]

YOUR COFFEE AS YOU DRINK IT] could help it,” Dave said.

I never knew how to handle Nick’s name. I should tell you that. He told me not to tell anyone at school he was trans, to let him leave town first so he could handle the flow of the information. Still, the more I used the right name, the more the old one sounded wrong and ugly. It was like I was humiliating Nick, showing people some soft, raw part of him so they could gawk at it. If I said anything else, he wouldn’t be safe. Most of the time, talking to people, I tried not to use a name at all.

“We’ve been there for each other,” I said, “for a long time. Our lives would have been really lonely if we hadn’t met.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being lonely,” said Dave.

How was I supposed to explain it? How do you explain what lonely means to someone like Dave, who never would be? Telling the truth would mean showing him my whole story: Crying in the cafeteria, books with dragons on the cover, the girl who spit in my hair. As far as Dave knew, I had never been that person. I was his sort of person, someone in his same league. Dave would never spend time with the girl who cried into her chili. No-one would, except Nick, and even Nick got pretty sick of me sometimes.

“When we met,” I said, “I had this pin. This Star Trek communicator pin. I wore it everywhere.”

“Yeah, I know, you were little kids,” Dave said. “You told me that already. You’re not a little kid now, though. I think [ROACH SKITTERS OUT OF THE MUG AND OVER YOUR FACE] wants to keep you that way. Stuck
in some old version of yourself, so you’ll always need her. She can’t see the special person you’re becoming.”

Then, somehow, suddenly, it was gone. I want to tell you it was just that sad little girl and her chili, but it was Nick, too; it was the sense of myself as his kid sister, his project, in need of his protection. Dave was right; he was perfectly right. I was becoming. I had the right to become something. I didn’t have to be loyal to that little kid and her dragon books, she didn’t need me any more. I needed me now.

I wanted so many things, and if that made me a bad person, it was just complication, it was just how grown-ups felt. I wanted to spend time with someone other than Nick for once. I wanted to fold Nick up and keep him in my pocket, take him anywhere anyone might hurt me. I wanted to be a grown-up, to savor unpleasantness like a strong taste, to drink black coffee. I wanted romance and sugar and whipped cream. I wanted what you want, when you let your boyfriend take you back to his apartment, because I hadn’t been there yet, and I had never done that before, and I had spent so long wondering if someday, somebody would pick me.

Dave leaned over to me and picked me. He did. I leaned into it, the grown-up taste, the bitterness in his mouth, and I let myself feel chosen. My child self receded into the distance, becoming a speck on my horizon, waving and shouting something I couldn’t make out. Help, maybe. Or stop. From a distance, they sound the same.

Sometimes, at night, I could feel myself.¹⁷

I’m going to pause, here, and let Jenny get what I assume is the inevitable masturbation joke out of the way.¹⁸

What I meant was that I felt like the person I would be. No-one looked at me or talked to me or called me by the wrong name. I would just sit in my room, listen to music. Talk to other guys on message boards. Read through old Sandman comics, or the one I really liked, From Hell. Jenny had borrowed half the Sandman comics looking for Tori Amos references, anyway. From Hell was not a Jenny thing. It had innards.

Everyone does that stuff, you’re thinking, and you’re right, that was the point: For a while, I was everyone. My bedroom was my own planet, a world built to hold me, where I could be whole and unobserved. I felt myself surfacing, the adult me shimmering through my skin. I knew he was inevitable, and I rose to greet him. My skin and the

---

¹⁷ Yeah, he could. And how! — Jenny

¹⁸ Thanks, buddy! And thanks for showing up. I assumed you broke both your hands typing mean notes all over my Dave chapter. You’d have trouble feeling yourself after that one, that’s for sure. — Jenny
way I live in it is none of your business. What I’m describing is not gender, it’s childhood: You, whoever you are, surfaced through your old body, too.

* * *

Sometimes being alone was like that. Sometimes it was the worst feeling I could name. That night, I grabbed every candle I owned and put them out on my lawn in the dark. Each of them had a specific function. I had studied to bless them with the right oils, learned the correct planetary colors for each purpose. I collected the real shit, not overpriced New Age junk, but stuff that worked, cheap seven-day candles with hearts and opened palms and cats printed sloppily on glass casing. FAST LUCK. BLACK CAT. CUT AND CLEAR. All of it was precious, scraped together on allowance money. All of it was power.

I lit all of it on fire at once, on my lawn, because who gave a shit. Magic was made up. It was junk. I had spent all my money on junk and I sat in the center of it, watching my power burn. You’re a joke, I thought, repressing the urge to put it all out, to save even one candle. You’re a joke you’re a goddamn joke you can’t do anything right, and I repeated this to myself until Hardy’s bike pulled up in my driveway.

Hardy never really learned how to ride that bike. He was, I assure you, a committed student; he rode it south from his neighborhood to mine every day at sunset, wobbling as he went. It was just that he’d waited until he was nearly eighteen to learn, and also, he was too big for any bike known to man. He looked like a circus bear riding a tricycle around the neighborhood, except those bears can keep their balance. Now here he was, straddling his tiny steed in my driveway, looking down at me with not-quite-concern.

“You all right?” Hardy said.

I nodded.

“You want company?”

I did. I really did. I shook my head.

“I’m fine,” I said.

It wasn’t about rejecting Hardy. Jenny thought I was insensitive about Hardy, that I made too many jokes about him, but I knew him better than she did. We hung out. He was my one guy friend, a status that was complicated by the fact that, in sophomore year, I’d kissed him. I was drunk, on peppermint Schnapps Jenny stole from her mother, and I had something to figure out, and I did. I figured out that I did not want to kiss Hardy. Attraction to men was still an unresolved question, mind you, still an open spot on my sexual-identity Bingo card; people who were attracted to men usually didn’t want to kiss Hardy either.

But Hardy knew that about me — that and the other relevant details; he knew my name, and how to think of me, which he accepted with the same thoughtful interest he’d shown when I told him we wouldn’t keep kissing — so he’d do this, when I was off by myself. He’d offer company. It was weird, largely silent company, but I didn’t mind. People treated Hardy like he was Forrest Gump, but he was a smart guy. He got into NYU. He became particularly appealing when you considered that my only other option for male friendship was goddamn Trevor. My point is, it wasn’t unusual that Hardy would keep standing there, after I told him to leave, or that he wasn’t talking.
I figured he was waiting me out, staying nearby until my mood shifted.

The light was dying, and the streetlights were coming on. Hardy shifted, rolling backward a little, until he was backlit against the orange glare, just a dark silhouette against the darkening sky. I looked away at my burning stash of candles, and when I looked back, somehow, I knew the silhouette wasn’t him any more.

“Tell her,” the shadow said.

It was Hardy’s outline, his size, his posture even, but its voice wasn’t human. It sounded like cold metal that rips your tongue off when you lick it. It sounded like time slowing down. It sounded like everything at once breaking.

“Tell her you let it in,” said the shadow. “Tell her.”

Something was moving in Jenny’s house. I didn’t have to look to know — something is in Jenny’s house, something bad is in there, it’s moving — but when I looked away from the shadow, into her windows, I caught glimpses. Big, lurching in the dark, something impossible, legs and mouths splintering off from each other in non-real numbers, at angles that didn’t exist.

I wanted to know what it was. I leaned toward the bad thing. I stared.

“Tell her you let it in and everything will change,” the shape promised, in its voice like time.

I knew it now. The thing moving through Jenny’s house was known to me. If I could just see it clearly I would be sure, I would remember its name. I knew its name. Just lean in far enough, lean into the window, see it, let it see me, if I just let it touch me a little I would know, I needed to see it so badly, let it in let it in let it in, it told me, looping endlessly through the dark, and I leaned so far into its thou-

sand eyes I felt the mouth closing around me that’s when I knew who it was of course of course

I woke up. In my bed, in my room, in the dark. I used to keep a clock radio on all night, tuned to some talk radio channel, so low I could barely hear it. The sound of voices made me feel watched over, un-alone, so I could fall asleep. That was how I soothed myself, in those days; with the sound of people going about their business without me, the planet’s constant spinning.

I rolled over, and the clock radio glared red at me: 12:01 AM. I listened for the midnight radio, all those low voices talking about street construction and stocks and tariffs. There was nothing. All through that black night, I lay there and heard nothing: The hum of silence and darkness, the sound of a world that was no longer there.
The morning the world ended was beautiful. Dave had dropped me off halfway around the block, so I wouldn’t get yelled at. I watched his dinged-up, dusty blue car disappear down the road. The mist was still lifting and the sun was pale white, just beginning to yellow, like the yolk leaking into the white of an egg. I thought about Easter, for some reason, hunting for eggs in a frilly dress not warm enough to keep me from shivering. I thought about spring.

I walked around the corner and down our street, mist collecting into rivulets on my arms, looking up at the sky. If I’d looked at the ground, or anywhere around me, I would have seen the problem. Instead, I saw Nick.

“Something is wrong,” he said.

Nick was sitting on his stoop, his elbows on his knees, staring at me. His eyes looked hollow, and this time, it wasn’t Halloween makeup.1 He looked like he’d been up all night.

“Did something happen to you last night?” Nick said.

I looked away from him, hoping I could disengage through sheer force of body language.

1 You heard the woman. Gently erase my eyeliner from your mental image, Reader. Give me back my dignity. Though, who am I kidding, now that I’ve brought it up, you’ll never be able to let it go. — Nick
“Dave and I went out. It’s personal,” I said. “I need to get back in there before my mom realizes I spent the night.”

“You’re incredibly bad at sneaking,” he said. “It’s ten AM, Jenny. She’s at work.”

It was true. My mom had about a dozen jobs, keeping the two of us afloat. This was the weekend she waitressed at Bob Evans. Still, if that were all, I would have kept walking. I stopped because of Nick’s voice. There was a shiver in it; a lost sound I’d never heard before.

“I had a dream last night,” Nick said, in his new voice. “I had a really bad dream. Something was in your house. Did you dream that, Jenny?”

I hadn’t. But I had dreamed. I was watching Nick from across the street and darkness came from beneath and behind him. He was sitting in front of the dark, like a beachgoer with his back turned to the sea, while the wave rose. It was the size of cities. Everything around Nick was getting darker, he was too small to be lost so far back in the dark, and next to me, someone said *don’t feel sorry for him, he let it in.* If I could turn my head I’d see who was talking, it was a voice I knew. I kept trying to turn my head, to see who was sitting next to me, and they spoke in a sweet terrible voice until morning.

“It was just a dream,” I said.

A trickle of fog rolled down the back of my neck. My spine lit up with a shiver. Nick was tugging at my arm, harder and harder, like he was trying to pull me right off the pavement, but I couldn’t stop thinking about that chill in the air. It was mid-morning, and it was almost June. Why was it still so cold?

Nick picked himself up and came striding toward me across the lawn, his giant boots clomping as he went.

“It was the portent of Change,” Nick said. “The third sign. You saw the swarm — the birds. You saw vermin — the ants.”

“I saw a few hundred ants,” I said.

Nick pointed, mutely, at the ground below us. I don’t blame him for not warning me. There weren’t any good words for it. I blame myself for looking.

The blacktop of the street was no longer blacktop. It swarmed and bubbled, one long, thick living thing, each of its hundred thousand million antennae twitching. The fuzzy, twitching river of ants overflowed and sent tendrils across the lawns. Seeing it made me itch all over. I reached up to scratch my arm, and that’s when I saw: There were twenty or thirty of them already. Hundreds more were climbing my skirt, my shirt, absorbing me into the swarm.

Nick yanked me toward his front door and inside. I heard myself screaming. I couldn’t remember starting, but I didn’t think I could stop. They were on me, and no matter how hard I brushed myself off — and I kept brushing myself off, kept having to put my hands on them — I knew I would never get all of them off. Nick shook me, like you do to someone in a movie when they’re being hysterical. *I’m being hysterical,* I realized, dimly. *This is hysterical, screaming and not stopping.* I could see him looking at his hand, wondering if he was supposed to slap me. I clamped my mouth shut.

“What,” I said.
This felt insufficient, so I rooted around in my brain for more. Eventually, I came up with: “What?” I’d said it louder, that time, so I felt it counted for more. “It was a mistake,” Nick said. “It was just a bad mistake, Jenny. I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, but you have to believe me.”

He was starting to sound hysterical himself. “What. Did you do,” I said, kludging together a sentence on sheer willpower. “The ritual for Omphagor,” Nick said. “It does something different than what I said.”

* * *

_Being the Queer and Pleafaunt Summoning of a Demon,_ the manuscript had read, in large embellished letters. It was some old library book Nick had dug up — or, more specifically, a bad Xerox of that book, which he’d made in the copy center, since they wouldn’t let him check it out. He wasn’t even really supposed to copy it. The book was old.

It didn’t look like anything much to me, just more crazy Nick stuff. I spent more time trying to figure out what a “pleafaunt” was than I did reading the page itself. Some kind of chicken, maybe. It grants wishes, Nick insisted. Look: “Good health of the body,” wealth, fame. You trap a demon on the mortal plane and make it give you whatever you want. What I just means “pleasant.” It’s an old-timey typography problem; there was no standardized spelling before dictionaries, and their lowercase “s” looks like an “f” to us now. You’re probably expecting me to add that “queer” doesn’t mean what you think it means, or that there are no bees involved, but I won’t. You’ll just have to find out. — Nick

wanted was for Nick to get some normal hobbies. I stuck the Xeroxed sheet in my desk drawer with a bunch of old term papers and craft projects and moved on.

I should have read it. I should have looked. I should have realized that whatever was building in Nick that semester was dangerous, desperate, that his normal sugar high vibe was drifting toward something more like mania — the kind of mood where you max out your credit cards in Vegas, leave your wife for the singer of a ukulele folk band, get a tattoo of Rainier Wolfcastle on your face, end the world for fun. Because now, here he was, pleading with me, voice shaking, huge brown eyes on the edge of tears. Saying I messed up, I messed up, it was a mistake, believe me, in a way that no-one who’s made an actual mistake ever really does.


3 Yes, “it.” Demons don’t have genders — not in the fun, my-non-binary-friend-Alix way, but in the terrifying, force-beyond-human-comprehension way. Think for a second: Electricity doesn’t have a gender, but it can move your body around against your will. Cancer doesn’t have a gender, but it’s alive, it changes you, and it kills you. A demon isn’t a person. It’s a raw current, a deadly contagion; it’s cancer that can think. — Nick.
you. Fairuza Balk in *The Craft*, when she puts Manon’s spirit inside her, yelling *he’s in me he’s in me* and murdering everyone because he gave her sharks. A dozen images rained through me, all of them a little stupid, a little ridiculous, all of them horrible, and I clutched my arms, holding my only precious skin, because Nick had tried to take it. He’d made me do that ritual over a dozen times, knowing that if it worked, something might take my body away.

“You didn’t tell me,” I said. “How could you do that and not tell me?”

“You wouldn’t have believed me,” Nick said. “It didn’t matter. It was crazy to think it mattered. That’s what you said. Right, Jenny?”

This time I actually thought he might cry. Or throw up; he was looking pretty grey. *Serves you right,* I was thinking. But I didn’t get time to be petty, and since this is all supposed to be educational, this is one thing I will tell you: When something called the Vermin Tide is approaching your house, you don’t want to stand still and have a heart-to-heart with your fellow sorcerer next to the heating vent. Or any vent, really.

* * *

Maybe at one point the roaches had been coming through one by one, leaking into the room slowly, but when we saw them, the rats came with them, a wave of matted gray fur and yellowed teeth breaking the vent cover off its hinges and pouring toward us. The rats were as long as my forearm, some knotted together into pus-seeping, scabbed, multi-headed things. Brown roaches seethed in the mangy gaps of their fur and poured off around them, the size of a child’s palm or a peanut butter cup, glossy brown and twitching.

Nick lunged in the direction of his basement bedroom, working on old instincts. But insects come from below. Rats do, too. We hovered, for a second, at the top of the basement stairway, looking down at it: The heaving mess of chitin and legs and twitching antennae, the Vermin Tide coming to drown his house.

There was no time to scream or lose my mind, and I knew that, even as I also knew they had reached the door and at least one or two big roaches were crawling on my hand. I grabbed Nick by the back of his ancient t-shirt and hauled him back through his living room and up his own stairs, toward what passed for higher ground.

I could feel things crunching below my feet as I ran. The bottoms of my shoes got sticky, and then slippery, with that yellowy pus bugs use for guts. A rat got under my skirt and bit me, right above my Achilles tendon, taking a big chunk of me away with him. I screamed, I slipped; I would have fallen, right into all those other mouths waiting for me on the floor below. Nick threw one arm back to steady me, so I lived.

My body kept going through no means I could understand, just the need to survive kicking in. My brain thought *rabies, rabies.* I kept moving, propelled along by my body, as if it were a car someone else was driving, and as I started panicking about hydrophobia and muscle spasms, we made it to the top of the stairs.
“My books,” Nick said, trying to pull away from me. “My books are all in the basement. I can’t do anything without them.”

“It isn’t possession,” I said.

It was amazing, how my body could keep talking when I wasn’t in it. I was floating two feet to the side of myself, numb, stunned, looking in on what my life had become.

“Possession is cussing and peeing on the carpet,” I said. “This is something else. What else does your ritual do, Nick?”

It was the way he looked at me, just then. Sadly, as if he were sorry for me. That’s when I knew we were going to die.

“Omphagor shows up,” Nick said. “Like I told you. To ‘walk the earth and taste its pleasures.’ But after a while, it gets sick of walking and tasting.”

“So the demon leaves?” I said. “That’s good. That’s what we want.”

“It doesn’t leave anything behind,” Nick said. “Think of it this way. You like candy, right?”

I couldn’t believe he was going to spend the last few minutes of our lives posing clever rhetorical questions. I stared at him, with the face of someone who did not like candy, until he kept talking.

“This place, our world,” Nick said, “it’s not the candy. It’s the wrapper. Omphagor takes what we have to give, the good things, and it enjoys them. But when it’s done, the wrapper goes in the trash.”

I could see the rats milling around at the bottom of the stairs, thick as carpet. A stream of roaches was making its way along the banister, a glossy blackish vine reaching up from below. As I looked, the biggest rat rose up, twitching half-cockroach still in its teeth, and looked up the stairs. I swear to God, it looked right at me.

“Whoever Omphagor is, it’s been here for a while now,” Nick said. “Maybe since we did the first ritual. I don’t know. But it’s over now. Omphagor got what it wanted. The world is ending. We’re done.”

As he said it, he took my hand.

The rats would be coming soon. I realized how useless it was, running from the one that bit me. I would have been better off letting go, falling into them right away, letting the tide take me. I wouldn’t get rabies. I wouldn’t live long enough. I would just die, and by the time I died, I knew I would think death had taken too long.

I held Nick’s hand, because he was going to die too, and I couldn’t feel anything but sorrow for that, even though he’d killed me. His hot, sandpapery palm scraped against mine. I could almost be okay, I thought, knowing we’d be together through the end. Then Nick heard the tangle of metal hitting pavement, and he was running away from me, down the stairs, heading off somewhere to die alone.
— INTERLUDE —

**Beeing the Queer and Pleaunt Summoning of a Demon**

For that these be hard times for men of easy virtue;
For that the Church hath forbade our assembly and pleasant visits, and such gaieties as dancing, and the taste of wine;
For that if joy be forbade by law, only outlaws shall ever be joyful;
For these reasons, we entice thee to speak the name of OMPHAGOR, that General whose forces surpass any earthly King, lord of earthly virtues and pleasures, OMPHAGOR who gives each man fame, good health of body, the wealth of coin, the conquest of those as he desires, and etc.

For this bounty OMPHAGOR, our lord, desires nothing but walking the Earth and tasting its Pleasure, and to do with that earth as OMPHAGOR wishes — as you may wish who see it so void and barren of Delight.

If you be He who hath been denied your Earthly Tithe of Joy, we entice you, join hand with Friend, and invite OMPHAGOR who is Remedy to all Pain to join your gathering.

For there is no thing to lose but this world we have, and what good, friend, is that world to us?

---

**CHAPTER TWO**

**NICK**

I was moving before I knew what I’d heard; metal on concrete, rats squealing, a boy’s scream. Hardy, and that goddamn bike he’d never learned to ride, rolling through the apocalypse like it was any Saturday morning.

Jenny pounded down the stairs after me. She threw her arm out in front of me, trying to hold me back.

“They’ll kill you,” she said.

“They’ll kill Hardy,” I said. “Move.”

I was furious with her, but somehow, that’s what brought me back. A few seconds ago, death had been inevitable; now, we were bargaining with it, trying to plan how and when it would happen. That bargaining is what being normal feels like. Death is inevitable every moment of your life. You just find a way to tell yourself that you’re in control.

“Hardy can take care of himself,” Jenny said, even though she, of all people, knew that Hardy couldn’t. “He steered right into that swarm. This is his problem. Let him solve it.”

I heard Hardy scream, his voice ratcheting up another octave.

“He is solving it,” I said. “He’s screaming for help. Let’s help him.”
“What if we can’t?” Jenny said. “What if we die trying? You’re being codependent.”

It sounded like something she’d heard from someone else. The Oprah-y clunk of it, don’t be so codependent about the apocalypse, made me want to laugh at her, or throttle her. I had no time for either. Every second I spent trying to get past her was a lost eye, a lost lip, a rat tunneling through belly fat to gut. I just ducked her arm and kept moving.

She trailed after me — slowly, and holding her breath, but she did it, because her other option was being alone. Who’s codependent now, I thought, as I did what she and I both knew would kill me.

* * *

Hardy was alive, anyway. Or something was, underneath the blanket of rats. I could see him rolling, fighting them off, which meant he probably had all of his major pieces attached. Soft tissue, eyes, tongue, that would all be sort of a reveal, I figured, and I braced myself for it. Thinking about what the rats had already done to Hardy’s face meant I wasn’t thinking about what they would do to mine.

I charged out there, and Jenny charged after me, with much less conviction, and as we did, the rats sort of... scattered. I don’t mean to be anti-climactic. The wave moved on from us, down the street. I could see a flow of rats heading through the ground-floor window of the house next door from mine — such a nice-looking house, pale blue and white, not that it exists any more — and I hoped no-one was home. They had a baby.

Hardy was under the receding mass, and, anti-climactically, he still had a face. The rest of him was a mess. Ragged chunks had been torn out all down his forearms, where he’d crossed his arms over his face to defend himself. It looked like when my mom shredded pork for taco night. It was carnage. Jenny sucked a breath in at the sight.

“My mouth tastes like bugs,” said Hardy.

I helped him up, trying to get as little of his taco meat on me as possible. Jenny looked off, down the block, at the receding waves.

“Is it over?” she said.

“Are we alive?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Then it’s not over,” I said. “Omphagor is a General of Hell who’s been lying in wait for all eternity. It’s not going to scare us with bugs and then go away.”

Jenny’s face pinched and hardened; she sucked her lips in between her teeth until I could see what she’d look like at eighty. Not that she’d live to eighty. Not that I would.

“You don’t have to talk to me like that,” she said. “I went along with your plan.”

“Yes, Jenny, congratulations,” I said. “You did the decent thing in a life-or-death situation. It must have been hard for you. You’re one of our great American heroes, really.”

“I risked my life,” she said, starting to shout. “I let you risk your life, because you wouldn’t let me save it.”

“It’s my life, Jenny!”
“And mine is... what? The DVD extra to yours?” Jenny said. “You know, at least I think about your life. I think about your safety. I ask myself if any of my hobbies might accidentally murder you, and then, I don’t murder you.”

“I wish you would, sometimes, Jenny,” I said, letting the momentum of the fight sweep me straight from Moral High Ground to the deadly Threatening-Death-Just-To-Score-Points Swamp. “I really do. I would welcome death at this point.”

“Yes, you would,” Jenny said, “but you didn’t think about whether anyone else would, and that’s how you ended the world.”

“Did Jenny not want to come out here?” Hardy said, mildly.

I had honestly forgotten he was still there. Jenny had too, clearly. I watched all sense of righteousness drain from her face, and I grinned, which was the wrong move, because my turn was next.

“How did Nick end the world?” said Hardy.

* * *

We wound up in Jenny’s living room. Through its front window, I could see the wreck of the place I grew up; windows caved in and shattered, door busted off its hinges, a hole in one outer wall where the pipes had collapsed outward. Whatever was in there was covered in bug guts and rat shit and probably dead rats, too; they ate each other, was the one fact I had managed to retain about the species. All my tools — the cheap New Age paperbacks, the battered Crowley, the $19.99 Ren Fest athame; everything that made me a sorcerer and not a victim — were gone, eaten or fouled or just swept out of reach.

We were stuck there, in Jenny’s chintzy floral-print living room, waiting for the sky to cave in. There was a First Aid kit for Hardy under the kitchen sink, at least. There were bandages. He barely flinched as I poured disinfectant on his ruined arms, though it made me want to throw up just seeing it. I don’t think Hardy was a very manly person, in most respects, but he had one thing down. He was stoic. I stayed quiet, winding the bandages over his wounds.

Jenny, still mad that I’d made her be heroic, was curled up on her couch, propping her arms on the back of it so she could look out her big front window.

“Where are yours?” Jenny said.

“What?”

“Your parents,” she said. “My mom’s at work, but where are your mom and dad? Did they die?”

My mom. I kept trying and failing not to think of her. She was a receptionist named Gloria, and she was what other people referred to as “a real fun lady,” and as far as she was concerned, I had never done anything wrong in my life. Not the weird clothes, not the bad metal bands, not being unpopular or worshiping Satan or growing penicillin on a pile of old underwear in our basement, none of it. My Dad was a dad; he went in and out, he said stern things about report cards, he failed to play catch. My mother, though. She adored me. I sat in Jenny’s living room, wrapping ban-
dages, and wondered how quickly that would change.

