



Terror

By Darren Joiner

Chapter 1

CENTRAL PARK

In the city, death lurks just beyond the thin walls of your apartment, a faceless figure on the crowded sidewalk, a familiar face at the corner café, or even the warm body beside you in bed. It can strike without warning, and when it does, you vanish into the void—no second chances, no return tickets. Yet, as dawn breaks, the sun spills its golden light over the skyline, and the cheerful chorus of birds fills the air, creating an illusion of renewal. This is the rhythm of life for countless souls navigating the bustling streets of the metropolis.

Central Park, bathed in sunlight during the day, offers a playground of joy and serenity for both tourists and locals. However, as twilight descends, it transforms into a realm of shadows and uncertainty, where hidden dangers lurk just out of sight. The sun, a fiery orb, dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant strokes of orange and crimson, surrendering its reign to the watchful moon, which ascended with a silvery glow. Beneath this celestial light, the young couple sprawled on a checkered blanket, their gazes locked in an intimate exchange. The young man's heart raced like a wild drumbeat as he leaned in, his breath hitching in his throat. A moment of hesitation passed between them, but her encouraging smile coaxed him closer, their lips meeting softly at first, then deepening into a kiss that ignited a spark of fervor and longing.

He drew her closer, feeling the warmth of her body against his as her breath came in soft, quick gasps. His fingers traced a gentle path along her thigh while he pressed delicate kisses along her neck, his hand inching beneath the hem of her dress. Suddenly, she caught his wrist, halting his advance. "Are you sure we're alone?" she asked, sitting up, her eyes scanning the dimly lit park. He glanced around, reassured by the absence of anyone nearby. "I don't see anyone. Just relax and let's enjoy ourselves," he urged, a playful grin spreading across his face. With a teasing smile, she reclined back onto the blanket, slowly lifting her dress to reveal that she wore no panties. "Now that's what I like—a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to show it," he thought, excitement coursing through him as he imagined the pleasures that awaited them in the fading twilight.

Their moans of ecstasy echoed through the night, primal and raw like wolves serenading the moon. As the man's body convulsed with pleasure, she entwined her legs around his waist, drawing him in deeper, savoring every sensation. She clung to him, her grip tightening as he quaked with each thrust, filling her completely with warmth and abandon. Just as she reveled in the bliss of the moment, an unsettling sensation interrupted her reverie—something slick and cold dripped onto her hands. Startled, she opened her eyes to find a shadowy figure looming above them, its mouth dripping with a viscous substance that pooled on the grass, igniting small wisps of smoke as it sizzled against the earth.

Her breath caught in her throat, eyes widening in horror as the creature reached down, seizing the man by his throat and lifting him effortlessly into the air, shaking him like a child's forgotten toy. The lifeless body dangled from its grip, blood cascading down the creature's arm as it savagely tore into him, disemboweling him with a grotesque snarl that echoed through the night. The woman, frozen in terror, scrambled backward on her hands, desperate to escape the sight of the beast ravenously consuming her lover's entrails. Panic surged through her veins, propelling her

to her feet as she turned and fled into the shadowy embrace of the woods, branches clawing at her as she raced away from the nightmare unfolding behind her.

Branches whipped against her skin as she barreled through the underbrush, each step a frantic attempt to escape the horror that lurked behind her. It felt like she had been sprinting for an eternity when she finally collapsed against the rough bark of an ancient oak, gasping for air. The distant cacophony of honking horns reached her ears, mingling with the rhythmic thumping of her heart, while the glow of headlights flickered like fireflies in the night. She cast a wary glance over her shoulder into the suffocating darkness, dread pooling in her stomach as she grappled with the chilling image of the creature that had just torn her world apart. What monstrous thing had claimed her partner's life?

She inhaled deeply, the rough bark of the ancient oak pressing against her back as she reluctantly peeled herself away, yearning for the distant glow of life and safety. Just as she prepared to move, a rustle in the underbrush froze her in place, heart pounding like a war drum. Emerging from the shadows was a menacing figure, its form obscured by darkness, yet its eyes glimmered like distant stars, piercing through the night. A wicked grin revealed bloodstained teeth, and with a swift motion, it hurled something toward her, the object spinning through the air with an unsettling grace.

The young woman instinctively grasped the object soaring through the air, her heart plummeting as she recognized it—the severed head of the man she loved. The horror of the moment crashed over her like a tidal wave, and she dropped it, collapsing to her knees, a gut-wrenching scream tearing from her throat. The creature, its laughter echoing in the night like a twisted melody, extended a clawed hand toward her, its voice dripping with malice. “I’m your new lover now; come and give it to me.” Her blood-curdling cries pierced the stillness, reverberating through the park, drawing the attention of passersby who paused in their tracks. They stood, transfixed, glancing toward the shadows where the nightmare unfolded, wondering whose soul had been claimed by death’s merciless grasp before resuming their hurried lives in the city that never sleeps.

NIGHTMARES

Rudy bolted upright in bed, sweat trickling down his brow, his heart thundering like a war drum. He scanned the dimly lit room, shadows flickering ominously in the corners, before collapsing back against the pillow, the weight of fear pressing down on him. It felt all too real, a suffocating fog wrapping around his chest. The thought of sleep sent a shiver through him; he knew the demons lurking in his mind would return to torment him, tugging at his sanity with their cruel whispers. Those insidious phantoms played tricks, conjuring visions of death that the creature had unleashed. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, watching the erratic dance of shadows cast by the flickering streetlight outside his window, each pulse a reminder of the danger waiting just beyond the glass. Like a child afraid of the dark, Rudy resisted the pull of slumber, but exhaustion weighed heavy on his eyelids. Finally, he surrendered, allowing his eyes to flutter shut as memories of that haunting night in Central Park flooded back, pulling him into their chilling embrace.

HIS NIGHT IN CENTRAL PARK

The summer night unfolded like any other in the bustling heart of New York City, yet Rudy felt a pull toward Central Park, a place few dared to wander after dark. The moon hung overhead, a silent sentinel casting a silver glow on the winding paths as Rudy ambled through the park, embodying the confidence of a monarch surveying his domain. Above him, the stars flickered like watchful sentinels, their twinkling forms whispering warnings that went unnoticed by the oblivious king.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek sliced through the stillness, reverberating across the park and sending an icy shiver down his spine, as if a winter gust had swept through, raising every hair on his neck. What in the hell was that? He muttered under his breath, instinctively crouching low as he edged toward the thickets, moving with the careful precision of a seasoned fighter. Straining his ears, he peered into the enveloping darkness, heart racing.

The scream echoed again, sending electric jolts of fear coursing through him, striking him like a lightning bolt. Shit, someone must be in trouble, he thought, squinting into the shadows that swallowed the light. With determination set in his eyes, he stepped deeper into the forest, driven by an urgent need to uncover the source of the desperate cries.

Without a flashlight, Rudy stumbled through the inky blackness, his hand outstretched to part the thick branches that loomed before him. Suddenly, something brushed against his fingers, causing him to jerk back and tumble onto the damp forest floor. As he glanced up, he discovered it was merely a leaf, home to a woolly caterpillar diligently feasting on its meal. A laugh bubbled up from within him, breaking the tension as he hugged his knees to his chest, shaking his head in disbelief at his own ridiculousness. “What am I doing here? I could be killed out here, and no one would find me for days,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper, swallowed by the surrounding trees. Just then, the piercing screams erupted again, slicing through the silence like a knife. Springing to his feet, Rudy squinted into the depths of the woods, straining to locate the source of the distress, and set off toward the sound. Soon, he emerged from the oppressive shadows into a clearing illuminated by a flickering light—perhaps a small campfire, he thought, curiosity pulling him closer. As he approached, his jaw dropped in shock, and his feet rooted to the ground, eyes widening like saucers as he took in the astonishing scene unfolding before him.

The scene was surreal: two rats were locked in a ferocious battle, while hundreds of their peers encircled them, eyes gleaming with a mixture of excitement and hunger. The rodents wrestled on the ground, ripping at each other's flesh and fur, their tiny bodies twisting in a violent dance of survival. With a sudden surge of strength, the larger rat pinned its opponent down, sinking its teeth into the vulnerable throat and holding on until crimson streams gushed forth, painting the earth beneath them. Rudy stood frozen, disbelief coursing through him like ice water; this was straight out of a horror film. The rat, as if under some dark enchantment, transformed before his eyes, rising up on its hind legs, clutching the lifeless body of its rival in clawed hands. He rubbed his eyes repeatedly, convinced he was hallucinating, but the grotesque reality remained unchanged. For a few agonizing moments, he tried to comprehend the shocking scene, when a wave of dread washed over him. Heart racing, he began to inch backward, his gaze fixed on the ground, unaware of the tree stump lurking behind him. He stumbled and fell, landing hard on the damp earth. Lying there, he prayed fervently that he had not been noticed. As he cautiously lifted his head, the flickering firelight illuminated a terrifying sight: a sea of yellowish-red eyes, filled

with malice, and rows of snarling teeth glared back at him from the shadows, their intent unmistakable.

He had unwittingly stumbled upon a dark ritual that no human had ever witnessed, a secret so sinister that those who did were never heard from again. The creature, a grotesque figure in the flickering light, pointed directly at Rudy. In that instant, a massive wave of rats surged forward, moving in perfect synchrony like an army, their yellowish-red eyes locked onto the intruder who dared to invade their territory. The thunderous sound of their tiny feet pounding against the ground sent icy tendrils of fear spiraling through Rudy's veins, prompting him to leap to his feet and flee into the shadowy depths of the woods.

Rudy barreled through the underbrush like a man possessed, branches clawing at his skin as he raced for his life. The cacophony of a thousand tiny paws chasing him urged him to run faster, adrenaline surging through his limbs. He burst from the dense foliage, only to trip and crash onto the pavement, the impact jolting him into stunned silence. However, the momentary daze was fleeting; the echo of the relentless black wave grew louder, urging him to scramble back to his feet and stagger toward the park entrance.

Panting heavily, Rudy halted at the threshold, feeling the sticky warmth of dried blood smeared across his face and the painful lump on his head, swollen and throbbing like a heartbeat. Several passersby rushed to his side, concern etched on their faces, but he barely registered them. Instead, his gaze darted back into the shadows of the park, where he could still see the eerie glow of those malevolent yellowish-red eyes watching him, hungry and unyielding in the darkness.

APARTMENT: NIGHT

After being treated and released from the hospital, Rudy hailed a cab, his heart still racing with remnants of terror. As the vehicle slowed and came to a stop in front of his apartment building, a familiar chill crept down his spine, a twinge of fear tightening its grip on him. He stepped out of the cab, hesitating for a moment before trudging up the worn steps toward the entrance. Fumbling with the keys, he felt as though the shadows in the dimly lit hallway were inching closer, whispering secrets he dared not hear. Finally, the door swung open, and he darted inside, slamming it shut with a force that echoed through the empty space. He locked the door behind him, his breath coming in quick gasps.

Rudy leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath to steady himself, then shuffled over to the window. Rubbing his throbbing head, he peered outside, scanning the street below, but found nothing amiss. With a sigh, he pulled down the shade, blocking out the night. He wandered into the kitchen, where he sank into a chair at the table, leaning back and continuing to massage his temples. This has to be a nightmare, he thought, or perhaps it is the drugs—crack, weed, meth, and cocaine—that have been my constant companions throughout the week. I really need to cut back, he muttered to himself, rising from the table and making his way back into the living room. One last glance out the window confirmed what he feared: the door was locked tight. Satisfied, he turned and headed into the bedroom. Lying in bed, Rudy's thoughts spiraled back to the horrifying scene in the park. Each time he closed his eyes, a cold shiver raced through him, jolting him awake. It took nearly an hour, but eventually, exhaustion claimed him, and he slipped into a deep, restless sleep, haunted by the images that refused to fade.

