



Arrant Knaves All

by Jeff Somers

Arrant Knaves All

Copyright © 2002 by Jeff Somers

Arrant Knaves All

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One:	1
Chapter Two:	11
Chapter Three:	18
Chapter Four:	28
Chapter Five:	32
Chapter Six:	37

Arrant Knaves All

1

Holly was the sort of girl who frightened people with silence. The sort who would wake up one day and decide she didn't need you, and that would be it. No discussion. She had always been able to do this, just walk away. She managed somehow to convey this fact to everyone she met within a few minutes. It was an unsettling ability. People would be sitting with her, conversing, thinking that she was charming, in a dark way, and pretty, in a pale way, and suddenly the thought would creep in:

I don't think she'd ever need me

and the whole feel of the day would be changed, subtly.

Holly wore black most times, matching her dark hair and shadowed eyes. She had a wary grace that made her seem to always glide, albeit away from you. She was slim and insubstantial and disturbingly physical for all of that; despite weighing nothing and seemingly constructed out of dark smoke and bright lights she pushed and hugged and slapped and held hands and punched with wild abandon, expressing herself without speaking a word. Which was useful since she often went hours without saying anything, which fooled some people into thinking she was some sort of genius, tortured and mute. She wasn't. She often simply had nothing to say.

The first night her brother's ghost came to visit her she'd been sleeping over Roger's apartment. Or not sleeping; after making love with Roger she'd felt sleepy and content and ready to stay in bed until afternoon, it being the weekend, but then despite the warm blankets and physical exertion and Roger's pleasant breathing nearby she'd laid awake, staring at the ceiling. At three A.M. she'd given up and crawled into the living room to switch on a light and do some reading. She picked up something dull that Roger was reading, something pretentiously intellectual, impenetrable, and probably not really understood, by Roger or anybody.

Can I love someone who reads stuff like this on the train every morning?

She wondered. For Holly, it wasn't an idle question. She pondered it for a few moments, wondering where she and Roger, who she'd been dating for a few months, were headed.

Glancing up over the top of the book from the easy chair by the window

where she sat curled up with her legs tucked under her carefully, she found her dead brother sitting on the couch across the room. Watching her. Looking exactly as she'd last seen him: stitched up, starched, and squeezed into a ill-fitting suit. Looking slightly glandular and peaked. Hair stiff, mouth sewn shut.

They regarded each other carefully. Holly purposefully shut her eyes and counted to five. When she reopened them, he was gone.

She stood up and put the book back where she had found it. Padded back to the bedroom, resisting the urge to look behind her. Crawled into bed as clumsily and noisily as she could. Wrapped her cold arms around Roger and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Ummph.” he grunted, shifting against her.

“Shhhh.” she whispered. “Shhhh.”

She lay awake until dawn.

Holly woke up late for her second period English class and decided *to hell with it* and stayed in bed another fifteen minutes just to seal the deal. Then she got up and put on some coffee, and watched the fall weather go by for a while, feeling cold just looking at it. When Roger emerged an hour later, looking hungover and scraggly, a small thought

this is the idiot I sleep with?

skittered across the smooth plane of her mind and then faded into the shadows, and she kept staring. When he came up behind her and slid his arms around her middle, she absent-mindedly put her hands on his arms and leaned back into him, but she kept her eyes on the outside world.

“Your brother?”

Holly squinted at the red coal of her cigarette and nodded. “I know it sounds crazy, Gee. But I’d swear it was him.”

“What did he do?”

The autumn air was crisp and swirling leaves everywhere, slipping through the clear sunlight. Three girls, sitting on the steps of the Library, smoking cigarettes; flannel, denim and smoke. Gail, tall and blonde but angular and shadowed, a step away from pretty. Rose, shorter, browner, somehow less distinct. They’d been room-mates in their Freshman year and had remained girlfriends ever since. Holly made a distinction between friends, girlfriends, and boyfriends. To her, Rose and Gail were girlfriends: good to gossip with, open to listening to complaints about menstruation and vaginal discharge, but not necessarily who she wanted at her side in times of need. She glanced from one to the other and took a long drag on her cigarette.

“Just sat there.”

Rose scrunched up her face. “Just sat there?”

Holly nodded. “He was all sewn up and wired, like he was at the funeral home, you know? They had to do a lot of work on him.” *Because that car had*

dragged him for six blocks. “He just sat there, and looked sad.” *He couldn’t move his mouth because of the thread.* “Just sat there.”

“It’s only been three months, Holly.” Gail said carefully. “And you didn’t let yourself -”

“Gee, don’t psychoanalyze me, okay?” *Jesus does she think she’d the only one taking psyche 101?* “All I know is, I see him. Like he was really there. I felt like I could have touched him.”

Rose snuffed her cigarette. “You were sleeping -”

“Trying to.”

“- you were probably half-dreaming.”

“No.” Holly said simply. “No, I wasn’t dreaming.” She exhaled a cloud of smoke. “And this isn’t the first time.”

Rose and Gail glanced at each other. Holly shrugged. “Twice before. Last week. I thought it had ended, but....then this.”

“You miss Bill, don’t you?” Gail said seriously. Holly nodded, once.

“He was my brother.”

“I always liked Bill.” Rose said. “He was one of the good ones.”

Holly looked at her and then flicked her cigarette away, stood up and turned to look down at them. “He was a bastard just like the rest of us.” she said heatedly. She turned to go, and stopped, and turned back. She regarded the two women for a second.

That was mean. I’m a fucking bitch.

“But yeah, he was a good one. And I loved him, and I miss him.” She bit her lip. “Would you guys stay with me tonight?”

Rose stood up, followed quickly by Gail.

“Of course!”

“Yes, yes.”

Holly nodded. “Thanks.” She paused.

They’d probably still want to date him. She thought with an inner sigh. *Dead and everything.*

Holly rented a house a few miles from campus. It was run down and ugly, drafty and hell to heat in the winter, but it was cheap and Holly had a soft spot for it. In unguarded moments she found herself wondering about the possibility of buying it and fixing it up, living there in hippie splendor for the rest of her life, reading books and feeding her cats. The house was way too big for her, but the rent was so low she hadn’t had a room-mate in three semesters.

She opened the mailbox and sat down on the front steps to flip through it, smoking a last cigarette. She had imposed upon herself a no-smoking zone inside her own house. She wasn’t sure what she was trying to accomplish, since she went outside to smoke a few times every night. *Maybe I’m just forcing myself out into the wild. Maybe it’s an instinct.*

Junk mail, junk mail, a letter from a fading high school friend. Holly was

dispirited by her mail and sat watching cars go by until she heard her front screen door scrape open behind her.

“Holly?” a male voice said. “That you?”

She turned to regard the pleasant-looking young man who stood in worn penny-loafers on her front porch, his sandy hair cut short and combed conservatively.

“Yes.” she said, and stood up and walked past him into her home.

Holly’s opinion of Stan was difficult for her to articulate. He’d been Bill’s best friend for years, a room-mate, a bad influence. For years the two boys had been inseparable. Even after they’d gone their separate ways after school they’d stayed in touch, lived near each other, stayed deeply involved. Growing up, Holly had at first been a despised kid sister, then an affectionately regarded kid sister, and then on the cusp of becoming a fully adult friend, Bill had died, and, Holly thought, everything had gone to shit.

In the foyer, she turned on him as he followed her in.

“Is she here?” Holly asked.

Stan blinked. “Yeah. Yes, Hol, Mary’s here. We wanted to see how you were doing. We’re concerned, kiddo. You’ve been -”

Mourning?

“- depressed. We haven’t heard from you. It’s been three months.”

Holly turned and continued into her house, through the dim and browned living room that no amount of artificial light seemed to animate, into the small, yellowed kitchen. Sitting at the table was a pretty blonde girl, who smiled widely at Holly as she entered, tossing her mail on the counter and dropping her bag on the floor. Holly crossed to the refrigerator without a word, extracted a beer from within, and opened it, her dark eyes on the blonde girl throughout.

“Hello, Holly. How are you.”

Holly took a swig from the beer and nodded. “Mary.”

Stan entered, looked at Holly, sighed, and sat down next to Mary, one hand dropping to her leg. The blonde placed her own hand on top of his. They both regarded Holly.

Silence stretched out. Holly stared.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Stan said with a nervous cough, “the door was open.”

“Usually no need to.”

Silence crowded in again.

Holly studied them, sipping her beer. The silence didn’t bother her, she was just observing and nothing bothered her. Stan, cheerful, easygoing Stan. The last one to see Bill alive. Stan gave the eulogy at the funeral. Stan, now dating Mary, who had been Bill’s girlfriend. Mary, so pretty, so cheerful, so bright. Half-adopted as a sister, an official Dublen. Mary who had cried through the

entire funeral, sniffing against Stan's chest, against Stan's shoulder. So good that they had each other to lean against.

We should have suspected they'd do more than lean.

Stan sighed loudly. "All right, Holly, we'll go. I -"

Mary interrupted him gently, with a hand on his arm. "Holly honey, we understand why you're angry with us. But we can't just let you hate us. What happened between Stan and I -well, it was just fate. I'll always love your brother, and I think he'd want me to -to -"

To be screwing his best friend like a mink in heat?