“Doctor’s appointment,” I said. “I figured I’d just let them go. Where could they be that’s safer than a hospital, right?”

Jenny didn’t turn back to look at me. I squinted, trying to see her reflection in the glass. I knew it was desperate, but I couldn’t help it. I had to know what she thought of me.

“There’s a storm,” she said.

I had seen it, too — big, curdling, roiling clouds, closer to the ground than any I had ever seen before. They were strangely shaped, lit from inside by veins of orange light. Something that wasn’t lightning flickered through them, orange and red.

“It could be Y2K, right?” Jenny said. “The world was supposed to end this year, anyway. Maybe there aren’t even any demons. This could be what Y2K looks like.”

“Y2K isn’t until New Year’s,” I said.

“Shut up.”

She still hadn’t turned around. I looked past her, out the window. The storm moved over the world fast, blotting out the sun, until the whole sky was one great flame.

I wondered if I was going to cry. I decided against it. The end of the world was bad enough without me crying because my grade school friend was mean to me. Someone had to be the grown-up around here, and given who I was working with, it looked like I was going to be stuck with the job.

“Don’t say things you’ll regret, Jennifer,” I said. “The world is ending. We won’t get to talk much longer.”

Jenny shot a glare like the storm clouds at me, hot and ugly. I braced myself for the second round to commence.

“The world was already ending,” Hardy said.

He pulled back from me as I finished taping off the bandages, flexing his arms to test them. Specks of blood and ooze came through the gauze almost right away, but — considering how gnarly the underlying damage was — it was less than you’d think.

“I don’t think you understand what’s going on here,” I said.

This was true. I didn’t. I mean, we’d explained it all, in detail, and several times, but I barely understood it myself.

“I understand the end of the world,” Hardy said.

What he said next was the longest I’d ever heard him talk uninterrupted. It was also the strangest thing I’d ever heard him say. I’m trying to remember; he started off with a list of movies. Or, no, it was the singles of the year, or it was Clinton — no. Fuck it. I’ll get Hardy to tell you himself.
— INTERLUDE —

1999: An Apocalypse In Context

A brief sociocultural overview of the apocalypse of 1999, taking into account its precedents, historical context, and overall function

Lecturer: Hardy Anderson Patrick

The number one single on May 29, 1999 — the day the world ended — was “Livin’ La Vida Loca,” by Ricky Martin. The number one movie at the box office was Star Wars: The Phantom Menace.

Other #1 movies of 1999 included: Entrapment, The Mummy, Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me, and Wild Wild West, this last regarded as the movie that broke the formerly unbreakable winning streak of its star, Will Smith. Other #1 songs included Santana’s “Smooth” and the theme song to Wild Wild West, which Will Smith — much to his own and others’ regret — performed. The winner for Best Rock Video at the MTV Music Video Awards that year was Korn’s “Freak on a Leash;” Korn shared the category with Kid Rock and Limp Bizkit, and were nominated in the “Best New Artist” category. Kid Rock was in that one, too.

I submit these facts in advance of my conclusion: America in 1999 was a culture already in swift and irreversible decline. Its every development pointed to the darker world on the horizon. 1999’s most important news items were the Columbine shooting, in which two teenaged Nazi sympathizers killed 15 people including themselves, and the Clinton impeachment, in which the sitting President’s sexual misconduct with a much younger woman was uncovered by his political enemies and used to seek his removal. 1999’s most important startups were Napster (which would functionally collapse the music industry), Amazon (which would collapse independent bookstores) and Pets Dot Com (which sold pet food, a function soon taken over by Amazon). 1999’s most important fashion statement was the cargo skirt. I could go on.

What I argue is that, even if Nicholas Casini and Jennifer Long had never existed, or if they had done better things with their time in high school, the world would still have ended in 1999, or shortly thereafter; the world was already ending, all around us, which (along with the fact that 1999’s Academy Award winner for Best Picture was American Beauty) produced our overwhelming generational malaise.

To speak colloquially: Nothing that we were supposed to look forward to happened. Everyone loved Star Wars, but then Star Wars was out and everyone hated it. The Internet was supposed to be Matthew Lillard hacking and going to raves, but then it was just a place to buy pet food. The President was supposed to be an old man on the TV who showed up and gave speeches and disappeared, but now, the President was on trial, and we knew what he liked to do during sex.

Columbine was supposed to change everything. We

5 I have no idea how Nick got Hardy to do this. He’s not an easy guy to reach these days. But that’s the thing: As much as we hurt each other, as worn-out or angry as I sometimes got, Nick Casini was magic. — Jenny
had to show people our bags at the school’s entrance each morning, we had to follow a new dress code, we had to install metal detectors and do a dozen active shooter drills. The next month, a different kid with a different gun shot up a different school. None of it mattered. The world was just getting worse, and none of our plans to fix it ever seemed to work.

It was the end of the century. It was the end of the millennium. It was the end of high school. If it was the end of our lives, what else was new? What were those lives going to be? Internet pet food purchases, presidential sex crimes, people complaining about Star Wars. The world was already ending in 1999. The apocalypse was just a buzzer ringing, telling us that our time had run out.

I mean, what was I supposed to do? What do you do, when the single least articulate guy you know suddenly delivers a lecture in your living room?

Hardy’s speech hung in the air, making everything feel alien and disorienting. I watched the fire in the sky cast its shifting light on the tiny flowers in my mom’s wallpaper, saw the hulk of Hardy barely wedged into a wooden rocker in the corner. This looked like a house that only women lived in, I realized. Everything in it was pink or frilled or flower-printed. Nick, in his black outfit, looked like a bruise spreading on the carpet.

I had lived here. I knew that, but I didn’t believe it. Suddenly, my own house looked fake to me, like the inside of a dollhouse. It was ridiculous that such a place existed, and that I would pretend to be the girl who lived in this room. I had to get out. I stood up, breathing heavy, and ran up the stairs into my bedroom.

I steadied myself against the sight of all my old detritus, all the selves I was outgrowing: My “I WANT TO BELIEVE” poster, the stack of MST3K episodes I’d taped off the Sci-Fi Channel last Thanksgiving, the From the Choirgirl Hotel tour program on my desk. Nick and I had camped out by the doors of the theater, trying to meet Tori, but even
though we showed up at ten in the morning, there were too many people ahead of us. Nick promised that next time we’d get there before dawn, like the real weirdos, the ones Tori gave extra tickets to and knew by name.

So I couldn’t be dying, because Tori was touring that fall, and Nick was going to drive me around for a week so we could follow her like those people we read about on the Dent. The world couldn’t be ending, because that would mean Tori Amos was ending, and I couldn’t be the reason Tori Amos died, or — worse — canceled her tour. For a minute, I could almost believe none of it was happening; the apocalypse was just a bad dream, one of a thousand I’d had, and I felt safe.

Then Nick came pounding up the stairs and threw open the door, before I was fully sane yet, and everything came apart.

* * *

“What are you doing?” Nick said, standing in my open doorway. “Hardy is hurt down there. He needs our help.”

“It isn’t him,” I said.

It felt like a crazy thing to say, right up until I said it, but then it was out of my mouth, and I was committed. I pulled Nick in by one arm and shut the door, propping myself up against it in case of intrusion. Nick shot me a fed-up look, one eyebrow headed up toward his hairline, but he sat down patiently on the edge of my ratty lace-edged comforter and let me explain.

“You said Omphagor could be in anyone,” I said. “Did that sound like Hardy to you? Did it sound like anyone we know?”

“So Omphagor is going to bore us to death with Matthew Lillard references?” Nick said. “Seems like a long game, but let’s see if it pays off.”

“We’re the ones who summoned the demon,” I said. “Why wouldn’t it infect somebody we know? Hardy showed up right when that swarm did. He steered into it. The rats didn’t even hurt him.”

“They hurt him, Jenny,” Nick said. “I touched it. It was gross.”

“It’s not Omphagor’s body,” I said. “It can probably afford some superficial damage. I’m telling you — what Hardy did, out there, that’s what I’d do if I were the demon. I would try to act helpless. Show up at the right moment and let you invite me in.”

Nick sighed. He was looking down at the carpet between his boots. I couldn’t see his eyes. He scraped his hair back with one hand, rubbing his face, like a tired dad whose kid won’t stop begging for ice cream.

“Hardy’s not Leatherface, Jenny,” Nick said. “He’s just got some thing where he can’t read faces. His reactions look different than yours.”

“I’ve seen Hardy before,” I said. “I’m telling you, I want him out of my house.”

“Of course you do,” Nick said. “It’s twice today you’ve suggested killing the guy to solve a problem. You didn’t even think he was possessed the first time. You won’t rest until I leave Hardy Patrick dead in a ditch.”

It was so unfair. I had always helped Hardy — not the
way Nick did, by charging in and demanding things, but in my way, when I could. I provided crucial distractions. Nick shook his head. His face was twisted into some shape I’d never seen on him before.

“It’s like you give it up for one guy and suddenly no-one else matters to you,” he said. “I mean, at least it’s smarter than your Y2K theory.”

I looked up at my *Dragonriders of Pern* books, which were still racked up on my bookshelf. I had them all, in those elaborate ‘80s covers, with uniform spines — all except for *The White Dragon*. Its spine was a silver strip of duct tape, with the title written in Sharpie. That’s what Nick did, the first afternoon he invited me to his house. He took the two halves of the book that the teacher had ripped apart, and he taped them together.

Nick fixed my book. Nick gave me half of his sandwich so I wouldn’t miss lunch. Nick, the real Nick, didn’t hurt me. So I knew it then, clearly and all of a sudden: The person in front of me, the person who put me in danger and called me a bad person and made me feel stupid and tried to kill me, was not Nick any more.

“I don’t know you,” I said.

“Jesus,” Nick said. “Whatever this is, you need to snap out of it. You sound like a crazy person.”

“I don’t,” I said. “You made us do the ritual. You weren’t scared when those birds crashed into the mall. You dragged us out into the swarm, like you knew that it couldn’t hurt you. You let it in. Didn’t you? You wanted this.”

He snapped up to his feet then, faster than I’d ever seen him move. I knew I was right when I saw his eyes. The person in there was someone I’d never seen before. Someone awful.

“Is this hard for you, Jenny?” the awful stranger said. “Is it tough to be the only normal person you know? Trapped in this house with the freaks and the demons and everyone who’s just so much worse than you, does it scare you to be better than us all the fucking time?”

*Don’t listen,* I thought. *It only wants to hurt you.* I pressed myself up against the wall. The doorknob was a few inches from my hand, close enough that I thought I could grab it. The thing that looked like Nick saw the fear on my face, and it sneered.

“You do seem scared,” it said. “You seem like you’re not thinking straight. Because you’re trying to outrun a monster, and instead of actually running, Jenny, you locked yourself in the room with it. And then you pissed it off.”

He went for me, and I went for the door. I reached it just before he did. Then I was off down the hall, my body again working without me, getting me away from the room where Nick wanted to kill me. I found the closest door with a lock on it — the bathroom — and ducked behind it, slamming it shut. I tried to lean against it, but my foot slipped on all the blood, and I landed on my hands and knees, splashing in it. When I turned my head, I saw him.

---

6 She’s clearly crazy, you’re thinking. I was just being sensitive. I’ve been talking to you this whole time, telling you what I thought and felt, so I couldn’t possibly be possessed. For that matter, neither one of us can be dead, because we’re still narrating the book. That’s what you’re thinking. You’re wrong on both counts. — Nick
I heard screaming on the other side of the bathroom door, and I banged on it with both hands, shouting Jenny’s name.

I knew I had scared her, back in her bedroom. It was just a moment of pure meanness: I saw her round blue eyes wide and wet beneath her glasses, her jaw dropped and trembling, and she looked like a child to me. She looked eight years old, letting the whole world push her around and call her names on the playground. It was infuriating. How many people got away with being that fragile? How fragile did I ever get to be? How sheltered, how selfish, how weak did you have to be, to actually cry over being asked to think about someone else for a change?

I lunged for her, not even sure what I meant to do, and then she was running out the door. Watching her go, I suddenly felt insane to myself. I stumbled after her, calling I’m sorry, I’m sorry. She didn’t hear me. She ran from me like you’d run from the Devil, fast as you can and not looking back.

The screaming from the bathroom was terrible. We’d both screamed a lot that day, myself to an un-manly degree, but this sound was different. It was raw and animal and it went on and on. It sounded like someone being broken.

I banged on the door one more time, and Jenny stumbled out. The whole left side of her skirt was bloody up to the waist, as if she’d been doused with it. Her hands dripped with gore. So did her face, a little. She’d put one hand to her mouth, or something, and forgotten what was on there. It was smeared on her like a drunk girl’s lipstick.

Her mouth was red, her hands were red, her clothes were red. Her eyes were red in a different way. She’d been in that room maybe two or three minutes, but she looked as if she’d been crying for hours. Jenny didn’t look like a little kid any more. She didn’t look soft. She looked dead, vacant, like some vital part of her had been sucked out and disposed of in a waste dump.

“Get away from me,” she said, quietly.

Then she was running down the hall, nearly knocking me over as she went. I knew I should stop her, or at least some part of me did, but by then I had seen what was in the bathroom, and I couldn’t move. I heard a door slam downstairs. Jenny had run out into the storm. Jenny will die out there, I thought. You can’t let Jenny die, you have to go get her. The thought didn’t connect with my body. I stood there frozen.

* * *

The blood was smeared on the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It was crusted thick around the rim of the toilet. It bubbled in the sink, where it overflowed around chunks of something wet and tattered.
I mistook the marks for spatter at first. There was a splash mark on the floor where it looked like Jenny had fallen. She must have tried and failed to right herself, wound up sprawling in it. But the bloodstains didn’t look like spray. They were tracks: A thousand thousand tiny feet, wriggling up through the pipes. Fouling themselves. Crawling over everything.

I could move if I took it a step at a time, and so I did, walking over the gory tile slowly and in silence. I could hardly feel my legs; I would have thought I was floating, if not for the crunch of bug corpses under my feet. They had crushed each other with the sheer weight of the massed tide, thousands upon millions, coming and coming.

Coming for what, I thought. But I knew. I could already see that the window above the shower was cracked open—just a bit, to let the steam out. That had been enough to let the rats in. Blood slopped over the sill where they’d fled the room, each carrying their piece of Timothy.

He was in the bathtub. Or some of him was; the least edible bits, bone and meat that stuck close to it, a few high bits of his lung still wedged in his rib cage. He’d ripped neatly apart when there was no more tissue to hold him together. The front part pitched facelessly forward, one arm flung out over the edge of the tub. He must have tried to fight them off, or at least get out.

There were a lot of rats. Wet bathtubs are slippery. So in the end, Timothy died as he lived: Not leaving Jenny’s shower.

I could feel that I was going to laugh, actually heard it starting, and I knew that if I let it out, I would hate myself forever. I’d hear that demented supervillain giggle in my nightmares, proof of who I really was; I had killed someone, and then I had laughed about it, while his corpse was still steaming in front of me. I bit my own tongue, hard enough to draw tears and maybe blood. The giggle died in my chest.

Then I turned around, at which point I almost died, too. A shape bigger than the doorway loomed into view, and I jumped out of my skin, barely missing the chance to fall, crack my head open on the sink and bleed out in the bathtub with my new friend Tim.7

“Jesus Christ, Hardy,” I said.

“Rats are dirty,” he said patiently. “I wanted to use the shower.”

“I don’t advise it,” I said.

It was ultimately good that everyone I knew irritated me. It gave me something to focus on. Repressing the urge to snap at Hardy, for instance, gave me control of my arms and legs, so that I was able to get out of that bathroom and shut the door.

* * *

My legs gave out as soon as Timothy was out of my sight. Hardy and I wound up sitting on Jenny’s stairs, looking down at the front door.

“Why did she leave?” Hardy said.

“I don’t know, Hardy,” I said. “Because she thinks

---

7 Yes, the “-othy” went missing. But then, so did the rest of him. (What? It’s been years. Also, I hated that guy.) — Jenny.
this is all my fault.”

He shifted beside me — a big, quiet, companionable presence, demanding nothing. You could say anything around Hardy, not least because you were never really sure that he was listening. So it all spilled out.

“It is my fault,” I said. “Jenny’s right. I should have known this could happen. I did know. I just did it anyway. I’m not normal.”

“You’re more normal than I am,” Hardy said.

Hardy was genuinely good company, was the thing. I wasn’t lugging him around like a suitcase, I didn’t hang with him out of obligation or pity. No-one ever let Hardy be fragile, either; he’d had to eat shit every day of his life, and eat it twice if he ever struck back or flew off the handle. I’d flown off pretty much every handle I ever had, at one point or another, but Hardy had a way of establishing a certain baseline calm.

Also, it was nice to get a break from straight people. Jenny, God love her, was just intensely heterosexual, but Hardy — though you wouldn’t think it to look at him; most of the important things about Hardy were things you wouldn’t think to look at him, it turned out — was already sure he wanted to kiss boys.

“I messed up,” I said. “I do one thing, which is study magic, and I still messed up. I killed people. I ended the world.”

“I still need to pee,” he said.

“You can pee in other people’s houses, Hardy,” I said. “It’s not uncommon.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said.

I wanted to ask him why he thought it was more polite to shower, or whether he asked to use people’s showers every time he excused himself, or whether (this is where the conversation entered a weird territory for me) peeing for him somehow involved full nudity, which would make showering roughly equivalent in terms of social code violations, but which made me really anxious about how many times he’d used the school bathroom and what horrors the other boys saw in there, and I knew he would have answered every one of those questions, truthfully, and in the same pleasant tone. He was like a very polite anthropologist doing field research on teenage customs. He had no idea what any of us were doing, let alone how to participate, but he plugged away, determined to keep collecting data until he found out.

There was no more time for questions. The world was dead, and so was Jenny Long, most likely, and if Hardy and I weren’t dead yet, it was only because we were running behind schedule. What I decided, sitting on Jenny’s stairs, was that I had to make it count. If I was already the man I would be on the day I died, I had to make him someone worth becoming.

I stood up.

“Where are you going?” Hardy asked.

“It’s my fault the world is ending,” I said. “So it’s my full of quiet wisdom.
job to save it. You can stay here if you want.”

He shook his head and heaved his bulk up behind me. This had happened in every war, I suddenly realized; two guys standing up and heading out to die together. In trenches and jungles and Jenny Long’s living room, boys left shelter and headed out onto battle, most of them about our age. If this was being a man, it was terrible. Let it come. I moved, he moved, two young soldiers, down the stairs and out into a world on fire.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jenny

My leg was ruined, but I ran on it anyway, hobbling and bleeding my way down the street as fast as I could. Tears blurred my vision, and so did speed, and that was good, because anything I did manage to see of the world was horrible.

Fires raged in houses where rats had chewed through the wiring. Most of the windows had been broken; I saw chairs and tables resting on lawns in pools of shattered glass, where people had thrown them or beaten them through the windowpanes, trying to create a means of exit. I don’t think it worked. One man hung by the waist outside of his big bay window, stomach impaled on a shard of glass as long as my arm. Bits of him slopped down the siding.

The street was crowded with stopped cars — not all of them crashed, although some were. I tried not to look inside those. I saw clouds of blood, hair, skin, in configurations I knew would make me vomit. What I hadn’t seen, I couldn’t remember, so I ran. That awful, smoking sky hung over all of it, covering Darbyton in its shifting shadows, turning the whole world red.

I didn’t know where I was running to; west, vaguely, because west was good and good was west and I wanted to head toward a good part of the world. I was running just to
run, to get away from the mess that used to be Timothy and the thing inside Nick that wanted to kill me. I kept moving until my breath gave out and my ribs felt like splintered wood piercing my gut, and then I stopped, hands on my knees, trying to keep breathing while I sobbed.

When I looked up, I saw Debra lying on her lawn. She was breathing, too.

* * *

What else can I tell you about Debra McAllister? I saw her cry once. It was in freshman year, and it was messy. There were rumors about something that had happened to her — she’d gone to a party, with the West kids, and if you heard one side of the story, she got really drunk and embarrassed herself, and if you heard another side of the story, something much worse happened, and she was not the one who should have been ashamed. I knew who to believe. I saw her crying.

Debra was almost one of us. That was the thing. She lived just west of our bad neighborhood — better off than Nick and me, but not so much better that it would matter to the kids with three kitchens. She wasn’t rich, she just found a way to look rich by being meaner to the poor kids than anyone else. Before Debra proved her value as a bully, she was just another white-trash kid to mess with, a slightly better-dressed Courtney Scheiber. She was something fun to do.

So Debra was leaning on the sink in the girls’ bathroom, next to the auditorium, crying her eyes out. I had just walked in, and I wasn’t sure what to do. It was like seeing the T-Rex in *Jurassic Park* weeping into its little claw hands. You felt bad, but you also knew that if you moved, it would eat you. She eventually saw me anyway, in the back of her reflection, and snapped her head around. I braced for her teeth to close around me.

“What are you waiting for?” she snapped. “Did you just come to look?”

I shook my head.

“It could happen to you, too, you know,” she said. “They won’t believe you, either.”

I had a little pack of Kleenex in my backpack; I cried a lot in bathrooms, in those days, so I came prepared. I moved across the tile floor to Debra, and I handed the pack to her — the whole thing, because if I tried to dry her eyes or touch her face, she was still Debra enough to smack me. Don’t get me wrong: I couldn’t stand her. But I also couldn’t stand the idea of myself as someone who didn’t care when bad things happened to other girls.

She took the Kleenex and dried her eyes with it. Somehow, it seemed to draw her back to herself. She took a shaky breath and hardened her face against the world again, becoming beautiful and shiny and mean. But when she looked down at me, I saw something spark in her eyes, a little flash of humanity I knew she would eventually hate me for seeing.

“Jesus will reward you,” Debra said. “That which you do to the least of these. He rewards you if you help people.”

I guess that’s one more thing I can tell you about Debra. She was super Christian. You could tell, because she...
was a terrible bully that made everyone feel like crap all the time. Nick always made fun of it, the Debra-and-Jesus thing, but I hope it was real. I hope it helped her. It would make me feel better to think she had some comfort at the end.

** * * * **

What I first thought, seeing Debra there on the lawn, was that it had happened again — another attack, another bad party. The lawn behind her was strewn with red Solo cups and random sports equipment — bats, croquet mallets, and for reasons I’ll never know, a bowling ball — and a banner that read “GLADIATORS OF ’99” was strung along her front porch. Further back on the lawn, Billy and Chris were slumped on matching deck chairs. I couldn’t see their faces, but Chris was breathing; his gut slowly rose and fell as I watched.

Debra was curled up in fetal position on the grass, with her eyes closed, still wearing party clothes — a pink halter top and jeans with little rhinestones sewn along the seams. Her hair was twisted up in a million barrettes, one of those styles that would look ridiculous if I showed you a photo now, but which made me incredibly jealous at the time. I didn’t know how she got it to look so good, and I also didn’t know how she had the time to do it. It took hours. Her breathing was slow and even, and her face was peaceful, with all of the tension of her cruelty gone. She looked sweet, the way babies look when they’re sleeping, before they wake up and start screaming and throwing up on you.

She didn’t look hurt, I thought. But she didn’t look okay, either. Who just lies down on their lawn and takes a nap, fully dressed? Who can sleep through the end of the world?

I decided not to solve the mystery. I wasn’t Agent Scully, I was a high school graduate who had accidentally killed her mother’s boyfriend. I probably shouldn’t operate on the assumption that I was smart. I kneeled over Debra, shaking her by the shoulder. Bits of her body glitter came off and stuck to my palm.

“Are you all right?” I said. “Debra. Can you tell me if you’re all right?”

Debra opened her eyes and wrapped both hands around my throat.

** * * * **

She wasn’t looking at me, was the thing. She had moved up from the ground as if someone was dragging her by the hair, disjointed and strangely, like a puppet with an inexperienced puppeteer. Her head dangled from her neck, keeling off to the side. Her eyes were glazed, unseeing, like a sleepwalker’s.

I could feel some important piece of cartilage being compressed, squishing painfully up and back into my neck, toward my spine. I knew I was losing air, could hear the gag and cluck as I tried to suck a breath in. Maybe I was losing blood flow too. The world was getting darker.

“Wake up,” I mouthed, before realizing that I couldn’t
talk. My voice box was being crushed along with every-
thing else.

I didn’t want to hear my own voice that way again, a
gurgle coming through wet flesh. I couldn’t afford the air it
lost me. So I stayed silent, not even screaming, as Debra’s
head lolled toward me and her teeth started clicking to-
gether. *Oh, my God, her teeth.* She moved toward me, mouth
chewing fast on nothing, and I closed my eyes, waiting to
be shoved through the wood chipper of her face. Debra
was going to flay the face off my skull, because I’d tried to
see if she was okay, and I knew, in that moment, that Jesus
did not reward the helpers.

I heard a thud, and an angry, female grunt, and sudden-
ly Debra’s hands were off me, and I could breathe. I turned
and ran, not even looking to see what saved me, and ran
straight into Chris.

He was awake, too — or moving, anyway, with that
same vacant tilt of the head, the same fixed glare into the
middle distance. He was a big guy, with a lot of muscle;
running into his chest was like falling onto a gym mat. It
bounced you back a little. He grabbed both my wrists in
one hand and leaned toward my face, toothy and drooling.
I yanked away from him, backward, and ran backward into
Billy, who was standing right behind me.

