

PART ONE

Grisly Dawn!

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The 1967 Ford Mustang arced left. For a moment, the road seemed as if it had just opened, but it was impossible to see where the car's wheels were as they crunched broken branches and dry leaves. Suddenly, a black dog darted across the road. Eddie Esten applied pressure to the brakes, but the car wouldn't stop—it kept moving ahead as if sliding on loose gravel. The pedal seemed to have frozen in place—unable to stop the vehicle or even slow it down.

Eddie felt a thump. He couldn't catch sight of anything in his rearview mirror. It was not light enough to see in the split seconds that followed the impact, but as he drove on, he noticed something. It looked like a bag full of baseball bats or something big left behind on the road. Maybe it was a dead animal—*or did I hit that dog?*

He parked on the side of the road, checking under the car carefully to access for damage.

Eddie closed the door of his Mustang and scoped the outside space again, but there was nothing on the ground!

He slapped his face momentarily as if that would wake him up. *I just ran over a living thing. I saw something in the rearview mirror, but there was nothing anywhere!*

"I taut, I taw a putty tat," he said, with a smile on his face, relieving some of his tension. Putting the car in gear, he laughed nervously.

The Ford Mustang's stereo suddenly blared loudly. The speakers spewed out static then a voice, "ATTENCION LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" More static resonated in Eddie's ears, and then the gibberish broke off to a little whine. "GOING TO DIE—"

Hellish voices amid grunts began to a chorus, so damn horrifying that he covered his ears.

Then Eddie heard a strange howling, coming from outside the car, as if a pack of wolves were in range. Music began blaring noisily. He covered his ears as he turned the radio off.

"Hey, Eddie!" Liana said.

"Can we please hurry up and get there?"

Amid the fields, the car stopped in silence. The engine just shut down—Eddie tried the car key, and it just wouldn't give anymore. Not even a crank. The lights on the odometer died out on the dashboard as if the power was gone, but before it had come to a complete stop, the wheels pushed as far as thirteen yards.

Liana whined, "Now what?"

Eddie explained that the car was overheating. "Let's take advantage of this for a beer break. The car should start after that."

Leaning against the car, Eddie began to daydream.

Liana wore large spectacles, and Eddie liked that about her because they made her sexier somehow. Eddie took a sip of beer, and then another as he watched her staring at her soft skin. He imagined what it will be like to make love to her. Maybe he'd do it on the hood of his car. He loved that car (probably more than he did her).

Liana had just turned twenty-two. She was good-looking and had great breasts. Eddie had met Liana during his senior year in high school. Wearing a tank top and jeans, he had been pumping iron in his third period P.E class. Now, she was wearing a brown leather jacket and a pair of white jeans. He loved to see her in them, especially as she walked around campus, going from class to class. They were tight and showed the

outline of her beautiful bottom whenever she paced up and down the building's stairs. Eddie always payed attention every time she knelt, either to get something out of a bag, or to get into the car, or to pick up a dropped coin off the floor. He would stand close by and watch as her lace panties rode up under those tight white jeans.

Eddie's head snapped up.

When he had exited the 405 Freeway into the wilderness, traveling up a mountain peak, he thought he'd seen the map flying in his rearview mirror, fluttering down a cliff. Unfortunately, he had been accelerating the Mustang at top speed, and the wind must have yanked that vital paper out of his grip. On it, he had jotted step-by-step directions—a map that led to the location they

planned to visit. It had been too dangerous to go back and get it.

Now that he lost the map, there were no more names of streets or crooked old signs to follow. Who knew where they would wind up?

He'd got on a road, going North. The interstate highway had curved in and out through mountains and wilderness, patches of landscape, and an occasional ditch dangerous enough to break an axle. When he'd finally got to one mile straight of the road, he pressed the gas pedal to the metal, flying like a bat out of hell.

They had completed the trip beside a partially open black gate, where a single-story brick house's structure was cold and moldy. Eddie had read in an architecture magazine that brick wasn't a beautiful sight or an excellent insulator, and right now

he agreed. The house had a flat roof and an old, rectangular window centered in one of the rooms. It stood like an open eye at the front of the house.