"- to be happy." Mary finished firmly.

"Bill's gone, Holly, but you're like my sister. Like *our* sister. We don't want to lose you, too."

Holly looked away. Stan, and his good, honest face. Mary and her sincere, good posture.

Stan sighed again. "All right, hon, let's go."

They stood and moved awkwardly towards the front door. Mary stopped and took Holly's hand.

"Sweetie, any time you want to give me a call," Mary said, her face flushed and her eyes teary, "please do. I *miss* you, dammit."

Holly watched them walk down the hall silently.

Am I the coldest bitch in the universe, or what? She thought when they had closed the door behind her. *But God help me if it isn't creepy, how he was fucking her four days after Bill's in the ground. Emotions run high, all well and good, but four days?*

She shook her head and finished her beer. Gail and Rose were coming over in two hours, and Holly wanted to be drunk by the time that happened, or she'd never be able to speak to them without screaming.

"Over here!"

Gail was giggling, red-faced and breathless. The blonde girl had a red satin bra in her hand and dashed over to the drapes hanging over the big bay window in Holly's living room, where two bras already hung. Gail jumped slightly, kicking her heels up, and managed to fling the undergarment over the bar, almost directly between the other two.

"Perfect!" Rose shouted, raising her beer in salute. "The American judge gives you a perfect 10-point-0!!"

Gail, newly unfettered, managed a slight curtsy. "Thank you. I'd like to thank my trainer, my parents, all the little people -"

"And what does the East German judge say?" Rose demanded, turning dramatically to Holly.

Holly roused herself, sitting up on her elbows. The room was swimming a little. She wasn't more drunk than she'd ever been before, but it was getting close. She regarded the nearly-empty bottle of Tequila on the floor between

them. “The East German judge gives you 10 points for accuracy but subtracts two points for wearing a red bra.” she slurred gamely, and then collapsed back onto the floor. She stared up at the three bras, feeling herself breathing.

Gail trotted back and sat down heavily next to her. “Ha ha. You’re just jealous because you wish you had my girls.”

Holly smiled slightly. “I get a backache just looking at you, Gee. Besides, I’ve never heard any complaints.”

Rose leaned forward and crawled over to lie down next to Holly. “How is Roger?” She asked. “Sexually, I mean.”

“Oooh, gossip,” Gail whispered dramatically. “Do tell.”

Holly shook her head, and tried to shift herself slightly. She felt weird. “Uh-uh. Not going there.” She sighed. “Besides, I think I’m done with Roger.”

Gail and Rose exploded into demands for information. Holly sighed. *I don’t want to spend this much energy on breaking up with him. These two are gonna give me more hell than he will, I bet.*

She listened to her two friends discussing her sex life for a few minutes, her eyes closed and her stomach suddenly uneasy. *Too much goddamn Tequila.* She thought ruefully. She opened her eyes, and saw Bill sitting on the broken-down couch that had been in the living room when she’d moved it. It was green and hot and unsteady. He had his legs crossed, his arms stretched out across the back of the couch. He was smiling a little.

Holly sat upright, her face pale, her eyes wide. Gail and Rose followed her stare, and for a moment the three girls just sat there. Then Rose and Gail screamed, and as one they bolted up and ran into the kitchen. A second later their heads emerged from the kitchen, one on top of the other, curled around the doorway.

“Holly!” Rose stage-whispered. “What are you doing?”

Holly sat and studied Bill. After a second he stood up, eerily silent, and crossed the living room. He passed within an inch of her, and she thought she could feel some slight electricity tingle against her as he walked by. He turned towards the hallway, and faded into the shadows.

He isn’t gone yet.

Holly sat for a moment, staring, and then stood up, and began to follow.

“Holly!” Rose snapped.

Holly ignored her. She walked into the hallway and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness she realized she could still see him, walking up the stairs. Without hesitation, she followed.

He’s my brother. Bill wouldn’t hurt anyone.

She followed him up, down the upstairs hall, and into the bathroom. He was sitting on the sink, his hands folded in front of him. It was a familiar pose -it was the way he always talked serious with her, she realized, and he’d done it most often in the bathroom, a perverse sense of humor in action. She realized tears were pouring from her eyes. She reached up jerkily to wipe them away.

“God, Billy,” she said shakily, taking a step forward.

“Stop, Lee,” he said sternly, “you’re not allowed.”

She stopped. Hearing his old nickname for her made her begin crying in earnest.

“Shhh, sshhh.” he clucked. “Come on, Leelee, quiet. I don’t have much time.”

She snuffled loudly and dragged her arm across her face. “Stupid,” she hissed, “stupid. Billy, I’m sorry. I’m listening. Just don’t go yet.”

“Go where? You know what it’s like being a ghost, Lee? Boring. B-O-R-I-N-G. I don’t get many opportunities to materialize and scare the wits out of people. Kind of depressing.”

Holly laughed through her tears. “Figures. Billy, only you would come appear before your family and make *jokes*, huh?”

He shrugged. “It’s my haunting, huh? Do what I want. It’s good to see you, Leelee. I miss you. You were a great kid sister.”

She snorted moistly. “Sure. I came along when you were seven and ruined your life. You used to say that all the time.”

He looked upwards, as if at passing clouds, or great distances. “Ah, those halcyon days before my eighth birthday, when life was good and made sense.” His dry, flat eyes flicked back to her. “Don’t cry any more, Holly. Please.”

“I can’t help it, Billy.” She took two deep breaths. “Stan and Mary were here today, did you see?”

He looked sad. “I don’t have much time, Leelee. I’m sorry. But listen to me, okay?”

Holly nodded, her dark eyes shining in the moonlight coming in through the small window.

“I was murdered, Lee. It wasn’t an accident.”

She stared. She wanted to speak, opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“I came to ask you to avenge me.”

She felt her mouth trembling. Bill was just looking at her, in that sad way, in his funeral-suit, slit down the back so he could swell underground. Pins and wires holding his jacket and shirt in place. Pins and wires holding his face in place. Makeup. His shoes were shiny. His green eyes were dull, his dark hair shorter than he usually wore it. He was hunched in an odd way, sitting on the sink, and it made her picture his ruined body, twisted and torn.

“What?” she gasped. She could hear careful steps mounting the stairs, Rose and Gail, finding their courage. “What?”

He stood up again. “Make them pay, Leelee. Please.”

She found herself looking directly into his dry, yellowing eyes, finding a remnant of the wry fire and warmth that she’d loved. Then he moved past her, turned the corner into the hallway, and was gone.

A moment later, Rose and Gail peered carefully into the bathroom.

“He’s gone.” Holly said, still crying. “Don’t worry, he’s gone.”

Rose pushed in past her and examined the bathroom carefully. Gail put her arm around Holly.

“Shhh.” she cooed. “Shhhhh.”

“Sweetie, what happened?” Rose asked, turning back to her friends.

“Nothing.” Holly said, composing herself by apparent willpower. “You saw him? You saw him, right?”

Rose nodded, staring at the sink. “He looked so...sad. So dismal.”

Holly nodded. “He was. He told me....he told me that Stan killed him. That Stan ran him down. He told me....to avenge him.”

She looked from Gail to Rose, and pulled free of her friend’s embrace.

“Listen,” she said seriously, “this has to be a secret.”

Rose moved closer to them and sat on the edge of the tub. “Holly, you’re not going to...do anything, are you?”

Holly didn’t react. “Promise you’ll keep this secret. Don’t tell anyone. Please.” She reached out and touched Rose’s hand. “Please, Rose.”

Reluctantly, the blonde nodded. “Okay. I promise. But don’t do anything *dumb*, Holly. Okay? Promise me *that*.”

Holly nodded. “Nothing dumb, I promise.”

All three girls hugged themselves, as if suddenly cold. A moment of quiet seeped around them, elastic, padded.

“Was there any booze left?” Holly asked.

The next day, Holly woke up early, hungover, and quickly pulled on the oversized sweater Bill had given her years before, a pair of torn jeans, and her running shoes. She walked grimly down to Martha’s Café, where she ordered a huge coffee and a muffin to pick on. She sat outside despite the morning chill and stared at the town waking up, sipping coffee. There was only one other customer braving the cold air, a guy in jogging clothes who smiled at her slightly and stared at her ass as she moved past him.

My dead brother visits me, she thought, and tells me he was murdered and wants revenge. I accept it. I never think to wonder if I’m going crazy. Isn’t this what psychos always say? Voices. They heard voices. Their mother’s voice, their dog’s voice. Son of Sam listened to his dog, killed, what, twenty people? God, Holly, get a grip. The first sign that you’ve gone nuts is that peaceful sure feeling that you’re totally sane -in which case I guess I’m safe.

