

Excerpts—ROADKILL

from Chapter 1

It was behind her back, up above her on the hill, like a quick rustle in the thicket. She glanced up at the tangle of shrubs around a huge, spreading maple. The thick trunk was patched with moss, and the limbs were heavy with broad leaves.

Jamie's eyes travelled up the branches until she lost her balance and dropped one hand on the tire for support. Leaves like open hands shifting in the light breeze. A gentle soughing far up.

It was nothing, probably a cone dropping swiftly through pine bows into the leaf mat. Far above the maple, a jet was drawing a line in the evening sky, like a fingernail on skin. Jamie thought of Meg again, and then she was remembering the long, elegant slope of her back, the inviting curve that ran like a soft shadow around her hip and down her thigh. Deep red fingernails. Humid skin.

She was smiling to herself as she dragged the spare to the axle. She righted the tire, rolled it a bit, slid it back, aligned the holes with the bolts. It wouldn't be long. She slipped her hands under the tire and prepared to lift, but she did not lift. Breath stalled in her lungs.

Behind her on the hill again, louder this time and coming down, coming.

Jamie spun, grabbing the tire iron from the dirt. As she stood up, the tire tilted against her leg but she didn't feel it. There was crashing in the floor of leaves, and when it broke through the bushes, the leaves around it seemed to shimmer. The way it moved sickened her, the quick jerks. Coming. Blundering down. And the sound in its mouth—

from Chapter 3

The boy thought he heard something—a shifting sound. Before he could open his mouth, the pick struck home.

The point penetrated, wedging in to the handle. Dru gave it a yank but it stuck fast. He slid his hands to the end of the handle for leverage.

There was a clear shifting then, like rubble inside the wall.

Dru froze and they both looked up. The boy was wondering if the ceiling would hold. His breath caught.

The patch in the wall blew out, pelting them with rock-hard chunks. One hit the boy's forehead and another struck his jaw, and he dropped to the cave floor. Dru, closer to the wall, went down instantly, and before he could rise to his knees, the thing that had burst the ancient diaphragm of leaves was out of the wall and on him hard. The boy thought of the pick but he had lost sight of it. The air was filled with chalky dust and grit, and his eyes flooded with tears. He had seen the thing clearly for only an instant before the dank cloud obscured everything. Then, inside the dust with its smell like mold, was a human howl of pure terror.

Fear bursting from his brother's throat iced the boy's blood, and the sounds that followed it shot through him: first a furious hissing—a reptile hiss—and then an earsplitting shriek like the cry of a beast in an ecstasy of vengeance.

The boy was coughing and scrambling backwards, and the shriek was all around him, amplified by the bare stone. Something on the cave floor stuck to the palm of his hand. He pulled it free and shook it wildly, and a sticky chunk of the patch disconnected, leaving a filmy secretion on his hand.

He toppled over and slithered on his belly in the slime. The shriek was in his ears, and the sound of hitting also, dead blows on muscle.

The boy was crawling, whimpering and gulping for air, gagging on mucous and tears. As he clambered through the rubble, he did not feel the lacerations on his hands and stomach from the pitted stone floor. When he gained his feet he lunged out of the dust cloud but tripped abruptly and fell face-down on the rocks.

When he tried to stand again, his breath was gone. He gasped for air, bent double, battling the savage hammering of his heart. The shrieking had stopped, and an eerie dome of light rose in the dust where he had dropped the flashlight. He should stay and fight it, he knew. But then it stepped into the light. It didn't care about Dru anymore. The boy felt sick. In the strewn stones, he spotted a jagged one. It might be equal to the task if he could heft it over his head and heave. But it would have to be close...

A dry scrabbling was coming quickly in the dark.

from Chapter 6

Kathleen Meredith's hair hung straight down, dark brown and shiny, unfashionably long and fine. She was bent at the waist in the bathroom, feet spread, in her under-wire bra and pantyhose, brushing.

