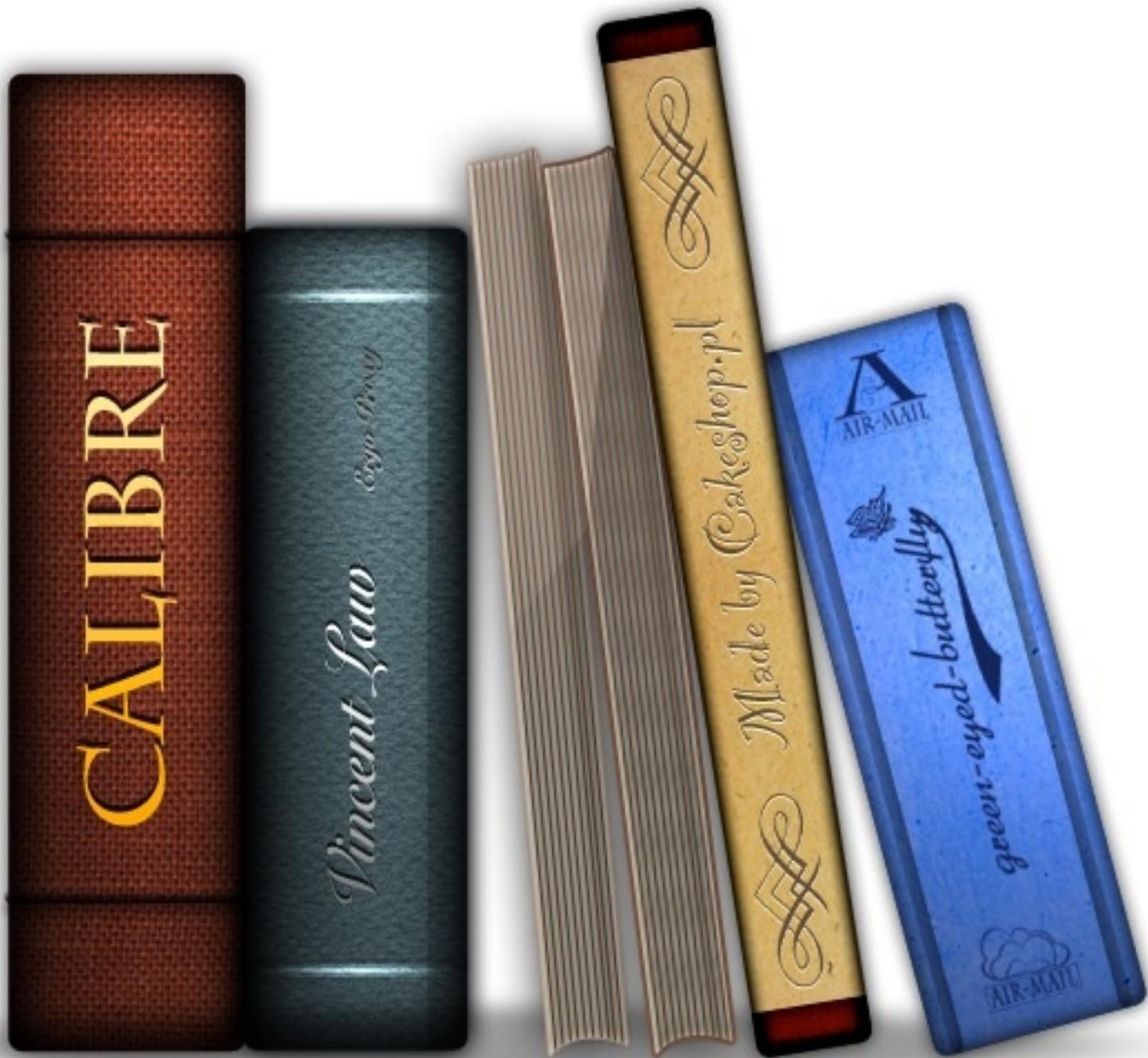


# The Howling 1

Gary Brandner



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# GARY BRANDNER

## THE HOWLING

### PROLOGUE

In the dark Arda Forest on the border between Greece and Bulgaria there is a dead gray patch of land roughly one mile square where no one goes and nothing lives. Today no map marks the location, no road leads there. Four hundred years ago it was a village. It was called Dradja.

Even when the village lived it was a place of darkness. Peasants from the surrounding lands made the sign of the cross when they spoke its name. They entered only when they had to, and left as soon as their business was done. Passing travelers were warned to avoid the place. Some who did not heed the warning would later wish they had.

The stories told about Dradja were unfocused and often conflicting. On one point they agreed: there was Evil in the village. The Evil took various forms, depending on the storyteller. Travelers listened to the stories and nodded. It was bad, but it was not their concern. They would skirt the village and cross themselves and tell each other that some things were best left alone. In the bleak autumn of 1583, all this changed.

In that season a shepherd named Kyust, with his wife Anya and his little daughter, brought his flock to the rich fields near Dradja. The land to the north, where Kyust had always grazed his sheep, had suffered through a terrible drought, and moving the flock was the only way to keep the animals from starving. Kyust had heard the dark tales of Dradja, but his need was greater than his fear.

At sundown of his first day Kyust settled his sheep and then returned to his cottage. After family supper, he fell into a deep sleep. In the morning he found three of his young lambs savagely killed, and the mother ewe bleating pathetically over the remains. The shepherd brought in a dog to keep watch through the next night. In the morning it, too, was dead.

Kyust knew the family could not survive without his flock. He had to catch the killer of his sheep. Through the next night he stayed with his flock in the fields. So that his wife would not be alone with their daughter, he sent for his sister Rachel.

Kyust spent a quiet, uneventful night and then worked all the following day. That evening, his little daughter, who had been playing in a nearby meadow, did not return home. Anya and Rachel called to her and searched as far from the cottage as they dared. Finally, Rachel ran to the field to get Kyust, and all three began to search. In a grove of alder trees near a stream where the child often played, Anya found what remained of her daughter. The small body was so badly torn it was barely recognizable as human.

When the shepherd saw what had been done to his child he let out one horrible scream. He swore vengeance and set off for the village of Dradja, vowing to destroy the Evil that lived there in whatever form it took.

The shepherd Kyust never returned. The sheep, un-tended, wandered away. Rachel stayed by the side of her sister, who refused to leave without her husband. Knowing she must have help, Rachel left the cottage one morning and journeyed many hours to a place where Gypsies often made their camps. To one of the Gypsies she gave a message for her brothers in their home village, telling of the tragedies that had befallen Anya, and asking the brothers to come for them.

In her haste to return to the cottage Rachel chose a shortcut that took her close to Dradja. Night had fallen by the time she passed the village, and a flurry of movement caught her attention. What she saw in Dradja was horrible beyond belief. The black secret of the place was the last thing she would ever experience.

When her brothers, having received her message, found her mangled body, they gathered

hundred men from their village and marched on Dradja. Armed with clubs, axes, pikes, and a few matchlock firearms, they swarmed into the accursed village and herded the people into the centre town. They ordered the guilty to step forward. No one moved.

It was clear then what had to be done. In that bloody day every man, woman, and child caught in Dradja was tortured to death. When the ground of the village was a crimson swamp the bodies were stacked with layers of dry wood, soaked with pitch, and set afire. The animals were slaughtered, the village itself put to the torch. When nothing remained of Dradja but ashes, these were plowed under. The fresh-turned earth was sown and sown again, but not even a weed would grow.

# CHAPTER ONE

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The September heat lay heavy on Los Angeles. In the condominium community called Hermosa Terrace all the windows were tightly closed. The only sounds were the hum of exhaust fans and the muted growl of a power mower.