I heard the roar of my name, in a voice I knew. I twisted
my head around, past Billy, and saw Dave, who was kneel-
ing on top of Debra, pounding her head into the dirt. Too
fast for me to protest, or even realize what I was seeing,
he lifted his foot over her head and — fast, decisive, like
crushing a cockroach — brought it down. I closed my eyes,
but I heard something crack, and when I opened them, she
wasn’t moving.

You want me to tell you how horrible it was, how I felt
sick or frightened or sorry. I can’t. Seeing Timothy in that
shower had shifted something. It was so hideous, so un-
like anything I had ever seen, and even as I was screaming
my throat raw, I knew I wasn’t screaming for him. I was
mourning some soft, innocent spot in my brain that had
been burnt out, the end of the Jenny who had never seen
a dead body. That was over. I had already seen the worst
thing I was ever going to see. I would never be that scared
again.

So here we were. Debra McAllister was dead, but I was
alive, and her boyfriends were trying to kill me. I brought
up one foot and stomped, hard, into Chris’s groin, kick-
ing him hard enough that my leg straightened. He let go
of my wrists, and the momentum knocked me backward,
into Billy, who stumbled away from me and nearly lost his
balance. I did, too; I wound up on the ground, breathing
hard, looking at a baseball bat that was just within arm’s
reach. Before either boy could grab me again, I had the bat
in my hands.

I wasn’t sure how to swing, but my body taught me. I
wrapped both hands around it and brought it hard and hor-
izontal into Billy’s skull first. One, two. The first cracked,
the second squished. He went down on his knees, bleeding
from his head, and I raised the bat high in both hands, like
I was staking a vampire. I brought it down. He went down
on his belly. I brought it down, and down, and down, until
he stopped moving.
It was a haze, a drug, a trance. I had to live, and he had to die. I didn’t think about anything else until it was over. I don’t know that I would call what I was doing “thinking.” It was like sex, or popping a pimple. I just had to finish. The second I was done, I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I couldn’t understand it — how murder had felt almost like joy.

I looked up and saw Chris looking at his dead friend. Actually *looking*; his eyes were connecting, he knew what he saw. He looked up at me, and I swear he was starting to cry. I saw Dave approaching from behind him.

“Wait,” I said, but I said it too slowly. Dave wrapped his hands around Chris’s skull and yanked it at the wrong angle. His neck snapped.

It wasn’t like the movies. Even with your neck snapped, you take a while to die. There’s twitching.

* * *

“Thank God I was there to save you,” Dave said.

I was in the passenger seat of his blue Volvo, looking through the window at the ruined world. Dave had been driving us in circles, swerving around the twisted wrecks that cluttered the blacktop. It was, he’d said, even worse on the highway; he’d been barricaded out of the city by the sheer impassable sea of wreckage, which was why he was still driving around nearby when Debra attacked me.

He’d said that, and the “thank God” thing, several times over. I had been quiet for a long time.

“Are you going to be okay?” Dave asked, eventually.

“I’m fine. I’m a little shaken up. I’m fine,” I said, twisting my bloody hands in my lap.

Dave nodded and looked at the road.

I was not fine. The sidewalk was littered with people like Debra — alive but unmoving. It was difficult to tell them apart from the dead. An ice cream truck had run aground. Its sleeping driver was keeling out the window; the kid he’d run over was popped open under his tires. A car had smashed neatly into the wall of one house. One person was a bloody splatter over the windshield. Another, a woman, was curled up a few feet away from her opened car door. Maybe she’d been thrown clear. Maybe she was trying to run when it hit her.

Some of the not-corpses twitched as we drove by. Waking, or dying, I couldn’t tell; those things looked alike, too.

“Torpor and confusion,” I muttered to myself. “Pleasures of the flesh. Sea of blood.”

Dave shot a look over at me, clearly wondering just how freaked out I was, and if it was the kind that required medical attention.

“I have something to tell you,” I said. “It’s going to sound really crazy.”

“I don’t think anything would sound really crazy at this point,” Dave said.

I peeled a rainbow teddy bear decal from Dave’s window. This car had been his brother’s, once. It had all sorts of stickers for bands he hated: Phish, the Grateful Dead, even a Dave Matthews logo somewhere in back. He could
never get them off, so he tried to play it as ironic. It was Dave’s one big weakness, and it made me feel so tender toward him: As cool as he was, he was stuck trying to make the best of some stoner’s car.

“You know my friend?” I said. “The one you don’t get along with?”

“[CRACK AND OOZE OF BILLY’S SKULL],” Dave said, nodding. “Sure.”

I winced, and hoped Dave wouldn’t notice.

“We summoned a demon,” I said. “A real one. It’s going to end the world.”

Dave looked over at me, his bangs flopping into his eyes. I thought he would shout or cry, freak out, the way Nick and I had done, but he just looked mildly concerned. It was like I told him someone had keyed his car. I guessed that was being a grown man; hearing the worst and not really flinching.

“So you see,” I said. “You didn’t save me, after all. You can’t save anyone. Not any more.”

“We’re still driving,” Dave said. “It’s a bad storm. But storms pass. There’s always a post-apocalypse.”

Just like that, as he said it, I realized there always was. Dave was smarter than me, so if Dave believed there was a future, there probably was one. Not a good one, maybe, but a livable outcome. We’d find old soup cans and grow vegetables and keep baseball bats to fight off the zombies. We’d survive.

“I didn’t tell you the worst of it,” I said, suddenly sure he could comfort me. “The demon possessed someone. I think it picked my friend.”

“You mean [GRISTLE OF CHRIS’S NECK SNAPPING] is possessed?” Dave said. “Like, head-twisting, vomit-cannon, Exorcist possessed?”

I nodded, waiting for him to laugh at me.

“That makes so much sense,” Dave said. “I mean, I know she was important to you growing up and all, but I always got a bad vibe. That possessiveness toward you... it was so intense.”

I looked out Dave’s sticker-marred window and thought of Josh Weir. He and I had been in eighth-grade choir together. I loved choir; I loved the idea that I could open my mouth and something worth hearing might come out. I loved Josh, too, because he could play piano and quote Monty Python and I could tell he was the only person there who cared half as much as I did. So I slipped him a note, before fall rehearsal. He read it aloud to his entire section when he thought I couldn’t hear him. I don’t know if you’ve heard a choir do “Wind Beneath My Wings,” but it’s not traditional for the arrangement to include loud sobbing.

Nick spent the rest of that year demolishing my crush on Josh Weir. They had homeroom together, so Nick wrote down every stupid or embarrassing thing Josh did and read it to me after school. Day 9: Josh recites “Dead Parrot” sketch in its entirety for the seventh time. Day 10: Josh wears socks with

---

Dave was forty-seven, worked at a Virgin Megastore, and had just greeted the statement “the world is ending” with “we’ll be fine,” so yes, he was clearly a Rhodes scholar. Was there a Guggenheim grant or two in Dave’s past? A Nobel, perchance? When you’re dealing with a towering genius like Dave, nothing is impossible. -- Nick
sandals. Day 14: Josh’s favorite band is They Might Be Giants.
Day 20: Josh wears sandals without socks; can understand why socks are necessary now, this is worse. He never admitted what he was doing. It was important, for the sake of my dignity, to pretend Josh was just objectively awful — you don’t like him or anything, do you? Nick said once, his eyes a little too wide — but I knew. Nick refused to let Josh ruin choir for me. He wouldn’t let me break my heart if it meant walking away from my one good thing.

I could never explain Josh Weir to Dave. It would sound small and petty, middle-schoolers gossiping about a boy. My stories about Nick were such tiny things — crushes, concerts, sleepovers — but they were bright little stars, strung across the void of how lonely I was without him. My dad left me, my mother was too busy for me, the other kids at school barely knew I existed, but Nick made me feel like I belonged to someone. It mattered to him that I was in the world.

“It wasn’t bad intensity,” I told Dave. “It was really nice, before the demons.”

“That’s how unhealthy relationships feel when you’re in them,” Dave said. “Once the other person’s gone, you can start to see the damage.”

My grief settled into my chest, vast and silent. I knew then that I could never share it with anyone. I couldn’t mourn a boy no-one else had known.

“We have to stay away from people,” I said. “I don’t want anyone else to die that way. Not because of me.”

“Yeah, how does that connect?” Dave said. “Can demons make zombies? That’s sort of mixing your genres, isn’t it?”

Oh, the magic of Dave: Death bothered him less than lazy writing. I steadied myself by looking at him, pretending I was just a teenager on a date, until the hollowness in the pit of my stomach felt more like a crush and less like nausea. He looked back at me, his eyes so green they looked like stained glass windows, lit from within.

“Torpor and confusion,” I said. “It means tiredness. One of the demon’s plagues. I don’t think they’re zombies. I think they’re sleepwalking. You saw Chris, at the end — it was like he woke up.”

“At the very end? I mostly saw twitching,” Dave said.

“We have to go somewhere isolated,” I said. “Somewhere they won’t hurt themselves trying to hurt us. They’re still people in there, no matter what they act like. They’re victims.”

Dave’s smile was like a camera flash; too bright, dazzling. When he aimed it directly at you, you couldn’t see anything else.

“Jenny Long,” Dave said. “The only girl in a zombie apocalypse who wants to spare the zombies.”

The blood on my hands was dry now. More blood was flaking off my face; when I rubbed my mouth, it came away in little black scabs, as if I’d scraped myself open somewhere and refused to let it heal. I hadn’t spared the zombies, not all of them, and I knew I wouldn’t spare them again, if it came to it. Maybe it made Dave feel better to think of me as soft-hearted and sentimental, a nice girl who wanted to be nice to everybody, no matter what it cost. I knew myself. I knew that if it was kill or die, I would
choose not dying.

I didn’t want to choose. I wanted to go somewhere lonely, where the choice would never present itself, and I could pretend to be the person Dave saw when he looked at me. My mind ran over all the locations I knew: What was abandoned at one PM on a Saturday? People would flee to shelter. What would they be avoiding?

“I never thought I would say this,” I told him, “but I have to go back to my old high school.”

The end of the world was an old movie, cheesy and un-convincing, a grainy image that frayed around the edges.

I’d entered some forcefield of unreality, back in that bathroom. My vision got tinny and too-bright, like a cheap PBS miniseries shot on video. Things moved like their frame rate was off. Everything felt cinematic, staged by some unseen director: The light coming though the trees was a Klieg light, the feral, mangled cat running down the street was from Jim Henson’s Creature Shop, Hardy’s expressions looked wrong, like bad acting. I stood in Jenny’s doorway, looking at the unreal world, and thought of A Nightmare Before Christmas.

I know, I know: The movie whose merch single-handedly kept Hot Topic profitable is not an unexpected reference for me. But I was never supposed to see A Nightmare Before Christmas. It came out in sixth grade, when I was too old for cartoons. My mother took me. That was the year of the chemo, when she was so sick that going to see any movie was a big deal. I could tell she’d chosen one she thought I would like. So I went to see it — gathered up all my manly eleven-year-old forbearance and let my mom treat me like a little kid for a few hours — and I came out changed.

For the rest of that year, every time I had to crash at
Jenny’s, we watched *A Nightmare Before Christmas*. I got the VHS tape from K-Mart and played it until the label peeled off and the plastic casing wore smooth in the shape of my grip. Jenny let me into her house every time I asked. Her mother wasn’t there, half the time, so she made dinner by heating a can of soup on the stove and divvying a bag of microwave popcorn into two piles, a kernel at a time. She fell asleep on me in front of the TV, with her head on my shoulder and her mouth open, and I let her. Something in the way she made that soup told me she hadn’t been put to bed by a grown-up in a long time. The movie got tangled up with all of it, needing my mother and Jenny’s breath on my collarbone and two precisely equal piles of popcorn. I watched *Nightmare* often enough for the celluloid to melt into my brain and cause lasting damage. When I closed my eyes, I saw a clay hill spiraling toward the moon.

It wasn’t the monsters that I loved. Not really. It was the idea of a world that was perfectly controlled. Everything in *Nightmare* was painstakingly managed, sculpted in cloth and clay and wire and moved a fraction of an inch at a time by unseen hands. What I thought, watching it with my mother, was how the world would be different for her if I could shape it. I thought of going into her blood and taking out everything that hurt her before the next frame started. I thought of magic.

I called Jenny to see if she’d watch *A Nightmare Before Christmas* with me, a few weeks before the end. I was having a bad night. She sighed into the receiver, and I heard the static of her exhaustion hissing against my ear.

“Christmas was months ago, Nick,” she’d said. “We’re too old for it, anyway. We probably always were.”

I could have still watched the movie, but it wouldn’t have worked. It would only have reminded me how alone I was. So I put the tape away, and then I lost it, and then my house was destroyed, so I never watched that tape again.

That’s what I was thinking, as I stood in Jenny’s doorway. I was trying to tell myself that the carnage around me was artificial and that none of this was really happening. I was pretending that I lived in a controllable world.

* * *

I had a car, was my main advantage, and so, after a brief and not-too-terrible scuffle on the front lawn — Hardy, being Hardy, had to go poking a collapsed mailman; fortunately, Hardy was so big there was nothing much the guy could do but snap at him, like a cocker spaniel trying to corral a buffalo — we were off to the library.

“Did you know our library won an award, Hardy?” I said, trying to keep the conversation flowing.

Conversation was not my first choice. We’d tried to turn on the radio, so that we could get some sense of how bad things were. That’s how it was supposed to work in this kind of movie: The world ends, but not before our hero rolls up on a bank of TVs in a store window, with useful narration and international disaster montages. *Everything is on fire in Argentina! The Goodyear Blimp has crashed into the Eiffel Tower! Are you seeing this, Brock?* There was no news when the real thing hit. Channel after channel played back the same eerie silence I’d heard from my clock radio. Not
static, or absence, but a present humming, a microphone turned on in an empty room, a black void where voices should be.

There was no electricity either — none of the traffic lights worked. No lights shone in any windows. There would be no Internet to check, probably no phone lines. If there was any useful information to be found, it would be hundreds of years old, and locked in a leather-bound book. It would be in this library. Which, as I’d just told Hardy, had won an award.

“Did you know that?” I said, pressing through his palpable apathy.

“I didn’t,” he said.

“Well, it’s true!” I said.

It may not have been true. I wasn’t citing any deep store of library-specific knowledge, I was just repeating something my mom said, in the same chipper tone, every single time we went to drop off books. My mother’s image floated up into my mind’s eye again, unbidden; I saw images of her corpse, things I hadn’t known how to imagine before I saw Timothy, and pushed them to the back of my mind so that I could keep moving.

“This is the best small-town library in America,” I said. “Which is amazing, because no-one in this small town reads.”

“I read,” said Hardy.

Above us, the library’s shattered windows reflected shards of blood-red sky. It was barely noon, and the world was already going dark. I gathered my breath, getting ready to head out into the twilight, and a monstrous figure flung itself out of the shadows and lunged at the windshield of my car.

I pulled back in a blind panic, spazzing out so thoroughly that I somehow managed to simultaneously bounce my skull off the headrest, slam the brakes in a parked car and injure my hand slamming it into the steering wheel. The horn blared, loudly, which I realized I could probably play off as intentional. I was giving a warning signal, trying to frighten the creature off. I was Man, tamer of Fire, master of the Natural World, and to make sure my natural world recognized this, and stopped throwing monsters at me, I honked my car horn again.

I don’t know why I was thinking this. The only other person in the car was Hardy, and it was hard to injure my manly dignity in front of Hardy, seeing as neither of us had any. He hadn’t screamed, when the thing hit us, but his eyes were wide, and he’d flung his arms up in front of his face, balling his fists like the Notre Dame mascot. He’d also put his thumbs inside his fists, like a four-year-old playing He-Man, but I respected the effort.

The thing on the glass was shrieking; a high, keening sound that went on forever, shredding against the sky. If I pressed past the pain to listen, I could hear that its cry had words.

“Let me in,” the thing screamed.

It slammed a single bloodied hand into the windshield. Its red-smereared palm landed directly in front of my face. It hit us just once, at first, then over and over, until the whole field of my vision was covered over by smears of dust and blackish blood. The glass shivered in its frame.
could hear my own voice, keeping time with the blows, in a holy chant of fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuck.

Hardy lowered his fists. Slowly, like a man possessed, he tilted forward in his seat, until his forehead was resting against the shuddering windshield.

“She wants you to let her in, Nick,” Hardy said.

“She?”

Hardy turned to me, eyes wide. In his face, I saw honest fear.

“Debra,” he said.

“Let me into the car, douchebags,” yelled Debra, because of course, that’s who she was.

* * *

Debra piled into the backseat of my car, breathing hard, and didn’t say thank you. I could see why I hadn’t recognized her. The underlying structure was the same — long legs and tan and varsity-league muscle, covered with so much body glitter you could use her to light your way down a dark hall — but her hard, glossy shell had melted into goo. She was bruised and limping, missing a shoe so she moved lopsided, and her makeup had smeared in black circles around her eyes. Her pink outfit was so muddy she looked like a wad of bubblegum on a dirty sidewalk; her dark hair was drifting down in ratty tangles from its barrettes. When she pushed it back, I could see that she had a shiner. Another big, nasty bruise spread along her jaw.

I studied her in my rear-view mirror, like a terrified Greek planning his line of attack on Medusa. She was slouching, legs cast wide apart and unladylike, as if she was the only person in the world. She looked like one of my Barbies, back when I used to melt them. She looked like something pretty that had been set on fire.

“What happened to you?” Hardy asked.

“I don’t know,” Debra said.

“What does that mean?” I said.

“It means I don’t know, Special Ed,” Debra said. “Are you both retarded now?”

Hardy’s face collapsed a little. He must have let his guard down, thinking we were alone for the duration; he must have thought the end of the world meant he’d never hear that word again.

“Call him that again and you can get out of the car, Debra,” I said.

Debra rolled her eyes like she was a sassy main character in a Nickelodeon show and I was her uptight principal.

“It was a joke,” Debra said. “Obviously.”

“I’m a tough crowd,” I said. “I spent most of high school hoping rats would eat you. Don’t give me a reason to pursue my dreams.”

Debra crossed her arms and settled against the backseat. I felt the thrill that always came when I’d managed to shut her up. Hardy nodded at me, accepting the favor.

“I still want to know what happened,” he said.

“I can’t tell you,” Debra said. “I woke up on my lawn like this. Hurt all over. My friends…”

Debra’s voice trailed off, and her eyes went wide. I’d never seen her look like that. Debra normally had two moods, “bored” and “lethal,” like a bear deciding whether to maul
a tent full of campers. This new expression looked lost, overwhelmed. On a human woman, you’d say “scared.”

I would try to act helpless, I heard Jenny say. Show up at the right moment and convince you to let me in. I tightened my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Billy and Chris,” Hardy said. “Billy and Chris are what?”

“Dead,” Debra said, and this time she didn’t bother to insult him. “I think maybe I killed them. Everything was dark, but I remember I could feel something holding me, the way you hold a doll, moving me around. Sometimes I dreamed I was hurting people. Sometimes I dreamed about people hurting me.”

She took a sharp breath and jolted a little, like someone jerking themselves back from the edge of sleep.

“Your friend,” Debra said. “That fat Amish-looking girl you’re always with. She was there.”

And Scarecrow, and Tin Man, and Toto too, I thought. But Debra’s eyes caught mine, in the rear view mirror, and there was no contempt in them. Whatever she had to say was so important she’d forgotten to hate me.

“She was the worst part,” Debra said. “There’s something bad in her. I could feel it coming out of her body, like a bad smell. A dead squirrel stuck in a chimney, or something. Evil is following her around.”

I felt a sick little flutter in the pit of my gut, remembering the thing twitching and scrabbling through Jenny’s house. I shook my head.

“Evil is following everyone,” I said. “Take me, for instance. I have Debra McAllister in my car.”

Debra’s lip curled a little, like a big cat in a zoo, snarling at its keeper. She was clearly thinking through which words she could still get away with. I couldn’t wait for her to find out the answer was “none.”

“I don’t know why you’re looking at each other,” Hardy said. “Weren’t we going to the library?”

“Right,” I said. “Good news, Debra. I’m about to broaden your horizons.”

Debra flipped me off. Her fingernails were that sparkly baby blue all the popular girls wore that year; the goal was to look cute, and sweet, like sugar almonds and Easter baskets. I thought about the stories our parents used to tell about trick candy, chocolate bars filled with broken syringes and caramel apples with razor blades inside. Stories that reminded you everyone was letting things in, all the time, and we couldn’t know if they were good for us. Any given sweetness might shred you apart.

Okay, there’s clearly a lot to respond to here, but let’s start with: The fat Amish-looking girl who consoled her after her assault.

— Jenny
“It’s fifteen seconds,” Dave said. “Fifteen seconds there and back. I can make it.”

We were crouched behind a cash register in Kroger’s. Dave’s hands were wrapped around mine, steadying me, as he peeked over the edge of the conveyor belt and out into the darkness. I’d told him my idea, the one about the soup cans, and he actually thought it was a good one. The problem was getting anything out of a store where half the customers wanted to eat you alive.

The first one had come for us while we were coming in through the front doors, just lunged for us from behind a stack of carts near the entrance. I recognized him. It was Tyler Cord, this super uptight kid a few years older than us who worked the lights the year I was a fairy in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He didn’t like me — I could not remember the two lines I had as a fairy, even though one of them was just my character’s name, and I’m pretty sure waiting for me to mess up every night wore Tyler’s fragile nerves to the breaking point — but I still said hi to him now and again, because he worked a cash register here on weekends.

Tyler didn’t move, after Dave knocked him to the pavement. I didn’t think he was dead, even though he’d skidded quite a bit when he hit it, and his face, from what I could see, looked ripped-open, oozing juice like a leaky packet of hamburger. What Dave and I worked out was that the sleepwalkers were like the doors — pressure-operated. They’d attack when you were right next to them, but they didn’t move unless you got close enough to set them off.

So that’s what it came down to: You’d live, but only if you kept clear of people and made sure they didn’t notice you. I could do that. It’s how I survived high school.

* * *

“Fifteen seconds to the toilet paper,” Dave said. “The only touchy part is that guy by the paper plates, and he’s not in great shape. He can’t have been fast even when he was conscious.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Do we really need toilet paper?”

We’d been going back and forth on this. I thought we needed only essentials: Soup cans, flashlights, maybe some more soup cans. Dave wanted a whole prep kit. He’d already stolen hurricane candles, shampoo, condoms, a set of knives from the kitchenware section. Why knives, I didn’t know, because it wasn’t like we needed to carve...
our soup, but Dave said it was best to be prepared. He just kept adding one more thing to the list, over and over, ducking a different sleepwalker every time. I think he actually found it fun — running around, dodging zombies, like he was playing Resident Evil. As nerve-wracking as it was, I couldn’t blame him. Dave was made to be a hero.

“We have so much already,” I said. “I don’t want you to get hurt for something I don’t even need.”

Dave turned around and smiled at me. He stroked me beneath my chin with one hand, tracing his finger along my throat like he was petting a kitten.

“You’ve got a man now, Jenny,” he said. “We’re hunter-gatherers. Can’t blame me for wanting to provide.”

He launched himself up from behind the cash register, hurtling over it in one big jump like Jean-Claude Van Damme. I kept my eyes on the guy by the paper towels. He looked so nice; he looked like someone’s dad, with his bristly mustache and polo shirt and soft stomach. He was probably picking up paper plates for a cookout. Maybe his kid graduated yesterday. Maybe he was throwing a celebration.

I wondered what my dad was doing, when the storm hit. I wondered what he looked like now. I would never know the answer, I realized. I’d played it out in my mind a million times: Some last-minute conscience attack on his part, a phone call, a long drive, a tearful reconciliation. Instead he had just died, somewhere far away, as someone I wouldn’t recognize if I passed him in a store.

Dave skidded past the plates, wobbling a little too close as he took the turn, and the cookout dad rumbled and flattened his eyelids and lunged. I knew Dave would have to hurt him now, that it was inevitable, and that Dave would try not to make it fatal. What I hated was that I couldn’t blame the guy for anything Dave might do. It wasn’t his fault he was in our way. He was just going to the grocery store. Just one more man trying to provide.
CHAPTER EIGHT

NICK

We picked through the stacks in the dying light. Even in darkness, I knew them almost by heart. Our library may have won an award — from whom, or whether it mattered, I’ll never know — but to me, and to the guys I knew on Usenet, it had another distinction. The Darbyton Public Library had the most bizarrely, dangerously large occult section in the Midwest.

I don’t know how it happened. Maybe the town was on a ley line or a hellmouth. Maybe some useful order of Satanic nuns did all the book purchasing. Nonetheless, you know how in every horror movie, the library has this whole section of haunted books for summoning Satan, and you’re like, what actual library has that? Our library had that. Also a coffee shop, an Internet room, and a special alcove with stained-glass fairy-tale windows for Toddler Story Time. It really was very good.

“Grab anything with ‘Goetic’ on the cover,” I told Hardy.

I wasn’t sure what good that would do — Goetia is baby-steps basic, as most people teach it, and ours was not a basic problem — but it never hurt to have as much on hand as you could. I looked for the serious stuff, Greater Key to the Seven Regions, the Leviathan Gospel, the Most Excellent Key of Jonah Swallow, that last one being more pornographic than you’d expect, or maybe exactly as pornographic as you’d expect, given the title.

“So he’s been a boy this whole time?” Debra asked.

Also, this had happened. Hardy and I broke the news somewhere back in Biography and Memoir, more or less on accident, while we were explaining the demonic plot to destroy the world. She took the demon news pretty well; maybe all that church-kid stuff had prepared her. She took the rest of it surprisingly well, too, but then, I’d given a lot of graphic warnings about her being eaten by rats if she did otherwise.