MORNING

The blaring wail of sirens heralded the dawn, slicing through the morning stillness as beams of sunlight pierced the tattered window shade, warming Rudy's face. He smacked his lips repeatedly, trying to dissolve the cottony residue that clung to his mouth, and gradually blinked awake, sitting on the edge of his bed. He lingered in that moment, feeling the weight of the night's terrors before rising, scratching at himself absently, and shuffling toward the window to lift the shade. Below, the street buzzed with the morning hustle—people darting about, their lives intertwining in a chaotic dance. With a playful grin, he began to sing, "Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a beautiful day, the sun is shining, and the garbage men are picking up the trash along the way."

As he scratched his backside, a chuckle escaped him, lightening his mood. He turned to head toward the bathroom, but paused at the mirror. The reflection staring back was a disheveled stranger, and he touched his face in disbelief, wondering who this ragged figure was and why it seemed to recognize him from some forgotten past. Reaching down to turn on the faucet, his hand plunged into an unseen abyss—a kettle brimming with squirming maggots and rotting entrails. Terror gripped him as he watched the larvae crawl up his arm, leaving a gruesome trail of shredded flesh. Panic surged through him as he fought to free his hand, but something unseen held it fast.

The agony escalated as more maggots feasted upon his skin; he screamed, collapsing to his knees, eyes squeezed shut against the cacophony of squirming horrors drawing closer, threatening to burrow into his very brain. But when he finally dared to open one eye, then the other, reality returned—everything was as it should be. Still staring at his reflection, he shrugged off the horrifying episode, convincing himself it was just an early morning nightmare, and stepped out of the bathroom, heart still racing.

Dressed and ready for the day, Rudy lingered in the kitchen doorway, scanning the shelves and fridge like a lion surveying a herd of wildebeest grazing in the golden savanna. He hoped to spot something appetizing among the remnants of last week's meals, a prize worthy of his morning hunt. After rummaging through various containers and finding nothing that sparked his appetite, he sighed in frustration. With a resigned shrug, he filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to brew coffee, the rich aroma soon wafting through the air.

He settled into a chair at the table, staring blankly at the chipped surface as thoughts of the previous night's terror crept back into his mind. The haunting images from the park replayed like a broken record, gnawing at the edges of his consciousness. Shaking off the dark thoughts, he rose abruptly, switched off the coffee pot, and padded into the living room. His jacket lay draped over the couch, and he snatched it up, feeling the weight of the fabric against his arm as he prepared to step outside into the world once more.

STREET

The early morning rush hour unfolded like a bustling marketplace as Rudy maneuvered through the crowded city streets, where honking cars and hurried pedestrians created a chaotic symphony of sounds. His gaze, however, was drawn to the parade of attractive women gliding by, like a sly old fox observing hens in a coop. One girl, clad in a snug body shirt and form-fitting jeans,

caught his attention; she moved with the elegance of a gazelle. As she passed, he couldn't help but murmur to himself, "Man, I'd love to have a taste of that cookie for dessert." He watched her until she melted into the throng, completely unaware that his forward momentum abruptly halted when he collided with a woman, sending her sprawling onto the pavement.

A look of shock washed over his face as he stared down at her, sprawled and disheveled. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Let me help you up," he offered, extending his hand in a gesture of assistance. But his kindness was met with a fierce rebuke. "Get your filthy hands off me, you pervert!" she shouted, shoving his hand away while scrambling to her feet and adjusting her clothes. By now, a small crowd had gathered, their eyes darting between Rudy and the woman, several men sizing him up with hawkish scrutiny.

"It's men like you who have nothing better to do than leer at women all day, giving decent, hard-working guys a bad name!" she exclaimed, indignation etched across her features. With a sheepish grin, Rudy took her in, appreciating the length of her slender frame. "I do have better things to do, but right now, admiring the voluptuous curves of shapely women like you is far more entertaining," he replied with a sarcastic lilt.

As the onlookers began to disperse, she shot him a withering glare and pushed past him. Undeterred, Rudy cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, "Hey lady, you've got a nice ass!" He watched her walk away, her back turned, and without looking back, she raised a middle finger in response. "I'd love to," he laughed, shaking his head as he continued on his way.

CENTRAL PARK

Rudy lingered at the park entrance, observing the steady stream of people filtering in, their laughter and playful banter echoing across the sunlit expanse. Children chased one another, their shrieks of joy mingling with the rustling leaves, creating a scene of innocent delight. Yet beneath the surface charm, Rudy carried a weighty secret from the night before that shattered this façade of tranquility. As he strolled toward the shadowy edge of the woods, an electric thrill coursed through him, tightening every muscle as if warning him of unseen dangers.

He paused, scanning the area for prying eyes, then cautiously stepped into the dense underbrush. Moving with the quiet grace of a stalking panther, he edged closer to a clearing where the trees thinned, revealing a tense confrontation between two figures. Just as he prepared to step fully into the light, a soft tap on his shoulder froze him in place. Panic surged through him as he envisioned the worst, convinced he had stumbled into something sinister. Whipping around, he swatted at whatever had touched him, heart racing.

To his relief, he found himself face-to-face with a police officer, who regarded him with a bemused expression, fingers tapping rhythmically against his holster. "What are you doing lurking around here?" the officer inquired, his tone sharp yet curious. "Just taking a look, officer," Rudy replied, attempting to mask his unease. The officer's nightstick was poised in his grip, ready for action, as he warned, "You'd best find somewhere else to be before I decide to lock you up."

As Rudy walked past the officer, he glanced back, noting the slight grin on the officer's face as he tapped his nightstick against his palm. "Is something wrong, Rudy?" the officer asked, stepping closer. "No, sir, just one last look. I don't want any trouble, so I'll be on my way. Thanks for your concern." Turning away, Rudy felt a sudden chill as he pondered how the officer knew his name without him having introduced himself. Spinning around, he discovered the officer had vanished, leaving behind only a thickening mist that curled up from the ground.

Approaching the park entrance, Rudy couldn't shake the eerie feeling of being watched. The hairs on his neck prickled, as if a sixth sense were alerting him to unseen eyes. Glancing over his shoulder, he spotted the officer again, standing motionless among children playing and joggers passing by, all oblivious to his presence. He waved, but the officer remained unresponsive. Realizing he was running late for his lunch date with Joanna, Rudy hurried toward the street, hailing a cab that skidded to a stop beside him. Without hesitation, he jumped inside, eager to escape the unsettling atmosphere of the park.

CAB

"Where to, pal?" the driver asked, glancing at Rudy through the rearview mirror. "The Red Chinese Restaurant on Seventh Avenue. Can you hurry? Joanna is going to kill me if I'm late!" Rudy pleaded, urgency lacing his voice. "Not my problem Rudy," the cab driver replied curtly, shifting gears and pulling away from the curb.

As the cab rattled along, Rudy's mind raced with questions. How did this driver know his name? Had they crossed paths before, perhaps in school? The thought gnawed at him, like a puzzle he could not quite piece together. "Did we go to the same school or something, I can't place your face, and I'm just curious how you knew my name," he expressed, half-heartedly hoping for an explanation.

"Oh, Rudy, I'm so disappointed you don't remember our little meeting that night in the park," the driver replied, his voice dripping with mockery. "Didn't you enjoy the entertaining battle between me and my rival?"

Suddenly, the driver leaned over the seat, twisting his head slowly to reveal a grotesque visage—a rat-like face with coal-black eyes and bloodstained teeth. A scream tore from Rudy's throat as he clawed at the back of the seat, instinctively pushing himself back against the window, desperate to escape.

Amidst his panic, he heard muffled words and felt something clawing at him. Just then, his eyes flew open to find the furious glare of the cab driver. "What the hell have you been smoking? Some of that black, red, yellow gunja weed shit from down under?" the driver shouted, his voice a mix of anger and disbelief. "You're back here screaming and kicking the seat like the devil himself is trying to drag your soul to hell!" "Sorry, man, it must have been a bad dream or something," Rudy stammered, still shaken.

"Sorry, my ass, I do not care what it was. Pay me my fee so I can get away from your crazy ass!" the cab driver barked, slamming the door as he sped off, leaving Rudy standing there,

bewildered. He took a moment to gather his thoughts, trying to make sense of the bizarre encounter before trudging up the street toward the restaurant.

RESTAURANT

Joanna traced her fingertip around the rim of her wine glass, her gaze drifting to a couple across the room lost in their own world. They leaned in closer, whispering sweet nothings and exchanging playful touches, their laughter ringing like music in the air. A gentle tap on her shoulder broke her reverie, and she turned to find Rudy standing there, his smile wide and mischievous. “You’re late!” she exclaimed, irritation lacing her voice. “Why are you grinning like that?”

He slid into the seat beside her, his fingers gliding along her shoulder and down her arm with a teasing warmth. “I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes locking onto hers, shimmering like amber jewels. “Something came up that needed my attention. Can you forgive me?” He suddenly dropped to one knee, pressing a kiss to her hand, his expression earnest.

Joanna felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she caught sight of curious glances from nearby tables. She quickly withdrew her hand, a smile creeping onto her lips despite herself. “Stop that! People are staring!” Rudy glanced around the bustling restaurant before turning his gaze back to her, his grin still playful. “I want them to see how much I love you,” he declared, unabashed.

“Get up and sit down,” she replied, shaking her head, though her heart softened at his words. “You know I can never stay mad at you for more than a minute.” He leaned in, planting a quick kiss on her lips, then settled back into his chair. They exchanged menus, ready to order their lunch, the earlier tension melting away in the warmth of their connection.

BUILDING HALLWAY (JOANNA’S)

Joanna opened the door to her apartment, pausing for a heartbeat as she turned to face Rudy. “Thanks for lunch,” she said, her smile brightening the dim hallway. “It was my pleasure,” he replied, gently taking her hand and drawing her closer. Their lips met in a tender kiss, and she playfully brushed her fingers across his mouth. “Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?” she whispered softly, her breath warm against his ear.

“That would be nice,” he said, warmth flooding through him, barely contained as she kissed him again, her hand gliding over his side. “What time should I expect you?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Anytime now, if you don’t stop,” he chuckled, locking eyes with her. They held each other’s gaze, laughter bubbling up between them until it erupted into joyful peals. “I’ll see you around seven-thirty, if that’s okay with you, my love.”

“Don’t be late,” she teased, her tone light. “Now close your eyes; I have something for you.” She placed her hand on his chest for a fleeting moment before turning away and slipping inside, closing the door with a soft click.

Rudy stood there, waiting for the kiss that never came. When he finally opened his eyes, he found a little boy standing in front of him, grinning widely. He reached down and patted the boy on the head before walking down the hall, Joanna's laughter echoing like music from behind the closed door.

STREET

A peculiar sensation crept over Rudy, as if eyes were tracking his every move. He glanced over his shoulder but found only empty pavement, prompting him to slip into a nearby barbershop. The barber, a lean man with a meticulously groomed beard and sharp attire, observed Rudy for a moment as he stood at the door, peering out into the street. After a few seconds, he approached, tapping Rudy lightly on the shoulder. "Can I help you with something?" he inquired, his expression a mixture of curiosity and concern.