In the living room of Unit Two, Karyn Beatty stood on tiptoe to kiss her husband, Roy. Lady, their miniature collie, wagged her approval from the sofa. It started as a casual husband-and-wife first-anniversary kiss, but it quickly became something more. Karyn drew back her head and looked into Roy's clear brown eyes.

'Are you trying to start something?' she said a little breathlessly.

'Darn right,' Roy replied, taking her in his arms.

Roy pulled her close, his big, gentle hands warm through the thin material of her summer dress. He kissed her neck where the blond hair curled forward below her ear.

'Won't Chris be here soon?' she said, her lips close to his ear.

'We won't answer the door.'

'You couldn't do that to your best friend. Especially after we asked him to come by for a anniversary drink.'

'I suppose you're right,' Roy admitted. 'Anyway, he won't stay long. He has a date.'

'Anybody we know?'

'A new one, I think.'

'Doesn't Chris ever get serious about anybody?'

'Who knows? I think he's secretly in love with you.'

'You don't mean it?'

'Why not? All my friends have good taste.'

Max Quist shut off the power mower and took out a soiled handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face. He watched as a young couple in sparkling tennis whites climbed out of a sports car and ran laughing across the lawn. They didn't pay any attention to Max. Nobody living in Hermosa Terrace paid any attention to Max. He was like another piece of shrubbery to them. No, he thought, not even that much. Max hated these people. He hated them for having all the things he would never have. He would quit this lousy job in a minute if it weren't for his parole officer. Just once he would like to show the smug sonsofbitches that Max Quist was *somebody*.

The telephone rang in Unit Two. Roy Beatty picked it up and frowned as he listened to the voice on the other end. He spoke briefly and hung up.

'Anything wrong?' Karyn asked.

'I've got to go to Anaheim. Deliver some books.'

'On Saturday? On our anniversary?'

'Dammit, it's my own fault. I promised to drop off a set of inspection manuals at Aerodyne yesterday. Had them in the trunk of the car and forgot all about it. I don't know how it slipped my mind.'

Karyn smiled. It was very unlike Roy to forget anything. He was always thoroughly organized like one of the technical manuals he edited. When she had first met him she had thought Roy Beatty was as stodgy as a church deacon. However, she had soon discovered his warm sense of humor, an open-minded willingness to listen, and a depth of intellect that was not apparent in his All-American good looks. Karyn had been working as a convention hostess for the New York Hilton at the time. Roy was in the city for a gathering of engineers. For the first time, she had broken the hotel rule again.

socializing with the guests. Roy had stayed on for a week after the convention, and they had been together constantly. When he had returned to the Coast he had said he would be back for her on his vacation. She had not expected him to come, but he had. That was when she had finally admitted she loved him.

'Don't be long,' she said as he stood at the door. She kissed him and watched him walk down the winding path through the neatly trimmed shrubbery. Karyn could not imagine how she could be happier. She had Roy and she had an excellent job with a hotel near the airport where she was in line for convention manager when her current boss retired. Tonight she would give Roy her special anniversary gift -the news that he was going to be a father. Yes, her life was just about perfect.

Max Quist watched the blond young man come out of Unit Two and stride down the walk past him without a flicker. Max might as well have been invisible. The woman stood in the doorway watching him go. Good-looking cunt. Too good-looking. Both of them. Like people in a magazine advertisement. Young, beautiful, healthy, rich. Max spat on the cropped grass. How he wanted to show them what it was like to be hurt. Hurt them. Yes... hurt them.

Karyn was in the kitchen putting the lunch things away when the doorbell chimed. Chris was early, she thought. She dried her hands and walked out through the living room to the door. She did not bother to look through the tiny viewer. She never did. There was no danger here. This was Hermosa Terrace, not East Los Angeles.

Karyn opened the door and the heat pushed against the cool inside air. The man in the doorway was not Chris Hal-loran. He smiled at her.

'Yes?' Karyn said when the man did not speak right away.

He had thick black hair that was poorly barbered. His cotton workshirt was dark with perspiration under the arms. He seemed vaguely familiar.

'I'm supposed to check the pipes in your bathroom,' he said.

'There's nothing wrong with our pipes.'

'It's in the apartment next door. Their shower don't drain right, and it might be plugged up where your drain pipes come together.'

Something in the way the man spoke was wrong. The short speech sounded rehearsed. Something about the man himself was wrong. He continued to smile.

'You'd better come back when my husband is here. He knows about those things.'

Without making any sudden moves the man had somehow come through the doorway and was standing in the living room. He was still smiling, but it was a different smile. 'That's okay,' he said. 'We won't need your husband.'

Over on the couch Lady raised her neat little head and pricked her ears at the strange man's voice. After a moment she put her head back down on her paws, but remained watchful.

'I'm sorry, but I'd rather you didn't come in now.' Karyn fought to still the tremor of fear in her voice.

'But I *am* in,' the man said. He reached behind him and closed the door. Without taking his eyes off Karyn he turned the small knob, shooting the dead-bolt lock into place.

'What do you think you're doing?' Karyn wanted her voice to be angry and strong, but the fear was in her now. She could not hide it.

'You know what I'm doing,' the man said.

'I - I don't keep much money in the house. You can have what there is. And my jewelry.'

'I don't want your money or your jewelry. But you know that, don't you? You know what I want and you're going to give it to me.' He reached out suddenly and squeezed her breast.

Karyn jumped back as though from an electric shock.

~~'Please, leave me alone!' The sour smell of his body was sharp in her nostrils. 'M-my husband will be home.'~~

'No he won't. He just left. We have all the time we need.'

She took a careful step backward. The man's eyes traveled over her body, probing at her. His hands shot out and seized her wrists.

'No!' she cried.

'Relax/ he said. 'You're going to like it.'

'Please... you can't...'

The man pulled Karyn against his body and mashed his mouth down on hers. Karyn clamped her jaws together as his tongue pushed in past her lips. He tasted of stale cigarettes.

'Where's the bedroom?'

Karyn shook her head from side to side, afraid to trust her voice.

With a sudden movement the man twisted one arm up behind her back, forcing her to walk in front of him. He marched Karyn into the hallway that opened between the living room and the room Roy used for a den. She stumbled along in his grasp past the bathroom to the open door, through which they could see the bed.

All the things she had read about rape tumbled through Karyn's mind. All the advice for women: Fight back. Don't fight back. Scream. Stay calm. Blow a whistle. Run. Reason with the man.

Lovely advice, all useless. Fight the man? He was at least seventy pounds heavier than she, and certainly stronger. Scream? Who would hear? Hermosa Terrace Townhomes were proud of their soundproofing. Reason with him? Reason with an animal?

They were in the bedroom now. The man spun Karyn around and pushed her backward onto the bed.

The thinking part of her mind shut off and instinct took over. She crossed her arms protectively over her breasts and drew back her feet to kick out at the man when he came at her.

The man laughed at her efforts and batted the kick aside with an easy swipe of his hand. He grasped her by the ankles and forced her legs apart. Karyn writhed on the bed, helpless against his strength.

The man grinned down at her, showing large, strong teeth. Droplets of sweat stood out on his forehead and upper lip. His eyes moved down to her crotch. Karyn felt open and exposed with the velour pants pulled tight between her legs.

'I'm pregnant,' she said suddenly.

'Bullshit.'

'I *am*' she insisted. 'Three months.'

Then you don't have to worry about getting knocked up, do you?'

He released one of Karyn's ankles and took hold of the velour pants at the waist. He yanked them down, exposing the smooth, pale skin of her belly. The snap and zipper held at first, but he tugged again and the material tore away.

Then she screamed. Not without any thought of summoning help or frightening the man off. A visceral scream of outrage and terror.