Still, she was finding ways to make me regret it. Debra was talking as much as she ever had when she said mean things, but it turned out that when Debra couldn’t say mean things, she just sort of… talked.

“I mean, is it like the end of Ace Ventura?” Debra asked.

I gritted my teeth so hard I could feel my jaw crack.

“Yes, Debra,” I said. “It’s exactly like Ace Ventura, because you’re talking out of your asshole.”

“Calm down,” Debra said. “I know what a [transition, a process which may entail several social and/or physical changes depending on the person’s needs, such as name changes, using correct pronouns, hormone prescriptions, and/or surgery] is. My friend’s cousin got one. I’m not going to give you a hard time, I just wanted to use words that… your friend… would understand.”

She was waving her hand in circles at Hardy’s face, clearly thinking she’d done a great job of skipping The Word.

14 Debra did not say “transition.” She said what people said in 1999. I mean, most people said it! But still. — Jenny
“I’ve never seen Ace Ventura,” Hardy said. “I was also the person who explained this to you.”

“By the way, if you’re a guy, you can’t talk about my asshole,” Debra said. “Like half the words you called me in high school are off the table now. Chivalry and all.”

I had not realized that I would be expected to do chivalry to Debra, and I regretted it, not least because I theoretically could have just stayed in the closet and pushed her through a window when I got the chance. I decided to feel like a good person for not yelling and turned to the stacks, running my hand along black leather spines and dust and crumbling paper edges.

My books comforted me. They were so mine. You couldn’t check any of them out — they were too old and fragile — but they belonged to me nonetheless, because I was the only person who knew how to love them. Anything in that library that was even a little bit demonic or dangerous, I’d read five hundred times. My books reminded me who I was: A necromancer. A summoner of demons. Someone with whom not to fuck, even if the person who most habitually and successfully fucked with me was about two feet away, trailing glitter onto the carpet.

“Are we safe here?” Hardy asked.

Hardy was on edge, and not just because of Debra. He was a creature of routine: Same breakfast every day, same bike ride every evening. He really did wear basically the same shirt all year round, and it wasn’t because he didn’t know how it looked. Dressing got him too stressed out if he had options. The world coming apart wasn’t easy for anyone, but for Hardy, it must have been like being thrown out of your spaceship and into the void of space. He had nothing left to hang onto.

“We’re not safe anywhere, bud,” I said. “It’s the end of the world. Remember?”

“But are we specifically safe here,” Hardy said. “Safer than we would be at another location?”

_Nope_, I thought. I’d cased the windows of the place coming in; half of them were broken. Anything that wanted to get in could. My only consolation was that the swarm had hit already; the aisles were littered with crushed bugs and tattered hunks of rat fur, and I could see the well-gnawed corpse of a librarian sprawled out across the end of our aisle.

Of course, swarms aren’t unidirectional entities. They could always come back.

“Try not to think about it,” I said.

“It’s just that the rats bit me,” Hardy said. “And the mailman. He also bit me.”

“That’s the state of the world, Hardy,” I snapped. “You’re going to live a long life, full of many more things that might bite you.”

Hardy nodded. A stranger might not have seen the pain that passed over his face just then. I was violating the terms of our friendship. I was treating Hardy like he was stupid. I knew he wasn’t stupid, and I also knew most people couldn’t see him as anything but, because of his whole social-cues problem. Hardy and I were invisible boys; we had a responsibility to each other. We had to treat each other as the people we were, not the jokes the world made of us. If we didn’t, we would die unseen.
“There are locked study rooms upstairs,” I said. “How about that?”

“I wish my brother would get a [transition, a process which may entail several social and/or physical changes depending on the person’s needs, such as name changes, using correct pronouns, hormone prescriptions, and/or surgery],” Debra pitched in. “My parents sent him away to prayer camp because he watched Clueless too much.”

When I looked back, she was leaning against a stack, paging through a grimoire from the 1800s with a bored look on her face, like she was disappointed by the dating quiz in the new YM.

“I mean, he did watch it like fifteen times,” Debra said. “Best case, he’s thinking really disgusting stuff about Alicia Silverstone. Still. Maybe they’d let him be if he were a girl.”

She shrugged, and let my book drop to the floor. I saw its spine crack, and a soft, pulpy page or two settled onto the carpet. I swallowed several dozen words I could have gotten away with in high school and headed to grab a book cart. This was inevitable, I told myself. It was my own fault. You didn’t let someone like Debra near precious things.

* * *

“These books are Satanic,” Debra said. “You know that, right?”

We were trekking up the stopped escalator, toward the second floor. Debra was leading me by a fairly embarrassing distance — athlete, long legs, tall girl, etc. — but Har-
through.

I tacked leeward,16 to the cleanest room, and Hardy followed, dumping his thirty pounds of books onto the table. I began spreading them out, propping the heaviest ones open to the sections I knew I’d need.

“She’s right,” Hardy said. “You didn’t tell us what the books are for.”

“You play Dungeons and Dragons, right, Hardy?” I asked.

“It’s a stereotype that all people with social difficulties play Dungeons and Dragons,” Hardy said. “I LARP a Vampire: The Masquerade chronicle at Mirror Lake on Fridays.”

“But you have a rule book, right?” I said. “You can’t just do whatever you want. Someone has to tell you how the vampires turn into bats or whatever.”

“Level Four Animalism takes a while to gain,” Hardy said. “And you don’t turn into the animal, you project your spirit into it.”

“Please stop telling us things about the vampires, Hardy,” I said, as pleasantly as I possibly could.

This conversation actually took a while — he did not stop telling us about the vampires; I had unleashed a deep and hidden passion, one he longed to share with his fellow man — so I’m going to skip the detailed recounting and just tell you now: Demons are rule monsters.

The apocalypse followed the ritual word for word and almost in order; portents, swarm, vermin, torpor, bing, bang, boom. Demons like contracts. They like finding loopholes in contracts. They can tempt you, or trick you, but they can’t improvise.

“So these are our SPLAT books,” I said.

“Storyteller manuals,” Hardy said.

“Whatever they are,” I said, “they tell us Omphagor’s rules. They give us the script it has to follow. If we can learn the rules well enough to summon it, we can learn them well enough to un-summon it. We can send the devil back to Hell.”

I looked up at my two companions, and for one clear moment I saw myself: Heroic, posed over my books, a skinny knot of sinew and intention.

“So I was right. The plan is ‘more Satan,’” Debra said. “Honestly, I would love to own a casino the night you two walked in.”

* * *

I’ll skip the hours it took to unravel everything, the names of the books I checked and cross-referenced, the sky darkening to the color of old blood as the light died; the bathroom breaks, the small talk, Hardy going downstairs to find a Discman and some CDs from the AV section so that he could fulfill his true destiny of not being remotely helpful, leaning back with his eyes closed and the fuzzy headphones clamped over his ears.

It was a long while later when the next important thing happened: Me and Debra, somehow alone in the stacks again, picking through the last of the books. We were down to the dregs now, chipper-looking paperbacks with titles like Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation, and we still

16 He “walked” “left,” for my fellow non-ship-captains in the audience. — Jenny
hadn’t found anything I could use.

“Your friend is probably dead, huh?” Debra said.

I flinched. I wouldn’t say the silence between me and Debra had been precisely comfortable, but it had been better than the other option.

“Why?” I asked. “Did you kill her?”

“No, dingus,” Debra said. “I mean, maybe. I hope not. It’s just, all my friends are dead too. I wanted to say I was sorry.”

I nodded. She was lying, and we both knew it; Debra wasn’t the kind of person who felt sorry for anyone but herself. Still, I wanted to end the conversation before she took it further. Debra faking sympathy was like a dog performing cardiac surgery. It hurt, having her poke and paw around in my heart, trying to fix things she could never understand.

“Why was she like that, by the way?” Debra said. “Was she homeschooled or something?”

Something snapped in my chest and surged up through my throat. I wheeled around to face her, close enough I could smell sweat and raspberry body spray.

“Shut up, Debra,” I said. “I haven’t killed you, because it’s wrong, and Hardy would be upset, but I swear to God, I could put you in a supply closet and lock it and just tell Hardy the zombies got you. He’d believe me. If you want to stay here, just stop talking. Now.”

It hung between us for a long second. She looked me staring. I don’t think I’d ever really made eye contact with her for that long before. Slowly, her eyes got a little shinier and shakier, and before I knew it, Debra had collapsed onto her knees. She just folded up, in a pile of mud and muscle and glitter, there on the floor.

“I don’t want to stay here,” Debra said. “I want to be dead.”

I shook my head, numbly.

“You don’t,” I said.

“I was supposed to be in Heaven,” Debra said. “When the apocalypse started, God was supposed to just airlift me out of here with all the other Christians. They told us this would be Titanic. You’re supposed to drown with all the steerage people. I’m supposed to get a boat.”

I rolled my eyes. Being consigned to the fiery pit was one thing, but I was also not shocked that Debra had watched Titanic and decided its major takeaway was don’t give poor people lifeboats.

“Why didn’t God take me?” Debra said. “I prayed. I went to church. I did whatever my parents said, but God saw there was something wrong with me. He will spit you out of his mouth. He spat me.”

“Can you blame him?” I said.

“No,” Debra said. “Not after what those boys did.”

She looked up at me, and my breath froze in my throat.

I’d heard about it, the thing that happened to Debra freshman year. Everyone had; the details were cloudy, they varied from account to account, most people who told the story managed to make it sound like her fault. No matter what, though, if you put enough pieces together, you saw
a picture of something pretty bad.

“Jesus,” I said.

“Don’t take his name in vain,” Debra said.

I knelt down next to her, trying to get my face on her level. She flinched. She wasn’t crying, not yet, but she turned her face from me, as if her sadness were an open cut and I had dirty hands.

“Debra, it doesn’t work like that,” I said. “Not the apocalypse. Not anything. You can’t go to Hell for something you couldn’t help.”

“Why not? You are,” Debra said. “My brother probably is. Anyone who’s gay, or Hindu, or Catholic, or born before Jesus… I mean, it’s most people. Why not me?”

She turned back to me, then. Her face was closer to mine than I’d ever thought it would be; I could see the pores and baby hairs and swirls of flesh-colored paint that comprised her. The look in her eyes wasn’t pitiful or lost or fragile. She was just confused, asking a question whose answer she thought she’d known.

It was such a lonely idea, I thought; everybody going to hell but you. Debra’s whole life depended on being the one pure human being, and it would take one mistake to break her. She lived like an egg baby from Home Economics class, perpetually afraid of slipping out of someone’s basket and smashing onto the pavement. How mean did your house or your family or your God have to be, to send some teenager to a re-education camp for liking the wrong movie? How unsafe would you feel if you’d watched your parents stop loving one of their kids?

It would make me lonely to be Debra, I realized. It would make me lonely, and it would make me mad, and I could never fight the thing I was mad at. I couldn’t call the Savior ugly or throw drink cups at God. If I lived like that, I could only hurt the people around me, hitting them because they were close enough to touch and I could see the hurt blooming on their faces. Hurt like Debra’s. Hurt like mine.

“Look, Debra,” I said, “I’m definitely going to Hell. But it’s not because I’m a guy, all right? It’s because I summoned a demon to kill everyone. You’re not going to Hell because someone did an evil thing to you. You’re going because you’re a mean person and you made my life miserable for years.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“You did,” I said. “And I gave it right back to you, and if it ever hurt your feelings, I’m not sorry. Because we’re tough people, Debra. We’re fighters. If either one of us is going down, we’re going down by choice.”

Debra rubbed her face with the back of her hand. Smears of dust and paint came away onto her fist.

“That’s sweet,” Debra said.

I was horrified to discover that she was right. Somehow, despite my best intentions, I was being sweet to Debra McAllister. Worse than that, she didn’t seem to mind.

We stopped talking for a little while. I was sitting close to her, close enough to feel the heat of her skin and her chest shuddering when she sighed, and somehow, for reasons unknown to me, I’d managed to throw an arm around her during our little pep talk. When she looked back up at
me, her hair was falling around her face in a cloud, and her
eyes were softer than I’d ever seen them.

“Hey,” she said. “You know the part in Clueless where
Alicia Silverstone gets tired of being popular, and she de-
cides she wants to be a good person, and she hooks up
with the weird alternative guy who’s always lecturing her
about how awful she is?”

I swallowed very hard.

“No,” I said.

“Well,” Debra said, “I just want to be really clear that’s
not what’s happening here. You’re not going to fist me
on a pile of rat corpses, or whatever weird Trent Reznor
shit you’re into. We’re just making friends because we’re
scared.”

There were so many ways to die at the end of the world.
Mauled by zombies. Drowned in bugs. Or, in my case, you
could die of a shame-based aneurysm directly after hearing
Debra McAllister say “fist me.” My face went completely
numb — a mercy, because I couldn’t feel whatever expres-
sion I was making — and I stood up.

“Maybe you’re right,” Debra said. “I mean, the Bible
has basically no good women in it. Devil’s gateway, and
all.”

I just walked away and kept walking, aiming my three-
lane car crash of a face down onto the carpet. I didn’t even
hear what she’d said until I was halfway up the escalator.
When I did, the answer unfurled in my chest, petal by pet-
al, a rose made of fear and blood.

18 At least she doesn’t know Paul Rudd’s name, either. I’m start-
ing to think something happened when Dave stomped on her head.
— Jenny

Hodgson’s Gramarye was simultaneously the most and
least valuable thing in that entire library. It was three hun-
dred years old, but that meant it had spent three hundred
years as the world’s most useless piece of literature; any
trash anecdote about something spooky happening in Eu-
rope had been thrown in there at some point. Two-headed
Lady at the vegetable market said “curse you” and you
had to burn her to death on suspicion she was a powerful
witch? Sure, why not. On Usenet, it was a running joke,
a way to separate hardcore people from the newbies; did u
check Hodgson’s, you’d type to some idiot wanting to learn
how to make pencils float, sending him off to dig up one of
the three or four copies still on the planet, a months-long
incalculably expensive quest to find an entire book’s worth
of nothing.

I had been sent to check Hodgson’s, in my time, so I
didn’t check it that day until it was way too late, running
through the door of our study room and scrambling to
pull it out from beneath my plastic chair. I flipped it open,
looking for a page I didn’t know I knew.

When I looked up, the sky was dark stone gray, like
cracked and crumbling blacktop, or the windless coma
before a tornado. Even the fire had mostly died out, and
there was only a sick red light fading through the clouds.
My stomach had dropped. I thought I might cry again. The
whole world was wrong, I realized, wronger than I ever
suspected, and it had been for a long, long time.

“I know who Omphagor is, Hardy,” I said.

He raised his head and looked sleepily at me, eyes still half-shut, headphones blaring. I kicked him, under the table, trying to get a response. He peeled the headphones off. His expression was not amused. It wasn’t anything, really, but “amused” was high on the list of things it wasn’t.

“I’ve had a physically draining day, Nick,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I know who Omphagor possessed. I know everything now.”

“Who is it?”

The words stalled somewhere between my throat and my teeth. My tongue was heavy in my mouth, my breath stopped, as if my body was trying to freeze itself in the moment before I told him. It was a world-ending spell in itself, what I knew; a set of terrible words that would change everything.

“It’s Jenny,” I said. Once I’d started, I couldn’t stop saying it. “Jenny’s the demon. It’s always been her.”

Then the glass wall shattered and the world blew in around me, sharp and hard and painful. I tried to shout something to Hardy, but it happened too fast. Something heavy connected with my skull. Cut to black.

— INTERLUDE —

Entertainments of the Devil
Being a most excellent account
of the Cataclysm of Montriapunto
by Henri de Beaulieu, a Traveller

For lo, I saw Hell hold court, and heard the sweetness of flutes, and drank Rhenish there. And many a man held court with me, for the Fiend, being inflamed with Lust for the world, takes the form the Whole World doth Lust for. Many be Its forms, for our desire be what shapes it; that which plots to consume us is best pleased that we wish to be consumed.

Thus among fountains of wine, and trained Apes, and men in suits of silk and crimson I passed, looking for Death. It came to the summoners bestride a Lion, glittering as the sun. For this was the Tempter Incarnate: A maiden of exceeding pride, drunken with wine and her own splendor. She that had been virgin, disdaining the Summoners, did indulge their lusts.

So, in her turning from a child’s ways to those of a wicked woman, from chaste virtue to a harlot’s wantonness, could her Change and Corruption be sighted plainly — for she did reject and cast off any Friend who might work to preserve her chastity and keep her such as would please our Savior in Heaven. And in the Shamelessness with which she pursued her Lusts was the filthiness of her Spirit displayed.

Alas: Such fates are not unknown to women, for their
Race is Weaker, and it is our Task as Men to guard them from their inclinations. And indeed each woman has a Fiend in her, as all Married men will attest.

(A Jest, fellows, to lighten my heavy tale. Am I right? Your own Knowledge shall accord me.)

Yet this fallen form, naked and splendorous, was worshipped by men countless in number, and their weakness, too, caused them Sorrow. For I passed between them, their faces twisted, and observed: Truly, lasting laughter is naught but screaming. Dead men’s skulls smile, for they have no lips to plead.
CHAPTER ONE

Jenny

Dave and I sat under a glass arch three stories high, watching the fire in the sky die out and the rippling clouds massing overhead.

At West High, if you were cool, you had lunch in the atrium. It was a big indoor courtyard at the back of the building, with a glass ceiling and a row of malnourished-looking trees stuck in an elevated planter in the middle. The actual cafeteria, in back, had benches and tables, but nobody but freshmen and dorks used them. You just had a few ceremonial bites, grabbed your bag of chips and your Arizona Iced Tea, and went out to the atrium, so you could lean against the wall like a tough guy, or sneakily make out in an abandoned corner, or just look through that huge glass arch at freedom.

Nick and I never had lunch in the atrium. Debra was out there. We sat at cheap chipboard tables, eating our lunch and playing with his Tarot cards, like the dorks we were. My card was the Page of Cups; his was the Page of Swords; I could tell he tried to make all our fortunes sound like good ones. Who knows? Maybe they would have been, if we were born in another time.

There were no more fortunes left to tell. No more conceivable futures. So when Dave asked me where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do at the end of the world, I knew my answer. I wanted to be cool before I died. I wanted to make out with my boyfriend in the atrium.

We hadn’t actually made out yet. Dave had set the hurricane candles in a circle around us, and the firelight flickered in the gathering dark, making Dave’s skin glow and ripple with shadow. It ought to have been romantic. But every time I’d try to feel the romance, I’d look up, at those whirling, ropy gray clouds covering the horizon. I’d look behind Dave, at the bloody bat he’d brought in with us from the car.

“It’s so dark,” I said. “It’s too early to be this dark.”

“Unusual conditions,” said Dave.

I don’t know how he managed to sound so unbothered all the time. It was a talent. Even in the face of death, Dave projected the idea that he was doing great and nothing else mattered.¹

“It seems so cruel,” I said, “to end the world at three in the afternoon. Like executing someone before you give them their last meal.”

“They still die,” Dave said, shrugging.

“But they have something to look forward to,” I said. “I was looking forward to the sunset. It was going to be my last one.”

Dave reached out and cradled me, the way you cradle your girlfriend who’s about to cry, but I was dry-eyed. I used to cry so easily, I thought, amazed at myself. I had no problems and I cried about them constantly. Now, with

¹ Well, yeah. Dave was eighty. Death was always pretty close.
— Nick
the sky about to fall in on me and everyone I knew dead or dying, I couldn’t shed a tear. I settled into Dave’s chest, waiting for his warmth to soothe me and set loose the sobs I must be holding back, but nothing happened.

Maybe I just wasn’t a girl who cried any more. The change that began with Timothy and carried me through killing Billy was getting faster, more intense, taking me further away from myself every minute. Maybe I could live to be an old lady and still not be teary or fragile or sweet any more. How would that feel, to be a tough person? Would I even know myself if I were strong?

The clouds rolled in, still sparking with odd bits of fire, like a cigarette that hadn’t been fully extinguished. They looked close enough that I could touch them. Maybe, soon, they would be. Maybe in the end, the clouds would simply fall and cover the earth, and there would be nothing left but dark.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” Dave said.

For a second, I wasn’t sure who he meant. The storm was rolling through me, too, clouding out things that used to be important.

“That’s not my friend any more,” I said.

“Because of the demon,” Dave said, nodding sadly.

“Right.”

It wasn’t because of the demon. Maybe that had been the deciding factor. Maybe the crazed, obsessive Nick of the past few months had been something else, someone else, some foul creature using his skin. But if that were true, what did it mean that I hadn’t been able to tell the difference?

There was darkness in Nick now, but it had always been there. It wasn’t about the Goth stuff, or the magic; plenty of kids dabbled in Wicca or listened to Marilyn Manson. It was something deeper, some well of pain he wouldn’t let me access, that he only ever showed to the world by burning something down. It was like all those times he said “I wish I was dead” while he was driving. It scared me, and it made me feel bad for him, but it also reminded me that I was in the car, at his mercy, and that he had the power to drive us both into a concrete embankment or off a bridge.

I had chosen not to see where Nick was taking us. I had chosen to see his kindness, his little-boy bravery, to focus on the ways he used his ferocity to protect people rather than the ways he used it to intimidate them. I had decided long ago not be scared of Nick Casini’s darkness. Yet most people were, and always had been, and now that he’d probably killed them all, I kind of saw their point.

“We should be saving people,” I said.

“You’re saving me,” Dave said. “I’m saving you. Isn’t that enough?”

He was running his fingers through my hair as he said it, patting my head as if I were a puppy, or a little kid, and I wanted him to keep doing it forever. It felt so good to be under the protection of someone bigger than me. Like my Dad, before he left. Like Nick, but without all the history and baggage, without the obligation to protect him back. I could just be the weaker party, with Dave, if I wanted; I... am not going to fight Jenny on this. That was an incredibly fucked-up thing I used to do. Please don’t threaten to kill yourself during an argument, it’s messed up. Please don’t kill yourself, either. — Nick
could just be the girl, the person who got saved.
I pushed his hand away.

“This is my fault, too, you know,” I said. “I didn’t find
the ritual, but I agreed to do it. People are dead now. Why
should I be safe?”

“Because you matter,” Dave said.
I shook my head, preparing a line of protest. He put his
hand over my mouth.

“You really matter. Not just to me,” Dave said. “You are
so much smarter than you think you are. You are so much
cooler than you know. When I look at you, I see someone
powerful. Someone who could matter to the whole world
one day.”

I’d never heard anyone say things like this about me.
I’d sometimes fantasized about it — like, if I got stuck
in an elevator with Keanu Reeves and had to save his life
or something, he would probably talk like this before
the sex started. But I knew better than to expect some
real-life guy to sound this way. I knew about real-life guys.
My mother had dated enough of them. They tolerated you,
and took you to Olive Garden, and let you grab them beers
from the fridge. They didn’t make speeches.

“You could have any kind of life you want,” Dave said.
“But it won’t happen if you go out there and get yourself
killed, trying to save a bunch of strangers from something
you can’t stop.”

It made sense. Dave always made sense; that was the
problem. When I was around him, my own ideas got all

wait, why are you in the elevator with Keanu? Why is his life
in danger? Is this the opening scene of Speed? Are you Jeff Daniels?
If your fantasy is being Jeff Daniels, Jenny, you can tell me. — Nick
Notes Toward a Post-Feminist Messianic Praxis of Millennial Crisis Management

Presented: H. A. P.

1: Entomology

The German cockroach is approximately one half inch long, light brown, and winged. It is what most people refer to as a “roach.” The American cockroach, or “waterbug,” is at least four times its size, a minimum of two inches long. It is a dark, glossy brown.

The German cockroach can compress its body and come through cracks in the walls. The American cockroach can breathe underwater and come through pipes. Either cockroach can live when decapitated, and, for at least some time, when chopped in half. If you bite a cockroach, half of it can scurry down your throat while the other half crawls back out of your mouth.

Both German and American cockroaches can fly. This was not an advantage I had considered, until the windows of the library blew in and thousands of them flew into our study room. Along with the cockroaches, I observed the following: Bees, hornets, standard house flies, much larger stinging horseflies, and swallows (birds, not insects) who provided the main battering thrust of the swarm, breaking the glass and allowing the insects to penetrate the interior. They also penetrated my mouth. Again. My cockroach-biting example is drawn from experience.

The most important part of this picture is Nick Casini, who had been struck on the temple or thereabouts by a piece of the window frame that had been dislodged by the swarm. He lay, bleeding heavily and unconscious, at my feet.

I got below the main body of the swarm to examine him. I was being hit, heavily, by several hundred birds at once, adding a layer of bruises and potential cracked ribs to my pre-existing injuries.

Upon determining that Nick was unconscious, I heaved him over my shoulder and began heading toward the exit, hoping I could make it safely down the escalator and to our car. My initial efforts were frustrated by the fact that my partner had locked the door, which now actively prevented escape.

A normal procedure in this instance would be to unlock the door, but the birds and insects had poured into our room with such force that I could not see more than two inches ahead in any direction. I kicked the door down, dislodging it from its hinges, and carried Nick down the stairs.

Readers may note that it was not difficult for me to kick a door down while carrying a full-grown man with one arm, or that I did this while severely injured. I understand how I was perceived: A gentle giant, a human Brontosaurus, a circus elephant abused by its trainers. Some would find all this emasculating. It never bothered me.

Circus elephants kill their trainers all the time.
2: Eschatology

The bulk of my report will concern the events surrounding Debra McAllister. These events have been laid forth in previous accounts of the apocalyptic crisis, but never at great length, or by a firsthand observer. I will therefore go into detail.

I located Debra at the bottom of the stairs, where she had been using the library washroom.