Startled, Rudy spun around, meeting the barber's scrutinizing gaze. "No, sir, I thought it might rain, but it looks clear now," he stammered, waving dismissively as he backed away toward the exit. As he stepped outside, he could feel the barber's eyes on him, a lingering scrutiny that made him uneasy.

Standing in the doorway, the barber scratched his head, watching Rudy retreat down the sidewalk. "This city sure has some characters," he muttered to himself, shaking his head before returning to his work, the bell above the door jingling softly as it closed behind Rudy.

BUILDING HALLWAY (RUDY'S)

As Rudy ascended the creaking stairs to his apartment, a heavy dampness clung to the air, wrapping around him like a shroud. An unsettling feeling twisted in his gut as he reached the top landing and ambled down the narrow corridor toward his door. He fumbled with his keys, the metallic jangle echoing in the stillness until he finally found the right one and slid it into the lock. Just as he turned the knob, something darted across his feet, prompting him to leap back in shock. His jaw dropped as he beheld the largest rat he had ever seen, its sleek body racing down the hall before it vanished into the wall like a wisp of smoke.

Rudy blinked, rubbed his eyes, and squinted at the spot where the creature had disappeared, but it was gone. Cautiously, he approached the wall, kneeling to inspect the area where the rat had entered. There was no hole, just solid plaster. What the hell, that thing must have chewed through the wall and somehow slipped out, he mused, marveling at the creature's audacity.

Suddenly, without warning, the rat leaped from the wall and landed squarely on his back. Rudy yelped, tumbling to the floor, flailing like a dog resisting a bath. Miss Beatrice, his elderly neighbor, burst from her apartment, wielding a broom like a knight with a sword, while other residents peeked out from their doors, curiosity piqued. "What's the matter, Rudy?" she shouted her voice sharp with concern as he writhed on the ground.

"There's a rat on my back! Can't you see it?" he cried, glancing over his shoulder. Miss Beatrice frowned and swatted him with her broom. "There's no rat, you faker! Now get up and stop acting like a fool!" He pushed himself onto his knees, patting down his back as if to confirm the

creature's presence was real. When he looked up, Miss Beatrice regarded him with a mixture of confusion and irritation. "You could have given an old woman like me a heart attack with that ridiculous stunt! You should be ashamed!"

Rudy kept his distance from her and the broom as he stood up, pointing at the wall. "I swear there was a rat! It jumped right out at me!" The other neighbors exchanged skeptical glances, sighing deeply before retreating behind their doors to resume their interrupted activities. With a disbelieving shake of her head, Miss Beatrice returned to her apartment, casting Rudy a pitying glance before shutting the door. Alone in the hallway, he stared intently at the wall for several moments, then finally turned and stepped into his own apartment, the door clicking shut behind him.

APARTMENT

Rudy scanned his apartment, his heart racing as he half-expected another rat to scurry out from behind the couch or under the kitchen table. The thought of his upcoming date with Joanna broke through the tension, and he darted a glance at the clock—almost six. A surge of urgency propelled him toward the bathroom, where he quickly stepped into the shower, letting the warm water cascade over him, washing away the remnants of the day's chaos. After drying off, he pulled on a crisp shirt and fitted jeans, glancing in the mirror to ensure he looked presentable. With one last sweep of the room, he took a deep breath, steeling himself against any lingering unease, before finally stepping out the door, the click of the lock echoing in the stillness behind him.

Chapter 2

STREET

As Rudy stepped out of his building, he strolled down the street, a light melody escaping his lips, filling the air with a hint of cheer. The sun dipped low on the horizon, casting a warm golden hue over everything. He approached the quaint florist shop, its window bursting with vibrant blooms—roses, daisies, and lilies all vying for attention. Pushing open the door, a delicate bell chimed overhead, announcing his arrival.

FLORIST SHOP

Rudy scanned the shop, his gaze landing on a cluster of roses. He picked one up, its velvety petals soft against his fingertips, and held it aloft. "Hey, how much are these?" he asked, glancing over at the florist. The man looked up, adjusting his glasses with a smirk. "I'm not your pal, and those are two dollars each." Rudy examined the flower again, and then shot a look back at the florist. "Two dollars each, I could stroll through the park and pick better ones for free." The florist removed his glasses, leaning forward slightly. "Then why don't you?" he replied with a cocky grin. Taken aback, Rudy stammered, "I would, but I don't have the time right now. Just give me a dozen and deliver them to this address." After handing over the cash, Rudy turned and stepped out of the shop, the bell jingling softly behind him.

JOANNA'S APARTMENT

Rudy strolled down the dimly lit hallway toward Joanna's apartment, his heart thrumming in anticipation as he raised his hand to knock on the door. It swung open to reveal Joanna, her face lighting up with a warm smile that made his stomach flutter. "You look nice," Rudy said, his voice barely above a whisper. She stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and pressed her lips softly against his, sending a jolt of electricity through him. "Well, are you coming in, or are you going to stand out there all night?" she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief. Before he could muster a reply, Joanna playfully tugged him inside, her laughter echoing in the small space as she shut the door behind them with a gentle thud.

Joanna lingered by the door, her gaze fixed on him with an intensity that made his heart race. He lifted the bottle of wine, its glass glinting in the soft light. "I brought this to go with our dinner," he said, his voice tinged with nervous excitement. She remained silent for a moment, her eyes sparkling as she took him in. "Um, I'll go put it in the refrigerator," he stammered, turning to head into the kitchen.

When he emerged, he found Joanna seated on the couch, a playful smile dancing on her lips. She beckoned him over, and like a bashful schoolboy, he shuffled toward her, settling down beside her. The distance between them vanished as she leaned in closer, her warm breath tickling his neck before her lips found their way to his skin, trailing up to his ear. "It's time for me to thank you for the roses," she whispered, her voice low and sultry. Rising from the couch, she entwined her fingers with his, guiding him gently toward the bedroom, her laughter echoing softly in the intimate space.

STREET

The city simmered under the weight of another sultry night. Kevin and Darrel lounged on the corner of Marion Ave, just like they did whenever the heat wrapped around them like a thick blanket. With a casual flick of his wrist, Kevin handed over the bottle of Old-E, its label slightly crumpled from countless passes. Darrel wiped his palm across the top, a ritual of sorts, before taking a long swig, the bitter liquid gliding down his throat. Kevin playfully thumped him on the head, eliciting a mock glare from Darrel. "Yo man, I don't want to catch your germs, so chill," he shot back, rolling his eyes.

With a grin, Kevin leaned over and pressed the play button on his boom box, the speakers crackling to life. As the beats thumped through the air, the two boys nodded their heads in sync, letting the rhythm wash over them. "Yo, who's kicking those death beats?" Darrel asked, his curiosity piqued. "I don't know, some new rap group, but they slam way too hard," Kevin replied, excitement lighting up his face as he jumped to his feet, breaking into an impromptu dance that matched the pulse of the music.

Darrel began to clap his hands in rhythm with the pulsating beats when, without warning, the radio erupted in a violent explosion, scattering shards of twisted metal and shattered plastic across the pavement. Kevin, thrown off balance, found himself sprawled on the ground for a moment, disoriented. He blinked rapidly, then turned his head to check on Darrel, who lay on his side, motionless. "Darrel! Darrel!" Kevin yelled, his voice trembling with panic.

As silence enveloped him, Kevin struggled to rise, but a jolt of agony shot through his left leg, forcing him to crumple back onto the pavement. He glanced down, his heart racing at the sight of a jagged shard of plastic embedded deep in his calf. Panic surged within him, but he pushed it aside; Darrel needed him. Gritting his teeth, he began to crawl toward his friend, each movement igniting fresh waves of pain. Just then, a shadow loomed over him, halting his progress. He turned his head, squinting against the dim light. "Looking for me, cockroach breeder?" a man's voice taunted from above. Kevin's gaze darted back to Darrel, who lay still on the ground, and he saw the man kneeling beside him. "Who the hell are you? Get away from Darrel!" Kevin shouted, fury and fear intertwining in his voice.

The man's laughter echoed, a cruel sound that ignited fury in Kevin. "Whoever you are, you're a dead motherfucker!" he screamed, his voice raw with rage. The man glanced down at Darrel, then back at Kevin, a twisted smile stretching across his face. "I don't think so, roach breeder. What are you going to do? Kill me with a roach bomb? Here, take a closer look at your friend." He shoved the lifeless body into the light, exposing the horrific sight. Half of Darrel's head was missing, and a viscous gray substance oozed from the gaping wound, overwhelming Kevin's senses. A wave of nausea crashed over him, and he instinctively clamped a hand over his mouth, but it was futile. The bile surged forth, spilling onto the pavement as he fought to suppress the horror. The man rose to his feet, advancing slowly, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "What's the matter, roach breeder? You don't like your friend anymore?"

A sharp click pierced the air, followed by a howl of agony as the man stumbled back, clutching his leg. Blood pooled beneath his fingers, vivid and glistening against the asphalt. His gaze darted to Kevin, who stood resolute, a knife gleaming ominously in his grip. "I was going to let you live, roach breeder," the man sneered, a twisted grin spreading across his face. "But now that you've made me bleed, I guess I'll have to take your life."

Fear gripped Kevin, his heart racing as he instinctively raised his hands in a futile gesture of surrender. Suddenly, a thunderous crack shattered the night, and Kevin felt a violent force rip through him. The world around him blurred as the back of his head erupted in a gruesome spray of blood, flesh and bone, painting the ground in crimson.

The man glanced down at the smoking .44 Magnum in his hand, then tucked it away into his jacket, his eyes narrowing as they fell upon the lifeless form of Kevin. "Sorry, roach breeder," he mocked, a sinister chuckle escaping his lips. "You should've been nicer to me; you might still be alive." With that, he turned and limped into the shadows, leaving behind the echoes of his laughter mingling with the darkness.

From its concealed vantage point across the street, it observed the man retreat into the darkness. With deliberate slowness, it glided across the pavement, each step measured and silent. As it neared the gruesome scene, it stooped low, fingers brushing against the cold surface to collect a ragged piece of flesh that lay discarded. Without hesitation, it savored the morsel, relishing the taste of warm blood still clinging to the meat. Tonight, it would not need to hunt; the bounty was already here. Hoisting one lifeless body over its shoulder, it grasped the other by the leg,

dragging it along with an ease that belied the weight. With a final glance around, it slipped back into the shadows, melding seamlessly into the night.

APARTMENT

Rudy stirred awake, the soft light filtering through the curtains casting a gentle glow over the room. He turned his head to find Joanna nestled under the blankets, her chest rising and falling in a peaceful rhythm. Carefully, he slipped out of bed, the sheets whispering against his skin as he padded quietly across the cool wooden floor. The bathroom door creaked softly as he entered, the air thick with the scent of lavender soap. He turned on the shower, steam curling around him as he let the warm water cascade over his body, washing away the remnants of sleep.

Once dressed in a crisp shirt and well-fitted jeans, he leaned down, pressing a tender kiss to Joanna's forehead, feeling the warmth of her skin against his lips. He paused for a moment, watching her serene expression, then grabbed a small notepad from the nightstand. With swift strokes, he scrawled a note, his handwriting careful and neat, before placing it gently beside her.

Stepping back, he took one last look at the woman who filled his life with light before slipping out of the apartment. The door clicked shut behind him, and he descended the staircase, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the quiet hallway as he headed toward the day that awaited him.