'Shut up!' he ordered. He leaned forward and slapped her hard on the face. She stopped screaming.

A sudden high-pitched barking behind the man spun him around. Lady stood braced on her little legs, yapping angrily. The man swung his foot in a vicious arc; the toe of his heavy shoe caught the little dog just below the ribs and lifted her off the floor.

Lady yelped in surprise and pain. Never before had anyone deliberately hurt her. She crouched

on the floor whimpering, her eyes pleading for an apology, a comforting pat.

'Get out of here, mutt,' the man snapped.

Still whimpering, Lady moved uncertainly toward the door. She stopped and looked back toward her mistress. The man made a threatening motion with his hand, and the dog retreated into the hallway. The man kicked the door shut behind her.

'Hell of a watchdog you've got there.' He grinned and came at Karyn again.

'Please don't do this. Please don't hurt me.' Even as the words came out, Karyn knew they were useless. This unspeakable thing was actually going to happen to her, *Was* happening to her. What had she ever done that she should be brutalized this way?

The man was upon her again, and Karyn's mind ceased to function logically. He tore away the nylon bikini pants, and his fingers crawled over and into her.

Abruptly he dropped to his knees and thrust his face up between her legs. He clamped his mouth on her, and Karyn could feel his tongue like a thick, wet worm probing, probing at her. She pummeled his head with her fists, but the blows had no effect.

Then he pulled his face back and bit her on the soft inside of the thigh. He bit down hard, and his teeth sank into the clean white flesh until the blood flowed. Karyn's back arched up off the bed in reaction to the pain.

When the man at last unclenched his jaw and stood over her again his lips were crimson with her blood. Breathing in short, harsh bursts, he reached down and unzipped the front of his pants. Karyn twisted her head away, but could not shut out the sight as he freed himself from the damp jockey shorts and bore down on her.

He forced her legs further apart and positioned himself between them. Blood from the throbbing bite wound left a red smear on the bedspread. With one cruel thrust he invaded her body.

Karyn cried out in pain and rage. She scrabbled at his face with both hands, clawing for his eyes. 'Bitch!' He hit her in the face with a rock-hard fist.

Karyn tasted blood, and the room swam for a moment, but she continued to use her nails to slash at the face above her.

The man pulled out of her for a moment and drove a fist into her bare belly. Karyn felt something break inside, and there was no fight left in her.

'That's better.' He planted his hands on her shoulders and rammed into her again.

Karyn squeezed her eyes shut. When she was a little girl in the dentist chair and the drill hurt her, she would dig her nails into her palms, making a small hurt to ease the larger one. She did it now. The lower part of her body was on fire. The wound on her thigh screamed. The man continued to pump away at her, grunting with every thrust.

*Get it over with!* she cried inside her head. *Get it over with and go away or kill me or whatever you're going to do. Just finish!*

And at last he did.

After endless minutes he withdrew and wiped himself with the satin bedspread. Karyn rolled her head on the pillow and looked up at him, but now the man would not meet her eye. Hurriedly he zipped up his pants and went out into the hall. Karyn heard him go through the living room.

She sat up on the bed and winced at the tearing pain in her stomach. Her insides felt loose, though they might slide out between her legs when she stood up. She pulled the remains of the velour pants up over the mess on her lower belly and walked carefully to the door. She made it as far as the bathroom and vomited into the toilet.

She knelt there for several minutes on the cold tile with her hands gripping the sides of the toilet bowl, waiting for the spasms of her stomach to ease. The sudden sound of someone moving around in the living room brought back the fear. When the bedroom door opened and the heavy footsteps came

toward her she started to scream.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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When Chris Halloran found Karyn on her knees in the bathroom she was sobbing incoherently. Finding the front door open, he had sensed something was wrong. He walked in, and that was when Karyn began to scream. Chris held her in his arms for five minutes before she could tell him what had happened. He called the police, then left a message for Roy at the Aerodyne Company in Anaheim.

The two months that followed were a painful time for Karyn. The blow she had taken to the stomach had brought on a miscarriage, but no permanent damage. There was an infection from the bite wound on her thigh that was slow to respond to medication. The doctor advised against plastic surgery until the scar had completely healed.

The police, using their new, more sympathetic procedures for rape victims, made that part of Karyn's ordeal as easy as they could. Her description of the rapist led them at once to Max Quist, the handyman, who had a record of assaults on women. Confronted with Karyn's positive identification, Quist pleaded guilty.

It was psychologically that Karyn suffered most. Twice-weekly sessions with an analyst helped a little, and group sessions brought her together with other women who had been raped. Still, her recovery was painfully slow. She would wake up in the night, eyes wide and staring, and scream that someone was biting her. Of all the violations of her body, it was the horror of the teeth sinking into her flesh that she could not erase. She returned to work, but her life at home with Roy suffered. She could not feel comfortable in their love-making.

The analyst suggested to Karyn and Roy that they go away from Los Angeles for a while. Restful, rural surroundings, he said, would be the best thing for Karyn's full recovery. The people at Karyn's hotel were understanding, giving her a six-month leave of absence. Roy worked out an arrangement with his firm, and they began taking trips out of the city to look for a place.

A friend in the real-estate business told them about an available house in a town to the north called Drago. They drove up to see it, but Karyn was not enthusiastic. The house was weathered and weed-grown, a mile outside the town, which Karyn thought looked like a cheerless cluster of wooden buildings. Roy, however, took to the place immediately. He assured Karyn that the house could be fixed up so she would love it. With some misgivings, she acquiesced.

For the next couple of weeks Roy made the trip alone to see that work on the house was being done to his specifications. He did not want Karyn to see it, he said. She would be surprised. When it was time to move in, he left a day early to see to last-minute details. Chris Halloran volunteered to drive Karyn up to the house.

It was a crisp November day when Chris headed north on Interstate 5 with Karyn beside him in the Camaro. In the back Lady stood with her front paws braced on the seat and her face thrust into the wind from the open window.

They left the freeway for a two-lane blacktop road that snaked up into the Tehachapi Mountains. The outside air grew chill as they climbed.

'Do you want me to roll up the window?' Chris asked.

Karyn moved her head, letting the wind play with her loose blond hair. 'No, it feels good. Clearer.' As they drove on the evergreen forest pushed in closer on both sides of the road.

'How much farther is the town?' said Chris.

'A few miles. Just over the ridge up ahead and down into the valley. Don't blink or you'll miss it.'

'I don't doubt it,' Chris said. 'I've lived in California all my life, and I have never heard of Drago.'

'Neither had I,' Karyn said. 'We were lucky to find the place. The house has been empty since the old owners died four years ago. Roy fell in love with it.'

'What about you, Karyn? How do you like the place?'

'It's all right, I suppose.'

'You don't sound convinced.'

'I haven't seen it since Roy had it fixed up. Anyway, it *is* quiet and out of the way. That's what we wanted. And yet it's only a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, so Roy can commute easily.'

'You won't mind being alone when he comes into L.A.?'

'Why should I? I've got to learn to be by myself sometime.' The words came out more sharply than Karyn had intended.

'That's right,' Chris said. 'It's none of my business, anyway.'

They reached the crest of the ridge and the road leveled off for a stretch before descending into the valley on the other side. The air was pungent with the scent of balsam. Karyn reached out and touched Chris's hand.

'Pull over for a minute, can you?'

Just before the road started down Chris eased the Camaro onto the shoulder and parked next to the metal guard rail. Below them lay a narrow valley thick with evergreens. Where the road straightened along the floor of the valley a dozen or so toylike buildings clustered in a clearing of the forest. Several narrow lanes branched off the main road. They could be seen only faintly through the heavy overgrowth. Here and there along the lanes a tiny house sat on a patch of cleared ground reclaimed from the forest. Although the valley was in shadow, no lights shone in the town of Drago.