She sipped coffee and watched joggers, dog-walkers, crusty-eyed kids going out for breakfast. *But what if he was right?*

She let the thought wander her subconscious for a moment, turning her attention to her fingernails, which had the last remnants of a dark purple polish. *What do I do if Billy really came to ask me to help him, and I didn’t believe it, or was too scared to let myself believe it? What if they killed him -or maybe just Stan- and I let them get away with it? She closed her eyes and sighed deeply. I should at least investigate. I should at least honor him that much.*

Her hand was shaking as she raised the coffee cup to her lips. The smell of the coffee, burnt and harsh, the sight of curdled milk floating on the surface, it all made her feel queasy. *I will never drink again.* She thought cheerfully, forcing herself to take a healthy sip. *Ugh, that didn't help.*

It's such a pretty day and here I am thinking about my dead brother.

She stared at the street scene before her, crystalline in the chill air, and let her coffee steam in her hands. *I can't let that smooth prick Stan get away with this. I knew he had a thing for Mary, and I guess I've resented them both for hooking up like two weeks after Billy was dead, but I guess I would have gotten over it. Eventually. These things happen. But if that bastard killed Billy over that little twat...then he has to burn for it. That simple.*

She stood up and left her steaming coffee on the table. The jogging guy smiled at her again and his eyes watched her breasts beneath her sweater. She moved past him without looking and nudged his table with her hip, knocking his decaf mocha into his lap. Hearing his shouts behind her, Holly smiled slightly.

That's the price of admission, buddy.

Walking felt good, so she put her hands in her pockets and started to wander amidst the falling leaves, her dark eyes on the sidewalk, watching her sneakers move, one in front of the other, again, repeat.

The police didn't find anything. Hit and run, only one witness, never found the car. A dark colored domestic car, big, four door. No specific make. Smacked Billy dead on going at least fifty in a twenty-five zone. Never braked, no skid marks on the road. Never even touched the brakes. She blinked. Who wouldn't at least touch the brakes?

She stopped dead. *Someone not surprised to see Billy in the street.* She forced herself to start walking.

Christ. Have we all been stupid? Blind? Both. Mom and Dad didn't want to think, they just wanted to get it over with, Mom wandering around with a glass of wine all day and Dad just working until midnight every day. Me just smoking in the parking lot of the funeral home, not talking to anyone. None of us, paying attention. Stan. Mary. They were in pretty good moods at the funeral. Stan got drunk after the wake, started singing.

The image of Stan, flushed and warbling into a spoon for the amusement of Mary, floated into her mind obscenely. Without realizing it, she started walking faster.

Mary's dress, so short. Stylish. She shows up stylish at my brother's funeral. Made up, perfect. I had a bird's nest for hair and Mom had to almost dress me in the morning. Not Mary, Mary was pinned down and perfect. Jesus Christ! What was I paying attention to? I don't think I've ever seen too less upset people in my life

An image suddenly snapped into place: Stan, drunker still that same night, helping Mary, not sober herself, into a cab. Looking around to see who was

watching. Then climbing in himself.

That look, Holly thought, moving faster. *That guilty look around*. She looked the memory over from all angles, and each time she did Stan's climb into the cab looked more sensuous, more seductive, more primal. He flowed into the cab. He slithered in. He drooled into the cab, wet whiskey lips and warm nicotine cologne. Holly'd seen that movement before on her own frat-party mistake-dates. She knew the look of a guy on the make. *That look, that bastard. He was banging her at the funeral!*

She was running.

2

Thanksgiving at the Dublen's, the whole family crawling out from under the funeral pallor of cousinnephewbrotherson-in-law Billy's untimely death.

In a short but otherwise tasteful black dress, her hair up in an attractively messy pile, Holly split time between the kitchen, listlessly listening to endless conversation about pregnant cousins, engaged cousins, and married cousins' children, and the back porch, shivering with rock hard nipples while she smoked stale cigarettes.

Christ sakes I should have let Marty Picovich knock me up like he wanted when I was fourteen. I'd be the success story of the family by now, I'd have like four kids and I'd be the belle of the fucking ball. I wonder what Marty's doing now? Probably convinced some other nice catholic girl to drop her knickers back in high school and works every morning shift at the Krispy Kreme on Harold Street to support them.

Sandwiched between heavysset Aunts displaying photos of doughy, formless babies over steaming cups of coffee and the clamor of her mother cooking all around them, Holly let her mind wander as she mindlessly oohed and aahed over grotesque children she refused to believe had any genetic connection to herself.

Look at this one. Down Syndrome, I'd guess....oh, if that's Jessie's kid I believe it. Poor rugrat, cursed with that face. I guess that's it for the Dublen name. No one's gonna breed with the new generation of Dublens. We're fading from history.

Look at Mom. I wonder when my inherited insanity will kick in. Look at her. Every year, it's the same, she invites the whole fucking clan over and then refuses to let anyone help her cook. I bet she was up at 3 in the morning to start cooking, if she every went to sleep. Probably already been through a bottle of red wine. And every year the turkey comes out an hour late and two shades too pink and we collectively take a deep breath and risk our lives and eat it and then spend two hours digesting and watching each other for signs of gastrointestinal distress. And its worse this year. Bill used to be able to make fun of her, break the tension, make her laugh at herself. Now she's cooking like it's a war.

I can't even look at Margie's kid. If I were Tommy I wouldn't investigate too deeply into this one's genetic makeup...it can't be human.

Fucking depressing. If she leaves a plate set for Billy I think I'll just get up and walk out on dinner. It's creepy how she's acting like he isn't dead, just gone. And Daddy isn't helping. And if one more Aunt or cousin asks me where this Roger guy they've been hearing about it, I'll scratch their eyes out. I swear I will.

“Sweetheart?”

She glanced up at her father, a stout man getting fatter every year, wearing a loose, billowing sweater over his paunch that granted him an unattractive, vaguely feminine cast. A tumbler was warming in one hand. His face was reddened from both shaving and drinking, his hair greyed.

“Stan and Mary are here.”

She looked back down at the table. *Oh great Dad, thank goodness. Aren't you angry? You used to get angry. Billy and me were always afraid when we'd done something bad, you'd come home and I thought you were going to have a heart attack from yelling so much. Now that whore shows up like nothing's changed since last Thanksgiving, and you're in here calling me sweetheart in that dress you call a sweater.*

“Sweetie -”

“I heard.” Holly snapped, then felt a flush coming to her cheeks. She looked back up. “Sorry, Dad. I don't want to see them.”

Her father opened his mouth, then hesitated. He looked back over his shoulder, then back at her. Holly watched him. *Come on, Dad, at least get pissed at me.*

“I'll tell them you're in here helping Mom.” He said, turning back for the living room.

Holly swallowed and looked down at the table. A small pile of photos had appeared there, smeary-faced kids howling at the camera. She realized that her Aunts had been speaking to her throughout the whole exchange. She couldn't remember a word they'd said.

“Hey, Lee.”

Holly froze for a moment, looked up, stared.

“Fuck.” She said. She was dimly aware of her Aunt's and Mother pausing, stopping to stare at her. Shock. Disapproval. “Stan, don't ever call me that.”

He thrust his hands into his pockets and stepped into the kitchen. “Hello, Mrs. Dublin.”

“Stan,” Her Mother said warmly, “good to see you. Don't let Ms. Cranky get to you. She's determined to ruin our holiday, I think.”

Holly stood up and walked past them, back out to the back porch. *I'll be damned if I'll listen to Mom make fun of me with this troll.* She knew he was following her and let the screen door slam in his face.

“Holly -”

She turned on him. “What the hell are you doing here, Stan? Is she here too?”

Stan blinked. “What?”

Holly hugged herself. The back porch was a small deck with stairs leading to the back yard, overgrown with weeds. Their breath steamed around them. *I can't believe this asshole.* She stared at him. “Stan.....” she paused. *What the hell am I going to say? Stan, I know you murdered Billy. How dare you attend our family Thanksgiving like you have for seven years straight you dirty thieving murderer. Christ, I can't say that.*

Stan suddenly glanced over his shoulder and moved a step closer to her. “What exactly do you mean, Holly?”

Holly took a step back. “I mean.....I -”

This is Stan. Could he have....

She blinked. “What?”

“What are you talking about, Holly?” He loomed over her and stole a glance over his shoulder. His hands came up and were on her shoulders, and she gasped as his fingers dug in. “Holly, what the hell did that *mean?!?*”

“I...I.....um....” *Oh, Christ. In a second he's going to hit me.* She was sure of it. The flat, dark look in his eyes scared the shit out of her.

She forced a smile across her face. “Stanley! When did you get here?” She stepped closed and threw her arms around him. “It's good that you came. Mom and Dad will be glad to see you.” She looked around and hugged him hard. “Is Mary here too?”

He patted her back uncertainly. “Yeah, she -”

Holly pulled back. *Crazy, that's me.* “Isn't it wonderful out here? So crisp. It's Thanksgiving weather.”

“Uh, yeah -”

I can almost here his thoughts creaking through the larded pathways of his miniature mind. “I like to just stay out here sometimes, feel the Fall around me, you know? Especially when my Aunts are telling me all about their little mongoloid heirs.”

“Mongoloid?”

Give up, Stanley. I can keep this up all day if I have to. I used to be Crazy all the time when I was a kid.

“Would you leave me alone for a little bit?” She said with the biggest grin she could manage. “I need to talk with the trees for a little while.” She turned serious. “I've been away.”