STREET

As Rudy strolled down the street, a light melody danced on his lips. He passed a mound of garbage, its stench rising like a thick fog, when a rustling sound caught his attention. Curiosity piqued, he turned to find a scruffy rat scouring through the refuse, its beady eyes glinting with mischief. Determined to catch it, he scanned the ground for something to hurl. Spotting a glass bottle nestled in the cracks of the sidewalk, he snatched it up, feeling the cool weight in his hand.

With a predator's stealth, he crept closer, aiming carefully before launching the bottle. It sailed through the air but missed its mark, shattering against the pavement as the rat darted away, its tiny legs propelling it forward. "You nasty son of a bitch! I'm going to smash your fucking head!" Rudy bellowed, adrenaline surging as he took off in pursuit. The rat scurried into the shadows of an abandoned building, and without hesitation, Rudy plunged after it, his heart racing.

Suddenly, he halted, a chill creeping up his spine. The creature stood before him, eyes gleaming with malevolence, blood dribbling from its jagged mouth. "Come on over, Rudy, so you can smash my fucking head," it taunted, a sinister grin stretching across its face, sending a wave of dread coursing through him.

Rudy took a cautious step backward, inching toward the exit of the building. The shadows pooled in the doorway, thick and suffocating, and he squinted into the darkness, where the creature beckoned him with a twisted gesture, urging him to return. Time seemed to freeze as he hesitated, his heart pounding in his chest. Without warning, the creature lunged from the shadows, its form shifting grotesquely midair, morphing into something far more menacing. A

scream tore from Rudy's throat as he turned on his heel, sprinting down the street. Glancing back, he caught a glimpse of the rat, its beady eyes glimmering like shards of glass, fixed on him with an unsettling intensity.

OFFICE

Rudy burst through the building's entrance, his heart still racing from his earlier encounter. He strode purposefully to the elevator, his fingers jabbing the button with urgency. The doors hesitated for a heartbeat before sliding open with a soft whoosh. He stepped inside, pressing the button for the fourth floor as the doors sealed shut behind him.

When the elevator chimed and opened again, he stepped out into the dimly lit corridor, the muted buzz of fluorescent lights overhead casting a sterile glow. He made his way to the Corriers office, the familiar scent of stale coffee and paper wafting through the air.

As he pushed the door open, his boss glared at him from behind a cluttered desk, eyes narrowed in irritation. "You're ten minutes late. What's your excuse? It better be good," he barked, his voice dripping with annoyance.

Rudy swallowed hard, his throat dry as he caught the piercing gaze of his boss, who was tapping his watch impatiently. "Well, you see, sir," he stammered, trying to gather his thoughts. "I was walking to work when I spotted this rat. I thought I could catch it with a bottle, but it bolted away. I chased it into an abandoned building, and then... it turned around and chased me out. That's why I'm late," he finished, his voice faltering as he cleared his throat, hoping his explanation would suffice.

His boss stared at him, disbelief etched across his features as one eyebrow arched sharply. "Say what? That's the wildest load of crap I've ever heard, and oddly well-structured," he scoffed, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Did you pull that from the loony bin over in New York?"

The boss stepped closer, his hand landing heavily on Rudy's shoulder, locking eyes with him. "Listen, Rudy, I like you, but if you're late again, I'll toss you out of here so fast it'll make your head spin. You get me?" A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, but the threat lingered beneath the surface.

Rudy nodded, a mix of embarrassment and resignation washing over him. The boss turned away, retreating into his office with a dismissive wave. Rudy shuffled into the messenger room, feeling the weight of the morning's chaos still clinging to him. He sank onto the worn couch, staring up at the cracked ceiling tiles, and let the exhaustion envelop him as he drifted off into a restless sleep.

Hours slipped by in the dim office, the air thick with silence until the boss finally emerged from his lair. He surveyed the room with a critical eye, his gaze landing on the messenger room. Shaking his head in disbelief, he strode over to the couch where Rudy lay sprawled, and his voice erupted like a thunderclap. "Get up, you lazy bum! First, you waltz in late, and now you're napping on my dime!"

Startled, Rudy bolted upright, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “I wasn’t sleeping! I was just resting my eyes, that’s all!” he protested, his voice cracking under the weight of embarrassment. The boss smirked, crossing his arms. “Well, you can rest at home because there are no messages for you today. It’s quitting time.”

With a heavy sigh, Rudy pushed himself off the couch and trudged toward the door. As he made his way out, he felt a dozen pairs of eyes boring into him, heads bobbing up and down over cubicle walls like gophers peeking from their holes. His boss lingered in the doorway, a gleam of mischief in his eyes. “Don’t let the rats beat you up on the way home!” he called out, laughter bubbling in his voice. Rudy shot him the finger, a defiant gesture that only fueled his boss’s amusement, the sound of his laughter echoing behind him as he exited the office.

STREET

Rudy stepped out of the office building, the chill of the evening air hitting him like a slap. He paused for a moment, glancing back at the looming structure, its windows reflecting the fading light of day. With a resigned sigh, he turned and made his way to the curb, his shoes scuffing against the cracked pavement. A yellow cab caught his eye, its headlights cutting through the dusk, and he raised his hand in a quick wave. The cab slowed, pulling over with a soft hiss of brakes. He climbed inside, the scent of stale cigarettes and cheap air freshener enveloping him as he closed the door with a finality that echoed in the quiet street.

CAB

The cab driver glanced at Rudy through the rearview mirror, a lazy smirk curling his lips as he exhaled a cloud of smoke that hung thick in the air. Rudy coughed violently, waving a hand in front of his face to disperse the acrid haze. “Where to, bud?” the driver asked, his voice gravelly and disinterested. “The Village,” Rudy replied, trying to mask his irritation as he settled back into the cracked vinyl seat, the faint scent of mildew mingling with the stale tobacco.

The cab lurched away from the curb, the engine roaring to life as Rudy sank back into the cracked vinyl seat, his eyelids fluttering shut. He began to hum a familiar tune, the vibrations of the music soothing him momentarily. When he finally opened his eyes, the world outside had morphed into a dizzying smear of colors. Frowning, he leaned forward and tapped the driver’s shoulder. “Hey man, why are we going so fast?”

The cab driver turned his head slowly, a wide grin spreading across his face, his eyes shimmering with an unnatural light. “Hello, Rudy. I’ve come to take you to the master.”

Rudy recoiled, his heart racing as a chill slithered down his spine. “Holy shit! Let me out of here! Did you hear me? I said let me out!” Panic surged within him as hands erupted from the cracks in the seat, gripping him tightly. “Let me go! I’m not going to see your master!” he screamed, desperation clawing at his throat. With a surge of adrenaline, he wrenched himself free from the grasp of the hands that emerged from the seat. In one swift motion, he flung open the door and hurled himself into the night, the asphalt rushing up to meet him as he hit the ground hard.

STREET

Rudy tumbled onto the asphalt, the gritty surface scraping against his palms as he scrambled to his feet. Heart pounding, he dashed into the street, narrowly avoiding the blaring horns of passing cars. He dared a glance over his shoulder, searching for any sign of pursuit. Suddenly, he collided with something solid and fell back onto the pavement, the impact jarring him.

Before him loomed a creature, its breath ragged and heavy, studying him with predatory intent, like a lion sizing up its prey. "Thought you could escape, didn't you?" it taunted, its voice a low growl that sent shivers down Rudy's spine. Panic surged as he began to crawl backward, desperately trying to distance himself from the looming threat. The creature's clawed hand reached down, fingers curling toward him with a menacing grace.

Rudy squeezed his eyes shut, a scream tearing from his throat as he felt the creature's claws tear into his flesh, shaking him violently as if he were nothing more than a rag doll. When he finally opened his eyes, the familiar skyline of the city was replaced by the cab driver's face, his expression a mix of annoyance and disbelief.

"Hey man, if you're on drugs, get the hell out of my cab! I don't need this shit," the driver barked, smoke curling from his lips. Rudy inhaled deeply, the reality crashing back in. "I'm okay. It was just a dream... I must have dozed off."

The cab driver eyed him suspiciously. "Alright, but don't you go back to sleep, or I'll toss your ass out of my cab, you got it?" Rudy nodded, the weight of the nightmare still clinging to him. "Yeah, I get it."

The cab rolled to a stop in front of his apartment building, the engine sputtering before falling silent. Rudy fished out a crumpled bill from his pocket, handing it over to the driver with a shaky hand. He stepped out into the cool evening air, the scent of rain soaked asphalt mingling with the faint aroma of blooming night jasmine. As he watched the cab pull away, its taillights flickering like distant stars, a shiver ran down his spine. He turned and trudged toward the entrance of the building, his footsteps echoing against the concrete as he pushed through the heavy glass door, the familiar creak of the hinges greeting him like an old friend.

APARTMENT

Rudy pushed the door open to his apartment, peering into the dimly lit space, his gaze darting around as if expecting someone to leap out from the shadows. "Hello? Is anyone here?" he called, his voice echoing slightly in the stillness. Sensing the familiar solitude, he stepped inside, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it onto the chair with a tired thud. He flicked on the TV, the screen flickering to life, casting a soft glow in the otherwise dark room. Collapsing onto the couch, he rubbed his temples, feeling the weight of the day settle heavily on him. "Man, what a rough day," he muttered, the exhaustion creeping deeper into his bones as he sank into the worn cushions.

Rudy pushed himself up from the couch, his joints creaking as he shuffled into the kitchen. He yanked open the refrigerator door, the cold air spilling out as he reached for the plate of leftover

chicken from the night before. As his fingers brushed the cool ceramic, he recoiled in horror; a writhing mass of maggots covered the surface, their pale bodies squirming in grotesque unison. Heart racing, he slammed the fridge shut, the sound echoing in the silence of the apartment. He stood frozen for a moment, breathless and disoriented, battling disbelief. Could he have imagined it? With trembling hands, he opened the door again, only to find the plate pristine, untouched by anything but the chill of the fridge. Confusion gnawed at him as he closed the door once more, retreating back to the living room. He sank onto the couch, his mind racing with dread. What the hell is happening to me?

APARTMENT (JOANNA'S)

Joanna reclined in her chair, the flickering light from the television casting shadows across her features. As the soft hum of the show lulled her, her eyelids grew heavy, and she drifted into a deep slumber. In her dream, she felt Rudy's warmth enveloping her as they made love, the world around them fading away. But when she opened her eyes, instead of Rudy's familiar face, a grotesque creature loomed above her, its eyes glinting with malice. "I'm your new lover now!" it hissed, sending a jolt of terror through her.

She awoke with a scream, heart racing as she scanned the dim room, her breath hitching in her throat. "My God, it was just a dream," she whispered, but the vividness of the nightmare still clung to her like a chill. Shaking off the remnants of fear, she rose unsteadily from the chair and padded into the kitchen, the floor cool beneath her feet. She poured herself a cup of warm milk, watching the steam curl upward like wisps of her fading nightmare.

Settling at the table, she cradled the mug in her hands, the warmth soothing her trembling fingers. A wave of uncertainty washed over her as she pondered whether to call Rudy, the thought of his voice both comforting and terrifying.

STREET

The creature lurked in the shadows of the alley, its gaze fixed on Joanna's window, where the faint glow of light flickered. A soft rustling broke the silence, drawing its attention to the street below. A homeless man rummaged through a pile of discarded refuse, his hands deftly prying open a can. As he leaned closer, the creature observed him pull out a piece of meat, lifting it to his nose with a puzzled expression. "What's wrong with people tossing away a perfectly good steak?" he muttered, tucking the prize into his pocket before resuming his search among the trash.