'It doesn't look like much from here, does it?' Karyn said.

Chris did not answer.

'May I have a cigarette?'

He handed her one and lighted it for her.

Karyn took several quick puffs before speaking. 'I really do want to talk to someone, Chris. Someone who cares about me as a person, not as a case history to read at the next psychiatric convention.'

She mashed the cigarette into the ashtray. When she spoke again the words came out in a rush. 'Chris, Roy and I haven't had good sex together since that day. There's nothing wrong physically, but it's just not working. Roy and I have talked and talked about it, and God knows we *do* try. We go to bed, and I want it so much... I go through all the motions. That's the trouble, all I'm doing is going through the motions. There's no feeling, and Roy knows it. He can't help but know it - he's not a fool. He's been awfully sweet and patient with me, but I can't expect him to put up with this forever. I just don't seem to be getting any better.'

'Did you talk the problem over with your doctor?' Chris asked.

'Oh, hell yes.'

'Did he give you any advice?'

'Nothing I couldn't have gotten out of *The Reader's Digest*. Good, sound, logical advice, but I still don't feel anything.'

'Give it a while,' Chris said. 'Two months isn't much time to get over what happened to you.'

Karyn nodded distractedly.

'Anyway,' Chris went on, 'that's what you're moving out here to the woods for, isn't it? Rest and rejuvenation?'

With an encouraging smile, he started the car, pulled back onto the road, and drove down into the valley. As they descended, the mountain loomed up behind and cut off the sun. The air grew colder and they rolled up the windows. When the road leveled out into the main street of Drago, Chris

switched on the headlights against the gathering gloom. They drove slowly along past the building which had a dusty, unused look. There were a couple of stores, a cafe, a gas station, a tavern, and a theater with an empty marquee. The only sound they heard was the singing of their tires over the pavement.

Karyn shivered slightly in the cool dusk of the tree-lined street. In the back seat Lady whined softly. Karyn reached back without turning around and rubbed the soft fur at the dog's throat.

'Where is everybody?' Chris asked. His eyes ranged along the blank fronts of the buildings.

'I don't know.' Karyn shivered again.

'Is your house in this street?'

'No, it's up one of these little cross streets. They all look alike, though, and I'm not sure which is. We'll have to ask someone.'

Chris eased the Camaro along for a hundred yards, then braked to a stop as a powerful-looking man in khakis and a Stetson appeared from the shadows.

Karyn rolled down her window and smiled at the man. 'Hello, there. I wonder if you could tell me how to get to the old Fenno house?'

For a moment she thought the man had not heard. He did not answer her smile, nor did he make any move to respond. His eyes continued to watch from the shadow of the Stetson. Then the man came toward them, moving with a deliberate measured gait. He planted both hands on the window sill and looked in. Involuntarily, Karyn drew back in the seat.

'You want the Fenno place?' the man said. His voice rumbled up from the deep barrel chest.

'Yes. I'm Karyn Beatty. My husband and I are leasing the house, and I can't remember which of these side roads it's on.'

The man thumbed his hat brim up a fraction, and a faint smile twitched on his mouth. 'Please to meet you. I'm Anton Gadak. I'm sort of sheriff here in Drago. Fact is, I'm sort of the whole police force. But then, we don't need all that much policing.' He looked pointedly past Karyn at Chris.

'This is our friend Chris Halloran. He drove me in from Los Angeles. My husband is waiting for the house.'

Anton Gadak nodded, apparently satisfied. 'The Fenno place is up the last road that turns off to the left, just before you start up into the hills again.'

Karyn thanked him and Chris started away from the curb. He found the last turnoff with some difficulty. It was little more than a wide weed-covered path into the woods.

'As I remember, it's up here about a mile,' Karyn said.

They passed two weathered old houses, dark and nearly hidden from the road by the brush. At each Chris looked over at Karyn, who shook her head. They came at last to a small clearing with a white frame cottage trimmed in apple green. A fireplace chimney trailed a ribbon of pale smoke across the slate-gray sky. Lights shone in all the windows, pushing the forest back. Chris pulled onto the clearing and parked behind Roy Beatty's Galaxie.

Karyn clapped her hands delightedly. 'What an improvement! You wouldn't believe the dismal brown color the house was when we first came out. And the whole place was strangled with brush and weeds. Roy's done a marvelous job.'

Chris got out of the car and walked back to open the trunk. As he brought out Karyn's bags the front door of the little house swung open and Roy Beatty came out. He shielded his eyes against the headlights for a moment, then waved a welcome and hurried toward the car.

Karyn jumped out and ran to his arms. 'Roy, it's... it's beautiful.'

'Didn't I tell you it had possibilities?' said Roy. 'Wait till you see the inside.'

With his arm around Karyn, Roy walked back to the car. 'Come on in, Chris, and take a look at how our rural folk live.'

'Thanks, but I've got to get back to the city.'

~~'Are you sure? There's steaks in the freezer, and the martini makings are already set out.'~~

'It's tempting, but I'll pass this time.'

'Got a date with a live one?'

Chris smiled and gave a noncommittal wave of his hand. 'Bring her out some weekend,' Roy said. 'We've got an extra bed and plenty of blankets.'

'Maybe I'll do that.'

Roy hefted Karyn's two suitcases, then looked around, puzzled. 'Where's Lady?'

'She's been acting funny,' Karyn said. 'I don't think she knows what to make of the woods.'

At that moment, the dog put her nose out for a tentative sniff of the surroundings, then bounded out of the car and frolicked happily around Roy's feet. He knelt and scratched her ear.

While Roy and Karyn watched the dog, Chris slid into his car and pulled the door closed. Roy walked over and reached through the window to shake his hand.

'Thanks for bringing the family out, buddy,' he said. 'Sorry you can't stay.'

'Maybe next time. I hope the place works out for you, Roy.'

'It will,' Roy assured him.

Karyn came over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Chris backed out onto the narrow lane and drove back the way they had come. Soon the glow of the Camaro's tail lights was lost among the trees.

'I wish Chris had stayed for dinner,' she said as they started toward the house. 'I think he's lonely.'

'Are you kidding? A handsome thirty-year-old bachelor with a good-paying job and an apartment at the marina? You call that lonely?'

'You sound a little jealous, mister.'

Roy set down one of her bags, and gave her a swat on the bottom. 'That's right, I can hardly wait to dump you so I can grow a mustache, buy a Porsche, load up on stereo equipment, and be a swinging bachelor.'

Laughing together, they continued up to the front stoop. Roy stood aside and gestured her into the living room.

Karyn started in, then hesitated. She ran her fingers down the surface of the heavy wooden door. Under the fresh green paint a series of deep vertical grooves like scars slashed the panel at about shoulder height.

'What do you suppose made these?' she said.

'Who knows?' Roy shrugged and went on inside.

Karyn followed, thinking about the marks. Absurd though it was, the angry furrows in the wood suggested only one thing.

Claws.

## CHAPTER THREE

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The small living room and the open dining area were spotlessly clean and lit with colorful new lamps. A blaze crackled over logs in the stone fireplace. The dark old furniture that had come with the house had been cleaned, polished, and recovered in bright hues. The floor was freshly sanded and waxed and covered with new rugs. Vases of fresh-cut flowers were everywhere.

Roy Beatty stood back and let Karyn survey the rooms. 'Well, what do you think?'

'Roy, it's lovely. I mean it.'