“What the flip is this?” Debra cried.

(For the purposes of this section, I am going to have to approximate teenage girl dialogue. I was not even very good at approximating teenage boy dialogue, and I was a teenage boy. I am not sure that she said “flip.”)

I proceeded past Debra to the library’s front door.

“What happened to him?” Debra said.

I opened the door, still holding Nick over my shoulder, and walked through it. I had learned not to engage in non-mandatory dialogue with Debra. She could interpret my meaning, because she followed me into the parking lot and approximately twelve feet out of the front door, in the direction of Nick’s car. Then she stopped.

The name for what we faced that day varies. “Sleep-walker” is the polite term. “The torpored,” somewhat more theatrical, has its adherents. Most people, tapping the pop culture vernacular, will say “zombies.”

If you’d like, you can say “zombies.” As in, “there were between twenty and fifty zombies standing around the perimeter of the library, blocking the way to Nick’s car.”

Debra gasped, and pulled me back inside. The air above us was filling with birds and insects. The birds were frantic. Their noise was overwhelming.

“We’ll find another way out,” she said.

Debra ran back into the dark and the swarm. I followed. The windows around the perimeter were broken, and I initially hoped we might make egress there. This was not practicable. Every window we passed had several sleep-walkers outside.

Debra pulled me behind a stack, crouching out of view of the creatures.

“What do we do?” she said. “Just hide?”

I found it strange that Debra McAllister would ask me a question. All her questions to date had been rhetorical: How stupid are you? Can you even talk? Did your parents know they were making a Frankenstein, or did they just electrocute that corpse for no reason?

I did not know how to answer Debra, so I didn’t. I was distracted by new noises. Beneath the buzzing and shrieking and flapping of wings, I had begun to hear the squeaking of rats.

“Why did they move?” I said.

I realized that I was now asking questions, and that this would invite Debra to talk to me, but I had embarked upon the course of action unwisely and could not withdraw.

“They didn’t,” she said. “The thing in the dark moved them. Whoever they are, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

I knelt down and laid Nick on the floor. I was not sure what else to do with the body. I did not want to think of Nick as “the body.” I knew that the longer we stayed in the library, the more applicable that descriptor would become.

Debra leaned over Nick. She touched the wound on his temple with her fingers. Debra’s touches were also things I knew: An ankle stuck out between cafeteria tables to trip
the unwary, a quick slap knocking binders and textbooks
from arm to floor, a shoulder thrown almost imperceptibly
to the left or right, sending the target reeling into a wall
of lockers while Debra passed calmly by. The ways Debra
used her body to affect other bodies were focused on
harm and humiliation, in my experience, and it was start-
tling to realize she could use it for this, too.

“You have to get him out of here, I guess,” Debra said.
“In the car. You can’t let them get to him while he’s passed
out.”

“There’s no way out of here,” I said.
Debra smiled. It was short. It looked like her face was
twitching.

“There’s always a way,” she said.
Debra began walking again, back toward the front door.
I picked Nick up and followed. When I caught her, she was
looking out the door, at the zombies she used to be.

“I miss my brother,” Debra said. “Isaac stopped talking
to us, when he moved out. Did I tell you that? He was good
to talk to. He knew what being in my family was like.”

Debra placed her hand on the door.

“I go out first,” she said. “When they start to move, you
come out behind me. You go straight to the car. You don’t
look back. You don’t get involved.”

“Involved in what?” I asked.
I was asking Debra questions again. This time, she de-
clined to answer.

“You’re the only one big enough to carry him,” she
said. “I’m the only one mean enough to fight them. It has
to be this way.”

Debra edged the outer door of the library open. A hot
wind blew in. She took an unusually deep breath.

“It really is Titanic,” Debra said. “I just didn’t know I’d
be Jack Dawson.”

“I don’t understand that analogy,” I said.

“You don’t need to understand, dummy,” she said.
“You need to get on the flipping door.”

She did not say “flip.” But she did say “dummy.” I
remember, because she stumbled over it, trying to avoid
the other word. Debra remains a complex and problematic
figure in this history, and the reasoning for her actions has
been much debated, so I find it necessary to say this, for
those who mourn her: Debra McAllister was who she was
to the very end of her life. But, by the end of her life, she
was other things too.

So Debra ran. She ran down the line from creature to
creature, glittering in the light, tapping a nose, a hand, a
shoulder as she went. They turned slowly, but each one
turned toward her, and was soon gaining. A hand grabbed
her wrist. A hand grabbed her hair. Debra was stronger
than most women, and when she wheeled around to punch
them, the muscle in her knocked them back, but she had
stopped running, which was all they needed.

I went directly for the car and did not look, as she in-
structed. I never saw the end. I never knew whose screams
were whose. As I drove away, I decided to forget even the
moment when she stopped. So that is what I’ll tell you: I
remember Debra running. She was someone who helped
people. She was the hero of her movie. She was, as far as
she knew, the world’s final girl.

Reader: If you get to the afterlife and you wind up Frenching
Debra McAllister for all eternity, I just want you to know that you
went to the wrong place. They don’t torture you in Heaven. — Jenny
CHAPTER TWO

**NICK**

I woke up with my face pressed into the ratty polyester of my car’s back seat. From the rattle of the seat beneath me, I could tell that the car was moving.

I pushed myself up with one arm, looking out the window at the blackening sky. It was darker than it had been; almost full night. My head felt like someone had set off a grenade inside it. When I reached up to rub my face, my hand came away sticky with blood.

“Scalp wound,” Hardy said, from the driver’s seat. “They bleed a lot. They’re not very serious.”

I decided not to ask why Hardy knew so much about head wounds. There were aspects of his Internet time I did not need to delve into, I figured.

“The fact that you passed out is serious,” Hardy said, in that same calm tone. “That could indicate some brain damage.”

Wonderful. The guy barely talked, but when he did, it was always a fucking adventure. I decided to try out my new brain by forming a sentence.

“Why are you driving my car?” I said.

“Something to do,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’m better at this than I am at the bike.”

He’d have to be. Otherwise, we’d be dead. I closed my eyes again. If I didn’t look at anything around me, it could almost be ordinary. Just me, and Hardy, out for a quiet drive, and —

You know, when you wake up in a hotel, sometimes it takes you a second to remember what city you’re in? Or when you wake up, the morning after someone breaks your heart, and you just forget that you’re sad? I forgot that the car wasn’t supposed to be quiet. My eyes snapped open.

“Hardy,” I said. “Where’s Debra?”

* * *

We wound up parked at the reservoir, watching the water pour over the concrete wall into darkness. In the fiery twilight, the waterfall looked black, with red glints where it hit the light — wine-dark, like old poets said. Or blood-dark. Like a tide, bleeding its way across the world.

Hardy and I were sitting on the hood of my car. It was an exposed position, but I didn’t care. I wanted to sit outdoors while I still could; watch the last of the light die, breathe the open air one last time.

“She was very definite,” Hardy said. “I don’t think it frightened her.”

“No,” I said. “It wouldn’t have. She would have wanted to have the choice.”

I was glad Debra got that; control over her own story, a chance to decide who she wanted to be. Hardy and I were not going to get a choice. No-one would. My books were gone, again, and with them, the last chance of saving anyone. You’d think we would have reached this milestone
earlier, living in central Ohio, but here it was: Our lives were finally completely pointless. We’d just ride in loops around town until the gas ran out or we died, whichever came first.

“Also, I saved your book,” Hardy said. “The one you were reading when you started talking about Jenny.”

“Hardy, you need to structure your information better,” I said. “You know how they tell you to write an essay? Put all the important information in the first paragraph? You need to do that, with talking. And then just leave all the other paragraphs out.”

He shrugged and pulled Hodgson’s Gramarye out from where he had apparently been keeping it, which was the waistband of his jeans. It had gone a long way down in the world, this book, from being too old to Xerox to being stored next to the unthinkable regions of Hardy Patrick, but we’d all fallen on hard times lately.

“You know who Omphagor is,” Hardy said. “Does that mean you know how to beat it?”

“You don’t beat a demon,” I said. “You exorcise it.”

“You know how to exorcise it, then,” he said.

He was right; I did. I also knew that exorcising Omphagor was going to kill the possessed person.

Possession doesn’t work the way you think it works, some creature putting you on like a suit jacket. Most people who are possessed don’t know it. Your demon nestles in the hidden parts of you. It warps the bits of you that are already bad, turning normal flaws into encroaching tumors, until your flaws are all you have left. By the time you are fully possessed by the demon, you are that demon. You won’t remember being anybody different. As it snuffs out the last ebbing spark of your human soul, you will think the whole thing was your own idea.

If a demon is a cancer, then exorcism is a sharp knife and a radioactive light and a poison running through your bloodstream. It takes out the demon, but only by taking parts of you with it. If the demon has real power, and time to do its work, there won’t be much “you” left when it’s over. Omphagor had been on Earth for months, and it was one of the most powerful demons my books could name. The only way to save Jenny now was to destroy her. The kindest thing would be to do it quick.

Hardy looked down at me. I knew that I’d been silent too long.

“I think I know, yeah,” I said. “At least, I know how the last people did it.”

I opened the book and flipped to the end of de Beau-lieu’s account — it was quite the account; most of it was about his wife, after a while, and her overly frequent visits to a local goose vendor — and shoved the book over to Hardy.

“There,” I said. “Right at the end. Under the engraving of the trained ape.”

He leaned down, adjusting his glasses.

“For truly, goose is a pleafaunt meal to eat upon a Christmas Day,” Hardy read, slowly, “but what man needst dine upon it twice a week, while his wife dallieth with the lady whomst does the butchering?”

I couldn’t even be mad. Like I say, that part took up a lot of real estate. I just pulled the book back onto my lap.
“For that men’s lust and vile impurity brought forth Omphagor, only manly purity could drive him out,” I read. “Two men were found in the village, who had never laid lustful hands upon a woman, nor pressed their lips to a maiden’s lips, and by them a dagger was forged, that did slay the fiend.”

Hardy collapsed in on himself a little, drawing his shoulders in over his broad chest, and turned away to watch the bloody waterfall. It only flowed steadily after a heavy rain, and today, it was spitting water in drips and gushes, like the pulse of arterial spray from a slashed throat. Not that I’d seen the pulse of arterial spray from a slashed throat, mind you, but it seemed like I was maybe gonna.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“No kissing,” he said. “Leaves us out.”

He was such a noble giant. He was genuinely sad about it. If you told another guy that he’d doomed the planet by being too sexually active in high school, he’d be psyched.

“Hardy,” I said. “I’ve never kissed a woman. I’ve wanted to, but I haven’t. Have you ever kissed a woman?”

“I’ve kissed you,” he said. “So, no.”

“There you go,” I said. “Contracts and loopholes. We could probably fuck on the hood of this car and still get the job done.”

The silence stretched out between us forever, first companionably, then horribly, a yawning invitation to a conversational segue that did not exist. This was the second time today I’d almost had a cinematic thank-God-we’re-alive makeout with somebody, I realized, and while that was an improvement on my lifetime total of zero cinematic makeouts, I was also learning that for me, encounters with men and women were equally defined by awkward silence and encroaching dread.

“You know who’d really be up a creek,” I said, “is Mrs. Beaulieu and the goose butcher. Right?”

“Do you think he knew?” Hardy said.

“I mean, his job description was ‘traveller,’” I said. “You have to figure he was out of town a lot.”

* * *

When Hardy and I got back into the car, I felt almost good again. The world was still ending, and most of the people we knew were dead, and I had to murder my best friend — Hardy’s friend, too, at least by the transitive property — but things were looking up. Still, even as we started the engine and headed out to save the day, I was asking myself the same question you are: How were two teenage boys, both of whom had failed shop class, supposed to forge a dagger?

“I wish Debra was here,” I said.

I hadn’t even really meant to say it — just thinking aloud, a half-mumbled thing that fell out of my mouth and into the world where it could embarrass me — but Hardy nodded sorrowfully.

“Because of your sexual tension,” he said.

I repressed the urge to open the car door and throw myself out into the road.

“Because Debra liked hurting people,” I said. “She’d

5 He’s being a little unfair to himself. I’ve seen him blow it with non-binary people, too. — Jenny
have ideas about how to make a knife.”

She would. She’d carve one with her teeth, if need be. She’d also be ready to use it, which, I suspected, would be my other main problem. I could be emotionally brutal, but that was only useful if we planned to defeat the demon by harshly critiquing its worldview until its self-esteem collapsed. Maybe life always broke down that way, I thought. We found the weapons that served us in high school and used them forever: Talkers and fighters, thinkers and doers, nerds and jocks.

That was the last thing Debra did for us that day, because I was thinking about jocks when it hit me. I knew where we were going to forge the dagger. I knew how we could save the world.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I took a hard left. Hardy snapped up against his seatbelt and threw one hand to the ceiling to keep from coming down on top of me. He looked at me, puzzled, but then he took in the scenery and saw it. We were riding fast with the black reservoir behind us and the bulk of the school sprawled before us like a spider, luring us in.

CHAPTER THREE

Jenny

There was no one definitive moment when I decided to kill Nick Casini. It seems like there should have been; I loved him, I was closer to him than anyone, before Dave showed up, and then there I was, with a baseball bat in my hand, planning to smash his skull. I should be able to pinpoint the change — how it was that one minute I couldn’t imagine a life without Nick, and the next, I was ready to finish his life right there on the floor of our old high school, to leave his skinny body crushed and twitching like a bug that had wandered underfoot.

I wish I could tell you exactly how I got from Point A to Point B, from loving Nick to wanting him dead. But it didn’t come down to one big moment. It wasn’t a decision I made with my conscious mind. I just slowly realized I had to do it; it was a feeling that grew into a suspicion, a suspicion that grew into a certainty, a certainty that rooted itself in me so deeply that it felt like I’d known it all along.

That’s not dramatic, though. It doesn’t make for good storytelling. So let’s say there was a point where I could have avoided it. Let’s at least pretend I had my hand on the wheel. If so, the choice didn’t come down to reason or persuasion. I didn’t spend hours in tearful introspection

6 It’s so unnecessarily vivid! Have I angered you in some way, Jennifer? Is there some grudge you’ve been holding? — Nick
while I gazed at Nick’s photograph. The decision to kill Nick, if there was one, came down to peanut butter crackers.

* * *

Dave and I had pulled our clothes back on, part-way and crookedly, after having them off together. I washed myself up in the sink of the bathroom behind the auditorium. It was the sink where I had seen Debra crying, I realized, splashing water over my face and smoothing my ratty hair back. I paused, waiting for the information to bother me. It didn’t. Lots of things had happened at that sink in the past four years. Debra’s pain, her lost humanity, was just one more ghost, one more girl sobbing in a bathroom. I had never been close enough to the soft, feeling Debra to mourn her, only to know that she was there. I just walked away and went to join Dave in the kitchen.

It was funny: I could have sworn the electricity was out. It had been when we first arrived. But as night fell, some hidden generator must have kicked on, because the whole school was suddenly blazing with crappy fluorescents. It reminded me of coming in late to see a school play, or something, all that flat white light against the black sky. It wasn’t beautiful, but it was more civilization than I had ever expected to see again.

The kitchen was in back of the cafeteria, just a narrow aisle of brushed steel and white tile glittering in gray fluorescent light. Dave was busy excavating the cabinets. You would not think this, but somehow, between Dave and I, we had managed to get several dozen cans of soup in that grocery store without getting a can opener.

“Any luck?” I called out, entering the kitchen.

“Depends how you define ‘luck,’” Dave said. “Is it ‘a lifetime supply of peanut butter crackers?’”

He was on his knees on the counter, his head and shoulders buried in some high cabinet. As he spoke, he pulled himself and the pallet of crackers back out, and slammed them down for me to see. I recognized them: They were the same crappy snack schools keep everywhere, neon orange cheese crackers sprinkled with salt, with an almost solid pat of peanut butter, like a thin line of mortar, gluing the two crackers together into a sandwich. They came in individually wrapped cellophane packets that you had to rip open with your teeth. The brand name on the package was nothing you’d recognize; the company made these crackers and nothing else. Like God, they beheld their creation, and rested, seeing it was Good.

“I love these,” I said. “I used to steal them.”

I ran my hand along the pallet. The thin, crinkling sound of the cellophane helped me remember that I had belonged to a better world. Dave laughed at me.

“Jenny Long, thief,” he said. “Someone should have warned me.”

Something in his tone stung me. It was like the way you laugh when a kid says a curse word. Dave thought I was some innocent little girl, some Reese Witherspoon he was ruining. I did plenty of bad stuff. I looked at porn on the Internet, I cursed, I’d puked up half a flask of peppermint Schnapps on Nick’s bed once. I wasn’t innocent. I
was young. There’s a difference.

“First grade,” I said. “There was a supply closet next to the bathroom that was always unlocked. I just... you know, I just hated being there. I hated first grade. So that was how I got myself through it. Every time I went to the bathroom, I took a packet of peanut butter crackers and ate them in the stall.”

They kept them around for the diabetic kids, I didn’t add. I got caught, and they yelled at me, and told me I could be endangering someone really sick. I kept stealing them anyway. Everyone was mean to me, and even if I wasn’t diabetic, I thought the school owed me something, for putting me through that. I thought I could steal niceness from the world.

“First bad thing I ever did on purpose,” I said.

Dave smiled broadly and spread his long arms, like a showman revealing his trick.

“Look how far you’ve come,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I work on a global scale now.”

I focused on ripping open my pack of crackers. Dave, sitting on the counter, scooped me up in his arms and brought me onto his lap. I studied the wobbly cartoon map of the US on the front of his orange T-shirt, the single word PAVEMENT written in cartoon letters across the entire US, like the name of a Nickelodeon show.

The t-shirt and the crackers were the same color, something not found in nature. The color of cheez, with the z. Something about it made me feel safe, like being a kid again. That, and sitting on a guy’s lap like he was Santa. That really killed the whole hardened-survivor, Terminator-2-Sarah-Connor vibe I was going for.

“I really am sorry about your friend,” Dave rumbled.


“I mean, I’m sorry about the implications,” he said.

I twisted up to look at him. Dave was turned away, squinting up at the fluorescents. He kept his face turned away from me as he spoke, as if he found it hard to look at me. I studied his noble profile, his mouth turned down with what really did seem to be pain.

“What you said, about wanting to save people,” Dave said. “It stuck with me. What if there’s a way?”

“You mean, like, look around for survivors? Gather people up, keep them here in the school?”

Dave shook his head and looked down at me.

“I’ve seen enough of these movies,” he said. “Demons always have a weakness. Some button you push where everything shuts down. You know, just stab the problem with a mystic dagger or something and everything goes back to normal.”

We didn’t have a demon to stab. We only had a Nick. In a better story, about a better person, I would have gasped aloud in horror. I would have at least argued. In this story, though, I understood what Dave meant, and as he said it, I somehow understood that I’d been thinking the same thing.

I looked at the pack of peanut butter crackers in my lap. This was what I had, before I had Nick Casini; cheez, sodium, a hardened little wedge of peanut butter that I had to soften with my spit to get the flavor out of it. The only sweetness in my life was sugar, and I was willing to risk
killing some sick kid to get it.

I stopped stealing crackers when I met Nick. I stopped stealing kindness when someone gave it to me. He was my friend, my only one, and the demon ate him alive. Omphagor had taken what I loved and left me with fucking crackers, and when I thought about that, I knew that I could kill it. I could tear Nick limb from limb and set the pieces on fire, just to make sure that thing wasn’t touching him any more.

“We don’t have a dagger,” I said.

“No,” Dave said. “We have a bat.”

--- INTERLUDE ---

Letter

From the belongings of Gloria Casini
Dated February 21, 1999

Honey —

You are about to graduate high school! This is such a time of importance in your life. I want you to know how proud of you we are. It seems like yesterday that you [SECTION MISSING].

It is a time of big changes for everyone. That can be scary or wonderful. Sometimes both. This next change [SECTION MISSING]. Honey, I am very sorry, but I want you to listen to this before you say anything. You should [SECTION MISSING]

[SECTION DESTROYED]
[IT LOOKS LIKE BURNING]
It didn’t feel real until we reached the school. I told you that I planned to kill Jenny, and that I was in a good mood about it, which I know makes me sound like a sociopath, but I still felt like I was pretending. The field of unreality kept my emotions glassy and thin, the way you feel for the characters in a movie you’ve seen maybe twenty times. Nothing felt good or bad any more, just interesting or dull. Mostly dull.

I mean. That’s what sociopaths say, too, but I thought, in my case, it was probably trauma.

When we arrived at West High, it hit me all at once. The glass between me and the world shattered, leaving me exposed and open to the wind. We were in the parking lot, staring down the school’s front entrance, and I could remember Jenny so clearly, for a second. I was thinking of her on the first day, freshman year, with her puffy sneakers and her hot pink scrunchie and her braces. God, what braces. She had that pale, freckly face, and a mouth full of metal, and neither of us ever would have guessed she’d turn out pretty.

Jenny was frightened, and when we walked through the front door, I let her grab my hand. *Don’t leave*, she’d said. As if I had a choice. As if I could just skip all my classes and follow her around. In the moment, I almost wanted to do it. *I won’t leave until I have to*, I said.

When did Jenny let go of me? She had always held on so tightly; I had wanted her to toughen up, grow up, learn to stand on her own. Then she did, and I realized that Jenny was gravity. She weighed me down, sure, but she also kept me from floating off into space. Jenny had probably always known, on some level, that I depended on her as much as she did on me; that I got stronger by having someone who needed saving. I should have understood, months ago, that a Jenny who could leave me wasn’t Jenny any more.

Now I was going to kill her. I had proof it was necessary. I should have been determined, I should have been resolute, and instead, for one terrible moment, I was frightened, and I wanted her to come hold my hand.

“Why are the lights on?” Hardy asked.

“Backup generator,” I muttered, and I rubbed my face with my hand until the bad moment passed.

I lifted my head to stare down the bulk of the school, its sad gray fluorescence flickering against the blood-dark sky. I could feel, more than see, the lobby visible through the glass: Trophy case, Achilles mural, giant letters painted over the front door so they were the first thing anyone saw each morning: ARE YOU LIVING LIKE A GLADIATOR?

Was I? If not, it seemed like I was about to start. I aimed my beat-up old car at the front entrance, squaring up several tons of dinged-up metal and black paint at the place I’d waited so long to escape. I stared, for one long second, at that glittering world. The rich kids’ world, the pretty world; the world that had never wanted me or Jenny in it.

Hardy turned to look at me, puzzled, as I slammed my
foot on the gas and brought us speeding up to the glass doorway. And through.

* * *

“It’s just that we have a problem with monsters getting through windows,” Hardy said.

Hardy and I were picking our way through the darkened gym, tripping on stacks of gym mats as we went. This part of the building did not have full lighting yet, just a few orange safety lights gleaming dully above the bleachers. The dim light on the floorboards reminded me of school dances — the way they looked in middle school, when Jenny and I could still go together without giving anything away. It made me think of Jenny, in that ludicrous purple dress she wore to senior prom, waving to me as I stood on my front doorstep and watched Dave drive her away.

“I don’t see why we broke the windows,” Hardy said, “if we don’t want monsters getting in.”

He would not stop bringing this up. He was right, which may have accounted for why he would not stop bringing it up, but it was distracting. I squinted across what felt like miles of dark, to see if I could spot the door of the supply closet in back.

I had a plan. It wasn’t shop class. I had, don’t get me wrong, considered shop class; I didn’t really pay attention there, just carved pentagrams into my desk and tried not to amputate anything on the table saw, but I figured they might have the facilities for some kind of blacksmithing. That implied that Hardy and I would learn to blacksmith, though, and I figured we would kill ourselves or get eaten before we’d so much as learned how to heat the metal. I didn’t have time to forge a sword of legend. Our dagger would have to be like our lives: Improvised. Unconventional. Probably stupid-looking. Who’s to say? Any dagger’s a good dagger, if it stabs.8

So here we were, in my second-least-favorite room of West High, because my plan depended on it. Jenny was a dork; I was a freak; Hardy was a reject. But our school did have a small, select number of nerd-nerds, the classical variety, the kind of people whose very presence implied the possibility of cosplay or some kind of Ren Faire. All of those nerds, as it turned out, took fencing.

I tried the handle of the supply closet.

“It’s locked,” I said, looking up at Hardy.

Hardy shrugged, lifted one massive, sneakered foot, and kicked yet another door in. It was a large, metal door. It was heavy. It clanged when it hit the wall. Hardy looked down at me, face blank, and I was suddenly very sorry I’d

8 Guys tell each other stuff like this all the time, and though it sounds nice and encouraging, I have to say: You’re still making it too much about the dagger. Stabbing’s great, yes, it’s a classic murder method. But you could also use your hands to murder, or — here’s an idea — your mouth. Lots of people get a much bigger, gorier payoff that way. Sure, right, your dagger’s your dagger, but it’s not the only tool you’ve got. Over-relying on it can actually make for a worse murder. Next time, just start manually, with a little light strangulation. You might be surprised how far that gets you. If that’s working, and you want to switch things up, you can move on to… okay, yeah, Nick is reading this over my shoulder and frantically making the “cut” motion, so just think about this, OK? Go get ‘em, killer. — Jenny
made him angry about the windows.

I dodged past him, into the supply closet, and found the bin full of fencing foils. I pulled the nearest one to me; I wanted something shiny, newer metal for a stronger impact, so I held it up into the ghostly orange night light to see if it gleamed. I really couldn’t tell. I wasn’t the kind of nerd who could tell a good fencing foil from a bad one.