Stan nodded, paused, and then turned and went back in the house.

Holly sat down and took a deep breath. *I remember playing Crazy with Billy. We used to drive Mom and Dad batty, trying to be the most insane.* She smiled. *Billy, running around the house screaming 'The voices! The Voices!', me sitting at the kitchen table rocking back and forth and staring. Until Dad threatened to spank us, and then we'd claim to be cured and we'd hug each*

other and jump up and down and say we'd made it through the darkness. She rubbed her face. Oh, Billy. We're gonna play Crazy again. And avenge you.

Holly was sitting between her Uncle Harry and her Cousin Marge.

Harry has apparently lost control of his chewing. I haven't anything this loud in my whole entire life. It's disgusting. It's like being inside his mouth. And Marge is wearing so much cheap perfume my eyes are watering. Thank God for wine. I think wine was invented at a family gathering thousands of years ago by desperate individuals locked in a life-or-death struggle with their relatives' quirks.

She looked around the table. *Stan is staring at me.* She looked away.

Little prick is watching me. Isn't that suspicious? I act a little strange and he gets nervous. He was practically crowding me out back when I asked him what he was doing here.

"Holly?"

She blinked and looked across the table at her mother. "Yes?"

"Aren't you going to eat, dear?"

Holly shook her head. "Mother," she replied with a quick glance at Stan. "This Turkey is..." she paused for a look around the table and then leaned forward "*d-e-a-d.*" she spelled. Then she sat back with a knowing nod.

Her mother's face was suddenly frozen in an odd smile. "Excuse me?"

"Dead." Holly said flatly, and loudly. "Dead. I didn't want to upset everyone, but there you go. It's Dead, and I won't eat it. I don't eat dead things. May I be excused?"

"Don't talk to your mother that way, Holly." Her father boomed in a slurred voice.

"What are you talking about?"

She stood up. "It's dead." She looked at Stan. "Just like Billy."

Silence filled the room. *Christ, Holly, way to overact. Look at Stan, though! He's blushing. With what? Shame? Anger? Embarrassment? Like as not fear. He's afraid I know something, to suddenly suspect him after all these months. Your brother's unsettled ghost will do that to you.*

Her mother stood up. "Get out." she said in a low, dangerous voice. Holly blinked. She didn't remember ever hearing her mother sounding like that.

"Do as your mother says." her father echoed weakly.

Holly nodded. "I'll be in the library. Better read than dead." With a slight curtsy, she smiled and left the room. *I think I've earned an academy award. Billy, did you see? I haven't lost it. I can still play Crazy with the best of 'em, which was pretty much you. Let's check out the upper levels of the family mansion, shall we? Since we've ruined dinner no reason to ruin the cocktails afterward. If we're quiet and missing long enough Mom'll come looking for us with apple pie a'la mode to lure us out. Billy, remember how we used to hide in the closets upstairs? The third floor no one ever used much, empty rooms*

from olden times, when we Dublens were populous.

She climbed the dark stairs, remembering her childhood fondly. She could hear the dull murmur of voices below, the shattered dinner conversation struggling to repair itself. Grimly, she smiled.

After dinner, Mrs. Dublen and some of the heavy-breasted Aunts cleared the table while the men and younger cousins watched TV in a semi-comatose state. Holly's father took Stan aside with a pair of Budweiser's and led him deeper into the house, into Mr. Dublen's study, a refuge of pine paneling and old books.

"How have you been, Stan?" Mr. Dublen said affably, sitting down in one of the overstuffed leather chairs before his unused desk. It was an open secret within the family that the patriarch of the Dublens used his study mostly to drink and nap in private.

Stan sat down in the other chair. "Fine, sir, fine. I've missed this family, though."

"And Mary? She looks well."

"She's fine. We're getting better. We're beginning to feel normal again."

Mr. Dublen nodded, peeling the label from his beer bottle. He was a man of fifty-three, solid and flushed, with big powerful hands he often did not know what to do with. "I'm worried about Holly, though."

Stan nodded soberly. "She's been acting...strange. She's been cold to me and Mary ever since....well, that's normal, I suppose, considering. But today..."

"Yes." Mr. Dublen nodded, studying the label carefully. "I'm worried."

"We all are."

"Yes. That's good." He cleared his throat and looked up. "Who are those two friends of hers, the two girls she spends so much time with?"

Stan nodded. "Rose and Gail. They're pretty much inseparable back at school."

Mr. Dublen nodded. "That's them. Nice girls. Only met them once or twice. Very pretty."

Stan waited a few seconds. "Yes, uh, they are."

The older man shifted in his seat. "I was thinking, maybe, I was thinking maybe we could invite them up this weekend. Holly's staying here through next Friday. Maybe you and Mary would stay too, and we could ask, um, Rose and Gail to come up. I think Holly needs people who love her around her. I think she's finally....feeling.....Billy's death."

Stan nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll call them."

"Thanks, Stan. You're a good kid. A good kid."

"Holly?"

Holly stared at the red coal of her cigarette in the dark.

A knock on the closet door. "Holly, I can smell that cigarette."

Holly sighed out smoke into the darkness. *Cousin Neal. Cool Cousin Neal. Well, he was cool until he went off to college to smoke pot all day and decided his cousin Holly was too immature to talk to any more.* She sighed. *He got better, though, and I guess I can't resent him forever.* "Come on in, Neal."

The door creaked open and weak twilight seeped into the closet. Mothballed winter coats and mysteriously unmarked boxes filled the walk-in. Holly sat demurely on one crushed and crumpled box, smoking. She squinted at her cousin, a lanky long-haired guy with a disastrously sparse beard. She shrugged. "I think there were holiday ornaments in here, but I'm afraid to confirm."

Neal laughed, closing the door behind him. "I remembered when we were younger you used to hide in here whenever you were upset."

Don't forget you and Billy were usually the ones upsetting me. Holly thought darkly. *Creeps.*

"Mom and Dad never figured it out."

Neal shook his head, sitting down and crumpling his own box, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. "Oh, they knew. There were just too many stairs involved. And right now I don't think they believe you would actually hide in the same place as when you were ten. Or that you would *hide* at all."

Great. My hippie cousin Neal who has been in school for six of the greatest years of his life while he gets to the bottom of his bong is calling me immature. Can this day improve? Doubtful. That would require serious special effects and I blew my budget on that five years ago with my first orgasm.

Neal flicked open his lighter and puffed a great cloud of smoke into the thick closet atmosphere. "You don't seem so crazy in here, cuz."

Holly nodded. "Who said I was crazy?"

"That was quite a performance."

She bit her lip and carefully snuffed her cigarette on the sole of her pump. "Neal, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot, babe."

"Can I trust you?"

Neal opened his mouth and then seemed taken aback. "What?"

Holly leaned forward. In the adjusted darkness, Neal was grey and indistinct. "Can I rely on you?"

Neal hesitated. *Good.* Holly thought. *Only assholes and insincere gimps answer questions like that immediately.* "Sure, Holly, sure. We're family, right? What's going on?"

Holly shook her head. "I need you to not ask that question just yet. I need you to let me be for a while. Okay?"

Neal nodded. "Okay, but -"

"But, I need you to know that I'm not losing it, Neal. I'm gonna be acting.....freaky....for a little while. Everyone's gonna think I've flipped. I need you to know that I haven't, and defend me if necessary, can I count on you?"

She made her eyes as wide as possible, tried to will herself to melt his heart. *If I got an 'A' in Poli Sci last semester just by wearing tight sweaters I can get Neal here to feel protective towards me, right? What good are feminine wiles if you never use them?*

Neal studied his cigarette for a few seconds, frowning. Then he nodded, looking up. "Okay, Holly. You can count on me. For a little while. I can't make any promises."

She nodded, leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek. She let her hand linger on his. "Thanks, cuz."

Feminine wiles in effect! She thought, stifling a giggle. *Even if it is a little incestuous. Creepy again. Then again, having three-headed kids with Neal here would probably be a better choice than genetically pure studmuffins with Roger, so there's something to be said for everything, I guess.*

Neal snuffed his own cigarette on his shoe and stood up. "All right, Holl. And listen, if you ever -"

"Thanks, Cuz. What are the theories on *The Problem With Holly* right now?"

Neal laughed. "Amongst the Uncles, the money's privately on women troubles."

Typical. Woman breaks out of the box, she's ragging. Goddamn men.

"Amongst the cousins, we thought perhaps you'd dropped a tab before dinner."

"Jesus, Neal, not everyone's a fiend like you."

"Hey, you were the one with the Turkey Declaration, remember?"

Holly paused. "What does Stan say?"

"That kneebiter?" Neal said with a snort. "Christ, who *invites* that guy? He isn't even related. He creeps me out, Holl." She smiled. "I don't know if he has an opinion on it, actually. Why?"

"No reason." *Kneebiter. I love that.* She smiled. "Thanks, Neal."

He nodded, and left. Holly sat in the dark. *Neal's okay. I'm glad I won't be freaking him out.* She lit another cigarette and tried to picture her lungs turning black, shrinking.