Karyn walked down the short hallway and looked into the bedroom. There was new maple furniture and a bright patchwork quilt on the double bed. Across the hall in the bathroom new wood panelling had replaced the scabrous, peeling wallboard. The fixtures were scoured, the air sweetened. Karyn came back out and walked through the dining area, running her fingers over the satiny finish on the heavy oak table. Out in the kitchen everything fairly sparkled. She came back into the living room where Roy waited, unable to conceal his pride.

'It's not Hermosa Terrace,' she said, 'but cozy, don't you think?'

'Very cozy,' she agreed.

'How about a martini to toast our new home?'

'Lovely idea.'

Roy went into the kitchen and brought back a bowl of ice, which he set before her on a low table in front of the fireplace. The green hydrant bottle of Tanqueray and the vermouth were already there. As he stirred the cocktails in a tall pitcher Lady began to whine softly and scratch the baseboard near the front door.

'I think it's time she took a trip outside,' Roy said. He crossed the room and held the door open. 'Come on. Lady, out.'

The dog looked up at him uncertainly, then at Karyn.

'Do you think she'll be all right?' Karyn said.

'Sure. There's no traffic out here, and she won't go far enough from the house to get lost.'

Lady crouched lower to the floor, her eyes on Roy.

'Come on, you, *out*,' he said again, in a more commanding tone.

The little dog obeyed at last, moving in a cautious sidling manner. Roy closed the door after her. He then selected two hefty logs from the pile on the hearth and laid them on the dwindling fire. The fire caught immediately. The flames snapped at the pockets of pitch and leaped up the chimney.

Roy sat down again and finished stirring the martinis. He brought out two iced glasses and filled them at the low table. They touched glasses, sipped at the cocktails, and smiled at each other.

'Did you get everything worked out at the office?' Karyn asked.

'It's all taken care of. I've got next year's publication list to go over. When I go into town I'll bring back whatever raw copy there is for editing. There's no reason why technical manuals can't be edited up here in the woods as well as on Wilshire Boulevard. I shouldn't have to make the trip into L.A. more than a couple of times a week, if that often.'

Karyn leaned back on the sofa. 'Are you *sure* you don't mind being cooped up here away from the city and all our friends?'

'Mind? What's to mind? You think I miss battling through the smog and the freeway traffic twice a day? Listen, this is as much a vacation for me as it is a therapy for you.'

Karyn squeezed his hand. "You're pretty sweet, you know that?'

'Yeah, I know, but tell me anyway.'

'What about some dinner? I'm starved.'

'Right. I'll get the steaks going while you build a salad.'

~~'Do we have everything we need?'~~

'We should have. I stocked up this afternoon at the Safeway over in Pinyon.'

'Pinyon?'

'That's the nearest town of any size. It's about twelve miles from here at the tip of Castaic Lake'

'Why didn't you do the shopping in Drago?'

'I guess you didn't get too good a look at the town. There's one general store that's about the size of the cheese section in most supermarkets. They had a few canned goods, a few boxes of cereal, a tin of meat counter, and that was it. Oh, yes, the place doubles as a post office.'

'At least we *do* have a post office.'

'Not exactly,' Roy said with an apologetic grin. 'The nearest post office is in Pinyon, but they only bring the Drago mail over once a day to the store.'

'And that's where we go to pick up our mail,' Karyn said.

'That's it. There's a funny little old lady running the place. You'll have to meet her.'

'I hope she's funnier than the sheriff.'

'You met Anton Gadak?'

'On the way in. He didn't exactly welcome us with open arms.'

'Yeah, well, it probably takes these people a while to warm up to strangers.'

'I suppose so.' Karyn leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. 'You were saying something about steaks?'

They ate together at the big oak dining table while shadows cast by the fire danced across the walls. After dinner they relaxed on the sofa, drinking rich burgundy out of big tulip glasses.

'It seems like a strange little town,' Karyn remarked. 'What kind of a name is Drago, anyway?'

'I don't know. It's not Spanish or Indian. Has a European sound. Hungarian or something. Tomorrow we can ask in the village. It will give us a chance to meet some of the local people. And we can get some candles to go with this romantic setting.'

After she had rinsed off the dinner dishes and stacked them in the sink, she joined Roy back in the living room.

'I wonder what the last people were like/ Karyn said, sitting down and lighting a cigarette.

'Who?'

'The people who lived in this house before us. The Fennos.'

'The man who handled the lease didn't know much about them,' Roy said. 'Apparently they were an older couple. Moved out here from somewhere in the East to retire. Weren't here long when they died in some kind of an accident. I didn't get any details.'

They both started at the sound of something scraping at the front door.

'Lady,' Roy said, relaxing with a little laugh. 'We forgot all about her.'

He walked over and opened the door. The little dog dashed into the room and across the rug to the couch. There she jumped up and pressed close to Karyn, peering back toward the door with wide brown eyes.

'She looks frightened,' Karyn said.

Roy stepped outside and looked both ways in the darkness. 'Nothing out here.'

He came back inside and closed the door. Lady stayed close to Karyn on the sofa.

They talked for a while about nothing important while the logs in the fireplace burned down to a dusky red, finally collapsing in a shower of sparks.

Roy stretched his arms up over his head and yawned generously. 'I don't know about you, but I'm beat. Ready to go to bed?'

Karyn felt her muscles tighten. 'Maybe I'll have a nice cup of coffee first. Everything tastes s

good up here in the mountains.' Even in her own ears the light tone of voice rang false.

~~—Karyn took as long as she could with the coffee. She made herself smile at Roy who sat beside her waiting patiently. 'Suddenly I'm tired too. Let's go to bed,' she said.~~

They went into the bedroom and Roy turned back the quilt and the snowy top sheet. Karyn's nerves crawled beneath her skin.

She undressed quickly, feeling sure Roy's eyes were fastened on the bite scar - broken red parentheses on the white skin of her inner thigh. She slipped into bed beside her husband and pulled up the covers. Maybe this time it would be all right.

But it was not all right. As soon as they were together in the big comfortable bed and she felt Roy's hand on her - Roy's gentle, familiar hand - a chill spread from her crotch up and throughout her body. Karyn squeezed her eyes shut and ran through all the mental tricks the doctor had given her to blot out the hateful memory of the rape. She clasped her arms about Roy's well-muscled back and pulled him down on top of her. She kissed him passionately and whispered their special love words into his ear.

She felt his body grow tense against hers. Gently he pulled away.

'Oh, Roy, what's the matter with me?'

'Nothing is the matter with you, except that you keep thinking something's the matter with you.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'Cut it out. Everything will be fine as long as we don't force it.'

She trailed her fingers slowly across his flat stomach. 'Can I do something, you know, for you?'

He shifted his body a fraction of an inch away from her. 'Never mind, honey. Get some sleep. Everything will workout.'

After that they lay together, their bodies touching, their minds miles apart.

Many hours later, in the cold, empty darkness before the dawn, Karyn heard the howling.

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

Morning came slowly to the valley. The blackness of the bedroom lightened imperceptibly through the shades of gray, and at last a finger of sunlight jabbed through a gap in the curtains. Karyn lay wakeful for a long time waiting for Roy to stir. At last his eyes opened. He looked over at Karyn and smiled.

'Good morning,' she said, rolling on her side to kiss him lightly on the mouth. 'Sleep well?'

'Sure, I guess so. You?'

'Fine. Except for...!' She hesitated, not wanting to start the day by complaining.

'Except for what?'

'Did you hear anything last night?'

'Hear what?'

'Something... like howling.'

'No, I didn't hear a thing.'

'Maybe it was the wind,' she said.

'That was probably it. Blowing over the chimney.'

'Probably.'

Roy reached over and patted her hip. 'Let's have some breakfast. Afterward we can go in and take a look at the town.'

Karyn swung lightly out of bed. 'You go ahead and take your shower and I'll start getting things set up in the kitchen.'