Liana's bare foot was on the ground. At first, she was hesitant to bend down and touch the dirt, but surprisingly, it felt like beach sand on a hot day. Strange!

Looking cuter than ever, Liana bent to pick up two bags inside the car. Looking at her up and down, he quickly moved to help her, but not before she yelled: "Ed, stop looking at my butt and help me!"

"Sure," he said feeling a bit embarrassed. Eddie stretched his muscular arms to help her with the two bags. After all, he was happy she had come along.

For a moment, he experienced a surge of déjà vu as he looked around them. He reassured himself that he was in the right place (although he had his doubts).

Everyone had noticed the house was ominous and neglected.

Unfortunately, there was no internet connection in range to check things online, or use MapQuest, or Google Maps. There was no reception to call or text a loved one or to check in on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram accounts—let alone Snapchat.

But who cares? Eddie had no other choice but to play it by ear.

He sighed and nervously cracked all the knuckles from his left hand, one after another, forming a fist as if he was about to punch someone. He smiled—a smile that slanted with worry.

He was a strong man, and when you looked at his muscles, you wouldn't think he would be the type of man to be afraid of anyone or anything. He had begun to lift weights in his senior year in high school, wanting to try out for boxing with the expectation of one day becoming a heavyweight professional—a champion if it came to that. But since he was too light to be a heavyweight, he preferred weight-lifting these days.

They looked past the black gate. What was lurking in the creepy terrain?

The garden—if it was a garden—was overgrown with sickly bushes. From afar, Eddie noticed a body of water, and who knew what could be creeping deep under the surface—the creature from the black lagoon? He laughed under his breath at his idiotic

paranoia, but the sounds of water droplets were vivid in his ears, as if something was swimming in the eerie slimy pond, keeping watch, waiting for them to come near.

There was also a huge magnolia tree in front of the house with a mass of leaves on the ground. He got dizzy just looking at the house, and he got the feeling it was studying them as much as they were examining it.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" Gus said. "I have a strange feeling about this place. This area looks creepy as hell. I didn't want to say anything back there, but I noticed it an hour ago I couldn't see any road signs. I didn't want to hurt your feelings bro since it was your idea to bring us here, but—"

"C' mon Gus," Liana said, elbowing him. "Stop it. Now let's have a little

fun. We're only spending one night here right Eddie?"

"Is that right, Ed?" Gus said.

"One night?" Eddie said. "That's shit! A few nights at least."

"Don't mess around, Ed," Gus said. "One night or two at the most is doable."

The front door creaked open, and they took a few steps passed the gate. Was this house abandoned and haunted? *Without a doubt*, Liana thought, but she wasn't scared. Not yet anyway. *Not all ghosts hated the living, but all demons did.* She was sure of that, nervously twisting a strand of hair. *A devil can impersonate a spirit, but a specter will never imitate demons.* She paused. *A demon almost always caused a personal possession that can't be redeemed.*

As far as Liana was concerned, she would rather see a ghost, which had a shorter lifespan, than a demon. And surely demons were more deceitful and often disguised themselves as good spirits to be allowed entry into a warm home or a pure heart. She shook her head and thought she needed to quit watching "Supernatural."

"The thrill of being lost makes it so much better," Eddie said. "Especially in such a magnificent area like this, one could easily get lost in such this unfamiliar and intriguing place of unique beauty—"

"Are you guys crazy enough to walk in there?" Liana asked, looking at the house.

"Why would it be crazy to walk in there, Liana," Eddie said. "It looks perfectly normal to me."

She could feel the wind whipping against her flesh. She could almost taste its bitterness while the stench of old brick permeated the air and seemed to seep into her skin and clothing.

"It's going to be dark as hell soon," Gus said.

"Well, did any of you guys bring a tent, an ax, a hammer—" Liana asked and continued, "—air mats, stove with propane, dish soap, razors, toilet tissue, binoculars, twine, nail clippers—"

Once again, they heard eerie howls in the dark distance. "Probably dogs," Gus said.