With each step, the creature drew nearer, its breath shallow and predatory. The man remained oblivious, lost in his scavenging, until the creature's foot crunched down on a glass bottle, shattering it underfoot. The homeless man jerked upright, eyes darting around. "Who's there? I can see you, whoever you are!"

"Can you really see me when I'm right behind you?" the creature whispered, a sinister grin stretching across its face. The man turned, backing away as panic set in. "What do you want? You want a piece of my steak?" He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out the meat as if it were a

peace offering, holding it up with trembling hands. The creature paused, its gaze locked onto the morsel, then shifted back to the man's face.

It advanced slowly, the air thickening with tension, causing the homeless man to stumble over a stack of cans, crashing to the ground. "I want you," the creature hissed, its voice low and hungry. "It's time to dine."

It seized the homeless man by the throat, lifting him effortlessly off the ground as panic flooded his eyes. The man choked and clawed at the creature's grip, gasping for air, but as the pressure intensified, crimson rivulets trickled from the corners of his mouth. His body convulsed in a desperate struggle, limbs thrashing violently until suddenly, it went still. The creature released its hold, letting the lifeless form drop to the pavement with a dull thud. It loomed over the fallen man, a low growl rumbling in its throat as it savored the moment before bringing its foot down with brutal force, shattering the skull like a ripe fruit.

As it stepped away into the shadows, the remnants of the gruesome act—gray matter and blood—spattered across the sidewalk, a grotesque offering. In an instant, the alley erupted with the sound of squealing and frantic scurrying as rats emerged from every crevice, their beady eyes glistening with hunger. They swarmed the discarded carcass, feasting ravenously on the remains left behind by their master, a macabre feast in the heart of the night.

APARTMENT

Rudy lay sprawled across the couch, the morning paper crinkling softly like leaves underfoot as he scanned the headlines, his eyes flicking over the familiar words. The phone's sudden ring sliced through the quiet, a sharp intrusion that jolted him from his reverie. He reached for the receiver, its weight feeling foreign in his hand. "Hello, this is your lover boy at your service! How may I assist you?" he quipped, trying to inject some levity into the moment. "Rudy, it's Joanna!" Her voice quivered, urgency lacing her tone like a thread pulling tight. "Joanna, I was just kidding around—what's up?" he replied, the playful banter fading as he sensed her distress. "Nothing much, but can you come over? I really need to talk." His body shot up like a lightning bolt, fueled by a sudden surge of concern and worry.

the paper slipping from his fingers and fluttering to the floor, forgotten. "Is everything okay? You sound upset." A heavy silence stretched between them, and he could almost hear her heartbeat through the line. "Joanna, are you still there?" "Yes, I'm here," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "There is something wrong. Please, can you come?" "Of course, I'll be right over." Rudy hung up, a sense of unease settling in his stomach. He threw on his jacket, the fabric feeling oddly constricting as he stepped out the door, the chill of the morning air hitting him like a warning.

APARTMENT (JOANNA'S)

A sharp knock echoed through the apartment, pulling Joanna from her thoughts in the kitchen. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and opened the door, revealing Rudy, his features softened by the morning light. Without hesitation, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him,

savoring the warmth of his embrace for a brief moment before stepping back to let him in. They moved into the living room, the air thick with unspoken tension as they settled onto the couch.

Rudy turned to her, concern etched across his brow. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice low and steady. A nervous laugh escaped Joanna's lips, breaking the heaviness. "Oh! You won't believe the dream I had last night," she began, her eyes wide with both embarrassment and disbelief. "Something with big eyes was... making love to me. It was so awful!" He raised an eyebrow, a mix of confusion and intrigue crossing his face. "Have you been to the park lately?"

Joanna shook her head, puzzled. "No, but what does that have to do with my dream?" "Nothing really," he replied, shrugging lightly, "I just thought it might help distract you." "Distract me? I can't get it out of my head! It was too horrifying. And besides, I was supposed to be making love to you in that dream!"

Rudy shot up from the couch, feigning indignation. "Oh! Thanks a lot! Now I have two big eyes—did I have any scales?" He laughed, trying to lighten the mood, but the shadows of her nightmare lingered between them, thickening the air with unease.

She grasped his hand, yanking him back down onto the couch. "Stop it, Rudy! This is serious; it could be a sign or something!" He chuckled, shaking his head. "Come off it, Joanna. It was just a dream—nothing more, nothing less. Now, if you want some real loving, let's head to the bedroom."

With a huff, she stood up, crossing the room to the window, her gaze lost in the distance. "I'm not in the mood," she replied, her voice laced with frustration. Undeterred, Rudy rose from the couch, striding toward her while making silly noises that made her turn and glare. "Stop it, Rudy! That's not funny!" In a playful burst of energy, he lunged at her, prompting Joanna to squeal and dart away, laughter mingling with panic as he chased her into the bedroom.

Rudy grasped Joanna's waist, and together they tumbled onto the bed, laughter spilling from her lips. "Now I have two big eyes, and I'm going to make love to you!" he teased, her giggles ringing like chimes in the air. His gaze roamed over her, drinking in every curve before he began to undress her, first with his eyes, then peeling away each garment until her bare skin glowed in the soft light, igniting a fire within him.

He shed his own clothes, joining her on the bed, where their lips met in a fervent kiss. Joanna rolled onto him, her warmth enveloping him, but the moment was fleeting as he shifted, laying her back against the sheets. His hands began their exploration, gliding down her stomach, teasingly brushing between her thighs. She gasped, instinctively parting her legs, inviting him deeper as he tenderly massaged her most intimate self.

Rudy locked eyes with her, the connection electric as he positioned himself between her legs, entering her warmth slowly. Their breaths quickened, a symphony of desire building around them. With each thrust, Joanna opened herself further, urging him deeper into her, the rhythm of their bodies matching the frantic beat of their hearts. As he felt the tension within him peak, she wrapped her legs around him, holding him close, knowing he was on the brink of release.

With a shuddering moan, he surrendered, filling her completely. They shared a lingering kiss before he settled beside her, gazing into her eyes. "Did I do it this good in your dream?" he asked, a playful grin tugging at his lips. She beamed back at him, "No, you did it better!" "Ha! Very funny, next, you'll say I had a bigger pecker too," he quipped, feigning indignation. "You did!" she laughed, her voice light and teasing.

He turned away, mocking disgust crossing his face. "Oh, forget it; you're always joking." She snuggled closer, her voice a soft coo, "Is the little baby upset? Come here, let mommy make it better." He chuckled, looking at her with affection. "You act so crazy sometimes." She leaned in for a kiss, her smile radiant. "That's why you love me so much." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. "So true, we're just two crazy people in love."

They slipped out of bed, the sheets still warm from their shared heat, and padded into the bathroom. The sound of water splashing filled the air as they stepped beneath the cascading spray, laughter mingling with the steam that enveloped them. After rinsing off, they dressed in comfortable clothes, the playful energy lingering between them. Joanna walked Rudy to the door, her fingers entwined with his. "I'll call you later tonight," he said. With a soft smile playing on her lips "I'll be waiting," she replied, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. They shared a lingering kiss, a sweet promise hanging in the air, before he turned and stepped out into the morning daylight, leaving her with a fluttering heart.

Chapter 3

STREET

Rudy stepped out of the building, the door creaking softly behind him as he made his way down the cracked pavement. The air was crisp, carrying the faint scent of summer leaves and distant car exhaust. He spotted a pay phone standing sentinel at the corner, its bright yellow paint peeling in patches. With a quick glance around, he approached it and lifted the receiver, the cool plastic feeling foreign against his ear., his fingers dancing over the worn keypad as he dialed Mark's number.

The phone rang, each tone reverberating through the stillness of the street, until a voice finally emerged, muffled and heavy with sleep. Just as Rudy opened his mouth to speak, the line abruptly cut off with a sharp clatter, the receiver crashing down, echoing in his ear like a ghostly farewell. Frowning, he pulled the phone away, studying it with bewilderment before pressing it back to his ear, an unsettling heaviness coiling in his stomach. Then, a girl's voice broke through the silence. "Hello? Um, is Mark there?" she mumbled, her words slurred with drowsiness. "Yeah, hold on. Mark, it's some dude for you," she added, her tone casual and unfazed. Rudy could hear Mark's groggy voice grumble on the other end, "Hello? Who is this?" "What's up, Mark? It's me, Rudy. Hope I didn't interrupt anything." "You did, my sleep," Mark replied, irritation lacing his words. "What's going on? I haven't heard from you in a while."

"Not much. Hey, can you meet me for lunch at Vinny's Place? My treat," Rudy said, trying to keep his tone light. "Sure, why not? But is everything okay?" Mark's voice was laced with

concern. “This is the first time you’ve ever offered to buy me lunch. Is Joanna pregnant?” “No, no, she’s not pregnant. I just need to talk to you about something important, that’s all,” Rudy replied, feeling the weight of the moment. “Alright, alright, no need to get defensive. I’ll meet you at Vinny’s Place around noon,” Mark said, a hint of curiosity creeping into his voice.

Rudy ended the call and stepped onto the sunlit street, his mind still buzzing with the conversation. Suddenly, a piercing scream shattered the morning calm, sending chills racing down his spine. He scanned the area, but the street lay eerily empty. Just as he began to dismiss it, a loud crash echoed nearby. Instinctively, he ducked behind a rusted car, peering cautiously up the street.

From the shadows of a dim alley, a grotesque creature emerged, its limbs elongated and unnatural, dragging a lifeless body behind it. The creature lumbered into the open, its movements jerky and unsettling as it approached a manhole. With an unsettling ease, it lifted the heavy cover and discarded the body into the gaping darkness below. For a moment, it paused, glancing around as if sensing an unseen presence, before vanishing into the black shadows below.

Rudy blinked hard, trying to shake off the surreal image. The manhole remained ajar, a yawning maw that beckoned him closer. Heart pounding, he rose from his hiding spot and cautiously approached the edge, peering into the abyss. Only impenetrable blackness greeted him. A shiver coursed through him as he turned away, casting one last wary glance over his shoulder to ensure he was alone before hastening down the street, urgency propelling him forward.

RESTAURANT

Rudy sat at the small, round table, a frosty beer in hand, the bubbles dancing against the glass. He scanned the bustling restaurant, the air thick with the savory aroma of fried food and the chatter of patrons. His gaze landed on Mark, who was just stepping through the door, his tall frame silhouetted against the sunlight streaming in. Rudy shot up from his chair, waving enthusiastically to catch his friend's attention. Mark ambled over, a casual grin spreading across his face as he slid into the seat opposite Rudy. Checking his watch, Rudy raised an eyebrow at Mark. “You’re late. What took you so long?” Mark chuckled, leaning back in his chair. “One does not hurry when he is with a beautiful woman,” he replied, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Rudy couldn’t help but smile at the quip. “So, what has you so keyed up that you would treat me to lunch?” Mark asked, curiosity lacing his tone.

Rudy shifted his gaze to the scuffed floor, then met Mark's curious eyes. “It’s a bit strange, actually. A few nights ago, I was wandering through the park when I heard this blood-curdling scream echoing from the trees. I decided to check it out and stumbled upon two rats battling it out. The larger one took down the smaller one, and then—get this—it transformed into some sort of demon.” He took a slow sip of his beer, maintaining a composed expression as he locked eyes with Mark, gauging his reaction before continuing, “Last night, Joanna had this bizarre dream,” Rudy continued, his voice lowering as if sharing a secret. “She described this creature with enormous, unblinking eyes that seemed to pierce right through her. In her dream, it was making love to her, and she insisted it was supposed to be me.” He took another slow sip of his beer, watching Mark intently, searching for any sign of disbelief or intrigue in his friend's expression.