Together they prepared and ate a breakfast of plump country sausages, eggs over easy, muffins, home fried potatoes, and coffee. Back in the city they seldom had more than plain toast. The food along with the crisp, piny morning air put them in an excellent mood.

Lady was given a helping of canned dogfood with a fresh egg beaten into it. She ate as hungrily as the two people, and afterward dashed eagerly outside.

'I'll get the car,' Roy said.

'Couldn't we walk into town?' Karyn said. 'It can't be more than two miles, and it's such a beautiful day.'

Roy grinned at her, his old warm grin, and Karyn felt a rush of affection for her husband. 'I keep forgetting you lived in Manhattan,' he said. 'I've never seen people walk as much as New Yorkers.'

'You wouldn't, being a Southern California boy,' Karyn replied. 'People here take the car to go to the mailbox.'

'Speaking of cars-' Roy began.

Karyn held up a hand to stop him. 'I promise, darling, I'll take driving lessons first thing when we get back.'

'I don't mean to nag,' Roy said, 'but there are times when it could be important.'

'Yes, sir,' Karyn said with mock servility. Roy could not hold his stern expression.

They both turned as the little dog dashed in through the open door and skidded to a stop, legs braced, ready to play.

'Lady will enjoy the walk too,' Karyn said. 'Won't you, girl?'

With Lady running ahead, Karyn and Roy started down the narrow lane toward the village of Drago. They continued past the old houses which, Karyn saw, were gray and crumbling, with sagging boards and blind windows. The yards had long since gone to weeds.

'Why do you suppose the people moved out and just left these old houses to rot?' Karyn remarked uneasily.

'Who knows? Drago isn't exactly a boom town. I guess when people die or move away, nobody comes in to take their place.'

When they reached the blacktopped road, the main street of Drago, the dog stopped her forward and stayed close to their feet, her ears up, eyes alert.

Karyn and Roy stopped for a moment. Sunlight filtering through the evergreen boughs gave the town a hazy, unreal appearance. The trees sighed under a gentle breeze. No one moved along the street.

'How many people are supposed to be living here?' Karyn asked. Her voice was hushed, though she were speaking in a church. Or a cemetery.

'I don't know,' Roy answered. 'Somewhere between a hundred and two hundred.'

'Where do you suppose everybody is?'

'Maybe they sleep late.'

'Oh, there's someone now,' Karyn said.

Across the street Anton Gadak stood leaning in the doorway of a small shop. His blocky form was half-hidden in shadows. Karyn and Roy crossed the street and approached him.

'Good morning,' Roy said. 'For a while there we thought the town was closed today.'

Gadak touched the brim of his Stetson and nodded to Karyn. He spoke to Roy. 'You'll find it pretty quiet here in Drago.'

'That's fine with us,' Roy said. 'We're pretty quiet ourselves. Are there stores open?'

'You can buy groceries and most anything else down the street at the Jolivets!'

Gadak jerked his thumb toward the narrow shop behind him. 'And knickknacks you can get in here.' He touched his hat brim again and swung off down the street without waiting for further conversation.

Roy looked after him, shaking his head. 'I thought he'd never shut up.'

'How do you suppose he got to be sheriff?'

'I think it's an honorary title,' Roy said. 'The town of Drago is not incorporated.'

'Well, shall we check out the "knickknacks"?' Karyn suggested pointing to the shop. 'They may have candles.'

There was no sign identifying the shop. A curtain was pulled across the show window, and the glass in the door was too dark to see through, giving the place an abandoned look. Roy thumbed the latch and pushed the door open. The clear tinkle of a tiny bell sounded inside. He let Karyn precede him and told Lady to stay put outside.

The interior of the shop was cluttered and dimly lit, but seemed quite clean. A faint scent of sandalwood hung in the air, mingling with the even fainter hint of herbs. A glass-fronted counter ran along one wall of the shop. All around were shelves and small tables filled with colorful and useless objects of the kind people like to give as presents, but seldom buy for themselves. There were china figurines, embroidered pillows, hurricane lamps, ceramic dishes, ornate vases, lace handkerchiefs, costume jewelry, and a collection of boxes and bottles with contents unknown.

'Wonder where the proprietor is,' Roy murmured.

A soft green curtain covering a doorway at the rear of the shop moved, and Karyn and Roy looked that way. The curtain parted in the center, sliding along the rod on silent rings, and a young woman stepped through.

The woman's hair was raven black, and soft with glinting highlights. Her eyes slanted just barely, and were a pale green that seemed lit from within. She wore a loose satiny garment that covered her from throat to ankles. When she moved it touched her in a way that revealed the lithe body underneath.

'Hello,' the woman said in a smoky voice. 'I wondered when you would be in.' Her pale-green eyes were trained full on Roy, ignoring Karyn.

'Well, hello,' Roy said in a tone Karyn barely recognized. 'Were you expecting us?'

~~'I saw you in the village yesterday. I knew you would be here soon. How may I serve you?'~~

An old grandfather's clock behind the counter ticked four times before Roy answered. 'Candles,' he blurted. Then, more composed, 'We wanted to buy some candles. We've moved into what I guess is called the old Fenno house.'

'Yes, I know,' said the black-haired woman. Noting Karyn's quizzical look she added, 'In a small town there are few secrets. My name is Marcia Lura.'

'I'm Roy Beatty, and this is my wife, Karyn.'

'You *do* have candles?' Karyn said. It came out more sharply than she intended, but the other woman did not seem to notice.

'Oh, yes, Mrs Beatty, I have candles of all kinds.' Marcia Lura turned to face Karyn. In the way she moved and the sharp contrast of pale-green eyes and midnight hair there could be a powerful attraction for a man. Was there also a challenge? Karyn wondered.

'We don't need anything elaborate,' Roy said. 'Just something for the dinner table. Something romantic.' He gave Karyn a quick grin, but his gaze quickly returned to Marcia Lura.

'I understand,' Marcia said with a slow smile. 'I'm sure I have something that will please you.'

Karyn kept her smile in place, but behind it she ground her teeth. Never had she considered herself a jealous woman, but now it infuriated her the way this woman directed her conversation with Roy, and seemed to put double meanings on everything she said. Maybe, Karyn thought, the double meanings were in her own mind. In any case, she did not intend to be upstaged.

'Do you live here in Drago?' Karyn asked, moving a step closer to her husband and touching his arm possessively.

'Yes, I have rooms right here behind the shop. There's not much space, but being alone, I don't need much,' Marcia said with a smile. Her mouth was wide and full, a pale-pink shade that might not have been achieved with lipstick. 'If you will step over this way I'll show you what I have in candles.'

They settled for half a dozen slim green candles with a pair of plain glass holders. Not until Roy was paying the woman did Karyn notice that the candles matched the color of her eyes. When they left the shop Karyn felt a vast relief at being back in the fresh air. She reached down and absently scratched Lady behind the ear.

'Striking woman, wasn't she,' Karyn said as casually as possible.

'Who? Oh, yes, I suppose you could say she was.'

'You didn't notice, I suppose.'

Roy snaked an arm around Karyn's waist and pulled her close to him. 'Hell, yes, I noticed. Want to make something of it?'

Karyn smiled, happy to have her husband's full attention once again. 'Maybe,' she said. 'Once we get home and get those romantic candles lit.'

'Do we need any groceries?' Roy asked.

'I don't think so. You did a pretty good job of shopping yesterday. We could use bread and some milk.'

'We can pick that up down at the Jolivets'. He doesn't say much, but she's a character. Anyway, I want you to know where the telephone is.'

Karyn stopped suddenly and looked at him. 'What telephone?'

'Our telephone. Didn't you notice that there isn't one in the house?'