3

Stan drove a Ford Escort, a small, cramped car that managed sixty on the highways on a good day. Privately, Gail and Rose thought that this was absolutely appropriate. Stan was perfect for downsized things, being somewhat downsized himself.

Somehow, Rose and Gail managed to communicate this back and forth with nothing more than glances, facial expressions, and giggles. They were irritating the hell out of Stan, but he struggled to swallow it.

“I appreciate your coming along. We’re all worried about Holly, and we figure she needs friends right now. It’s been a hard couple of months and all.”

Gail sighed in the front seat. “She’s been really weird. We’re happy to come.”

“Yeah.” Rose said from the back seat, where she was lying down sleepily. “Holly’s been so sad.”

“Besides, it’ll be an adventure. I was sick of my folks anyway.”

“I was sick of your folks too.” Rose grouched, her voice rising up from the dark depths of the back. “Your Dad was creepy, Gee. He kept staring at my chest.”

Gail twisted in her seat and swatted Rose on the thigh. “Shut up! It was only that one time, and it was only because you were practically flaunting them in his face. Next holiday you can either fly home or sit in the dorm for a week, you’re so creeped.”

“Was not *flaunting*.” She shifted slightly to be farther from the front.

“Besides, I can’t stay in the dorm, they fumigate over the breaks. It’s not like I accused your Dad of rape or something.”

“Uh,” Stan said slowly, “You know Holly doesn’t know you’re coming. It’s a surprise.”

“So you said.” Gail replied drolly.

“The thing is, none of us can figure out what’s bugging her. She’s really being strange but we don’t know why. We’re hoping you two can draw her out a little, maybe find out what’s bugging her. And then let us know.”

“We’re Holly’s best friends.” Gail said confidently. “She’ll tell us.”

“But we’re not, you know, going to *betray any confidences*, you know. She’s our friend. If she tells us what she’s depressed about, we won’t just turn around and blab it to her Dad and....you.” Rose protested.

“How *are* you related to this family, Stan?” Gail asked.

“Not related. I’ve known them for eight years. Me and Billy used to be best friends. I just *feel* like I’m related. Listen,” he assumed a lofty and parental expression. Gail caught Rose’s eye and rolled her own. “Maybe Holly’s just depressed about something, but maybe it’s more serious. She’s been acting *crazy* these past few days. I mean really nuts. No one wants to think she’s actually, you know, cuckoo, but it’s been getting weirder and weirder. It’s in her best interest that we know. I’m not asking you to betray confidences, girls, I’m asking you to help *us* help Holly. Look, if she told you she was going to kill herself, you wouldn’t keep *that* a secret, would you?”

Gail frowned. “No, of course not. But -”

“There are lots of things just as bad as that, only they maybe don’t always sound so bad. Sometimes when someone tells you one thing, they’re really saying ‘I’m thinking of committing suicide’. You can’t know. Are you guys psychologists?”

“I’m pre-med.” Rose offered.

Stan shook his head. “All we’re asking is let us know what Holly tells you. We don’t want to know run-of-the-mill secrets. But if it has to do with her behavior these past few days, we *need* to know. We won’t tell her you told us. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe we’ll all laugh about this. But right now, we’re worried about her. And when you see her, you will be too. So please, help us.”

“Well, jeez,” Gail muttered, “we already *said* we would, didn’t we? Holly’s our *friend*.” She lowered the vanity mirror on the sun-guard and blotted her lips. “How much more of a drive is it, anyway, Stanley?”

“I prefer Stan.”

Gail rolled her eyes again. “Stan. How much longer is it now, *Stan*?”

Rose giggled.

Stan sighed heavily. “About an hour.” He said, thinking: *were all the girls this annoying when I was 18?*

A few seconds of silence soothed him.

“I was really sad when her brother Billy died.” Rose offered from her shadows. “I liked him. He was sweet.”

“And cute.” Gail added.

The girls giggled, and Rose leaned up to tap Gail playfully on the head. “Whore.”

“What?” Gail protested. “He was yummy. I used to look forward to trying to seduce him every time he visited Holls.”

Rose resettled herself. “Whore.”

Gail shrugged. “As if you didn’t dress up a little when he came around.”

“*That’s enough!*” Stan shouted.

Silence swelled up and ate everything in the car. Gail and Rose stared, first at each other, then at Stan.

"I'm sorry." Stan said, swallowing. He was red-faced and stern, and the girls didn't think he looked very sorry at all. "Bill was my friend, you know. I'm...I'm just upset, is all."

They rode in silence.

"Holly?"

Holly sighed, rolling onto her back and holding her cigarette up in the air. *I think Stan has some form of low-level brain damage. He refuses to take this hint.* "Yes, Stanislaw?"

"Can I come in?"

Holly looked around the room. It no longer looked much like her room; her parents had wasted no time in stripping away the little-girl wallpaper and boxing up her crap, making her old room into a *guest room* or something. She knew they'd done the same thing to Bill's room when he'd moved away the first time, she knew her parents were famously unsentimental people, but still....it bothered her that her old room was now just a whitewashed shell. *Anyone could sleep in here.* She thought. *Even Stan.*

"Should we let him in?" she said loudly, sitting up and plucking an old blue T-shirt from a pile of clothes she'd created on one of her chairs. "I don't know, he's horrid." She pulled the shirt on and swung her bare legs onto the floor. "Yes, but he never gives up. You might as well give in. It's the only way." She stood up, bent over, and ran a hand through her short dark hair. "You're right. Besides, I'll hide here with this stout stick and if he becomes physical I'll leap out and beat him over the head." She took a last puff on her cigarette and snuffed it. "Smashing plan! Okay, Stanislaw, you can come in."

The door creaked open slowly. Holly crossed her arms under her chest and stared. "Yes?"

Stan entered slowly, leaving the door open behind him. He glanced at Holly and then down at the floor.

"Uh, sorry, I didn't realize you were..."

Naked. Gosh, Stan, you give every indication of being a completely clueless man, yet Mary pants after you so you must know how to use that thing. Well, at least you didn't stare, or give me the toe-to-head treatment.

"What can I do for you?"

He seemed to regroup, looking back up at her with forced cheer. "Look, Holl, I know you've been depressed this week -"

At least he's stopped calling me 'Lee'. "No, not depressed."

He paused, waiting for her to continue. When she didn't he looked down at the floor again. "Okay, whatever, I thought you were, and I have a surprise for you downstairs. Will you come down?"

She turned and started pacing a small square around her room. "No."

“Jesus, Holl, you haven’t been out of this room in like three days -”

“I don’t want to.”

“But I have a *surprise*.”

“Bring it up here, then.” *I think the fact that I’m not wearing any pants is actually freaking Stanley out. Could it be? My delicately unshaven thighs making him nervous? Hmmm.....brings a whole new possibility to the word ‘surprise’ I’d rather not investigate.*

“Holl, come on -”

Suddenly, two heads peered around the corner of the doorway. Holly froze for a moment, an involuntary grin spreading over her face. “Gail? Rose? What the?”

The two girls let out piercing screams and ran laughing into the room. Stan smiled as they embraced Holly, who patted their backs lightly, staring at him.

Oh my god I think they’ve gotten dumber since last time I saw them. It must be a disease. Maybe I’m the carrier? Everyone I see seems to get steadily stupider. Christ, I am a bitch.

“Are you surprised?” Gail asked, jumping up and down.

“Stan drove us up.” Rose added.

Holly nodded, smiling slightly. “I *am* surprised.” She confirmed. She looked at Stan and soured a little. “Could you excuse us, please?”

“Sure.” He said, looking down at his feet again. “See you later.”

None of the girls replied. Holly crossed the room and shut the door behind him.

“Wow, he’s a Drip, huh Holl? I mean like he’s totally weird. And you’re what, related to him?” Gail said, sitting on the bed and tucking one leg beneath her.

Gail, you always position yourself for maximum adorability, don’t you? Holly thought. She shrugged. “No, I’m not, but I might as well be. He was Billy’s friend, now he dates Billy’s Mary. Mom and Dad love Mary to pieces, so by extension they love Stan. They used to love Stan by extension off of Billy. Now it’s Mary.” She grabbed up a pair of soft, faded jeans and began tugging them on. “He *is* a Creep.”

“God, you don’t *know*, Holl.” Rose said, rolling her eyes dramatically. “We were stuck with him for like *two hours* in that crappy little car of his. No radio, either. He wouldn’t let us play it.”

“He was really snotty to us, too.” Gail added.

Holly nodded breathlessly, pulling her hair back. “Yeah, sounds like Stan.”

Gail glanced at Rose. “How are you, Holl?” She smiled a little. “We’ve been having a terrible holiday. Rose is much more annoying away from school. I must have been distracted, not to notice.”

Rose cheerfully extended her middle finger.

Holly laughed a little. “God, it’s good to relax. I’m....okay, I guess.” She sat down. “A little weird, but okay.”

“Yeah, Stan was telling us.” Rose said, inspecting the small collection of jewelry on the Dresser.

Holly nodded slowly. “He was?”

“Sure.” Gail said. “He’s worried about you. He and your Dad, they offered to pick us up.”

Rose sprayed some perfume on her wrist and sniffed it. “They thought you might need some cheering up.”