"I think a haunted house doesn't always look haunted," Liana suggested, with a smile on her face trying to be brave. "Its structure would look perfectly normal, just like

this house. It wouldn't let us know it's haunted. Not right away. Not until you step inside and spend some time in it or stay all night."

"I am not spending the night in there. No Way," Gus said.

Everyone stood quietly, thinking in the silence, waiting to hear or see something bizarre or frightening.

Eddie said: "You guys are making a big deal over nothing." Trying to lighten the mood.

Gus looked at Eddie's face and said: "I thought we would be hiking in the moonlight."

"We can go hiking later, don't worry," Eddie said, heading to the back of the car's trunk and searching inside a grocery bag, finding and opening a large bag of potato chips. He grabbed a handful of them, crunching a few in his mouth. And

then he gulped icy cold Bohemia beer, which was his preferred beer. Bohemia tasted best and got him buzzing fast.

Gus watched Eddie grab another hand full of potato chips from the bag in the trunk, put them in his mouth, picked up a new beer from the cooler, opened it, and drank it all down in a few long gulps, needing the liquid courage.

"Ed, you're drinking pretty fast buddy," she said. When he finished, he threw the bottle which broke on the wall.

"Hey, don't break glass around here! With our luck, we'll be the ones to get cut."

"I didn't mean to do that jeez!" Eddie said. "Anyone want a beer?"

"Anyways. When did you guys buy all this booze?" Gus said. "A lot of

liquor for one night, don't you guys think?"

"Eddie and I went shopping," she said, "And he paid for it."

Earlier in the day, Eddie had driven Liana happily to Costco where she had gotten fresh goods for the camping trip while he waited in the car for what seemed an eternity. After that, they drove to a nearby liquor store, where Eddie had gotten ice bags, a few six-packs of Bohemia beer and a couple of bottles of tequila—two of Vodka also for mixing drinks. They had made one last stop at CVS for some juices and other necessities, such as Advil, new toothbrushes, paper plates, plastic cups, and plastic forks and spoons.

Eddie used the time to meditate about where he had gotten the money

and quickly shoved the thought out of his mind.

"Well, no shit! A man must pay for a lady, right," Gus said, looking at Eddie. "You better have paid, punk."

Liana wanted to make good deli sandwiches. She had brought turkey, tomatoes, lettuce, and mayonnaise.

"Liana, how much did you pay for those plastic forks and spoons?" Eddie asked.

"Four dollars a bag," she said.

"Four dollars? Did you' know you could've bought um' at the 99c store for ninety-nine cents?"

"Yes, I know," she said. "You were loaded so I paid the extra."

"Thank you, guys, for coming," Eddie said. "Otherwise I would've been here alone."

"Alone?" Gus said. "You're kidding. You weren't going to come here alone?"

"Oh, yes I was. God knows I've done it before."

"Wow, and you wouldn't be scared?" Gus said.

"No, I'm not a scaredy-cat like you. I like the thrill of adventure. The adrenaline rush, you know. I like to get out of my comfort zone. Besides, you get used to strange places like this one."

"Does the house even have furniture?" Gus said.

No furniture, Eddie thought, biting his thumbnail.

"There is no furniture in there," Liana said. "C' mon Mr. Garcia. Just think about it. Who believes a house in this part of the wilderness will come fully furnished? If anything, it looks

more abandoned than the Cassadaga Haunted Hotel.”

“Aw, shut up Liana,” Gus said.

“Gus?” Eddie said, looking at him cracking both sides of his neck, mediating a bit, and shrugging his shoulders with worry. “We were supposed to drive past the Sequoia National Forest area, not staying in a five-star hotel in the city’s hottest tourist spots, right Liana?” He paused. “The car suddenly stopped and now this makes a perfect campground. I brought my sleeping bag. I don’t know if you guys brought yours...”

“A sleeping bag?” Gus said. “I didn’t bring no sleeping bag.”

“Gus we clearly said we were going camping,” Eddie said. “Why no sleeping bag?”