'No, as a matter of fact, I didn't.'

'There are no wires out there. Anytime we have to make a call we use the phone at Jolivet's store.'

'When we go rural, we don't mess around,' Karyn said.

—They walked on up the street to a false-front wooden building with a faded sign reading *Jolivet's General Merchandise*. Inside, the store seemed to be stocked indiscriminately with hardware, clothes and groceries. It had probably looked the same for the last forty years.

Standing at an ancient cash register was a round-faced little woman with a snub nose, rimless glasses, and a bright smile. 'Hi, Roy,' she said with easy familiarity. 'I see the little woman got in a right.'

'That's right,' Roy said. 'This is my wife, Karyn. Oriole Jolivet.'

'My, you're pretty as a picture,' said Oriole, coming round the counter and taking Karyn's hand. 'I just knew a handsome devil like Roy would have a looker for a wife.'

'Well, thank you,' Karyn said, a little embarrassed, but flattered as well.

'That's my husband, Etienne, over there by the meat case,' Oriole said.

A long-faced man looked up from the tray of chops he was arranging and gave Karyn a sad smile.

'You're the first new folks to move into Drago in quite a spell,' Oriole told them. 'Hope we'll be seein' you around from time to time.'

'I'm sure you will,' Karyn said.

'No need to wait till you have to buy something, just come on by anytime you feel like chewing the fat.'

'I'll do that,' Karyn said.

'Good, good. Do you like coffee?'

'I love coffee.'

Oriole's smile got even brighter. 'That's the kind of talk I like to hear. Yes, indeed, you and me are goin' to get along fine, Karyn. Now you wait right there and I'll go out back and pour us all a cup.'

'I don't want you to go to any trouble-'

'No trouble at all, honey. Be back in a jiffy.'

Oriole bustled out and returned in a moment carrying a tray laden with cups of dark, rich coffee and thick slices of cinnamon-sprinkled coffee cake. Karyn sipped the coffee and chatted with Oriole while Roy prowled around the store. For the first time since arriving in Drago she felt at ease.

When they had finished the last of the coffee and cake, Roy bought a loaf of bread and two quarts of milk. He put the candles in the bag with the groceries and they left the Jolivets' store.

Lady, who seemed to sense that they were going home now, bounded off down the street. Watching the dog, Karyn touched Roy's arm and pointed toward one of the old houses. There a boy and girl of about twelve stood motionless in the front yard watching them. Their faces were grave, their eyes shadowed. A woman came out onto the porch and said something. The children turned silently and went inside.

'You know,' Karyn said, 'those are the first children I've seen in this town.'

'The rest of them are probably in school.'

'Where? I haven't seen anything in Drago that looks like a school'

'Maybe they go over to Pinyon,' Roy said. 'Does it matter?'

'I guess not,' Karyn said, 'but it does seem odd.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

That night in bed Karyn gave the finest acting performance of her life. She twisted and moaned under her husband; she dug her nails into his back. She caressed him with her hands and with her mouth. She heaved her body to meet his thrusts and clamped her legs around his waist. She cried out words of passion as she felt his climax burst inside her.

And she felt nothing.

She could not be sure if Roy knew. He gripped her with his strong, square hands and tongued her ear and said all the right things as he approached orgasm, but Karyn was not sure that he believed her response. At least, she told herself, he had climaxed. Her performance was not wasted.

Afterward he rolled over and slept. Karyn lay beside him trying to sleep too. But as the minutes ticked into hours she gave it up and lay waiting, listening. She knew it would come, as surely as death. And it did come. The distant ululation. The mournful sinister night cry. The howling.

After that she slept fitfully, waking up time and again to listen breathlessly to the night. Finally she came awake with a start to find that it was light and Roy was gone from the bed. She could smell coffee perking in the kitchen, and hurried to join her husband.

That day, and the next, and the next, Karyn and Roy did not go into the village of Drago. They stayed close to the little house, walking on the trails in the forest and delighting in the birds and wildflowers. Lady loved these outings. She would rush joyfully ahead barking officiously at anything that moved, as though clearing the path for her people. Although Karyn and Roy kept up the pretense of enjoying each other, each was occupied with thoughts that could not be shared.

In the evenings they played cribbage or backgammon. Having no television set, they rediscovered the radio. Sometimes Karyn would read from the stack of paperbacks she had brought from the city while Roy worked at the kitchen table going over the list of his company's technical publications.

At night Karyn tried to let go during sex, but, it became harder all the time to pretend she was enjoying it. Roy's lovemaking became perfunctory, and at last he merely kissed her goodnight and turned away. Then while he slept Karyn would lie on her back, her muscles taut, and stare into the dark.

Every night now, the howling came. Karyn no longer asked Roy if he heard it. He never seemed to. Karyn was afraid that if she talked about it he would say it was all in her head. She knew better. Something was out there. Something.

By the end of the first week Karyn had dug out the bottle containing the remaining Seconals that the doctor in Los Angeles had prescribed when she came home from the hospital. She had never liked taking pills, but at least she was able to sleep soundly.

Roy began to walk in the forest by himself. His excuse was that he wanted to gather wood for the fireplace but Karyn knew there was all the wood they needed within fifty yards of the house. The real reason had to be that he wanted to get away from her.

She became convinced of it the day of Roy's first trip into Los Angeles. Although he made a show of reluctance to leave their wilderness paradise, his eagerness was not hard to read. She watched the Ford disappear down the narrow lane with an increasing sense of fear and uneasiness.

The day was cool with a high overcast. Karyn vowed to pull herself out of her funk. She put on a heavy sweater and took Lady for a long walk through the woods. For a city girl, she had a remarkable sense of direction, and there was never any problem finding her way back.

Returning home around noon, she washed the walls and windows, even though they didn't need it. She fixed herself a sandwich, fed the dog, and shuffled through the books without finding one she

wanted to read. She began looking up the road for Roy long before he was due to return.

~~When at last he drove into the yard, Karyn ran out to meet him and they hugged each other enthusiastically and walked back to the house arm in arm.~~

Karyn had prepared a small roast for their meal. It came out perfectly - crispy brown on the outside, pink and tender within. The candles provided an intimate glow, and the talk came easy. It was almost the way it had been before their trouble started.

After dinner Karyn fed Lady and let her outside while Roy poured brandy. They moved into the living room and sat close together by the fireplace. Their legs touched, and for the first time in months Karyn felt a surge of desire for her husband.

'Roy,' she said, 'let's go to bed.'

'Sleepy already?'

She shook her head, holding the warm pressure of her thigh against him. 'Nope.'

Roy looked at her closely for a moment, then took her into his arms. He kissed her. She returned the kiss with feeling. Everything about him - his hands on her back, the taste of his mouth, even the short stubble of beard - excited her.

'Let's not waste any more time,' he said. They stood up together and he led her into the bedroom.

When they were lying together, Karyn rolled onto her side to face him. Roy's hand roved across her rib cage and up over the swell of her hip. She reached down for his sex and found him erect and hard. The touch of him in her hand was good. His fingers trailed down across her flat stomach and into the blond fluff of pubic hair. She felt herself open willingly and go moist under his touch, *Oh, God* said a part of Karyn's mind, *let it be good this time. Let it be right, the way it was.*

Roy was kissing her breast, teasing the erect nipple with his tongue. His hand was up between her legs, stroking, massaging. Karyn was ready for him. As ready as she would ever be. Then she heard it.

The howling.

Not far off in the woods this time, but close outside. Close, deep throated, and cold as death.

'Roy!' she said, sitting up in bed.

'I heard it,' he said. He pulled himself up beside her, but his voice did not reflect the urgency that Karyn felt.

Roy's hand moved between her legs. His head dipped again to her breast.