Mark's eyes widened before he erupted into a fit of laughter, the sound booming through the restaurant. He quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, glancing around as patrons turned their heads, curiosity painted on their faces. Trying to stifle his amusement, Mark returned his gaze to Rudy, shaking his head in disbelief. "Come on, Rudy," he said, his voice still tinged with mirth. "You really can't believe in demons. And besides, if you were my boyfriend, I'd be having nightmares every night." Rudy chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Maybe you're right. I was definitely a bit out of it that night, probably from some stuff I had taken." Mark chuckled softly, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "I know I'm right. Now, let's order; I'm starving!" He leaned back in his chair, glancing at the menu as his stomach rumbled audibly, a reminder of how long it had been since breakfast.

SUPERMARKET

After his lunch with Mark, Rudy swung by the market to grab a few essentials. He strolled through the cereal aisle, the bright packaging flashing in the fluorescent light, before making his way to the produce section. As he approached the grapes, he reached down to select a bunch, but froze mid-motion. The grapes began to quiver and shift, as if alive. Heart racing, he stepped back, his eyes wide with disbelief as the once-innocent fruit pulsated, swelling grotesquely. They continued to expand until, with a sudden, horrific pop, they erupted, spraying crimson liquid in all directions. Rudy screamed, instinctively raising his hands to shield his face as the warm, sticky blood splattered against his skin, leaving him reeling in shock. A woman rushed over, her expression a mix of concern and confusion. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice edged with urgency. Rudy glanced from her to the grapes, bewildered. "Where's the blood?" he stammered, his heart still racing.

The woman furrowed her brow, clearly puzzled. "What blood?" she replied, taking a cautious step back. Rudy pointed at the grapes, remnants of the horrific explosion still vivid in his mind. "They exploded! Blood went everywhere!" She stared at him as if he were speaking a different language. "Are you sure you're alright?" she pressed, her tone now laced with skepticism. Rudy took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. "Yes, I'm fine. It must be the medication I'm on," he managed, forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace. The woman hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked away, leaving Rudy standing there, grappling with reality. He lingered for a heartbeat longer, then turned on his heel and exited the store, the fluorescent lights flickering overhead as he stepped back into the world outside.

APARTMENT (RUDY'S)

Rudy sprawled on the couch, the flickering screen casting shadows across the dim room, when the shrill ring of the phone sliced through the air. He groaned, stretching out an arm to grab the receiver. "Hello?" he mumbled, still half-lost in the world of reality TV.

"Hello, lover boy! This is your lucky day!" a sultry voice purred on the other end, sending a shiver down his spine. "You've just won an evening out with the most beautiful woman in the world!" The words dripped with allure, wrapping around him like a warm embrace, igniting a mix of excitement and disbelief. Rudy jerked upright on the couch, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Wait, are you saying I just won a date with the Playmate of the Month?" he exclaimed, his voice tinged with excitement. "No, you knucklehead! It's with me!" the sultry voice snapped

back, irritation lacing her tone. "And when exactly did you enter a contest to win a date with the Playmate of the Month?"

"I knew it was you all along, Joanna," he said, laughter bubbling up as he spoke. "I was just playing with you. Honestly, the Playmate of the Month doesn't hold a candle to you." "Oh, really?" she shot back, her tone sharp. "You say that now, but if you had the chance to get between those legs, you'd leap at it like any other guy." "Well, if we're being honest, I wouldn't say no to a Playmate given half a chance," Rudy replied, a teasing grin on his face. Joanna's expression darkened, her frustration simmering just below the surface. "You're just like every other guy, Rudy. All you want is a quick fling and nothing more."

"That's not true at all," Rudy shot back, his voice firm. "I've loved you more times than I can count, and I'm still here. You want to know why? Because I love you." "You're just saying that to make me feel better," Joanna replied softly, her tone laced with doubt. "No, I'm not. Why are we even arguing about some fictional woman I'll never meet?" Rudy said, frustration creeping into his voice. A heavy silence hung between them. "I'm sorry," Joanna finally murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "I guess I got carried away. Are you coming over tomorrow?" "No! I am not waiting until tomorrow. I am coming over tonight. I want you to see how much I love you, and I want you to understand that no one else has my heart but you," Rudy declared, his resolve unwavering, before abruptly hanging up the phone.

ALLEY

In a grimy alley strewn with discarded refuse, a woman is pinned against the cold, damp wall. Her assailant, grinning with a twisted delight, presses a glinting knife against her throat, the blade catching the faint light. His hands move with a brutal force, groping her as she trembles in fear. "Stay quiet, and you won't get hurt," he breathes, his voice low and menacing. "We're going to have some fun." He roughly yanked up her dress, the fabric tearing as it caught on a jagged edge of the wall. With a sickening rip, her underwear followed, the lace shredding against her trembling thighs. The assailant's putrid breath was hot on her neck as he pressed the knife harder against her throat, drawing a thin line of blood. She winced, her eyes squeezing shut as she tried to block out the nightmare unfolding around her. Forcing her legs apart, he wedged his knee between them, causing her to whimper in pain. His hands were everywhere, groping and squeezing her breasts, sliding down her stomach with a cold, clammy touch.

Bile rose in her throat as his fingers began to probe her most intimate place, invading her with a cruelty that went beyond the physical. The sound of his zipper being lowered was like a death knell in the dark alley. She could feel him, hard and pulsing against her thigh, the malformed outline of his erection pressing into her skin. A wave of revulsion washed over her, but she dared not move, lest she enrage him further. As if sensing her disgust, he leaned in closer, his foul breath a noxious cloud in her face. "I'm going to make you like this," he growled, his spittle landing on her cheek. "You're going to beg for more." He ground his hips against her, trying to force himself inside her, but she clenched her muscles, denying him entry. "No!" she managed to croak out, her voice hoarse with fear. "No, please, don't do this!" His response was immediate and brutal. The knife bit deeper into her neck, drawing a trickle of warm blood down her collar.

As he thrust harder, desperate to penetrate her, a sudden grip on his shoulder jolted him from his twisted focus. He spun around, instincts flaring, ready to confront whatever threat had interrupted his vile intentions. The woman, trembling and defeated, collapsed to the ground, her eyes wide with terror. His gaze darted back to her, then to the source of the intrusion, panic flooding his senses. He stumbled backward, his heart racing, and shouted, "Stay away from me, or I swear I'll stab you!" Fear etched across his features, his bravado crumbling as he realized the gravity of the situation.

The rapist lunged at the creature, his desperation fueling a wild slash through the air. But the creature was faster, seizing his wrist with an iron grip that crushed bone and sinew. A howl of agony erupted from the rapist's lips as he crumpled to the ground, curling into a fetal position, instinctively trying to shield himself from the horror before him. The creature loomed over him, its gaze piercing as it lifted him effortlessly, examining his face with a cold, clinical curiosity. It tilted his head from side to side, studying the terror etched into his features before locking onto his eyes with an intensity that felt like a death sentence.

As the rapist met the dark void of the creature's gaze, a wave of dread washed over him. He felt a grotesque transformation begin; large, pulsating blisters erupted on his arms, swelling ominously until they burst, releasing a noxious green and yellow pus that oozed and dripped. Panic surged through him, and he opened his mouth to scream, but only a choked gasp escaped as his body convulsed violently. The pus flowed freely from his lips, a sickening testament to his impending demise, trapped in a nightmare of his own making. "You are the filth of the night, devoid of a heart," the creature intoned, its voice a chilling whisper that echoed in the darkness. With a swift motion, it plunged its claws deep into his chest, tearing through flesh and sinew. The rapist gasped, eyes wide with terror as the creature extracted his heart, slick and pulsing, dripping with dark blood. It dropped the lifeless body to the ground with a thud.

The body convulsed, bubbling and dissolving into a putrid mass of pus as the creature feasted on the rapist's still-beating heart. A faint whimper pierced the thick air, drawing its attention to the trembling woman huddled in the corner, her eyes wide with terror. As it advanced, she pressed herself against the cold, unforgiving wall, wishing to merge with the bricks and disappear. The creature halted before her, its gaze piercing through the grime and bruises that marred her skin. "I'll finish what he started," it snarled, a sinister promise hanging in the air. With a swift, merciless grip, it seized her legs, forcefully spreading them apart. Her screams erupted, slicing through the night like a siren's wail, echoing into the darkness as dread settled over the alley.

WOODS

Rudy lay in a deep slumber, the remnants of a dream fading like mist. A sudden chill swept over him, causing him to stir and reach instinctively for his blanket, only to find emptiness. Startled, he opened his eyes, a dim light was filtering through the dense forest revealing a tangled expanse of trees and underbrush. Confusion gripped him as he scanned his surroundings. How in the hell did I end up here? A sharp crack echoed through the silence—a twig snapping underfoot. He turned sharply, straining his eyes to pierce the shadows, but saw nothing. "Hello, Rudy. So glad you could make it," a voice slithered from the darkness, smooth and sinister, sending a shiver down his spine.

Rudy scrambled to his feet, adrenaline surging as he bolted through the underbrush. Shadows flickered around him, and then a dark shape lunged from the gloom, tackling him to the ground. Sharp claws raked across his skin, tearing at his clothes with frenzied intensity. He fought back, twisting and writhing until he broke free, gasping for breath. As he turned to face his attacker, his heart sank—there stood Joanna, her eyes wild and feral, a predatory glint in her gaze. With a primal roar, she pounced again, her movements fluid and powerful, reminiscent of a tiger stalking its prey.

APARTMENT

Rudy jolted upright in bed, gasping for air as beads of sweat trickled down his forehead, soaking into the sheets. His heart raced, pounding against his ribcage like a frantic drum. He scanned the dimly lit room, shadows dancing across the walls, remnants of his nightmare still clinging to the edges of his mind. "Shit!" he muttered, the words escaping his lips like a desperate plea. "That was way too real. It's that damn thing from the park haunting me again. Why won't it just leave me the hell alone?" In frustration, he slammed his fist onto the mattress, the sound echoing in the stillness, a futile attempt to shake off the lingering terror that gripped him.

Rudy swung his legs over the side of the bed, the cool floor sending a jolt through his tired body. He trudged into the living room, the faint light from the street filtering through the curtains casting eerie shadows on the walls. With a flick of his wrist, he turned on the television, the screen flickering to life with a low hum, illuminating the dim space. He sank into the worn couch, its fabric rough against his skin, and let out a heavy sigh. Sleep eluded him, the remnants of his nightmare still clawing at the edges of his consciousness, ensuring that he would remain awake through the dark hours of the night.

ALLEY

The first rays of sunlight crept over the horizon, casting a pale glow on the scene below as a police car rolled into the alley, its siren fading into an eerie silence. A crowd had already gathered, murmuring and jostling for a better view. The rookie cop couldn't help but wonder how these spectators always seemed to materialize at crime scenes, yet remained blissfully ignorant of the actual events unfolding. Shoving his way through the throng, he felt a knot of anxiety twist in his stomach.

As he stepped into the grim reality of the alley, a sight so horrific met his eyes that he stumbled back, his instincts screaming at him to flee. Laughter erupted behind him, mocking and cruel, as a man in the front shouted, "Look at that! One of New York's finest!" The sound of their derision echoed off the grimy walls, amplifying the rookie's humiliation as he turned on his heel, desperate to escape the judgmental eyes that bore down on him.