To her the ritual was compulsory, not just because of the radiance imparted by the brush but because of the arm action and the flow of blood. Capillaries in the inverted head carried oxygen to the brain. Small veins in the arms made the heart work harder. It didn't assure long life, but over a lifetime she believed it had to make a difference. Maestros did it the same way. Why did they live long and richly? Because of hours spent waving their arms, pumping the small muscles, working the heart. Kate liked to eat right and do the right things. She was three months from thirty-five....

She was beside the bed, ready to slip on the skirt, but her own reflection above the dressing table stopped her. She was bending forward, about to step in, and as she looked up, she saw her own dark eyes enhanced by makeup, her face framed by lustrous hair, nearly black. Her breasts swelled a bit over the diagonals made by the top of the black bra. She stood up. She did have a plane to catch, she knew that. She must be on time.

One hand took the skirt, concealing it behind her back. She turned a little to the side and let her head tilt, as though fingers had the ends of her hair and were pulling it down. Her glance went to the arm, the one bent at the elbow hiding the skirt. She liked the line of the tricep there, firm from bench presses but not overdone. Similarly pleasing were the shadowy accents on her abdominals when she tensed them, the defined center line. The sit-ups paid off, and the knee-lift machine.

She allowed the fingertips of her free hand to trace their way up her stomach to the featherweight bra. Around the nipple, through the filmy cup, it felt like being caressed while she was stoned. As she watched the mirror, her lips parted. It was the way Keith would see her. The amber light of nylons rode along her thigh.

Who? she wondered again, only half-consciously. It could have been that boy. She had had a couple of crank calls late, past midnight—nothing really, breathing like asthma on the line, not

so much as a word. She just had an idea that it was that boy. No reason that would hold up in court, only intuition. Feminine. Female. Her palm slid down her hip, showcasing the curve.

She knew he had watched her from across the street. She had seen his curtains move. And then there had been that day when she was in the back getting sun. He was working in the yard with his shirt off, and she had seen him through her sunglasses leaning on the shovel.

She tilted her head to the other side and hair fell across her cheek. Her hand slipped to the front and nestled at the bottom of the V. Not exactly a boy, she thought. Maybe seventeen? What an age. When it's gone, it's gone, she was thinking. It was a cold thought, and Kate's pulse quickened. When it's gone—

from Chapter 15

It was Chet's last chance and he knew it. He pushed off with his arms and rolled to the side, trying to spin free, and as he turned he saw his opponent again, looming hugely behind him, wings half-cocked for balance, foam slopping from its beak, the pole in its midsection pointed and stiff. It hopped backwards on one leg, clutching him in the talons of the other.

He kicked at it furiously and his heel caught the claws. He threw his weight to the side and rolled, and his leg felt as though it was tearing in half at the knee. The talons ripped through his ankle and he screamed, but he was still rolling on the blacktop and he was free.

He scrambled towards the open car door. He was closer to it than the bird-thing but he was slower. He would never have time to pull the door shut and come up with the key, wherever he had dropped it. When he reached the car, he seized the door frame with both hands and vaulted in, far enough to jam one arm between the bucket seats to the tote bag in the back.

The creature had him again, this time by the belt, but he clutched solid wood and it slipped from the bag and came with him backwards out of the car. The sudden yank at his midsection nearly caused him to heave, but just as suddenly, the pressure was gone, and the bird-thing was staggering backward from the snapped belt. The force of the pull had brought Chet to his feet, and he leaned his weight back against the car and braced himself.

The creature came at him hissing, beak clacking, urine-colored foam slopping from its bony mouth as black as char. Chet let the thing strike first and it did, chopping at him with one of the razor-like bones in the middle of its wing. He fainted to the left. The blow grazed his shoulder

and the thing was beside him, momentarily off balance. Chet gulped a breath, locked it in, put every ounce of remaining strength into the baseball bat he had pulled from the bag, and whipped it around.