“So,” Gail finished, turning to face Holly directly, “any good bars in this town?”

“Ones that don’t card.” Rose added.

Holly looked at Gail. *You know, I bet they’d go out on their own if I didn’t feel like it. It wouldn’t surprise me at all. The Glimmer Twins here don’t want nothing but a good time. And I get the feeling Stan is fishing for more than an improvement in my mood.* “That’s all? Cheer me up?”

Gail’s eyes flicked to Rose and then back again. “Well, sure. We’re your best friends. Who else could cheer you up?”

Best friends. It’s like having my own personal security leak, right here in my room, touching all my stuff and scheming to steal cute outfits from me. If I’m not careful The Twins here will happily tell Mom, Dad, and Stan everything I tell them, then walk out of here with half my accessories and most of my shoes. I’ve seen it in action. They’re like living, breathing recording devices. They look dense, but they hear everything and repeat it accurately. She sighed. *Christ, I can’t tell them anything.*

She looked at Gail, and smiled as wide as she could make her mouth go. “This,” she said deliriously, “is going to be *so much fun!*!”

Gail and Rose exchanged a look, and Holly felt better.

Holly lowered the vanity mirror on the sun guard in the front seat and looked her face over, blotting her lips a little and staring into her dark eyes steadily. She stole glances at the three women in the back seat: Rose, Gail, and a sour-looking Mary. *Rose’s hair is about twice as wide as she is.* Holly thought. *If you lit a match near her she’d combust in a blue fireball of hairspray. Gail’s wonderbra is doing so much wonder she looks like she’s got small animals stuffed down her shirt. Mary looks like she’s headed for a bible-reading instead of a bar, and Stan is driving with the two-fisted white-knuckled grim determination of a man on a mission. I think he could run over his own parents on this road tonight and just keep driving, gritting his teeth.* She smiled widely at herself, making the muscles in her face move against their wishes. *This is gonna be interesting.*

The fact that Rose and Gail and Holly were underage had met resistance from Stan and Mary, who were each twenty-three and dripping with condescending experience. Holly had approached Stan and with minimum Craziess had asked him nicely to turn a blind eye to it for one night. She told

him she needed a night out, needed to talk with her friends and get some stuff off her chest, and a few drinks wouldn't hurt the process. Stan had agreed, with the condition that he and Mary tag along.

"Not to cramp your style, but just to be there, in case something happens." He'd said in his best grown-up voice. "We'll stay out of your way."

Holly let herself study Mary another second, and then snapped up the mirror. *She sure looks thrilled to be here. Stan, I wonder how you explained this to her. Christ, there's so much perfume here it's getting hard to breathe.* She adjusted her skirt demurely. *I knew I shouldn't have worn this. I feel like my ass is sticking out all the time. And the top button on this sweater is missing. I'm gonna be feeling like a Freeshow all night.* She wriggled a little, trying to feel more comfortable in her clothes, and then gave up, sighing heavily. *Oh well. Maybe I'll at least get some free drinks out of it. But stick to the plan, girlie. Don't forget the plan.*

"Ever been here before, Holly?" Rose asked, examining her nails.

Duh, it was my idea. "Sure. A few times. Back in High School we used to come here a lot, they never card. It's not a real elegant place, but they'll serve you." She sighed, summoning energy for her knew persona. "It's got a big bar but they don't have very many beers on draft and they won't sell bottles and god help you if you want a mixed drink and the bartenders always try to pick you up but if you flirt with them they'll buy you drinks but that sometimes leads to ugly situations and there are always fifteen-year olds throwing up in there because they don't know how to drink but a lot of local college kids come too especially around the holidays and they have a jukebox but the bathrooms are really, really gross so don't drink too much unless you're dedicated to the whole experience."

A moment of silence greeted her. "Okay," Rose said at last.

Holly tried to catch her breath quietly. She felt like she'd been talking nonstop ever since Rose and Gee had shown up. This was more sociable than her previous Crazy, but much more exhausting. She could tell she had Stan confused and disturbed, though, and that was her immediate goal....she hoped to move on to bigger and better things later.

Rose exchanged a shrug with Gail. In the years they'd known Holly she'd never spoken that many words in one breath.

Holly plunged on. "At any rate I guess we can have a few drinks well not you Stan since you're driving but the rest of us can have a few drinks and we can tell Mary some stories from school and it's *so nice* that you guys came just to check up on me I feel sooooo much better and I'm sure after a few drinks I'll be fine and then we can all get on with our holiday and relax for a few more days before we have to go back to school and it's sooooo cool to get to show you guys my hometown and I'll have to come visit you one of these days."

Stan glanced at her quickly. "Holly, you all right?"

She beamed at him viscerously. "Yes. Why?"

“You seem like you’re on drugs.” Gail offered.

Holly sighed. *It’s gonna be a long night.* She shook her head. “Just feeling better than I have these past few days isn’t that okay? I mean isn’t that why you guys came up here? To cheer me up? Well, I’m cheered. Be happy. Mission Accomplished.”

Another few seconds of silence ensued. Mary cleared her throat delicately. “Gail? Rose? What are your majors at school?”

Oh boy, girl talk. Holly thought darkly. *She doesn’t know what she’s in for.* She examined Mary out of the corner of her eye, pretending to fiddle with her seatbelt. *She’s the all-American wet-dream. Blonde. Skinny. Big tits. Dumb as a post. Do I believe she would have ever hurt Billy? Nope. This woman breaks for animals, this woman cries at Jimmy Stewart movies, even the funny ones. No way she hurt Billy on purpose. But I don’t think she’s paying attention, either. How can you not see Stan’s at the very least a slug? How can you not be wary of a guy moving in on his best friend’s big-titted girlfriend at said friend’s funeral? No one’s that dumb, unless it’s on purpose.*

“I’m pre-med.” Gail answered proudly.

And will be for a very long time. Holly thought grumpily.

“I’m still undecided.”

And will be until she meets her husband, the future Mr. Rose Dawson.

“I totally understand.” Mary said with every ounce of warmth she was presently denying Stan. “It took me like three years to decide on a major. And I don’t even use my degree, really. My job is totally unrelated..”

The chatter filled the car, and Holly closed her eyes, not listening, but letting the familiar squealing rhythm of it wash over her. *How I ended up with such Chicklets for friends I’ll never know. I must not have been paying attention. At least Mary is getting along with them. That’s good.*

“Hey, Mare, I think that guy over there is checking you out.”

Mary nearly jumped, swallowing the sip of her drink with difficulty. “What?”

Christ, this is what happens when you go nine continuous years in a steady relationship of one sort. Holly thought. *The idea of attracting the opposite sex becomes frightening.* “That guy in the blue Chambray shirt. He’s digging you.” *Even in that matronly dress. At least she’s having a drink, even if it is a Maitai. We’ll loosen her up.*

Rose and Gail came skipping back from the jukebox, beers in hand. “The juke rocks!” Gail announced happily, sitting down. “Where’s Stan?”

“Making a call.” Mary replied.

Holly nodded absently. The bar wasn’t filled up yet, it was a little early and the noise level was still rising to its peak. It was an unpretentious place with bare wooden tables and chairs, a scuffed floor, and nothing but free beer plaques for decoration. Holly found she had to put a little lung into it to be

heard, but it wasn't distractingly loud yet. She finished her beer with a prodigious gulp and stood up, smiling hugely. "Come on! Let's do a shot!"

Gail and Rose almost burst with pleasure at this suggestion, leaping up. Mary smiled and shook her head. "No, no, my shot days are long behind me."

Holly took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Mare. Hang out with us! It's girls night out and I command you to do a shot. You have no choice. Blame it on us."

"Yeah!" Rose giggled. "We can be very cruel to people who don't give in to our peer pressure, you know."

"We'll make you cry."

Mary laughed. "All right, all right. One can't hurt."

My God, Holly thought, she's touched that I'm being friendly to her. I'm the world's hugest bitch and everyone loves me. Nothing makes sense any more. Up is down. Black is white.

They elbowed their way to the bar and caught the eye of the bartender immediately. A young guy, he tossed a bottle of whiskey in the air and caught it jauntily, sauntering over to them.

"And what can I do for such attractive ladies?"

Gag. Holly thought. *If that line actually works he's caught more diseases than I ever want to learn about.* "Four shots." She said with a grin.

"Of what?" He smiled back. Rose and Gail giggled, and Holly considered it a triumph of will that she didn't let it bother her.

"You decide." Rose said. "We want to get drunk."

The bartender's smile widened, and Holly desperately wanted to kick his teeth in. She could feel Mary burning with something -embarrassment? Rage?- next to her, and she winked in her direction. "Come on, Mare, one won't hurt."

"Sure." Mary said, smiling nervously.

Holly turned back to the bar and caught the tender looking directly at her chest. *Mental note: if I ever want to pick up sleazy men in bars, this sweater is perfect. Assuming I never fix that button.* He quickly redirected his gaze to her eyes, and smiled. *I'll bet he's operating at 110% charm right now, all sorts of overflow klaxons going in there, his own little Engineer Scotty shouting "No more charm, Captain, we'll blow a vessel!" but it ain't gonna work on me.*

"I'll be right back with something special, ladies." He said to her, and winked.