What I did know was that a fencing foil couldn’t hurt anyone. Not yet. Its metal was springy, made to bend when it touched someone, and its tip had been blunted off. I tested the door to see if Hardy had busted the hinges — it still swung — and positioned my foil on the jamb of the door, half in and half out.

“Here,” I said. “Slam that door for me. Hard as you can. Don’t hold back on my account.”

He did not. There was a bang so loud it emitted its own little shock wave, and the thin, high sound of snapping metal. Then I was stumbling back, holding my new dagger.

It honestly did gleam, when I held it up to the light. Maybe I was fooling myself. But there was a wild edge to it now, a bit of magic that made it sparkle. It wasn’t much else other than shiny — as I had foretold, it looked kind of dumb, just a hilt with a single square-edged length of metal, about as long as my fist, protruding from its base. The blade snapped off awkwardly at the end to make a jagged point. It wasn’t even a dagger, really, more of a shiv, but I could see, without testing it, that the broken point would be sharp enough to draw blood. Especially if you shoved it into someone with great force, which was what I intended to do.

Hardy moved past me into the closet, dragging the plastic bin of fencing foils out into the dim light of the gym.

“Are we making any more knives?” he asked. “There are at least a dozen foils here.”

“It’s not a knife,” I said. “It’s a mystic dagger.”

“We have one mystic dagger,” Hardy said. “Why?”

I was beginning to miss the days when Hardy was my silent friend.

“I don’t know, Hardy,” I said. “Why wasn’t there more than one Ark of the Covenant? Why was there only one Holy Grail?”

“Because it was hard to mass-manufacture things in the Middle Ages, Nick,” Hardy said, mildly. “Obviously, if King Arthur had several Grails, they wouldn’t have had to spend all their time looking for one.”

It was hard to communicate the intangibles to Hardy. I ignored him and focused on the magic: The broken-off piece of myth now resting in my hand. It didn’t start off as a dagger, my dagger. It had lived its little life as a fencing foil, a tool for dorks and children, never expecting it would be called into service. Now, it was the most important object in the universe; the only destined weapon that could slay the Devil and save humanity.

Things don’t always start off looking like what they are, is my point here. A shape can be freed from another shape; a sword can be pulled from the stone of its old self, and it will gleam. Blood, pain, and sharp metal: At the right time, for the right reasons, it can save the world.

* * *
I was still staring at the dagger, reaching out a finger to test its sharpness, when we heard the noise in the hallway. It sounded human, or formerly-human; smallish, moving fast. There was some extra gait in its step, a metallic clunk and drag. My mind briefly went fractal, a dizzying whirl of mess like a Magic Eye poster, as I tried to imagine every horrible thing that noise could be.

Hardy stiffened beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. It was sweet; protective. Yet only one of us could hold the dagger, and only the dagger could protect us from what was coming. I knew that Hardy, no matter how big or strong he was, could not be the one to kill Omphagor. He might be a tank, but his heart was true, and he didn’t have it in him to stab a girl that much smaller than himself.

I had it in me. She wasn’t smaller than me, for one thing. So I looked up at Hardy and told him: “Run.”

He didn’t protest, but he didn’t move, either. He looked down at me with those big, stunned eyes — Jenny was right; they were newborn eyes, with no malice in them — and asked me a question without asking.

“I’m armed,” I said. “I can take care of myself.”

“So could Debra,” said Hardy. “Until they killed her.”

He still didn’t move. I felt like John Lithgow in Harry and the Hendersons, like I was supposed to start hitting him on the chest and weeping. The footsteps in the hall were coming closer; I didn’t have time for the big goodbye, or even any time to convince him.

“Hardy,” I said, in my are-you-listening-to-me voice. “You saved me in the library. You have to do this for me. You have to trust me to save you back.”

He nodded, and put one hand on my head, like a benediction. I stood still, uncomfortable, just sort of letting him do it. He’d never touched me that way before, and I wasn’t sure what it meant. Or I knew exactly what it meant, and just wasn’t sure how to respond. I knew the answer I had might not be the one he wanted, but it was the best I’d got, one of the best I gave anybody: I never fell in love with Hardy Patrick. Some people, you don’t fall for. Some people you just love.

Hardy turned, without another word, and left through the rear doorway. I turned to face the front hall. As I did, the door swung open, and a slice of dazzling light arced across the floor, making me squint. There was a shadowy figure in the open doorway. I couldn’t make her face out, but I knew her. Even if I killed her or she killed me, I would always know her.

“Jenny,” I said.

The first swing of the baseball bat hit me in the jaw.
Letter
From the belongings of Gloria Casini
Dated February 21, 1999

[ILLEGIBLE] had to write this down is that I know you won’t like it. You are not good at separation. I just want this to be the easiest and best time it can be. I know that no matter what it will not be easy.

I know you love [SECTION MISSING] I’m your mother. I always [ILLEGIBLE] maybe by Christmas [ILLEGIBLE] [DOCUMENT ILLEGIBLE] [IT LOOKS LIKE TEARS]

It’s still me. I’m still here. It’s still me.

The bat connected with my jaw. I swung back on my heel, spinning with it. The whole world behind my eyes went black with golden sparkles fading along it like fireworks.

As I spun, she hit me again. She must have been aiming for the ribs. She half got them. She got my gut, too, right along the side.

Was anything broken? I had never broken a bone, I realized. I wouldn’t know what it felt like. If breaking a bone felt like the whole shape of you coming apart, the things that were supposed to hold you upright crumbling and giving way, if it felt like being destroyed from the inside, then I knew what it felt like. If that was what it felt like, all of my bones had broken at once.

If a heart breaking feels like the thing that holds you together shattering, if it feels like some secret inner support coming apart and shredding your soft tissue with its jagged shards, then I knew what that felt like too. My heart had been broken for a very long time.

“Get out of him,” Jenny said.

I should have had a one-liner ready, or at least asked her what she meant. I said nothing, because I couldn’t breathe. I was bent over, with my arms wrapped around
my gut. Every time I tried to inhale, I could feel something sharp poking into me, drawing blood. Jenny readied the bat, like a policeman with a nightstick, ready to dole out some brutality she’d convinced herself was corrective.

She swung again, but I was already moving, barreling into her. I wrapped my arms around my best friend’s waist and slammed her into the wall. Most guys who write sentences like that are about to describe some bad, sweaty decisions in the back seat of a Toyota, but I wasn’t that dumb. I was just trying to commit a murder.

She was startled. Her grip on the bat slipped. I ripped it out of her hand and threw it away. She looked up at me, furious, and tried to push me back, but I had her. She tried to throw a hand up to shield herself, but she could not be shielded. I brought up the dagger and shoved it, fast, into her throat.

I didn’t do that. I thought I did, but I didn’t. Her hand was in the wrong place, so as I watched, almost mesmerized, on some internal slo-mo replay of adrenaline and regret, I pushed the jagged point of the dagger into the center of her palm and right through her hand.

She was startled. Her grip on the bat slipped. I ripped it out of her hand and threw it away. She looked up at me, furious, and tried to push me back, but I had her. She tried to throw a hand up to shield herself, but she could not be shielded. I brought up the dagger and shoved it, fast, into her throat.

I didn’t do that. I thought I did, but I didn’t. Her hand was in the wrong place, so as I watched, almost mesmerized, on some internal slo-mo replay of adrenaline and regret, I pushed the jagged point of the dagger into the center of her palm and right through her hand.

Jenny looked at me, her pale eyes wide with confusion and horror, and suddenly I knew: I did that to a person. She wasn’t a demon, she was a person. She was Jenny. Oh, my God, I thought, I stabbed Jenny.

I stumbled back, leaving the dagger lodged in her hand.

It took her a minute to start screaming. When she did, it was awful. I had stabbed Jenny in the hand, and worse than that, she was hurt. Or she was angry. Or both. Eventually, the scream resolved into words.

“What is wrong with you?” Jenny said, panting and holding her mauled hand by the wrist.

Everything, I thought. Everything everything everything. I was ice cold. I felt like I was standing in a walk-in freezer. I couldn’t move. If Jenny wasn’t possessed — if Jenny wasn’t possessed and I had stabbed her — if Jenny wasn’t possessed and I had stabbed her and she knew I had stabbed her — the train of thought kept collecting new cars, on and on, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Jenny,” I said. “Please believe me. I thought you were —“

I didn’t get to finish the sentence. Jenny pulled the dagger out of her palm, like a maniac, and ran toward me, and that’s how I got stabbed in the face.
CHAPTER SIX

Jenny

How did he get a knife? I remember thinking, right before it went through me.

Dave and I had heard the sound of something big and dangerous crashing through the entrance, and had come out to check on it. We split up a few hallways in — I had our only weapon, but he was a guy, so as I understood it, we were even — but even alone, when I should have doubted myself, anger and fear had kept me going. They propelled me across the gym floor. They pumped adrenaline through me as I raised the bat. They got me halfway through killing Nick, without regret or remorse ever once clouding my purpose.

The one thing they hadn’t done, evidently, was give me better eyesight. I’d left my glasses on the floor of the atrium when I got dressed, so I didn’t see the knife in Nick’s hand until he was aiming it at me. His face was so close to me, as he shoved me up against the bleachers, and as I looked past the knife to his dark eyes, I realized I knew that face better than my own. I only saw myself every once in a while, in a mirror, but I looked at Nick Casini for hours every day.

But I know you, I was thinking. You can’t stab me. I know you too well.

Then the shiv went in, and through, and I was staring at it, awestruck by the sight of my own blood bubbling up and around the blade, my formerly impermeable and self-contained palm skewered like a marshmallow on a camping trip. For a moment, the world was perfectly still around me. I was so amazed that I forgot it hurt.

Then it started hurting, and I was furious. I screamed at him, and he started babbling some excuse, and I just ripped the knife out of my hand, the pain making the whole world flash red and nauseous for an instant, and raked the point of the shiv hard across his face. He says he got “stabbed in the face,” when we talk about this. He didn’t. I was the one with the puncture wound. But I ripped a good long flap of skin open, along his cheekbone, barely missing his eye, and it was bloody.

He screamed as I cut him, and staggered back, and I threw the shiv away across the gym floor, hearing it rattle and clang off into the darkness. Before he could rally, I grabbed his shirt with my one good hand and used the other to punch him in the nose. As my fist landed, I heard the crunch of his profile getting more distinguished.

I just kept hitting him, hard, with my whole hand and with my bloody one. I should have stopped. I should have worried about the damage I was doing. Half of his face had been bloodied up when I got there; he’d clearly been hurt already. But I wasn’t hitting Nick any more. I wasn’t hitting someone I loved or worried about, I wasn’t even hitting a person: I was hitting the monster who had stabbed me. It was all self-defense, I thought, and I kept thinking that even when I realized that he wasn’t hitting me back, or that all he was doing was trying to back up or shove me
away from him, or that he was crying.

He was crying. As he tried to back up, his boot slipped in blood spatter — his, mine; there was so much of it I couldn’t tell any more — and he went down on his side. I could see the tears streaking through the dirt and blood on his face as he lay below me. You’d think that would be the thing that clued me in, that I would relent, because a demon wouldn’t be crying over a teenage slap fight. It wasn’t.

“Jaxom,” he said.

His voice was a broken-down whisper, but from where I stood, hanging over him, I was close enough to hear it. The breath went out of me, and I fell to my knees.

* * *

“When you were little,” Nick said, “you had those dragon books you were obsessed with. Your favorite guy was Jaxom.”

I reached out to Nick with my good hand. I don’t know what I meant to do — touch his injuries, convince myself they were real, or just wipe the tears off his face. He dodged me and wiped them off himself. His face was wrecked, and his fist came away gory.

“He found a dragon egg that wasn’t supposed to hatch,” Nick said. “The dragon in the egg was all fucked-up. It was too small, and it was albino, and it was just basically this gross mutant, but Jaxom chose him anyway. You loved Jaxom, because he picked the White Dragon.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Nick looked at me. Not the way you’d look at some woman who just tried to murder you; I could have taken that. There would be hate, or pain, or anger, I would know myself to be an evil human being — I was still pretty sure, in that moment, that I was an evil human being — but he would at least be reacting. The look in Nick’s eyes just then was dead, blank. He was looking at a stranger.

“Nobody else is ever going to know all this about you,” Nick said. “No-one, for the rest of your life, is going to care what you cried about in third grade. But it never mattered. I’m just some fucked-up egg you found in the garbage. I was your pet mutant. Now I’m the weird friend you’re outgrowing.”

His voice was so level, like he was reading the news. I could feel him getting further away from me with every word out of his mouth, receding into some place where I couldn’t reach him and didn’t touch him. I thought about the black wave I had seen in my dream, swallowing Nick up and carrying him away from me. I thought it was Hell. I hadn’t realized it might just be the future; the world where Nick didn’t love me any more.


Nick looked away from me, into the dark.

“Need,” he said. “Need isn’t love. It isn’t care. It isn’t even like. You’re going to stop needing me, Jenny, and then what will you do?”

“I won’t stop,” I said.

“You will,” Nick said. “You have. The second someone better came along, you were done.”
I shook my head. I could feel the conversation slipping out from under me, like I was standing on a conveyor belt covered in grease. I knew I loved Nick; I knew it the way I knew I had two arms and ten fingers. It was a basic fact of how I was built. He just didn’t believe me, and wouldn’t believe me, and by the time he was done talking, I had a horrible feeling that I wouldn’t believe me either.

“I still see you every day,” I said. “How can I be done with you if we see each other every day?”

“That’s exactly it,” Nick said. “You don’t see me, Jenny. You show up. You stand next to me, maybe. But you don’t see me at all. I’m going through one of the biggest things in my life right now, maybe ever, and you didn’t even notice.”

“The doctors. The shots,” I said. “We talked about that.”

Nick sighed. Blood bubbled out of the wreck of his nose. He slumped, looking down at his hands, his shoulders caving over his skinny chest, and for a moment, I realized how small he really was. I never thought about it, usually. His personality could fill a stadium. But for that one moment, he looked like a little boy again, as young as he’d ever been, lost in the dark with blood and snot and tears dripping from his face.

“Jenny,” Nick said. “My mom is dying.”

CHAPTER FOUR

NICK

Good health of the body. That’s what the Summoning said I’d get; that’s what the ritual promised, right there in elaborate calligraphy, next to fame, wealth, conquest of those I should desire, and all those other fun things. Most guys would probably have paid more attention to that part; they would have had a longer set of wishes. Pleasures of the flesh, and all that.

I figured the greatest pleasure your flesh could have was to stay put, with you still in it. I saw good health of the body, and I thought: it doesn’t say the body has to be mine.

My mother held my hand, when she told me. She sat there at the kitchen table, still smoking a Marlboro, putting it to rest in a white ashtray with a Myrtle Beach logo on the bottom. She folded a piece of paper over and over in her hand; they were notes, I’d realized, she was so afraid to tell me that she’d needed to write it down to get it all the way through, and I watched the sunlight glow blue through the rising smoke and wanted to scream. My mother loved her killer. Even after the first diagnosis, back in sixth grade, she’d just quit for a year or two, then gone and bought a pack as soon as she felt safe. Gloria Casini wrapped herself in death every day of her life, until it became part of her, until it twisted her own body against her, until it possessed her entirely.
She told me what she needed to tell me — it was back, it was bad, it was unlikely to respond to treatment — and I wanted to yell at her for leaving me, to blame her for not trying to stop it. She saw where my eyes were and held my hand.

I know you don’t like me smoking, she’d said. But honey, there’s not much point trying to quit.

She took me to the library. There was no reason to do anything differently, she said. She liked our routine; she wanted to enjoy it while she could. She wanted the same life she always had, until she was too sick to live it. So she took me to the library, and I barreled into the stacks, cold and sweating, and I found a book I hadn’t seen before. A book that made the right promises.

* * *

“What did you think would happen?” Jenny said. “When Omphagor came to collect?”

“I didn’t think, Jenny,” I said. “People who make deals with the devil usually don’t. I just wanted her to get bet-

er.”

“But you knew she might die again, when the world ended,” Jenny said. “We all might.”

Jenny was nearly as wrecked as I was. Her hair was ratty and tangled and hanging in her face. Her dorky vanilla outfit was covered in bloodstains; I could see, where her skirt had hiked up, that the bite on her ankle was still bleeding, blood oozing out from a deep wound that couldn’t manage to scab. She looked sweaty and tired and puffy-eyed from crying, and when she tried to wipe her eyes, her bloody hand left a black streak along her face.

“I guess I figured that I’d find a way out of it, before anything else happened,” I said. “That there’d be a loop-
hole.”

Jenny sighed, cradling her ruined hand in her clean one.

“So your plan — the one you risked both our lives on — was that you’d find some last-minute way to outsmart the Devil,” she said. “Sounds right.”

There it was again — that paper-cut voice, that salt shaker and cup of lemon juice Jenny always managed to hold just over my wounds, waiting for an excuse to pour. I flinched back, suddenly furious.

“You have no right to judge me,” I said. “It isn’t your mother. It isn’t your life. This didn’t happen to you.”

She looked at me, then, really looked at me. Her eyes had that same lost-kid-in-the-mall look I’d seen in her bedroom, open and defenseless against the sadness of the world.

“You’re right,” she said. “It didn’t. I wish it hadn’t hap-

pened to you, either. I’m so sorry, Nick.”

I said nothing. The air around me buzzed and vibrat-
ed, pulsing in time to the ache in my head. It hurt badly enough that I thought I might vomit, and I wondered, almost idly, if I was dying. Maybe this was it: No death-defy-
ing confrontation, no heroic finish. I’d just keel over while processing my feelings in a high school gym.

“The apocalypse did happen to me, though,” Jenny said. “Even if I wasn’t losing anyone before, I’m losing them now. We all are.”
I stared at my boots, suddenly very conscious of the hole in Jenny’s hand.

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t tell me,” she said.

“When was I supposed to tell you?” I said. “When were you not busy with your boyfriend or your mom’s boyfriend or your goddamn shower? You spent more time thinking about how to impress some sex predator you picked up at a food court than you did thinking about me. How was I supposed to tell you anything when you were always halfway out the door?”

Jenny stiffened, and sucked her lips in, and I could tell the fight was going to start again. I probably wanted it to, I realized; I probably would have kept pushing that button until the machine started, no matter what she said.

“You lied to me,” Jenny said. “You hurt me. You bargained my life away like it was nothing. You flattened a suburb, and why? Because I had a boyfriend? Like: I kissed a boy, and I didn’t ask your permission first, so now I’m evil and awful and you get to punish me forever. I’ve never made you feel bad about yourself that way. You know that.”

“How many times do you think Dave says ‘she’ when he’s talking to me?” I said. “Five? Ten? How many times does a normal person say ‘she,’ in one conversation?”

Jenny huffed a little, and rolled her eyes, and just like that, I didn’t feel that bad about her hand any more.

“He knows it bugs me, Jenny,” I said. “He doesn’t know how, or why. But he sees something on my face that says ‘stop,’ so he keeps going.”

“You two antagonize each other,” Jenny said, weakly.

“I antagonize Dave,” I said. “Dave hurts me. And you let him.”

Jenny shook her head, but there was no conviction in it. I knew that I had won the argument, and that if I wanted to stay friends with her, I should stop talking. I didn’t stop. Winning didn’t feel like enough any more.

“You think you’re so great for putting up with the rest of us,” I said. “You make such a big deal out of how you help Hardy. You love helping. Like, oh, high school’s so mean, and everyone else is so awful, and you’re Mother Theresa for not calling him the r-word. But you’d never hang out with him.”

“Who would?” Jenny asked.

“I would,” I said. “Hardy is my friend. He’s a big, weird, gay giant, and I think he takes all his clothes off every time he poops, and I like him very much. That’s how friendship works.”

Jenny blinked hard and rubbed tears out of her eyes with her clean hand.

“You’re not Hardy,” she said.

“You’re right. I’m not,” I said. “Because I’m not going to stick around and let you tell yourself some story about how tolerant and liberal you are for not beating me to death in an alley. For one thing, you did try to beat me to death, about five minutes ago. It’s not enough for you to not be a bigot, Jennifer. You have to actually be something good.”

Jenny collapsed, curling in on herself and weeping into her awful skirt. I knew I was hurting her. She’d hurt me, too. I knew she would cry, and need me, and I knew that
I was supposed to feel mean for staying angry at her, to rush back in and make everything all right again. But I was tired, and bleeding, and every time I took a breath, I could feel the damage she’d done. These might be my last minutes. I wasn’t going to spend them letting Jenny Long off the hook.

I looked down at the mesh sleeve of my undershirt. It was already shredded, from birds and bugs and just being a cheap, shitty thing I’d made out of a $2.99 pack of fish-nets. It was never going to live a long life. I poked my finger into one of the bigger holes and ripped the sleeve off, making a little wad of cloth for me to bleed into. I looked at Jenny’s hand, which was black and wet with blood, and ripped off the other sleeve.

“Here,” I said, shoving it at her. “Tie it around your hand. Tight, so it slows the bleeding.”

She did as I told her, tying the bandage around her hand — I realized as she did it that the fabric was so filthy I was probably giving her blood poisoning; ah-ha, I thought, revenge at last! — and it wasn’t until she finished that she spoke.

“Can we go to the nurse’s office?” she said.

“I’m not your teacher, Jenny,” I said. “You don’t need a permission slip.”

“I didn’t ask if I could go,” she said. “Your nose is bleeding and I put a shiv through your face. I want to see if there’s something we could use to bandage you up.”

She looked up at me through the dark. Her eyes were hidden in shadow, but her voice was level, with no pity in it. I had gotten pretty used to detecting pity in Jenny Long’s voice, these past few months, so I knew.

“Fine,” I said. “But I’m bringing the shiv.”

* * *

The nurse’s office gleamed in the half-light. It was one of the oldest rooms in the school, which had expanded over the years as rich alumni poured more and more money and children into it. This part was from the ‘60s, maybe, with the walls covered ominously in pale ceramic tile, as if the people who built it planned to do a lot of impromptu field surgery and needed an easy way to clean up blood spatter. Only one fluorescent light had come on, and it flickered, which really gave the place that haunted-mental-asylum quality you look for in a healthcare provider. You can blame the apocalypse, but it looked like this even when school was open. I’d faked sick a lot, so I knew.

I sat on the nurse’s desk, playing with the little rubber monsters she’d put on her pencil erasers (how fun! I imagined her thinking, what a kick! And also, why is my life like this! And when will I be allowed to die!) while Jenny rummaged around behind me in the shadows at the back of the room. I heard the hiss of water pouring into the sink where she’d washed her hands.

“They have hydrogen peroxide,” Jenny called out. “It bubbles when it disinfects the wound.”

I kept playing with my erasers.

“I always thought that was really cool,” Jenny said.

I bet she did think it was really cool. Jenny Long was exactly the sort of person who would have opinions about
the relative coolness of household disinfectants, and would be excited to find a bottle of her favorite one. Wow, she’d think, hydrogen peroxide! She’d think it exactly like that, with the exclamation point and everything.

I hissed as Jenny poured extremely cool hydrogen peroxide over the cut on my cheekbone.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said.

It didn’t, but I wanted her to feel bad about pouring liquids on me. Jenny picked up a pad of gauze and pressed it to my cut, and I reached up to hold it in place. She looked down, peeling and snipping off little strips of tape, so that she didn’t have to make eye contact.

“Helping someone isn’t always an insult, you know,” Jenny said. “If you think it is, no wonder you tried to handle this alone.”

“I am alone,” I said. “My mother was leaving me. You were leaving me. I had to take care of myself.”

“You killed yourself,” Jenny said. “So it seems like that didn’t work.”

I rubbed my jaw, testing the extent of the damage. Just a bad bruise, I thought; I wasn’t spitting out teeth, I could still move it. My nose, though, was gruesome. It was a burst star in the middle of my face, radiating waves of heat and agony. Jenny brushed it with her fingers, trying to get a look, and I — forgive me, reader — screamed and smacked her hand away.

“I probably can’t fix that,” Jenny said. “I think it’s broken.”

I shrugged, trying to regain some dignity. It wasn’t the worst thing to happen to my head that afternoon, I told myself. I also had all that brain damage.

“I’m sorry it’s broken,” Jenny said. “I’m sorry that I hurt you, or that I let Dave hurt you. I’m sorry he calls you the wrong name. But, Nick, I don’t think your mom knows your name either.”

Maybe I would scream again, I thought. I’d just give up on language and shriek my way through the whole conversation. I pushed myself up off of the nurse’s desk, and headed for the door.

“Your mother wasn’t leaving you,” Jenny said. “She got sick. She didn’t do it on purpose. I wasn’t leaving either. I just went to the prom.”

“Don’t,” I said. “Don’t have insights at me. I told you that you could put a Band-Aid on me, not book me on Ricki Lake.”

“But you were sure someone was leaving, right?” Jenny said. “Someone was going to get rid of you. You were so afraid that person would stop loving you that you would rather end the world.”

I stood with my hand on the door, shaking. I knew Jenny wanted to tell me things with my family would be all right, the way you tell a scared kid there’s no monster under the bed. She wanted to promise that the hard part was over, because, for her, it was — because girls like her got to grow up and fit in and reminisce about the worst thing that ever happened to them, which was being unpopular in high school.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “No matter what I feel or why I feel it, people are still dying. The world is still on fire.”
Jenny sighed and leaned forward onto the desk, pushing a hunk of blonde hair out of her face as it fell. It was knotting together into cords, sewn together with gore and gunk, and I wondered why she bothered.

“Look,” Jenny said. “Do you remember when you blew up your trashcan?”