The rookie cop leaned against the patrol car, his hands trembling slightly as he tried to steady his breath. His partner approached, a reassuring hand landing on his back. "Hey kid, it's alright. I felt the same way when I first laid eyes on a gunshot victim. Trust me, it was a nightmare." The rookie turned to face him, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, the metallic taste of bile lingering. "Why would anyone do that to another person?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, thick with disbelief. His partner sighed, a grimace crossing his face. "I don't know, kid.

This world is filled with twisted souls, people who've lost their grip on sanity," he replied, shaking his head as they began to walk back toward the alley, the stench of decay still heavy in the air.

TWENTY THIRD PRECINCT

Captain Brown sat in his dimly lit office, the harsh glow of the desk lamp illuminating the grim reports detailing the brutal deaths in the alley. He leaned back in his chair, the worn leather creaking under his weight, and rubbed his temples, trying to ease the tension that had settled there. The thought nagged at him like a persistent itch: could this be the beginning of a psychopathic killer's spree or the emergence of some twisted religious cult? A wave of dread washed over him; he didn't need the chaos of a public panic with the elections looming just around the corner.

A patrolman entered the office, his knuckles rapping against the doorframe. "You called for me, sir?" he asked, his voice steady yet tinged with uncertainty. Captain Brown lifted his gaze from the cluttered desk, where grim reports lay scattered like fallen leaves. "What's your name?" he inquired, studying the officer's face for a hint of familiarity. "I'm Patrolman Luis, sir," came the reply, the young man's posture stiffening slightly as he stood at attention. Captain Brown rubbed his chin thoughtfully, the stubble scratching against his fingers. "Did I summon you for something specific?" "Yes, sir. You requested I bring up the reports on the victims found in the alley," Patrolman Luis answered, his eyes flicking nervously to the floor. "Right, right," Captain Brown sighed, the weight of the recent events pressing heavily on his mind. "Sometimes I feel like I have so much swirling around in here that I forget the details." He gestured toward the stack of reports, his expression a mix of fatigue and frustration.

"Alright, Officer Luis, you're dismissed," Captain Brown said, his eyes glued to the scattered reports that littered his desk like discarded thoughts. The young officer nodded, a hint of relief washing over his features as he stepped out of the cramped office, the door clicking shut behind him. Brown let out a weary sigh, sinking deeper into the worn leather of his chair, the creaks echoing in the stillness. He closed his eyes, seeking a moment of respite from the chaos swirling in his mind when a sharp knock interrupted his brief solace. "Come in," he called out, his voice gravelly and tired.

The police chief strode into the office, the door slamming shut behind him with a decisive thud. He paused, arms crossed, staring down at Captain Brown, who remained oblivious, his eyes still shut tight against the dim light. "Who is it and what do you want?" Brown's voice boomed, sharp and impatient. The chief's expression soured, his lips curling in disdain. "If you bothered to open your eyes, Captain, you'd know exactly who it is—and you're well aware of why I'm here." At that, Captain Brown jolted upright, the chair creaking under his sudden movement. "Ah! It's you, Chief. How are you? Yes, yes, I know what you want," he replied, his tone shifting from irritation to a begrudging familiarity.

The police chief strode up to Captain Brown's desk, his brow furrowed with impatience. "What are you doing to address these bizarre murders plaguing my city?" he demanded, his voice sharp like a knife slicing through the tension in the room. Captain Brown leaned back, rubbing the stubble on his chin as he collected his thoughts. "Well, Chief, there's not much we can do at this

moment. We don't have any solid leads," he replied, his voice steady but laced with frustration. "Whoever is committing these killings is skilled at covering their tracks, leaving nothing behind but the bodies." He faltered slightly, the weight of the situation pressing down on him, his gaze dropping to the cluttered desk as if searching for answers among the chaos.

The police chief slammed his fist onto Captain Brown's desk, the impact reverberating through the cluttered office. "That's not what I wanted to hear!" he barked, his voice a thunderclap of frustration. He leaned forward, jabbing a finger toward Brown's chest. "You better find some leads and catch this killer, or you won't be captain for much longer. Do you understand me?" His eyes blazed with a fierce intensity.

Captain Brown rose slowly from his chair, his jaw tightening as he met the chief's gaze head-on. "Look, Chief, I'm doing the best I can with what I've got, which is next to nothing right now," he replied, his voice low but steady. "But when we do get a lead, I'll make sure we catch this killer—or killers—and bring them to you personally. And another thing, don't threaten me. I don't take kindly to threats, you understand?" He punctuated his words by poking the chief firmly in the chest.

The police chief recoiled slightly, casting Brown a venomous glare before storming out of the office, the door slamming shut behind him with a resounding bang. Captain Brown sank back into his chair, staring at the closed door, muttering under his breath, "Don't be slamming my door, you asshole."

He opened the drawer of his desk, rummaging through the chaos within. "Where the hell is my aspirin? I can never find the damn things when I need them," he grumbled to himself, frustration gnawing at him like a persistent itch.

APARTMENT (JOANNA'S)

Rudy slumped forward on the couch, his elbows digging into his knees, and his face hidden behind his hands. The dim light of the room cast shadows over him, amplifying the weight of his silence. Joanna sat beside him, her brow furrowed with concern. "Is something wrong? You haven't said a word since you got here," she asked, her voice soft yet probing. Rudy lifted his head slightly, his eyes heavy and weary. "No, I'm just tired, that's all," he replied, his voice barely above a murmur. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"What kept you from sleeping? If I might ask," Joanna said, her tone laced with sarcasm. Rudy shot her a perplexed glance. "It's not what you're imagining. I just had a bad dream, that's all," he replied, shaking his head as if to dispel the lingering shadows of the night. She shifted closer, her curiosity piqued. "Was it anything like the nightmare I had a couple of nights ago?"

"No, it was worse," he admitted, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I dreamt I was lost in the woods, and this demon was chasing me. Just when I thought I could escape, you appeared out of nowhere, tearing at me, ripping me apart." The words hung in the air, thick with dread, as Joanna's expression shifted from concern to something darker.

"That's bizarre," Joanna remarked, her expression a mix of disbelief and amusement. "First, I dream about you, and now you dream about me? What's next?" She paused, a laugh bubbling up as she added, "Maybe we'll end up in the Twilight Zone or something."

"Don't say that, Joanna. With my luck, it just might happen," Rudy replied, shaking his head, a wry smile creeping onto his face. He stretched his arms overhead, a yawn escaping him. "Why don't you spend the rest of the day with me? You can crash in the bedroom for a bit, and when you wake up, I'll have a nice meal ready for you."

Rudy's eyes sparkled as he glanced at her. "Now that's an offer I can't refuse," he responded "But what about lunch?"

She gazed into his tired eyes, which seemed to droop with exhaustion. "Well, those eyes are telling me that once you hit that bed, you won't be getting up until late."

They both rose from the couch, and Rudy chuckled softly. "You're absolutely right about that," he agreed, heading toward the bedroom.

Rudy rolled over in the bed, stretching his arms wide as he inhaled deeply. A wave of sweet perfume filled his nostrils, wrapping around him like a comforting blanket. Blinking against the soft light, he focused on Joanna, who stood in the doorway with an amused smile playing on her lips. "It's about time you woke up, sleepyhead," she teased, her eyes sparkling with warmth. He pushed himself up, rubbing the remnants of sleep from his eyes. "How long have I been out?" he mumbled, his voice thick with drowsiness. "Oh, about six hours," she replied, glancing at her watch. "Anyway, hurry up and get dressed; it's almost time to eat." The urgency in her tone coaxed him to shake off the last vestiges of slumber.

Rudy dressed quickly, his mind still hazy from sleep as he shuffled into the kitchen. The sight that greeted him took his breath away—Joanna had transformed the space into a romantic haven, flickering candlelight casting a warm glow over the table adorned with delicate linen and polished silverware. She turned to him, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Do you like it? I did it especially for you," she said, her voice laced with excitement.

Without hesitation, Rudy crossed the room and pulled her into a gentle kiss, feeling the warmth of her lips against his. He stepped back, taking in the scene again, shaking his head in disbelief. "Do I like it? What kind of question is that? Of course, I love it!"

With a playful nudge, Joanna urged him toward the table. "Come on, let's sit down and open the bottle of wine. I'll get the Cornish hens out of the oven." As she moved gracefully to the kitchen counter, Rudy watched her, a smile tugging at his lips.

Once the hens were placed on the table, their golden skin glistening, Rudy poured wine into two crystal glasses, the rich red liquid swirling enticingly. "Let's have a toast," he suggested, raising his glass. "To this lovely dinner and to us." Their glasses clinked softly, the sound mingling with the comforting ambiance around them.

They exchanged smiles, and Rudy took a sip, savoring the taste before setting his glass down. "Now, let's eat. I'm starving," he declared, his stomach rumbling in agreement.

Once dinner was finished, Rudy rolled up his sleeves and joined Joanna at the sink, scrubbing the dishes side by side. "You know, this is the first time we've done this together," he remarked, glancing over at her with a playful grin. She looked up, a sparkle in her eyes. "I know! Maybe you should stay over more often," she suggested, her voice light but laced with sincerity. "I just might do that," he replied, a hint of warmth in his tone. "I'm getting tired of being alone at night anyway."

They rinsed off the last plate, the water splashing lightly as they worked in tandem. Once the final dish was set aside to dry, Joanna drifted into the living room, where she selected a soft melody that filled the air with a soothing ambiance. Rudy followed her, drawn in by the inviting sound. He approached her, wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her close.

As they swayed gently to the music, he leaned down and pressed his lips against hers, a sweet connection that lingered in the air. They continued to dance, moving slowly toward the bedroom, their laughter mingling with the soft notes, creating a moment that felt suspended in time.

CENTRAL PARK

The creature's eyes glinted in the dim light as it observed the three muggers closing in on it. The leader swaggered forward, a sneer twisting his lips. "Hand over the wallet, you ugly bastard, and maybe you won't get hurt," he spat, his voice dripping with menace. In the shadows, one of the accomplices chimed in, "Yeah, hand over the cash, sweetheart!" The third thug brandished a knife, its blade gleaming ominously. "That's right, just cooperate, and we won't have to mess you up," he taunted, his grip tightening around the weapon.

The leader raised a hand, silencing his cohorts. "What's your problem, you deaf freak? I said, hand over the wallet!" He leaned closer, eyes narrowing in frustration. But the creature remained unmoved, its gaze locked onto them, an unsettling stillness enveloping the air. After a tense moment, it finally broke the silence, its voice low and gravelly. "Take it if you can."

The muggers began to circle the creature like sharks scenting blood, their movements predatory and deliberate. Two of them brandished glinting knives, while the third swung a heavy club over his shoulder, a sinister grin plastered across his face. "Now I'm going to have to hurt you real bad, hero," he taunted, stepping closer, the threat in his voice unmistakable. "Let's see how you feel with my blade in your gut."

In a flash, the creature lunged forward, seizing the thug's wrist with a grip like iron, lifting him effortlessly off the ground. The knife slipped from the mugger's fingers, clattering to the pavement below. The creature locked eyes with him, a chilling calmness radiating from its presence.

The other two muggers exchanged frantic glances, panic igniting in their eyes. "Man, let's get the hell out of here!" one shouted, turning on his heel and sprinting away, the sound of their

footsteps echoing in the night. The leader, still dangling helplessly in the creature's grasp, yelled for help, but his cohorts never glanced back.