'What was it?' Karyn said. She was whispering without knowing why.

'I don't know. An owl.' His tone took on an edge of impatience.

'Not an owl,' she said.

'Who cares? Come on, Karyn, lie down.'

Obediently Karyn lay back on the sheet. She tried hard to recover the mood of a few moments before, but the terrible howling still sounded in her brain. How could Roy ignore it?

His head moved lower on her body. She could feel his tongue tracing a moist line across her navel and on down...'

Abruptly it was not her husband kissing her down there, it was that horrible other thing. The teeth.

With a startled cry she drew away from him.

He pulled himself up. 'What?'

Karyn reached out to him, trying to make her touch affectionate, though she still felt the unreasoning revulsion. 'I'm sorry, Roy. I - I don't think I can.'

'But just a minute ago-'

'I know,' she said quickly. 'I know, Roy, but now I can't.'

'Jesus,' he said through clenched teeth, and turned away from her. His broad naked back was lit

a wall in the middle of the bed.

—'Please, darling,' she said, 'be patient with me for a little while longer.'

He gave her an unconvincing pat on the shoulder. 'Sure, Karyn, it's all right. I'm just keyed up after driving from the city.'

But it was not all right, and they both knew it. Karyn's throat filled up with words she wanted to say to her husband but could not: *I'm sorry dear, I was all ready and in the mood, and then something howled outside. No, it was not an owl. And after that the only picture in my mind was that filthy animal with his hands up in me and his teeth biting me and then... and then...*

Karyn forced her mind back from the brink of hysteria, and at last fell into a shallow sleep.

In the morning she was the first one up. She combed out her hair and went into the kitchen. She would prepare a lovely breakfast for Roy - ham-and-cheese omelet with hot muffins, and rich black coffee. But first she had to feed the dog. She took a can of Alpo from the cupboard, then wondered why Lady did not come trotting in at the sound of the can on the countertop. Then she remembered that no one had let her back in last night. Karyn went to open the door. The dog was not in sight.

Karyn stepped outside and called the dog's name. The forest was unusually silent on this gray damp day, the only sound the dripping moisture from the tree branches. Karyn called again and walked all around the yard. Nothing answered.

She went back inside and into the bedroom, where Roy sat on the edge of the bed pulling on a pair of denim pants.

'Lady's not here,' she said. 'We forgot to let her in last night. Now I can't find her. She doesn't answer.' Karen sensed the rising pitch of her voice, but she did not try to control it. Concern for the dog was an acceptable outlet for the other tangled emotions that she was not ready to examine.

'I'll go take a look,' Roy replied. He went outside, whistling and calling for the little dog. He made several forays into the woods, calling louder, and came back with his jeans wet from the damp brush.

'She's probably off exploring somewhere,' he said without conviction.

'Roy, do you think something's happened to her?'

'What could happen? We've been here over a week. Lady knows her way around by now. She'll come home when she gets hungry.'

Karyn caught the irritability just beneath his words. She said, 'I guess we might as well eat breakfast.'

She had lost all enthusiasm for the omelet. While she cooked it, Karyn left the front door open. From time to time each of them would look over that way.

Afterward Roy went to work editing his manuscripts. Karyn sat in a chair by the window with a book open on her lap. She tried to read, but the printed words would not register on her mind. When it was almost noon she could sit still no longer.

'Roy, I think we should go out and look for her. She may be hurt and can't get back to us.'

Roy looked over at her, and Karyn could see that he was not as unconcerned as he acted. 'All right,' he said.

The sun was out now, high and pale, but warm enough to dry off the forest. Roy and Karyn walked the trails that interlaced the surrounding woods. Some were so dim and overgrown that they were hardly there. Others showed signs of recent use.

Roy went in one direction, Karyn in another. She concentrated on looking down as she walked, scanning the ground along both sides of each trail. She saw nothing.

When Roy came upon her suddenly walking from the opposite direction, she started and gave a little squeal of surprise.

He reached out and grasped her arm gently. 'No luck?'

She shook her head.

'Roy, let's try going into town.'

'What for?'

'Maybe Lady got confused and went that way. Maybe somebody saw her. It wouldn't hurt to ask. It's better than sitting in that house and waiting to hear her bark, or see her come running home.' Karyn turned away so Roy would not see the sudden tears. 'Damn, how stupid it is to let a little animal become such a part of your life. *Stupid.*'

Roy put his arms around Karyn and held her for a moment.

They did not talk during the short drive. There was no sign of the dog in the roadway or in the brush alongside.

Once they were in the village Roy pulled over to the side and turned to Karyn while the engine idled. 'What now?'

Karyn looked up and down the deserted street, confused. 'How... how about that sheriff whatever he is, Anton Gadak? Maybe he would know if anybody has seen Lady.'

The words were barely out of her mouth when the broad figure of Anton Gadak appeared up the street, angling across the blacktop toward their car. Roy shut off the engine and got out on the driver's side. Karyn came around and stood beside him.

Gadak put two fingers to the brim of his Stetson. 'Afternoon, folks. Haven't seen you for a few days. Everything all right?'

'Everything's fine,' Roy began automatically, then corrected himself. 'No, the truth is we've got a problem.'

'Problem?' Gadak waited politely.

When Roy hesitated, Karyn spoke up. 'It's our little dog. We left her out last night, and this morning she's missing.' Even as she spoke, Karyn thought how trivial it must sound.

'Sorry to hear that.'

'We wondered if she might have found her way to town somehow.'

'If she did, I ain't heard about it,' Gadak said. 'Folks in Drago don't keep pets much, so they most likely notice your dog if she came in this way. I'll ask around, and keep an eye out myself.'

'Thanks,' Roy said. 'We'd appreciate it.'

'No trouble.'

As the big man was about to turn away, Karyn stopped him. 'Mr Gadak, are there any large animals around here that might have... harmed her?'

'Large animals?' Gadak repeated.

'Last night, and on other nights, I've heard something in the woods. A howling.'

Gadak pulled at his lower lip and looked down at Karyn. His eyes were shaded by the hat brim. 'A howling, you say. Coyote, maybe. Sure, could have been a coyote. Been a few of them seen hereabouts. They'll carry off a small animal now and again. How big was this dog of yours?'

'About so high,' Roy said, flattening his hand at about knee level.

'Kinda big for a coyote to take on,' Gadak said, 'But maybe it was hungry.'

'It was not a coyote,' Karyn said firmly.

The big man turned his shadowed eyes back to her. 'Eh, what's that?'

The thing I heard howling in the woods. It was no coyote.'

'Come on, Karyn,' Roy said. 'How can you be sure?'

She turned on her husband. 'You heard it. You heard the howling last night. Did that sound like a coyote to you?'

Roy's eyes shifted uneasily. 'How would I know? I'm a city boy. The only coyotes I ever hear about are on *Wild Kingdom.*'

'All right,' Karyn persisted, 'but that howling last night, that didn't sound like any coyote on television - or any other place.'

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'Maybe an owl,' Roy offered.

'Could be,' Gadak remarked, scratching his chin. 'The woods has a lot of peculiar sounds at night. Specially for the folks from the city. You'll get used to it.'

'I doubt it,' Karyn said quietly. She walked around the car and got in.

Anton Gadak spoke to Roy in a confidential tone, but the words came clearly to Karyn through the open window. 'I'll ask around about your dog, Mr Beatty, but I want to be honest with you. I think it's gone for good. Take my word for it, that was a coyote your missus heard. They can tear up a small animal in a hurry when they get hold of one.'

Roy got in and turned the car back toward their house. Karyn kept her eyes straight ahead, but she could see Roy glancing over at her.

Without looking at him, she said in a firm voice, 'It was no coyote.'

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