"All I brought was a thick blanket," Liana said, smiling. "I thought you would keep me warm Ed."

"I didn't even bring a blanket," Gus said. "I just planned to crash out in the back seat of the car. What about food?" Gus grabbed a heaping handful of potato chips and began munching on them. "I hope you guys brought plenty because I am starving Marvin. I could eat all day and all night."

"We have plenty of snacks," Liana said. "Sandwich bread, peanut butter, soups, granola bars, trail mix and fruit, canned beans, corn, turkey, tomatoes, lettuce, and mayonnaise—"

"And I drove my Ford Mustang to get all these goodies—"

"Yes, Eddie," Gus said, rolling his eyes. "We know you love your three-fifty engine nineteen sixty-seven Ford

Mustang, and you paid for all the food.”

Eddie imagined making love to Liana, the two young lovers, enjoying each other under a canopy of stars, serenaded by a symphony of crickets and birds. He had a good idea that she probably expected it to be that way.

“Guys if it was up to me,” Eddie said. “I’d stay two weeks. I fucking love camping.”

Liana had been looking at Eddie too, anytime she got the chance. She had known that he practiced boxing at a local boxing gym around the corner from his house, and that was a significant turn on for her. He had developed a ‘mule’s kick’ punch and a 14-4 amateur record—first criteria for having a future as a professional.

“Two weeks? I don’t think so, Eddie,” Liana said, continuing to get

some of the things out of the car. Even though we don't have school until next Monday, just two days is enough for me."

"Yes, just two nights," Gus agreed. "And school. Don't even remind me. I have tons of homework." He paused analyzing the so-called wannabe woods. Instead, he stared inside the property, and he wondered what the inside of the house would look like when they walked in.

"Gus, relax." Eddie said. "You can sleep outside if you don't like the house!"

Gus and Liana both laughed.

"I hope it has tiled floor, a refrigerator, and a stove. Towels. Nice lawn chairs by the pond..." He swallowed something dry in his throat, continuing to get carried away.

"...catching the sun in our summer apparel, a piña colada in one hand..."

"Well, we have a bottle of vodka here and some pineapple juice," Eddie said.

"A piña colada does sound good right now," Liana said. "Do you guys want one?"

"Great idea, Liana," Eddie said.

"Sure," Gus said. "I need one."

While Liana went to make them a drink, Eddie showed Gus some of the games he had gotten for them to play, something besides dominoes and cards.

Eddie took Gus aside and whispered to him that he had a surprise. A Ouija board!

"Look... someone gave me this Ouija board last night."

"Don't you fuck with that," Gus whispered. "No way Jose!"

"But... it's just a toy Ouija board, c'mon this could be fun."

Gus couldn't even look at it, let alone touch it. On the box front, the

words 'they want to meet you' were printed legibly.

Wincing, Gus shoved the box away from his face.

"No," Gus said, looking around to see if Liana was close enough to listen. "You shouldn't mess with this stuff. It's bad luck. Demonic shit, man."

"C' mon Gus," Eddie said. "We can even ask about money, fortune, love." All we must do is place our hands upon the planchette, centered on the game board, then ask away! Like...what kinky stuff your lover might want you to perform—"

"EDDIE! EDDIE! STOP! NO WAY!" Gus said. "Stop. I suggest you leave that in the car if you don't want trouble, my friend. It is not a parlor game nor is it something for us to experiment with. It is dangerous. Not

to mention in this shithole scary place you brought us to—”

“Is there something wrong,” Liana asked. “Here are your piña coladas. I’ve made them kind of strong.” She looked down at her boots. Since she always kept them super clean and they were expensive, she noticed they were dusty with a bit of mud on the shoe soles. “Oh no! Look at my boots.” She didn’t have a napkin, so she bent over to try to clean them up with her hands. She was a city girl after all.

End of this sample book.
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Gabriel J.M. lives in Los Angeles, California. He has a B.A. in English Literature from California State University Long Beach. He is presently working on more novels, novellas, and short-stories.

Facebook Twitter Instagram Pinterest:
@gabrieljmwrites