I did. I threw a lit firecracker into it. I would tell you that it was an experiment, but the thing I was trying to find out was “can I blow up this trashcan,” and I extremely could. I had forgotten that the trashcan had a whole garage around it, and that the garage was full of used cardboard and oily rags and other things you don’t want near explosions, so the next thing I knew, I was standing on my lawn, crying, as the fire trucks pulled up to the curb.

“Fires can be put out,” Jenny said. “Even big ones. I got left, a long time ago, by my Dad, but it didn’t mean my life was over. It meant that I moved across the street from you. I’d pick you over my Dad any day.”

“You wouldn’t,” I said. “You wouldn’t lose a parent if you could help it, Jenny. No-one would.”

“I would,” Jenny said. “Because my parent is a guy who abandoned a seven-year-old. Nobody who’s going to leave you deserves you, Nick. I’m not leaving, and if your mom stuck with you when you burned her garage down, she probably won’t, either. But even if someone does leave, all that means is that we failed you. It’s not the end of your story. It’s the beginning of something better. It’s leaving room for people who won’t fail.”

Jenny sat down on the edge of the desk, near the festively despairing novelty erasers. I sat down at the other end, out of the firing range of her compassion.

“I’m not telling you to hope,” Jenny said. “I know hope is, like, the least Goth emotion. But you believe in so many things. You believe in magic and demons and black mirrors. You could at least try to believe that you have a future worth saving.”

My head hurt so badly. Everything just hurt so badly, and I was so tired of pretending that it didn’t hurt. I’d been moving and talking through the pain so long. I slumped over sideways and collapsed, right on top of the Post-Its and novelty pencils and tragic decorative Garfield-themed mouse pad. I wound up with my head in Jenny’s lap, like a little kid, listening to the silvery sound of water echoing against the sink basin.

“I don’t want the world to end, Jenny,” I said. “I just wish the world were better.”

“It’s a bad place,” Jenny said. “Dangerous on the best days. But you’re not alone in it.”

I looked up at her, and she looked down at me, and finally, at long last, we saw each other.

Jenny rubbed my shoulder with her not-gross hand. I reached up to hold it. When I pulled away, a trail of dried blood came off in little flecks on my palm.

I grabbed Jenny’s hand and held it in front of my face. It was black, and bloody, and dirty, and worst of all, it was dry.

“You didn’t wash your hands,” I said.

“You killed my mom’s boyfriend,” Jenny said. “I was

9 Are we going to make out???? I mean, I don’t think so, because I was there. But still. Why does this sound romantic?! — Jenny
scared to get soap in my stab wound, Nick. Just enjoy the moment.”

I hauled myself up on one aching arm, looking to the shadows in the back of the room.

“If you didn’t wash your hands, you didn’t use the sink,” I said. “Why is it running?”

But by then, I had looked behind us, and so I knew. I drew the dagger out of my belt loop and charged for the door.

“What are you doing?” Jenny asked.

“Moment’s over, Jennifer,” I said. “Time to save the world.”
CHAPTER ONE

What does it mean to be possessed? You’ve seen the movies. Possession is an evil force inside you, that is not you, that drives you. It’s a little voice in your head that makes you do things crueler than you ever thought yourself capable of. It’s the words coming out of your mouth that horrify you, the rage that makes you say *I don’t know what I was thinking*, the force that tenses your muscles and curls your fist before you punch your friend.

Yet that voice, those words, that clenched fist, are all yours, too. Forget the movies; forget Linda Blair telling priests to fuck each other and Fairuza Balk kneeling exultant over a dead shark. Demons don’t put anything in you that wasn’t already there. They find the parts of you that are ugly and destructive and cruel, and they just turn the volume up, until those ugly tendencies drown out all the good ones.

Possession, for Nick Casini, was self-destruction; the black tide sweeping him into the dark, the certainty that he had nothing left to lose. It was the force that drove him over and over to the same sheet of Xeroxed paper, repeating the lethal words on it, heedless of who he might hurt, not even caring if he hurt or killed himself, so long as he could feel in control. Possession told Nick Casini that he was the smartest boy alive, no matter how lost he looked, and no matter how lost he felt, and so he could do anything he wanted; possession allowed Nick to damn himself and everyone he knew to oblivion while convincing himself it was all a game.

Possession, for Jenny Long, was selfishness. It was an idiot voice in her head repeating one phrase, over and over: *I deserve, I deserve, I deserve*. She deserved love. She deserved respect. She deserved pleasure. She deserved friendship, even if it meant leaving someone else lonely. She deserved safety, even when other people were unsafe. She deserved to live, and so other people deserved to die. She deserved to beat her best friend into a bloody pulp while he wept, and fell, and tried in vain to escape her, because he’d hurt her feelings.

We are all possessed, many times over: By the stories we’ve heard, by the secrets we’ve kept, by our own sheer bloody-minded refusal to see or deal with our problems. In Nick and Jenny’s case, someone was possessed by a demon. Its name was Omphagor, and it was gnarly; if not the actual Devil, then certainly the Vice-Devil, or the Speaker of the House of Hell.

Nick and Jenny had exorcised each other, with the one tool fitted to the purpose. It was a brutal operation, and parts of them were lost in the process; they always are. Yet, as Nick and Jenny left the nurse’s office that night, some wall between them dissolved, and they began sharing the same story.

In that story, it made no sense for some hugging and a few life lessons to dispatch something as powerful as Omphagor.

Sometimes a demon is just your flaws getting louder. Sometimes. Mostly. But sometimes — like if the summon-
ers repeat the same ritual twenty or thirty times in a row, and if there’s an especially pliable host body in the vicinity, and if you’re summoning a truly powerful entity, the Vice-Devil of Hell Itself, the World-Eater, Omphagor — sometimes you really do get the classic pea-soup routine, something inhuman using your face as a Halloween mask to go trick-or-treating. Sometimes a demon possesses you whole, and entire, and drives any last trace of the human out. Nick and Jenny had been possessed slowly, corrupting themselves and each other, but that was not the problem. While they were subtly becoming worse people, someone else had gone the full Linda.

* * *

“Why do you even have a shiv, anyway?” Jenny asked. “It feels like I should have asked that earlier.”

“It’s a mystic dagger,” Nick said. “The only thing that can slay the demon.”

“Oh, wow,” Jenny said. “Did you borrow it from Buffy the Vampire Slayer?”

It was strange how quickly normalcy re-asserted itself. Within a few seconds of walking down the fluorescent-lit halls of their old high school, their bodies had somehow snapped into place, lulled by familiarity. They loped along next to each other, Jenny half-limping on her wounded ankle, Nick adjusting his pace almost unconsciously to keep her by his side. They might as well have been walking up to the counter at Starbucks.

“I made it, in fact.” Nick said. “It had to be forged by two untouched male virgins. Me and Hardy.”

“Hardy? Really?”

Jenny was good at some things — reading, hiding, avoiding conflict; if there was no-one around to hear her, she could sing about half of Cats — but one thing she could not do well was fake surprise.

“Men don’t have to screw everything in sight to be men, Jenny,” Nick said. “Virginity has its uses.”

“I hope I used mine while I had the chance,” Jenny said.

Nick threw a glance back at her. He suspected her of rubbing it in, if only a little, but she was trying to rub it on a version of him that wanted to date Dave, and that was never going to stick. Dave was handsome, but there was something cold about it. You looked at his features, and they were perfect, but there was nothing there.

“So who are you supposed to shiv?” Jenny said. “If I’m not possessed, and you’re not possessed…”

“I think we were, a little,” Nick said. “I feel different now. Clearer. Like I can think with my whole head. Don’t you?”

Jenny squinted off into the distance, feeling around the inside of her own head, as if she were testing for a loose tooth with her tongue.

“I think so,” she said, “I mean, I don’t feel as much like beating people to death.”

Nick privately felt that the phrase “as much” was a point of concern — “murderer” vs. “not murderer” was one of the few cases where he favored a strong binary; he was also weirded out by that thing in Pittsburgh where they put fries on sandwiches — but, though a moral lesson
could definitely be gleaned here, it was not a lesson that should be delivered by a guy who recently damned humanity to eternal torment to avoid talking about his feelings.

Jenny tacked left, past the atrium, and into the chipboard forest of the cafeteria. In the back of the atrium, near the windows, Nick spotted a ring of burnt-out candles and wondered for a moment what she had been trying to do. Another ritual, maybe, though that wasn’t like her.

“Well,” Nick said, “at least I stopped you before you actually killed anybody.”

It took Nick a few seconds to realize that Jenny had stopped walking. When he looked back, she was staring at the linoleum cafeteria floor. Her eyes were dark and hollow. She knitted her hands together, locking and unlocking her fingers.

“You didn’t stop me,” Jenny said. “Not in time. We killed Debra.”

Nick stared at her, temporarily at a loss.

“No, you didn’t,” Nick said.

Jenny nodded. She looked sick.

“Debra. Billy. Chris,” Jenny said. “I think some other people at the supermarket. The idea was just to hurt them, but some of them got really, really hurt, you know? So you didn’t stop me. I did every bad thing I was going to do.”


Stop.

Sorry. What?
I ran along the halls as fast as I could, but I didn’t know what I was running to, or why. If Nick was dead then we were both dead. He had the only dagger. I was moving because I’d been told to move, and when I realized that, I stopped.

Dave was running, and that’s why I knocked him down. He came around a corner without looking and slammed straight into my chest. He was carrying a flashlight in one hand. It went flying. So did he.

I didn’t know he was Dave. I had not met Dave. I was surprised to see another person awake, and it kept me from asking certain questions.

“Who are you?” he said, squinting up at me from the floor.

“Hardy Patrick,” I said.

“Is that a name?” Dave said. “Or are you saying your name backward? Like, are you Patrick Hardy, and it says ‘Hardy, Patrick’ on your driver’s license?”

“I’m Hardy Patrick,” I said. “It’s unfortunate. On many levels.”

I was trying to place him. Orange t-shirt, green eyes, messy hair that glinted red under the light. He was attractive. Strikingly so. I thought maybe the end of the world was about to improve for me. Last man on earth, and all that.

I didn’t have to place him. He placed me. As he rose to his feet, dusting himself off, he narrowed his eyes and gave me a long look that must have been recognition.

“Wait,” Dave said. “Are you Jenny Long’s friend, Hardy?”

Jenny was not my friend. Nick was. Jenny was conspicuously nice to me to prove she was not a bully. I didn’t think my potential first sexual partner would want to waste time parsing those distinctions.

“Yes,” I said.

Dave turned and walked away from me. People often did that, so I stayed put. Dave turned around at the last moment.

“Follow me,” he said. “We’ll be safer in the kitchen.”

I have attempted to be very clear on my thought process. I hope you can see why I followed.

* * *

Dave leaned against the silver wall of cabinets. His long legs were crossed at the ankle. His arms were crossed across his chest. There is a certain sort of man who can lean well on things. I was not one of them, but I was very familiar with what they looked like, because I noticed them, exhaustively, when they started leaning.

I looked down at Dave’s high-tops and was quiet. I was usually quiet. It hides a lot.
The faucet was dripping behind me. I could hear the hollow metallic splat of each droplet resonating slightly against the sides. It was the only sound in the room for a long time.

“So this is Hardy,” Dave said. “You know, I bet Jenny thinks you’re dead?”

“I’m not dead,” I said.

Dave nodded. I realized that I was expected to add value to the conversation.


I held up my bandaged arms to show him. The structural integrity of the bandages was not holding up. My body was popped open and oozing out, and it was bloody.

“Not dead, though,” I concluded.

“It would take a lot to kill you,” Dave said. “Full points for that. So what brings you here, Hardy?”

“I came with my friend,” I said. “We made a dagger.”

Dave smiled up at me. It was a wide smile. It had more teeth than smiles usually do. For a second, I thought, it almost looked uncomfortable.

“A dagger, huh?” Dave said.

Dave stopped leaning. He walked across the kitchen to where I stood. I hardly even noticed. In that moment, all I could hear was the *splat, splat, splat* of the dripping faucet. The sound of impact was wetter, now. Like the sink was filling up. That should not have been possible. The drains didn’t close. The only way for the sink to fill would be for the pipes to flood.

I was thinking about fluid dynamics when he reached me.

“Hardy,” Dave said, standing very close to me, “who is your friend?”

“His name is Nick,” I said.

“You mean…”

He said the wrong name. I didn’t like it. Even on accident, it felt like a violation. It seemed clear to me, though, that it was not an accident. Dave made the connection too easily. He was using the wrong name because he knew it was wrong.

“I mean Nick,” I said.

The noise in the sink didn’t make sense. It sounded like a very full basin of water sloshing. It sounded denser than water. Milk, maybe. Oil. There was a thick sound that implied viscosity. I kept looking at Dave.

“People’s identities are complex,” I said.

“You’re telling me,” Dave said, smiling that strange smile again. It looked like the skin of his face was being peeled away from his teeth. Like he was forcing his own body to react to him. I understood the feeling.

I wanted to look at the sink very badly. I know I don’t seem vulnerable in ordinary ways. You probably can’t imagine me crying, or needing my mother, or having a bad dream. I still did all those things. I recognized the feeling I was having now from the bad dreams: Being so afraid you were stuck in place. I was trying to turn my head, to see the source of the noises — now there was bubbling, a sound of liquid mass shifting or being shifted, air or gas
being introduced somehow — but I could not. My eyes stayed fixed on Dave as he leaned against the counter next to me, nearly as tall as I was, and close enough to touch.

Touching Dave had seemed exciting a moment ago. Now, for reasons I could not name, he was no longer handsome. The part of me that craved human connection did not crave him.

“Have you ever been in love, Hardy?” Dave smile-con-vulsed up at me.

He took a step toward me. I took a step back. Then my sneaker slipped, and I fell backward, into the bad noise. Looking up from the floor, I could see it clearly. The sinks, the drain on the floor, every pipe and orifice in the room was bubbling and overflowing with blackish-red blood.

* * *

“I love Jenny,” the thing inside Dave said. “I know it seems unlikely. But I do.”

His tone had not changed. I was never a strong reader of tones, but this one was not threatening. He sounded casual. He was still smiling. We were friends, and he was talking to me about his girlfriend, as friends often do.

The blood on the floor was at least two or three inches deep. It was gushing up fast from the drain on the floor. It was getting deeper.

“You know how it is when you love someone,” Dave said. “You walk into someone’s life. You’re a stranger. All you want to do is to make that life better.”

I tried to get up and could not. My sneakers kept slipping in the blood. I was not a coordinated person. Maybe I should have been. Maybe I could have learned to be. I should have taken fencing.

Dave kept smiling and speaking in his reasonable voice and moving toward me. I knew that when he touched me something terrible would begin to happen.

“No,” I tried saying. “No.”

He smiled and smiled and did not listen.

“I had hoped to keep some of Jenny’s old life around,” he said. “Something to comfort her through all these changes. But I have to counterbalance that with the camp-site rule. Do you know that rule, Hardy?”

“I’m eighteen years old,” I said.

It was important for him to know. Eighteen, and going to New York in the fall, and if I just made it through these last three months, my eighteen years of being laughed at and excluded and hit in the head with drink cups would be over, and I would have a better future than anyone I knew.

“Please,” I said. “I’m eighteen.”

Dave leaned over me where I lay on the floor. This is the part where he picks me up, I thought. Then his smile got bigger. It was so big I thought it would rip his face apart, like a zipper coming open. I knew then he wouldn’t help me.

“You leave someone better than you found them,” Dave said. “Like a campsite. Isn’t that clever?”

He brought his knee down into my gut and pinned me to the floor. I knew myself to be big. I was a big, strong man, the sort of person who was traditionally okay in these situations. Dave was tall, too, however, and as his knee dug into my abdomen I realized he was heavier than I
anticipated. Dave might be the first person I had met who was almost as big and as strong as I was.

“Almost;” “mostly;” “sort of;” qualifiers. I avoided them. I had been taught they weakened a sentence. Now I thought of sentences with qualifiers in them. *Dave is almost as big as Hardy. Hardy is mostly un-injured. Dave is somewhat human.* Qualifiers, I realized too late, were the most important words.

Then I heard the metal of the floor grate dislodging itself, and I realized what the source of the bubbling had been. Blood had been pumping into the room, but something had been breathing and moving through it. With the blood had come the rats.

The first rat to climb out of the sink edged its way along the counter and looked at me. I looked at it. I could see the blood reflecting in its eyes. I could see that another rat was poking its way through the floor drain and heading along the floor toward me.

“I’m thinking about how I can improve Jenny Long,” Dave said. “How can I clean up the campsite that is her? And you know what I think she needs, Hardy?”

All I had to do was live for three more months. I closed my eyes and thought of it: The city. The only city, towers of glass and bright fall air and a thousand bookstores. Whole buildings full of people just like me, smart like me, strange like me, welcoming me home.

Nick had to burst through the door. Dave had to make some fatal error. Then I would live. I knew I would live, I knew it. I could see the glass world waiting.

“I think she needs better friends,” Dave said.

The first rat came for my face.

I didn’t go to New York. I didn’t become a lecturer at a university. I didn’t do anything at all. I just died. I bled, and I suffered, and I was only eighteen years old, and my last words were: *Not yet.*

Not yet. Not yet. Because it was unfair, and it was awful, and I never hurt anyone, and he was never sorry about hurting me. Nick is a necromancer, a word meaning *magician who commands the dead,* and he asked me here to speak to you, and here I am. But I am not. I am only this voice, a thin shred of who Hardy Patrick was, that goes back and forth over the moment of his death, forever. I never get out. It always ends here, on the floor, with Dave smiling down at me.

So I came to tell you that. I came to tell you that I died young. I was wasted. I came to finish saying it: *Not yet.* A death like mine should not happen, not to someone that young, not to anyone, not ever.

I should have told you that at the beginning. I’m sorry. This was never the kind of story where all of the good people were going to live.
CHAPTER TWO

The blood flowed out from the kitchen in an awesome wave. Dave stepped through the knee-high flood, his blue jeans soaked black with blood. His hands were dripping with it. The rest of Dave was clean. It was something you’d notice, if you ever looked closely at him, which no-one ever did: Dave did not get dirty. He did not get hurt. He was like a picture of a man superimposed on reality, gliding through it, while everyone else had to deal with its hard-edged furniture and gravity and dust.

The picture-perfect man turned to Nick and Jenny, where they stood, frozen, in the center of the cafeteria. He smiled with all his teeth.

There were too many of them, now that Jenny thought of it. They probably shouldn’t have been pointed.

“Hi, Jenny,” he said. “Hi, Jenny’s friend.”

Jenny stood, silent, feeling the story of her first great love turn itself inside-out. Wow, she thought, crazily. It really is like Buffy. Or Scream. Or Dracula. She stood there, marveling, almost insulted by the obviousness of her own life.

Not the book Dracula? But the Winona Ryder movie. It’s like a lot of Winona Ryder movies, actually.

Jenny’s mind rattled on in a list of references and similes and metaphors for the thing right in front of her, and while it was doing so, Jenny could not move. She felt Nick’s hot, bony hand pulling at her, shaking her by the shoulder, trying to make her save herself.

“Beetlejuice,” Jenny whispered.

“We don’t need to summon another one, Jenny,” Nick said. “We need to run.”

So they did. Dave looked after them, unbothered. Above him, the ceiling sprinklers began spraying blood into the hallways of the school, staining the world red. Dave stood under the shower, smiling and spotless, as if he was never really there.

* * *

I missed it, Nick thought. Jenny was stumbling behind him. He was yanking her along by the strap of her tank top, hard enough that he thought he might rip it. Jenny had frozen again; a rabbit in the headlights, a rat staring at the cobra that danced in her mind’s eye. Nick was someone who could keep running, so he ran for them both.

But he was smart. Right? He was a smart guy, or he’d thought he was, and he had studied this demon from every angle, learned its secret names and its history and its place in Hell, and he had stood two feet away from it in a suburban mall and not known to be anything but pissed. The glamour coming off Dave was blinding, like a lens flare. It kept you from seeing him. That’s all Omphagor was, really: It was glamour. It was status. It was power. For one brief, life-affirming moment, Nick was grateful for the fact that he’d always had objectively shitty taste. The Devil couldn’t tempt him with the finer things in life, because he preferred Hot Topic.
The gray industrial carpet of the school was soaked through with blood. It squelched up in gouts under Nick’s boots. The sprinklers kept spraying it down around them, what felt like whole slaughterhouses’ worth of carnage. The pipes were flooded; it lapped like a spreading pool from beneath the doors of the bathrooms and bubbled out of every sink. As Nick watched, a water fountain bubbled, then exploded off the wall.

Jenny turned her head and threw her hand up, warding the shrapnel off. In that moment, she saw Dave standing at the end of the hallway.

He wasn’t angry, and he wasn’t running. He just ambled toward them at the same pace as ever, calm and reasonable, except that somehow, even though he’d seemed very far away at first, he was gaining ground.

“I think this is an overreaction,” Dave said.

Jenny chose to believe her reaction was appropriate, and began running. Her skirt was wet and weighted down with blood. She’d be better off stripping down to her underwear and fleeing naked, but she didn’t want to parse the implications for feminism. Nick huffed along behind her, burdened by the dead weight of his enormous, soaked-through JNCO jeans.

Dear God, Jenny thought, please don’t let us be killed by these clothes. Having to wear them was bad enough.

Dave followed along, walking at his own cool and steady pace, faster than anyone else in the room.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Jenny,” he said. “I mean, I could. At a certain point, the Stockholm syndrome would set in, and you’d forgive me. But that wouldn’t feel earned, you know?”

Nick yanked the both of them around a random corner, hoping that, if they had no advantage in speed, the unpredictability of their path might throw Dave off. Jenny stopped short and grabbed him by the shoulder, so hard he nearly fell.

“Your friend, though,” Dave said, his pleasant voice echoing around the corner. “Your friend, I don’t really care about earning.”

Nick looked at her, furious, and for once, unable to say so. Jenny stared at the face of her salvation: The opened door of a supply closet.

* * *

There’s a common fantasy among kids — you’ve had this one, right? — that the inside of their school conceals a hidden world. You know that there are rooms you’re not permitted to enter; teachers’ lounges, back offices, janitorial supply stations. It’s easy to infer that there must be a whole second school inside the school, a hidden night world of corridors and secret rooms, connecting the thing together; that if you could just find the right access point, you’d be led along some secret maze, seeing the backstage darkness behind the lit stage of classrooms and gymnasiums and cafeterias.

That fantasy, as it happens, is absolutely true, and Jenny Long, the one girl in Ohio who knew how true it was, was saved that day by her own willingness to believe. She dragged Nick through the supply closet, past the rackety...
metal shelves, to the hidden access door in the far back corner of the room. It was unlocked, and she opened it as silently as she could, dragging Nick down the hidden stair-case and toward the school’s basement.

He followed her down, trying to pick his way through the darkness by the distant glare of the safety lights below.

“Can’t he find us down here?” Nick whispered.

“We’re not staying,” Jenny said. “The basement is open-plan. We can cut across toward an exit and leave the school in a place he doesn’t expect.”

“How do you even know all this?” Nick asked.

“I used to sneak around in supply closets,” Jenny said. “God. Twelve years of public school, and the most useful thing I learned was how the closets worked.”

“I also learned a lot about closets in high school, if I recall,” Nick said.

Jenny paused, squinting out into the dark. They were near the bottom of the stairs now, though still not close enough to see what was waiting for them. Nick peered over her shoulder, watching her face.

“I know you’re being extra nice to me,” he said, “so I’m not even going to point out that I was right.”

“Right about what?” Jenny said absently, scanning the darkness.

“Yes, your boyfriend is a force of pure malice, spawned in the fathomless abyss before the dawn of time,” Nick said. “He’s way too old to be dating a teenager.”

They had taken the last few steps down the stairs, by that time, and by now they saw it: The whole basement, what felt like acres of vacant concrete-floored space, was flooded waist-high with blood. It lapped and bubbled in front of them, as far as they could see, like a hidden ocean beneath the world.

Jenny took a breath and headed out into the gore, wading in until it soaked through the waistband of her skirt and to her belly. Nick hung back, appalled, and a little jealous that hadn’t been the first to take the risk. Jenny looked back at him over her shoulder, her long hair trailing in the murk.

“If we walk left far enough,” she said, “we’ll come up under the auditorium. We can head out through the side doors, like we did for graduation.”

Nick nodded, wading in behind her. He expected the blood to be cold, like entering a swimming pool on an early morning; he was braced for it, the chill that made your muscles clench and try to propel you out of the water as fast as possible. But it was warm, of course. Blood always is unless it’s congealed.

“So where does all this stuff come from?” Jenny asked.

She was wading out ahead of him in the dark, made unexpectedly slow and graceful by the viscosity of the blood. The thick, ratty denim of Nick’s jeans billowed and dragged behind him. Above them, he could hear the faint creak of the ceiling tiles, weakened by the flood.

“What do you mean?” Nick said. “It comes from Satan.”

“I mean, is it Satan’s blood?” Jenny said. “Did he donate it, with an IV and everything? Is this what happens to the rats when Dave’s done with them? Blood comes from inside a body, Nick. How do you get enough of it to fill a basement?”
You got it by being really spooky, was what Nick thought, and he regretted, not for the first time that day, that no-one in central Ohio was willing to cross the threshold into a mythic world.

“The rat thing sounds right,” Nick said. “I mean, that, or humanity has finally failed to save the dolphins.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Jenny said. “After we boycotted the tuna for them in fourth grade and everything.”

Then it caught him. The blood was black and opaque in the darkness, so Nick couldn’t see the thing that had gotten wrapped around his boot; an extension cord, he thought, or a fire hose, or just some tentacle the school had grown in a sudden desperate attempt to make sure he’d die there. He was tangled in it, anyway; he had stepped into a slip-knot and tightened it around his ankle.