Like a slaughterhouse sledge, it hit bone. It was a moderate uppercut because of the height of the opponent, but fundamentally it was a good swing—excellent wrist action and decent follow-through. The crack on the back of the bony head raised a flurry of scales, and the thing pitched forward, its beak ripping like a pick through the convertible top. Chet's game should have been baseball, he knew it all along.

The thing wasn't moving....

He would make the road now. He could get close to town, call from a pay phone, and wait for an ambulance. But what if they screwed up, got the wrong address, or just took too long? He could die in the car. Better, he could keep going all the way to the emergency room. He would do that if he felt that he could make it.

But driving would be tough with a beak in his ear, and it wasn't just the beak. The thing had gone down with wings extended—the left partly draped over the windshield—and the dead weight of its torso was sagging the convertible top.

It would be easier to tackle from the other side. Steadying himself on the fender and the trunk, he worked his way around the back of the car. From the passenger side he could see its face buried in the car top. But there was a pocket by the shoulder, close to the collarbone, and that was where he wedged in the barrel end of the bat. With the heel of his hand he pounded it in as far as it would go. He would have a good chance to move it if he used the bat as a lever under first one shoulder and then the other.

But he also knew what he had left, and what he didn't have. He folded his arms on the top of the car and rested his head for a moment. The thing a few inches away was giving off a putrid smell. He would never get it out of the car. Focus. Get it in your head. Make it real in your mind and then go there. The body would follow the mind, even if the arm muscles were twitching and the stomach was ready to invert and the knees and the ankle were surgical cases.

He needed air and he was taking it in through the nose and blowing out through the mouth, so that the first time he heard it, he was sure he was mistaken. The next time he imagined it was

his own ears, or that he was replaying it in his head to process it, to work it out. He could even be slipping into shock.

The thing was out of commission, down for the count, and if he looked up, he would see it. He did, and it was. It was not about to come up with a hiss, or any other protest. He had felt the bat ring in his hands. The chunk of cranium lay in front of him, missing a patch of scales. When the hissing sound came again, and he looked over the back of the fallen beast into the park, his insides were an elevator with a snapped cable, dropping through the dark.

Across the lawn, at the edge of the trees, a bird creature was moving toward him. Its beak opened and closed deliberately. It made a hissing sound.

At the end of the park, on the roof of the outbuilding, another was poised, wings spread, crouching.

Chet moved slowly to the front of the car. His mind was empty as he raised the bat and the thing came at him across the grass. He did not hear the creature behind him lifting itself from the car top. When it swung from the rear, the wrist bone severed the bat like a hard slider.

from Chapter 20

Charlie gave it gas and started shifting. The big engine was roaring and Melissa was scared.

"We're going to go a little faster," he panted, "so you hang on tight."

He had kept it in sight as he ran back to the cab until the trailer had blocked it from view. Rolling out of the lot, churning to pick up speed, he couldn't find it in the mirrors. But he had seen it, he was sure, taller than a man covering ground with huge strides, unbelievable strides. It could have been somebody's idea of a prank, the whole thing, even the kid. He tried to think whether he had known anyone deranged enough to set it all up, wondering at the same time if booze could have a delayed reaction, hitting you with Twilight Zone DTs when you were daylight sober.

Melissa watched him hunching forward, one arm on the big wheel and the other hand pushing and jerking the gear shift. The revving engine sounded louder than the times she had ridden on airplanes, even during the takeoffs. She covered her ears, but she could still hear the loud growling, and feel it in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to scream to the man to stop it, but she didn't because she saw the way he was trying to make the truck go faster and faster and

the way he kept looking in the mirrors. Suddenly she understood what would happen to him, to them both. A rudorical question, her dad called it, when you knew the answer before you asked it. She uncovered her ears.

"Is it one of the things?"

Charlie shot a glance at her. Okay, kid, he was thinking. So somebody can make Uncle Charlie jump like a trick monkey. Somebody can have a few laughs.

"Mind telling me how you know that?"