Rose and Gail circled around from Mary's other side. "He's digging you, Holl." Rose said in a stage whisper.

"He's got a great butt." Gail confirmed. The two girls giggled again, and Holly forced herself to join in. *If these two manage to stay single beyond their quarter-century, I'll eat one of my bras.* She thought grimly. Out loud, she said

"Well, if he makes a halfway decent drink, he's got a chance. These shots will make or break him, girls."

Gail and Rose whooped. Mary smiled politely, her eyes scanning for Stan. Holly kept her smile on firmly, and absent-mindedly clutched the top of her sweater closed.

Holly squinted at her watch. *Ten-freaking-thirty?* She gasped mentally. *We've been here for two hours already? Whoa. So much for the plan.* She eyed her glass warily. *I think the bartender's spiking these drinks.*

She took stock of the situation. *Bar: much more crowded. Rose: drunk, dancing with three guys by the jukebox, red-faced. Gail: drunk, not feeling well, sitting miserably next to me like a vomit time bomb. Mary: tipsy, chatting amiably with the bartender, as she has been for an hour now, sipping her Maitais. Stan: getting redder and redder in the face, watching her. I think he's going to blow a vessel soon. Blood everywhere and then Gail will start to puke.* She sighed, draining the last of the mudslide from her glass. *Everything according to plan.*

"Stan." She said.

Gail perked up suddenly, raising her head from her arms. "I gotta go home, Holly."

"No. Not now." She pushed Gail's head down gently. "Stan?"

He glanced at her. "What, Holly?"

"You haven't touched your beer. Aren't you having fun?"

He grimaced. *Oh my God, he's smiling.* "Sure. Sure I am." To prove it, he took a swig of beer, and grimaced again. *That was warm half an hour ago.*

She shifted into the seat next to him and leaned in close. "Tell me."

He divided his attention between Holly and Mary, who was giggling at the bar. "Tell you....what?"

"What's bothering you?" She sighed. "You came out all this way just to cheer me up, Stan. Now you're sitting here like a gloomy gus." She put her elbows on his knees and leaned in close. "It's Mary isn't it? She's spending all her time chatting up an old boyfriend while you sit here with me and Gail."

Now that oughta do it. She thought.

He swallowed, looking from her to Mary and back again. "What?"

"Look, she used to date the bartender. I should have remembered, we ran into him once when we came here with Billy. Back in high school, they were very hot and heavy." She looked down coyly. "As I recall now, there was an incident that time, too."

Now we'll see what kind of man Stanley is.

"An 'incident'?"

She put her chin in her hands, her elbows on his knees. *I can smell his aftershave. Stan actually doesn't smell too bad, for a creep. Whoa -don't even let yourself idly be attracted to him, Holly. Christ, two or three drinks and you're susceptible to Lectric Shave, for God's sakes. This is how guys like Stan breed, Holl. Alcohol is a key element in their mating dances.*

"Well, you know how those old purely physical relationships are -the coals

smolder for years after its officially over. She had a few drinks, and he made a move on her which she didn't exactly refuse -well, there was an incident." She tried to look innocent. "Happily I've grown a little in the past few years, else I don't think they'd have let me in. I'm blacklisted here, since then."

He looked over at the bar again, and Holly leaned back, crossing her legs demurely and smoothing her pantyhose. *Come on, Stan. Let's see what you're capable of in the heat of passion.* She stole a glance at the bar. *Well, it looks innocent enough. But it's amazing what an active imagination can do. Well, there he goes! Hunt and gather, Stan!*

She felt tugging on her sleeve. "Holl," Gail whined, "I want to go home."

Holly shrugged her off. "Not now, Gee. Go lock yourself in the bathroom."

Gail moaned a little.

Stan suddenly slammed his beer down on the table, stood up and strode purposely for the bar. Holly watched him raptly, his tight swagger across the crowded floor, through a haze of sweat and cigarette smoke, lies and betrayal. She watched him pull hard on Mary's arm, swinging her away from the bar roughly, his face red and stern and angry. She watched him say a few mean things to her. She watched him ignoring the bartender's angry demands until suddenly spinning away from Mary, diving forward, and sucker-punching the bartender with extreme prejudice. She watched the bartender disappear to the floor. Then, incredibly, she watched Stan leaping up onto the bar, and disappearing behind it. For a few stunned seconds all she saw was his arm, rising, falling, rising, falling.

As if from a great distance, Mary's shouting broke through the thickened air of the bar.

"Oh my God Stan STOP!"

Holly realized her mouth was hanging open. *Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a winner.*

4

Holly set her shoes down on the porch and searched for her keys in her purse. *I haven't used these house keys in about a year. I'm not even sure I brought them.* The moonlight wasn't very helpful, and she began to ponder sleeping on the porch, curled up in the milkbox.

The front door snapped open, and she looked up to find her father standing there, gaping.

"Hey, Dad."

He pushed open the door. "Are you okay, sweetie? Stan told us you wouldn't let him drive you home. Are you okay? I was going to call the cops!"

She stepped into the house. All the lights were on, and she could hear loud conversation down the hall. *Oh boy, it's a Dublen crisis I guess. Last time this happened was when I came home drunk from the fucking prom and Mom was convinced I'd slept with my reptillian boyfriend Murray the Gimp.*

"Good you didn't, Dad." She said, pushing past him. "Or Stan might be cooling his heels downtown right now."

"What?"

Speak of the devil. Here comes the lunatic.

She stopped still in the hall. "Don't come any nearer to me, you fucking psycho."

Stan stopped. Behind him, she could see Rose and her Mom. Stan's right hand was wrapped in a towel and ice. "Holl -"

"Back up." She snapped. "Let me through."

"Holly -"

"*Back up!*" Holly snapped. "I don't want to breathe your aura." *Where's that temper now, Stan? An hour ago you were the fucking Incredible Hulk. Now you're sensitive Stan again? Jesus Christ.* "I said back up!"

Stan began backing up, causing some confusion among Holly's Mom and Rose. "Holly, what's -"

Holly advanced. "Don't fucking pretend nothing's wrong. Mary obviously knows better, which is why she called a goddamned cab. I wouldn't get in a car with you either, you *fucking madman. Back up!*"

Whoo-hee girl, you could be an actress. Get thee to an agency.

Stan moved into the living room and Holly moved past him into the kitchen. In the doorway she whirled and stopped, and everyone paused in mid-follow.

“That *madman* isn’t allowed in the same room with me. Anyone else wants to talk to me, fine. But Stan stays one room away from me for the rest of my life.”

The Dublens left Stan standing in the living room with Rose, who looked woozy.

“What has gotten into you?” Her mother demanded.

“Holly, what’s going on?” Her Dad asked.

“Where’s Mary? Stan wouldn’t say anything.”

Ah, Mom and Dad. Holly thought. Sweet parents who gave the best years of their lives to me and Billy, who eagerly sucked it all away like ravenous vampires. I’ll try to not be annoyed by the fact that you’re more concerned with Mary than with me.

“Mom, Dad, Mary was talking to this guy at the bar, and Stan went absolutely *apeshit* and beat the *hell* out of him. The guy was *unconscious* when they pulled Stan off of him.” *He’s a killer, Mom. I think he killed Billy. After tonight, I believe it.* She hugged herself carefully. “He scared me, Mom. He scared Mary. If we hadn’t gotten out of there while everyone was still stunned, Stan’d be in jail right now. They might still come after him.” She paused. “Is Gail okay?”

Her father nodded. “Throwing up in the bathroom.” He touched her arm, and Holly hugged herself tighter. “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah, Dad. Would you do me a favor, and take Rose upstairs? I need to talk to Stan alone.”

Her parents looked at each other. Her father thrust his hands into his pockets. “Is that such a -”

Holly was nodding vigorously. “I’ll be okay, don’t worry. You’ll just be upstairs.”

They looked dubious, but then her mother grabbed her father’s arm and pulled him into the living room. Holly began pacing, found cigarettes in her purse, and was standing still smoking one, leaning against the far yellow wall of the kitchen, when Stan stepped into the room.

He looks normal again. Placid. Good old Stan. “Quit the act, Stan. I think we all know you have a fucking temper now, huh?”

“Holly, I’m sorry, okay?” He put his hands out. “I’m human. I have a temper, fine. Who doesn’t?”

“That was more than *temper*, Stan.” She said icily. “I can’t believe we’ve been letting a fucking subhuman like you into our house.”

His face hardened. “Holly, calm down.”

Oh, I’m calm, Stanislaw. How about you? “I can’t believe we’ve let a

fucking animal like you be near us. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I said I was sorry, Holly." Stan said, looking down at his shoes and then back at her from under his eyebrows.

"Sorry, huh? You gonna go down to the hospital and tell that poor sap you sucker punched you're sorry?" *Oh, he's pissed all right. This ought to take about six more seconds.* "You gonna go down there and apologize and explain how you hit him for *no fucking reason* like a goddamn schoolyard bully -"

"Holly -"

"- how you jumped on top of him and beat his face until he was unconscious to show everyone what a big fucking *man* you are -"

"Holly!"