He yanked his foot up and forward a few times, and it only got tighter, cutting into his heel through the leather of his boot. He was going to have to get down on his knees, he realized, or actually stick his head under the surface, and even then, he wouldn’t be able to see, so he wouldn’t know what he was doing. The best thing to do was to take off the boot. That boot had twenty-seven buckles on it, and went all the way up to Jesus; it would take time to set himself free.

Nick called Jenny’s name, in the dark, and she turned to him. So she saw it happen. Nick knelt down, forgetting the ever-present creak of the soaked-thorough ceiling, and it collapsed, coming down on top of him in a gout of tile and dislodged plaster, knocking him face-down into the blood.

— INTERLUDE —

**Beeing the True Gospel of OMPHAGOR**

General of Hell’s Greater Forces, Fiend of Fiends, Devourer of Worlds and Hopes, Your Boyfriend

For that I am beside you, and in you, and always with you; for that I have placed myself in your heart’s deepest regions; for that I watch from behind your eyes, breathe your breath, and in this manner was forced to sit through your whole graduation; for this, you will know me, OMPHAGOR.

For that I have lifted you above mortal women; for that the love I bear you is great, and other love can only dilute it; for that I know you long for surrender, and the pleasure surrender brings; for this reason I shall cleanse the world of all but Myself, that you will turn to Me alone.

For I have watched at each step, as a Blade of silence and secrecy, a thing I cannot see, is formed. For I have tried as I may to halt its creation, but only managed to kill the same volleyball player twice. For you seek with a child’s willfulness to reject the generosity I have shown, and children must be disciplined by those who have grown to wisdom;

For this I bring you suffering, and darkness, and the grief beyond speaking. For there is no thing to lose but this world you have, and what good, Jennifer, is that world to you? When all else is gone, who will you belong to, if not to me?
CHAPTER THREE

Jenny limped into the auditorium alone. Tears streaked through the blood that covered her face from when she’d gone under the surface for Nick, tried and failed to yank him loose. Every part of her dripped with carnage. Her eyes were empty.

Jenny stood high up, near the projection booth, her breath still in her chest, trying not to inhale or shudder. She was looking down on hundreds of gathered bodies that filled the seats of the auditorium. They looked away from her in the darkness and did not move.

Dave smiled up at her from the stage.

“You see,” he said. “I’m not going to lose you, Jenny.”

He was sitting on a folding chair, under a spotlight, leaning back with his legs crossed and his long arms dangling to his side. He looked almost theatrically casual, like it was important for her to know that what she thought wasn’t important. He always looked like that, Jenny realized, and Nick had been right: It was irritating. More so, when you knew he was a mass murderer.

The spotlight carved new shadows in his face and made the red lights in his hair gleam, so bright they looked like sparks of flame. Exactly like sparks of flame, actually. As Jenny squinted down at Dave, it occurred to her that she didn’t actually know what color his hair was. Was it blonde with red in it, or was it dark brown with auburn highlights, or was he actually redheaded? She had looked right at him, touched him, and not known the answer to that question; it was as if her mind had substituted the abstract idea of A Handsome Man for whatever it was she’d actually been seeing. It had never occurred to her to question that, just like it had never occurred to her — Nick Casini, Debra McAllister, Hardy Patrick, she counted the facts like rosary beads — that Dave did not have a last name.

“What do you look like?” Jenny asked the thing standing on the stage.

“Whatever you want,” Omphagor said. “Isn’t that the point?”

It smiled up at her, with teeth that she was used to telling herself were perfect.

Jenny looked away. She had wanted to see beauty, that was true, and she had wanted it badly. She was so used to ugly men; her mother’s men, middle-aged and shy and sad, men with wire-framed glasses and bad mustaches and receding hairlines, men who smelled of the Camels they kept in the pockets of their polo shirts. She had grown up with those men, coming in and out of her life, leaving cigarette butts and wreckage, and she had told herself love would be different for her. When it was her time, she would escape into the arms of someone beautiful. Now she had, and all she wanted was to get back out again.

A dozen hands seized her, making her wince where they gripped her bruises. The shadowy figures in the seats loomed over her. Some of them, Jenny knew. Courtney Scheiber in torn flannel and rings of eyeliner, her snarl gone slack and vacant; Tyler Cord, with his ruined face; Trevor Murphy, creaking a little in his black pleather trenchcoat.
Their eyes were empty, and their hands had the strength to tear her to pieces, and she knew, with deep dread, that every one of them was a person like herself, who wanted to live.

The sleepwalkers passed her down to the stage — shoving and grabbing and pulling her forward, with a force that reminded her she would be easy to rip apart. Omphagor extended a hand to help her up the final steps, and she took it. It was ice cold, and Jenny wondered, horrified, if he’d been this cold every time he touched her. If he’d been hurting her, this whole time, without her knowing.

“What happened to Dave?” Jenny whispered. “The real Dave. If there ever was one.”

“There was a man,” Omphagor said. “He didn’t use that name. I got this off a sticker on his car. He was the sort of guy who’d have that car, Jenny. He was a waste of a good face. The world is better off.”

“Better off without him, you mean,” Jenny said. “You’re not sharing his body with him? The only person in there is you?”

“I’ve never been a person,” Omphagor said. “And this is my body now.”

Jenny looked at the dead man in front of her, feeling a terror so deep it was nearly sorrow. She realized she’d been right: She wasn’t a girl who cried easily any more. If she were, she’d be in hysterics now.

Omphagor closed in on Jenny, looking down at her with an intensity she’d used to mistake for romantic. Maybe his eyes were so green they seemed to glow. Maybe they glowed. Either way, Jenny knew enough not to look in them any more.

“Where’s [DEAD]?” it said.

“His name’s Nick,” Jenny said.

“[DEAD] had the dagger,” Omphagor said, not quite patiently. “You tell me: Where is [DEAD]?”

“Why do you hate him so much?” Jenny asked. “You hate him, and you love me. What’s the difference between us?”

Omphagor grimaced and shook its head. The gesture was almost human.

“Hate is mortal,” it said. “It’s too small for what I am. Your friend is just very self-possessed. I can’t work with that. You, you’re more…vacant, I guess?”

“Vacant.” There it was. Her boyfriend hadn’t loved her, and though Jenny ought to know better, and her heart had already been broken in several places that day, it still cut through her to know she had not been loved.

“I don’t mean it as an insult,” it said. “You’re receptive. You want someone to tell you who you are. I can tell you, if you’ll let me.”

“So who am I?” Jenny asked.

“Special,” the Devil replied. “Soon, you’ll be the wealthiest, most famous, most beloved person in the world. Because you’ll be the only person in it. Isn’t that a wish worth granting?”

It was true, Jenny thought. She had wanted to be special. She had wanted a stage and a crowd and a voice worth hearing. She had wanted to be something, because she was unformed, less a person than a place where a person might one day happen. She was a child, and Omphagor had cho-
sen her because it was a creature that went looking for children to use.

Yet she was not empty. And so Jenny Long decided to take her unformed self and twist it into a shape that she recognized. Jenny decided, for the first time in her life, to give a bully a devastating speech.

“Debra McAllister loved Jesus,” Jenny said.

The Devil looked down at her, coolly.

“I’m not as weak as people think, Jenny,” it said. “That name doesn’t frighten me.”

“What name? Debra?” Jenny said. “It should. Debra frightened a lot of people. She was cruel, and she made life worse for the people around her. But people were cruel to her, too, because the world is like that for girls, and deep down, when she was alone with herself, what she wanted to believe was that God would reward her if she helped people.”

Jenny took a step forward.

“Billy Kilpatrick volunteered weekends at an animal shelter,” Jenny said. “I saw him once outside of Kroger’s, doing a fundraiser. He was awful to people, but he loved puppies. Some part of him wanted to care for helpless things. Chris Swartz took advanced science classes. I think he might have been smart or something. Chris could have been a scientist, or a doctor, and even though he hurt people in high school, he might have saved people, if he lived.”

Jenny walked forward, into the thing that she had loved an hour ago. It edged backward and away from her.

“Brent Cherry was going to OSU on a football scholarship,” Jenny said, “and you’d think he’d be a jerk, right? The one guy in our school with a football scholarship, the one everyone thought was going to go pro? But he was incredibly nice to everyone, even to Nick and me, and he got higher SAT scores than I did. I saw them. Cara Gray was going to Juilliard, and she was in every single theater production, and Nick and I used to find her so irritating. But I heard her sing ‘I Dreamed A Dream’ at choir recital, and I cried. She deserved it. The world deserved to hear Cara Gray sing. Hardy Patrick.”

“You have a story about Hardy Patrick,” Omphagor said.

The sound in its voice was a laugh. It swept through her like a sickness, reminding her of things that she couldn’t take back.

“I don’t,” Jenny said. “I wish I had one. I think Nick probably had hundreds. I wish that I had known Nick’s friend.”

“[DEAD],” Omphagor said. “Your friend is [DEAD].”

“My friend is Nick Casini,” Jenny said. “He loved Marilyn Manson, and Nine Inch Nails, and he thought there were redeeming things about Korn. He said the drums in ‘Freak on a Leash’ were good, and they kind of are, in the chorus. He burned down his own garage once and he barely even got grounded. He spent fifty dollars at the drug store on Halloween so he’d have enough grease paint to look dead for the rest of the year.”

Jenny kept moving toward Omphagor, and Omphagor kept edging back, away from her. Something was building in Jenny, made of the best parts of her and the worst, and in the end, even the Devil knew there was only one thing to do when Jenny Long was angry. You could witness her.
Or you could duck.

“Nick made arm warmers out of fishnets,” Jenny said. “He never cleaned his room. He went to the library with his mom every Sunday, and he loved it. His mom and the library. He loved them both. He never let someone feel helpless or worthless or powerless in his presence. He never said something behind your back he wouldn’t say to your face. He had more to be afraid of than any of us, and he never let fear stop him. Even with the whole world falling apart around him, he was thinking about who needed help and who he could save.”

Omphagor had backed up so far that it was nearly at the edge of the stage, creeping out of the spotlight and into the darkness of the wings. Jenny followed her first love into the dark.

“You tell me I matter,” Jenny said, “but what you mean is that no-one else does. Everybody matters. Everyone was more than we knew. Every single person you killed was so important that someone, somewhere, would risk the world to save them. Every time we lose someone, a world ends, and my world was Nick Casini. He was brave, and he was good, and he was important, and he’s standing right behind you, and —”

Omphagor tried to turn. But it was too late. He (I) was.

CHAPTER FOUR

NICK

Oh, come on. Are you surprised? Every “we” is an “I” in hiding.¹ I told you from the beginning what to expect of me: I’m a necromancer, a summoner of demons, a Gemini, and more important than all of that, I’m the guy who stabbed the Devil in the neck when he wasn’t looking.

Jenny saw the thing that had been Dave as she was climbing up from the basement. I was still behind her, brushing plaster from my hair; yes, I’d been hit on the head, again, but my head had given up protesting by that point. I was still conscious, mostly because going into a coma would be too much work. So, in the roughly three thousand hours it had taken me to get my boot off, we’d scraped together a plan, found my last-minute way to outsmart the Devil: She went around to the front of the house, and I hid backstage, hoping that the weird laser focus Omphagor kept on Jenny would protect me. She just had to provide that one crucial distraction long enough to back him up into me.

The speech was her idea. I didn’t know she had it in her. It was also her idea to ask if the original Dave was still in there; maybe it’s shameful to admit this, in retrospect, but I was ready to just stab him. Even if exorcising him

¹ Some readers may wonder why I did not get to be the “I” in hiding — I haven’t even gotten to narrate since the middle of Part Three, in fact — but what can I say? I guess there just aren’t enough books written from the male perspective. — Jenny
somehow restored him to full Dave-ness, at least some of those flaws had been in there to begin with, and I didn’t really feel like risking my life to save some transphobic statutory rapist we found outside a Claire’s. So Jenny is a hero too, if you doubted it; that soft heart the world sank into, her ability to care obsessively about every tiny little thing that ever happened to her, saved us both. I also got to hear her say a lot of nice things about me, which helped a lot with the day I’d been having. Awww, she really does care, I was thinking, as Jenny finished harshly critiquing the demon’s worldview, and the Devil — Dave? — the Dave-il came within arm’s reach. I rammed the mystic shiv into the soft spot below its ear.

It wheeled around and backhanded me, and for one moment — not long, but long enough to count — I saw what its face really looked like. I won’t tell you my hair went white, or anything, but I still have the nightmares. Jenny pulled the shiv out of its neck and stabbed her boyfriend directly in the eye. It was like ramming a fork really hard into Jell-O. As she pulled the blade out, I could see bits of that poor stoner’s rented-out brain were stuck to it. It was like something out of *Event Horizon*.

That seemed to do it. Dave’s corpse, newly void of Omphagor, fell steaming and hissing to the floor.

Jenny and I stared at each other over the body. She was drenched in blood and muck, and — a little, on her face — her ex-boyfriend’s eye jelly. It was rough. Meanwhile, I had recently been knocked out by a swarm of flying cockroaches, beaten within an inch of my life, stabbed in the face, and knocked bodily under a sea of blood, but I was hoping I wore it better.

“You look horrible,” Jenny said.

“Thank you,” I said. “Did you mean what you said about me?”

“I did,” she said.

“You look like Old Navy put out a line for Mormon sister wives,” I said, “but you’re okay.”

We stood together in the ruins of our teenage life, looking at all the ways it had destroyed us. We were still ourselves, somewhere underneath. The catastrophe of our final day had been bloody, but blood is just dirt, and dirt washes off. The end of the world had come and gone, Jenny and I were still standing, and for the first time, I really knew that we would survive, rather than just hoping. I began to smile.

Then the corpse exploded. Have you ever crushed a Coke can in your fist, after you drank it? That’s kind of what happened to Dave, when Omphagor was done with him. You’d have to imagine that the Coke can was full of bones and innards, though, because those came out, with great force. We were standing right over it.

So, yes: The blood on Jenny and I would wash off, eventually. But it was going to take a *lot* of washing.

* * *

The town regained consciousness slowly, then all at once. People filed out of the stage doors in the auditorium for the second time in twenty-four hours, bloody and filthy and mostly silent. Sure, it didn’t look great for us to
be caught, gore-soaked and dagger-wielding, over a dead body — *fucking Trenchcoat Mafia*, I heard someone whisper as they bumped past me — but everyone had woken up in a place they didn’t remember walking to, some with suspicious stains on their hands or the taste of raw meat in their mouths. It was in our best interest to keep each others’ secrets. Everyone has things they’d prefer to forget about high school.

So it was, not quite four weeks later, that Jenny and I found ourselves sitting, scarred and beaten but still breathing, on the bench in the courtyard of what was once Easton.

All of the stores were closed. Not even Arnold Schwarzenegger could make people show up to what that mall had become. The glass ceiling had completely shattered down into the central building. Fires had burnt out big chunks of it; a helicopter had crashed into the roof of the Virgin Megastore, where it still stuck halfway out, its propeller blades silhouetted like dragonfly wings against the sky. The ground was littered with insect and bird and rat corpses, which were by then decaying. You could complain that no-one had cleaned up, but our whole corner of Franklin County looked like this. It was a localized disaster, but it was a total one, and nothing in Darbyton was livable any more.

Starbucks was still open, though. You still had to go to the mall to get Starbucks. So Jenny and I were sitting there, on our usual bench, drinking Frappucinos.

She was healing up nicely, I thought. Her hand was still bandaged, but that was just Jenny being hyper-conscious about it; she’d unwound the bandage, and shown it to me, and the stitches had healed into a cool, jagged scar. She’d been on some weapons-grade antibiotics, for a while, not to mention the rabies shots, because she really did get every possible kind of dirt in that wound. Her face had gotten leaner, during the illness, or maybe it had just settled into itself. Her eyes were sharper, and sadder, and you could begin to see the adult she was becoming.

I was becoming, too, though in my case what I was becoming was a dude with a busted nose. You could see it swerve, not badly, but distinctively, halfway up the bridge; in a few years, people would say *Wilson brother*, but right now, they just said *broken*. The cut along my cheekbone was going to scar. Still, the black eyes and bruises had gone down, and I’d cut my own hair that summer, in a burst of confidence, and then shaved most of it off, when that confidence had proven to be misplaced; I won’t go into it all, but I was liking more about how I looked.

We spent a lot of time like that, just looking at each other, because this was the first time we’d actually hung out since the world ended. I’d felt a burst of love for her, there on that stage, but my love, like the rest of me, needed time to heal; Jenny had learned some important life lessons, but she’d also hit me repeatedly in the face, and as a general rule, people don’t get un-hurt just because you’ve learned something. I spent most of that summer with my mom, driving her to her doctor’s appointments, or letting her drive me to mine, helping my father anxiously cook one thousand pancake breakfasts. It seems strange, that I have to tell you this after everything, but my
mother didn’t turn me away.

Anyway, between that and the unexpected developments with Trevor Murphy — I guess all the name-dropping had been him trying to impress me; I’m not saying it worked, but my virginity had already saved the world, so I could afford to throw Trevor a bone — I had barely seen Jenny. For what it’s worth, I think Jenny needed her own time apart, her own vale of solitude. I don’t know exactly how she dealt with it, the Dave thing, but I knew that when I bumped into her outside her FEMA trailer two weeks after the world ended, she was whispering his name to herself and crying.

So we left each other alone, with our changes and our love and our grief, the wounds we’d given each other and the wounds we didn’t know we had until they started bleeding, and by the time I saw her again, we were still friends, but neither of us knew who we were looking at any more.

“I guess I thought everything would go back to normal,” Jenny said, staring out past me at the destroyed courtyard.

“Eh,” I said. “What’s ‘normal,’ you know?”

“I mean, I guess I thought the birds would… evaporate? Somehow?” Jenny said. “I thought it was magic.”

“It was magic,” I said. “With innards. Can’t get rid of innards.”

“Don’t remind me,” Jenny said, rolling her eyes and stirring her straw around her cup.

“How was Timothy’s funeral, by the way?” I said.

“Can you believe my mom made me go to that thing?” Jenny said. “He had, like, a family. They loved him. No-one would stop talking about it.”

I made a sympathetically aghast face. Jenny was a sociopath, but that was something I knew about her, and I’d had years of practice. At any rate, it was better than what most people did when I said the word funeral, which was flinch and look slightly to one side of me, as if trying to locate a guy whose mom did not have cancer.

“The one that got to me was Debra’s,” I said. “Remember? All the singing?”

“Cara Gray didn’t even know Debra!” Jenny yelped. “She just couldn’t pass up the gig!”

She really couldn’t. She evidently couldn’t learn a new song, either; she sang “I Dreamed A Dream,” dragging every emotional climax out three yards past its end point, as if we were gathered to mourn the end of Debra’s career as a tragic French sex worker. I thought about asking her to sing something else. “My Heart Will Go On,” maybe; Debra would’ve liked that. But that would require me to admit that I’d listened to “My Heart Will Go On,” at least once in my life, which was the second most embarrassing thing I’d ever done. The most embarrassing was caring about Debra.

“Oh, my God, the eulogies,” Jenny said. “‘The
sweetest girl I've ever met! Always a kind word when you passed her in the hallway!”

“Farewell, Debra,” I said. “She’s with Jesus now. And he thought being nailed to that cross was bad.”

Jenny cackled, and so did I. We weren’t good people. We weren’t bad, either; we were just teenagers, making dumb jokes to survive the horror that surrounded us, rolling our eyes and making fart noises at the void. Every human life is unique and irreplaceable, but most human beings are assholes, and though adulthood is wonderful, and I’m glad I survived to see mine, I will tell you that most of it is just trying to resolve that one basic contradiction.

“I miss Hardy,” I said, suddenly.
Jenny’s laughter died.

“He was really good, Jenny,” I said. “Hardy was such a good guy. We never gave him credit for how good he was.”

“I didn’t,” Jenny said. “But you did. He was probably really happy to be with you, on that last day. You were his best friend.”

I was. Maybe he was mine, too. Hardy was certainly my something, though it might take me a lifetime to find out what. He was a voice in the darkness, a place I’d go back to in quiet times, trying to remember. He was proof that we don’t all make it out of high school alive.

“I keep thinking I’ll see him,” I said. “I keep expecting that one day, I’ll turn a corner, and he’ll be there. Knowing he’s dead doesn’t change it. He’ll just be right around the corner, forever.”

“He’s not around the corner,” Jenny said. “He’s in you.”

Jenny settled close to me on the bench. She was warm, and I leaned into the comfort of her like family. When she spoke, though, her voice was something new; the voice of the woman with the sad eyes, the one I was just now getting to know.

“Hardy is in you,” Jenny said. “Your mother is in you. Dave is in me. I don’t like it, but I can’t help it, either. I don’t think a soul is a solitary thing, you know? We’re possessed even on our best days. Our souls are made up of the people we’ve loved.”

I looked at Jenny — my soft-hearted sidekick, my baby sister; the woman who fucked the Devil and stabbed him in the eyeball — and I knew that it was true. Some part of me was Jenny, and some part of Jenny was me, and even if the worst happened, and I never saw her again, we would be spinning around each other forever, like twin stars whirling through the night. I had been trying so hard, for so long, not to lose anyone, but I could never lose Jenny Long. She was my childhood home and the posters in my old bedroom. She was recess and lunchboxes and the creak of a swing while my legs pumped in the air. She was a long car drive and an old song and the flat yellow sunshine of an Ohio summer gleaming off the blacktop. Every memory of myself was a memory of her, and even if Jenny was no part of my future, we would love each other, as we loved the children we’d been.

So the world spun on, that summer and every other, and if this seems like a lot of build-up for nothing, just know that the world really did end that day, and you and I are living in the post-apocalypse right now. Ask yourself: Has anything felt normal, since the summer of 1999? Has
anything ever really felt the same? But we live through the end, because the end is always upon us, and the beginning is too; because every new world is built on the ashes of the old one, and every adult surfaces through the vanished body of a child. We just kept going, Jenny Long and I, through college classes and girlfriends and boyfriends and gradu-
ations, through shared apartments and roommate fights and moving out and moving away, through presidential elections and terrorist attacks and global pandemics and Christmas parties, through testosterone and childbirth, through funerals and first dates, through climate change, through car crashes, through her engagement, through my wedding, through great joy, through great pain, we just kept surviving a thousand different apocalypses, the way you do, the way we all do, the way love always does in this dangerous and endangered world.
Credits

Editor: Maddox Pennington
Maddox Pennington is the nonbinary writer of A Girl Walks Into a Book: What the Brontës Taught Me about Life, Love, and Women’s Work; when they’re not not teaching college and creative writing, you can find them performing stand-up comedy in many of DC’s finest dive bars.

Sensitivity Read: Nathaniel Glanzman
Nathaniel Glanzman is a professional sensitivity reader and the owner of Glanzman Sensitivity Reading. He has worked with authors pursuing all avenues of publishing and is always excited to see his clients’ books hit the shelves and online marketplaces. He also teaches classes on what sensitivity reading is and how to become one at his local writers’ center. He can be reached at glanzman-sensitivityreading.com or on Twitter @natglanzman.

Sensitivity Read: Inigo Purcell
Inigo Purcell is a grad student and writer currently studying on a PhD about Arthurian legend at the University of Bristol and Macquarie University. He previously studied at St Edmund’s College, Cambridge and Oxford Brookes University, and is working on a novel about political scandal.

Cover Design and Illustration: James Curcio
James Curcio is an author, visual artist, audio producer, and editor. He is the author of many books and experimental graphic novels, including MASKS: Bowie & Artists of Ar-
tifice, Narrative Machines, Party At The World’s End, and Join My Cult!, and editor of the interdisciplinary web journal Modern Mythology. He also co-founded a number of start-ups and music projects you’ve probably never heard of.

Interior Illustration: Benny Hope
Benny Hope is a nonbinary, disabled artist living in the Pacific Northwest. They love to paint portraits and make comics about their life. You can find them marathoning cooking competition shows and avoiding the great outdoors.

Design, Layout and Writing: Sady Doyle
Sady Doyle is the author of Trainwreck: The Women We Love to Hate, Mock, and Fear… and Why (Melville House, 2016) and Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power (Melville House, 2019). Dead Blondes was named a Kirkus Best Non-Fiction Book of 2019 and was shortlisted for Starburst Magazine’s Brave New Words Award. In addition, Doyle founded the feminist blog Tiger Beatdown in 2008, writes an ongoing column at GEN, has a prolific freelance journalism career, and once did a flowchart about farts for the New York Times.
I first read about the Columbine killers’ Nazi sympathies from the Twitter user @CaseyExplosion; in a non-fiction book, you could do a cite, but I couldn’t, so it’s here.

Several people kicked around early, extremely terrible drafts or outlines of this story with me, and if it’s readable, it’s only because they kicked it hard. Profound thanks in particular to Chris Rosa and Benjanun Sridangkaew, who took the most time with the worst drafts.

The person who read the very first and very worst draft was my husband, Brian. This project only exists because he refused to give it back to me when I was begging him to hand the laptop over so I could delete it. “I want to see what happens,” he said. Basically, what I’m saying is that if you hated this, it’s his fault.

Finally: I am just so grateful that Maddox, J, Benny, Nathaniel, and Inigo agreed to work with me on this project. Each and every one of them made it better, and each and every one is a dream to work with, which is my way of saying you should hire them right away. The world of stories is better when more trans and non-binary artists get work, yes, but it is also better because these specific people are working.

My love, until the end of the world, to the kids who sat with me in the cafeteria. You know who you are. I’m lucky I do, too.

-- Sady Doyle, post-apocalyptic survivor
September 2020