He was waiting for the punch line and for who had hatched it. He was waiting for the whole twisted joke to untangle and lie down flat like a snake under his tires.

"They killed my mom and dad," she said.

The grief and confusion in her eyes sent his brain reeling backward, shifting gears. He put the gas to the floor, and as they gained momentum rolled into the denser woods, he tried to think of something to say. How could he help her at all? How could he make sense of a thing like that? It stalled his brain, blanked it out. He was wishing he had been a priest when he spotted the thing in the fish-eye mirror.

It was clinging to the side of the trailer in the rear, wings tucked tight to its body. As he watched, the thing inched closer, clawing its way along the paneling toward the cab, its wedge-shaped head cleaving the air.

"Hang on!" he warned....

The instant the brakes started to blast and screech, Melissa felt the man's hand flat against her chest, pinning her back to the seat tighter than the shoulder belt. Then she felt the whole truck shaking as the brakes howled and they headed toward the side of the road.

The engine was hot, he knew, but they were not going to blow the head or flame the brakes into any incendiary self-immolation screw-up. He felt okay. His truck was jumping like an alligator in heat, and he had total responsibility for the small life sitting one foot from his right hand, but he felt that he could handle it. Death was the toothless lady he had taken to the prom before, and he felt oddly comfortable in her presence. They ground to a halt in a roil of dust that enshrouded the cab, and he peered into the mirror for anything that moved.

Charlie's nose filled with scorched rubber and dry, yellow dust, and he cranked the window shut. He checked hers—closed already—then squinted into the rectangular reflection of floating dirt, trying to make out the side of the trailer.

As the dust began to drift and settle, he detected an irregularity, like a large bump, on the paneling. Then he made out the scaly head and the body pressed tightly against the trailer, clinging to the wood with its talons and the vestigial hands on the tops of its wings.

Its head came up. It snapped to the side, the black bead of its eye fixed on the mirror. It began creeping forward.

Time to cross that bridge. Charlie punched the catches and lifted the broad locker door above the seats. In a second he had unhooked the twelve-gauge and was ripping open the box of shells. He only had time to slip a few into the magazine, and he stopped at four.

The thing was halfway up the trailer and still coming, staying low like a stalking cat. Charlie saw a beer-colored liquid dripping from the open beak. He turned to the girl.

"Stay here."

"Don't leave!" She was cringing in the big seat. "Don't go out there!"

"I'll be back. You stay here, understand?"

Melissa could only remember her father saying that and how she had stayed kneeling on the wet ground until she could wait no longer. She didn't believe him, and she couldn't stand to be alone again, but in the next moment the man was gone.

Charlie popped the door open and climbed out onto the steel steps. It was there, a dozen feet away, more like a huge scaly bug or lizard than a bird, so close he could have thrown the shotgun at it, but he wasn't going to risk a shot off balance and leaning backwards. At first he tried to cradle the gun with one arm and lock the door with the other, but then he remembered the keys were in the ignition, and he couldn't trust the girl to unlock it if he needed to get back in fast. It was hissing at him.

He slammed the door and dropped to the dirt. The bird-thing was above him, its wings beginning to lift.

"Hey!" he shouted and did an automatic drop-and-roll from basic training.

One, two, three rolls to the right, clutching the shotgun to his chest, the barrel pointing straight up beside his head. After the third roll he popped to his feet. His head was light and spinning.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" he yelled and charged away from the creature toward the back of the trailer. When he stopped and turned a few strides past the end of the semi, he saw the thing had done as he had hoped. It had left the cab and hopped onto the steel drums to follow him, using them like stepping stones. He heard the talons scraping metal.

Charlie waited like a batter refusing to commit too early, outlasting the pitcher's elaborate motion and concentrating only on the pitch. His heart was racing in his ears. He searched for a soft spot on the throat or anywhere outside the heavily scaled torso. He eased the safety off. The thing began clacking its beak over and over with machinelike speed. He wanted it closer. Closer still.