With a menacing slowness, the creature pressed the knife against the mugger's cheek, the cold steel biting into his skin before it trailed down to his stomach, drawing a line of crimson in its wake. The man screamed in agony, his voice a raw wail that pierced the darkness. "Let's see how you feel with this in your gut," the creature snarled, its voice a low growl filled with malice.

The creature drove the blade deep into the man's abdomen, unleashing a piercing scream that echoed through the darkness. A twisted thrill coursed through the creature as it pressed the knife further in, savoring the agony etched on the mugger's face. The thug began to gag, his body convulsing violently as the blade was drawn slowly across his stomach, tearing flesh and fabric alike. Warm blood pooled beneath him, and his entrails spilled forth, glistening in the dim light like grotesque ribbons cascading onto the pavement. As the life drained from the mugger's eyes, the creature leaned down, brushing its lips against his in a chilling mockery of intimacy. With a final, disdainful glance, it released the lifeless body, allowing it to crumple to the ground before vanishing into the shadows of the night.

The two muggers slowed their frantic pace, glancing over their shoulders as they caught their breath. "Do you think we're far enough from that freak?" one of them asked, his voice laced with unease. The other shrugged, a forced chuckle escaping his lips. "Whoever that guy was, he won't follow us. And if he does, we'll hear him coming and make sure he regrets it." Their laughter echoed nervously in the night air.

"Going somewhere?" A low, sinister voice slithered through the darkness, freezing them in place. The muggers exchanged horrified looks. "Holy shit, it's him! How did he get in front of us without making a sound?" one of them shouted, panic rising in his throat. "I don't know, man, but we need to get the hell out of here!" the other yelled, adrenaline surging through him.

They turned to flee, but the creature loomed before them once again, its presence suffocating. "It's time for you to die like your friend," it growled, the words dripping with malice as the night closed in around them.

The two muggers stumbled backward, terror etched on their faces as the creature advanced with a predatory grace. In an instant, it seized them by their heads, its grip like a vice. Their screams pierced the night, raw and desperate, as they crumpled to their knees, eyes bulging in horror. Blood oozed from their mouths and trickled from their ears, painting the pavement beneath them. With a swift, brutal motion, the creature lifted them off the ground and slammed their bodies down, the impact reverberating through the air. It stood over the lifeless forms, a dark silhouette against the flickering streetlights, surveying its handiwork. Just then, a policeman approached, his voice cutting through the stillness. "Hey, what's going on over there?" he shouted, but before the words could settle, the creature vanished into the shadows of the woods, leaving only silence in its wake.

Captain Brown's car rolled to a stop, the engine's hum fading into the heavy silence of the park. He lingered for a moment, absorbing the chaotic scene before him. As soon as he stepped out, a

horde of reporters descended, their voices rising like a swarm of angry bees. He brushed past them, ignoring their clamoring questions, and made his way deeper into the park.

Approaching the covered bodies, he knelt down and carefully peeled back the sheet that the paramedics had draped over them. A grimace twisted his features as he took in the sight, and with a heavy heart, he replaced the cloth, sealing away the horror beneath it. Rising to his feet, he scanned the area, his eyes searching for the officer who had reported the murder.

“Where’s the officer who called this in?” he called out, his voice firm. “Right here, sir,” a policeman replied, hurrying over, his uniform slightly askew from the earlier chaos. Captain Brown turned to face him, his expression serious. “Did you catch a glimpse of the guy who did this?” “Not really, sir. I was too far away, but I saw him dart into the woods over there,” the officer gestured vaguely, anxiety flickering in his eyes.

Captain Brown followed the direction of the officer's finger, glancing toward the shadowy tree line where several other officers were already combing the underbrush. “Have you found anything?” he inquired, his tone edged with urgency. “Not yet, sir, but we’ll keep looking,” one of the officers replied, determination etched on his face. Frustration bubbled within Captain Brown, and he threw his hands up in exasperation, turning back toward his car. The reporters, sensing his movement, surged forward again, their voices escalating into a cacophony of questions and flashbulbs popping like firecrackers.

“Is this the same person who murdered the other two victims?” one reporter shouted, urgency lacing his voice. “Could we be facing the emergence of a psychopathic killer?” another pressed, eyes wide with anticipation. Captain Brown raised his hand, silencing the frenzied inquiries, and met their eager gazes. “I’m sorry, but I have no comment at this time,” he replied, his tone firm yet weary. Undeterred, the reporters continued to barrage him with questions, their voices rising in a chaotic symphony as he climbed into his car, the engine rumbling to life as he pulled away from the scene.

Chapter 4

APARTMENT (JOANNA’S)

Johanna and Rudy sprawled on the couch, the flickering glow of the television illuminating their faces when an urgent news flash interrupted their morning. “This is a special report,” the anchor announced, his tone grave. “Last night, the bodies of three men were discovered in Central Park. Their deaths are believed to be linked to two other murders that occurred just days ago. Officers, speaking on the condition of anonymity, stated—and I quote—‘this appears to be the work of an individual or individuals who will kill anyone they encounter.’” Rudy abruptly stood up, his hand reaching for the remote to silence the grim broadcast. Johanna turned to him, confusion knitting her brow. “Why did you do that?” she asked, her voice a blend of surprise and concern.

He sighed deeply, the weight of the news pressing on him. “I’m just tired of hearing about people getting killed. It’s becoming one of New York’s reporters’ favorite pastimes,” he replied, frustration seeping into his words. Johanna regarded him with a quizzical expression. “So why does it bother you now? You’ve lived in this city your whole life. Are you really going to tell me

that it's finally getting to you? What's next? Are you going to announce you're born again and we can't have sex until we get married?"

Silence fell between them, thick and uncomfortable. Rudy turned away, heading toward the door but hesitating as he glanced back at her. "Maybe after that great speech you just gave, I should consider becoming a monk and retreat into solitude," he said, a hint of sarcasm lacing his tone. In a rush, Johanna dashed after him, grabbing his arm. "I'm sorry, Rudy. I didn't mean it like that."

He avoided her gaze, the tension palpable, and walked out the door, leaving her standing alone, the weight of her words hanging in the air.

CENTRAL PARK

Rudy lingered at the park entrance, his eyes scanning the crowd as people bustled in and out, laughter and chatter swirling around him. "Look at them," he thought bitterly. "What a bunch of heartless fools." Three men had been brutally murdered just steps away, yet here they were, blissfully unaware or uncaring, as long as it wasn't someone they knew. He imagined how some might feign sorrow at a funeral, shedding a few tears, but then it would be back to their carefree lives, indulging in picnics and games without a second thought. "What a joke," Rudy scoffed inwardly, a hollow laugh escaping his lips. With a heavy heart, he stepped into the park, the vibrant atmosphere clashing with the darkness that lingered in his mind.

Rudy tread softly through the dense underbrush, retracing his steps to the clearing where he had first encountered the creature. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves, a stark contrast to the vibrant life of the park just beyond the treeline. As he scanned the area, something caught his eye—a gaping tunnel, half-hidden by twisted roots and shadowy ferns. Curiosity piqued, he approached, puzzled by how he had overlooked it before. Peering into the abyss, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, a frown creasing his brow. "If that thing has a lair, it's got to be in there," he murmured, resolve hardening in his chest. With a deep breath, he stepped into the oppressive darkness of the tunnel, oblivious to the sinister glow of eyes materializing in the shadows behind him, watching his every move.

A sudden chill swept through Rudy, prickling his skin as if icy fingers danced along his spine. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled, standing erect like the sharp quills of a porcupine. Panic surged within him, and he pivoted on his heel, sprinting back out of the tunnel. If he was going to confront whatever lurked within, he realized he could not do it alone. With one last glance at the dark maw of the tunnel, he hurried through the underbrush, emerging from the woods into the bustling park entrance, where laughter and light seemed to mock his growing dread.

LIBRARY

The afternoon sun blazed overhead, its relentless heat pressing down and gut punching on Rudy like a heavy weight fighter in the ring. He quickened his pace, his sneakers thudding against the worn wooden steps of the library as he ascended. The cool air inside beckoned him, promising relief from the sweltering outside. He pushed through the heavy glass doors, the familiar scent of aged paper and polished wood enveloping him like a comforting embrace. As he stepped into the

hushed sanctuary of knowledge, he could feel the oppressive heat dissipating as the cold air quietly blowing from the vents, the quiet rustle of pages turning and the soft whispers of patrons lost in their own worlds, replaced the stifling and overbearing noonday high temperature.

Rudy strolled toward the counter, glancing at people absorbed in their books. Not seeing the librarian, he lingered for a moment, then rang the bell repeatedly. A noise caught his attention, and he peered over the counter to find a young woman's cute face looking up at him. As she stood, her emerald green eyes held Rudy captive. "May I help you, sir?" she asked, but he seemed not to hear her words before a bell ringing snapped him back to himself. He watched as she walked over to assist someone else at the counter. When she returned, she found Rudy smiling. "Yes, you can," he replied, trying not to get lost in her eyes. "I wonder if you can point me to the right section where you have books on demons, vampires, and things of that nature," he asked.

Looking at him strangely, she pointed toward the back, saying, "It's the last section in the nine hundred series." Rudy thanked her and started to walk away but stopped, drawn once more to her hypnotizing green eyes. She smiled and asked if something was wrong. Rudy shook his head, then told her how beautiful her eyes were. Still smiling, she said they once belonged to her grandmother, and after she died, she plucked them from her eye sockets, had hers taken out, and those implanted in her memory. Stunned by what he had just heard, Rudy turned and slowly began walking away as the woman, now laughing under her breath, went back to work.

He wove through the aisles until he reached the section he sought, rifling through books, scanning covers, before selecting a few and settling at one of the back tables. He opened the book titled "Demons, Witches, and Other Demonic Creatures of Darkness," skimming the images before pausing at a page labeled "Shapeshifters." Rudy sat back, shaking his head. "This shit is unbelievable," he thought. These shifters of shape could invade your mind, change their form at will. The only difference between demons and vampires was that one killed for blood while the others did it for sport. Reading further, a paragraph at the bottom caught his attention, and he muttered to himself, "Holy water can hurt them, and you can kill a vampire with a stake through the heart, but to kill a demon you need..."

Rudy turned the page, but there was nothing there. The next one, blank as well. He flipped through several more; they were all empty. Slamming the book shut, he leaned back in the chair, puzzlement furrowing his brow. "What happened to those pages?" He sat up straight, fear twisting his features. "It knows! The damn thing knows I'm trying to find a way to kill it, so it wiped away the pages so I wouldn't know how." He began thinking and talking to himself, "How can I kill this damn thing if I don't know how? Maybe a stake through its heart will kill it, like a vampire, but where am I going to find some stakes and holy water?"

He sat there thinking, then it dawned on him—he could go to one of those religious novelty shops downtown. As he rose, something touched his shoulder, and he froze in place like an ice statue, fear and terror etched on his face. Rudy slowly turned his head to see the librarian standing there, smiling at him. "We will be closing in ten minutes, and I hope you found what you were looking for, Rudy." She stood there, looking into his eyes, before turning and walking away. As he went to put the books back, he suddenly stopped mid-step. He never told her his

name—how did she know who he was? Not waiting to find out, he quickly put the books back on the shelf and made a hasty exit out the side library door.

Prelude:

Will Rudy manage to make it to the shop to acquire what he needs to fend off the taunting beasts, or will the dark demon lord of the rats put an end to his nightmares for good? We will find out in the upcoming “Terror” chapters.