"You're pathetic, Stan. You're a pathetic loser asshole and I'm fucking *amazed* that my brother let you tag along with him for so many years -"

"Holly *shut the fuck up!*" Stan suddenly shouted.

Holly shut her mouth with a click, and then took a deep breath of the sudden silence that filled the room. "What are you going to do, Stan, kill me?"

The faucet was dripping hardened city water into the sink. The fluorescent light on the ceiling was sizzling and flickering just slightly. The refrigerator was humming softly with expectant and determined cheer.

Holly took a long drag on her cigarette and narrowed her eyes at Stan.

"What did you say?" The words came from somewhere in the vicinity of Stan, but Holly couldn't see his lips move. With his head bowed, his eyes were shadows.

"You heard me, Stan."

From upstairs, her father's voice: "Holly? Stan? Everything okay?"

Holly raised an eyebrow. "Is it?"

Stan swallowed, looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, Mr. Dublen." He said moderately. "We're fine."

"Holly?"

Go Dad. Finally worried about me, huh? Well, I could get all infantile about it taking a direct threat to my life to gather some concern, but I'm mature now, I think. We'll deal with it in family therapy next year. "Fine, Dad." She called out.

Holly shifted her weight, and the old kitchen floor creaked a little.

Stan was still looking over his shoulder. "What did you say, Holly?"

He sounds crazy. He doesn't sound like Stan at all. Holly felt her stomach clench a little. This is getting a little scary. He can't kill me right here in my house with Mom and Dad upstairs, can he?

He turned back to look at her, and she took a step backwards without thinking about it, bumping into the door to the porch. *Oh, Christ.* She thought.

"Holly," he said, his voice reasonable and eerily calm, "let's put our cards on the table, huh? It sounds like you're accusing me of something. Are you? Do you," he paused and glanced at the sink, "do you think I killed Bill?"

All right, bright girl, this is where the Plan Train stops and leaves you standing in the kitchen, huh? What exactly did you expect to happen? She pulled her sweater closed at her throat and watched as Stan crossed to the sink and carefully turned the faucet until the dripping stopped. *I guess there's nothing left but to go for broke.*

"Yes, Stan. I know you did. After tonight, I know."

Still studying the empty sink, he smiled and she wanted to scream. Without a word, he turned away, and started to leave the kitchen. At the edge of the Living Room, he paused and turned partway back.

"See you around, Holly." he said quietly, coldly. "Tell your cuntty girlfriends to find their own ride home."

Holly watched him exit the Kitchen, heard the front door open, and then slam. She pulled out one of the horrible yellow chairs and sat down at the kitchen table. She snuffed her cigarette against her shoe, dropped it on the floor, and searched herself for another one. She was shaking, a little. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them Billy was sitting across from her.

"Can I have a drag?"

She was frozen for a moment. *C'mon, Holly. This is becoming the norm for you, you know. Quit acting like you've never seen this before.* "Sure." She said, handing it across the table, her hand shaking terribly. He reached over and his suit jacket, split up the middle, bunched weirdly. *Split so he could swell in peace.* She thought. *Swell in Peace, Billy-boy. Oh my God that sounds absolutely terrible. Swell in Peace.*

For one horrible second she thought she might burst out laughing.

Her dead brother took a deep drag on the cigarette, the coal shining brightly for a second, and smoke drifted from his jacket, seeping out of his emptied and inexpertly stitched torso. He seemed to steam, momentarily. She closed her eyes.

"Holly,"

Billy said. She kept her eyes closed.

"Holly."

Oh, Billy, leave me alone for a few minutes at least. I've had a long night.

"Holly, that isn't enough."

She opened her eyes. "Billy, what do you want from me?"

"Help me rest, Leelee. He's got to be punished. Then I can rest."

"What can I *do*?" She said suddenly, her voice breaking. "He's a killer, Billy. He beat the shit out of that guy tonight." *He could beat the shit out of me.* "What can I do?"

"Get him arrested. Get proof. Put him away. When he's punished, I'll be able to rest." He took another gruesome drag on the cigarette, and she looked away. "I'll be able to rest."

She closed her eyes again. "Okay, Billy. Okay."

When she looked again, he was gone.

5

“I’m still not sure how I feel about this, Holly.”

Holly sighed. *For five minutes a week ago, Mary, you found the balls God’s been hiding from you all these years. You slapped that bastards face and walked home. Now you’re going weak sister on me? And naturally you wait until I’m freezing in this icebox of a car outside Stan’s house to voice your concerns. How did Billy date you?*

“Mary, you heard what I told you, right?”

“Yes, but -”

“You believe me, don’t you?”

“I believe you believe -”

“Then help me.” Holly said forcefully. “Just let me in. Help me look. If I don’t find anything, we leave and Stan never knows, and you can hate me.” *For all I care.* “Please. Help me. For Billy.”

Mary shut her eyes. Holly rolled hers. *This is what passes for a moral dilemma for Mary, eh? Closed eyes. Otherwise she might as well be contemplating what shoes to wear to the break-in. Actually, we won’t be breaking in, since we have keys. Is Entering a crime by itself? I may just find out.*

“All right. What are we looking for?”

“Anything. A rented car. A diary -I don’t know, Mary. Anything. Stan’s not bright enough to leave nothing behind. It’s just that no one thought to look before. I just know it.”

Mary’s face suddenly aged. “Smart enough to fool me.”

Like I said. Holly thought. *Oh, oh, the bitch is rising again.*

“C’mon,” she said. “If I’m wrong it’s all on me, Mary.” *If he catches us you can just wiggle that butt of yours and he’ll forgive you. Me, I’m the one he’s probably planning to kill.*

The two women opened the car doors and stepped out into the chill night. Stan’s house stood darkly across the street, white siding, untrimmed shrubs. The driveway was empty. They glanced at each other, and then Holly started to

cross the street. Mary hesitated for a moment, twirling a blonde lock on one finger, and then moved after the younger girl. They crossed the street, walked up the steps, and then stopped in front of the old-fashioned front door, which had a large pane of painted glass affording a blurry view of the foyer.

Holly crossed her arms and looked at Mary. The blonde just stood before the door, wringing her hands.

“This doesn’t feel right, Holly.” she complained.

Holly nodded. “Of course it doesn’t, Mary, why would it? My brother was murdered. We’re committing a crime to prove that. This is not standard operating procedure for the Dublens, and I’m guessing not SOP for you either. If you don’t unlock the door with your key, Mary, I’ll just break the glass and let myself in, and you can go home.” She sighed, softening a little. *Ain’t her fault she’s a twink.* “No guilt, I promise.”

Mary shook her head. “No, I guess I came this far because I want....to know, you know? I want to know if I’ve been.....with....a monster like what I saw at that bar, or....what. You know?”

Vocabulary’s never been Mare’s strong suit. “I know. Shall we? Before the neighbors notice two hot chicks hanging around Stan’s porch?”

Mary nodded, strode forward, and pulled her key ring from her purse. She opened the door slowly, and then stepped aside.

“You first.” She said to Holly.

Oh for God’s sake. “Fine.”

Holly took a deep breath, forced herself not to look around, and stepped into the foyer. It was dark and musty. She felt Mary creeping in behind her, and started walking slowly into the house. The floorboards creaked beneath her, and made her nervous.

“Which way is his bedroom?” Holly asked.

“Straight down the hall. Through the living room.” Mary replied, her voice shaky.

Holly walked down the hall. It opened into a nondescript room dominated by a huge television set and a pair of lumpy-looking couches. The blinds were drawn and half the room was completely dark, until the lights flicked on without warning.

“Hey there, Holly.”

Holly froze. Stan was sitting in an overstuffed chair by a table lamp. Legs crossed. Looking casual. Her eyes lingered on the shiny revolver he held in his left hand, loosely, as if it had been forgotten.

She didn’t turn to look at Mary. “Ladies first, huh, Mare?”

“Holly, I’m sorry.” Mary said in a casual tone of voice. “But you kept insisting on making this into a Federal case.”

“You both killed him.” Holly said flatly.

“Holly, for once in your life, shut up. You’ve been unstable. We had a falling out. You broke in to my house one night, up to some mad scheme, and I

shot you, thinking you were a burglar.” Stan said with a smug tone. “You’re making it easy, for once.”

So much for the importance of playing Crazy. Holly thought bitterly. “I can’t believe you’re such a fucking whore, Mary. How long were you spreading it for Stan while Billy was *alive*?”

Mary didn’t say anything at first. “Stan, just shoot her, okay? She’s been driving me bats for weeks.”

Holly didn’t take her eyes off of Stan. *I cannot believe these two freaks outwitted me. Have I been brain damaged? Mary humps Stan practically on the casket and it never occurs to me that this has been germinating for too long.* “Stan, you must have one magic prick, huh?”

Stan smiled, a sudden splitting of the lips. “Too bad you’ll never know, Leelee. In your sad delusion, I tragically cut your life short and you’ll never come around to me.”

Holly nodded slowly. “Huh. I’ve told people about you, you know. People know I thought you killed Billy. Even if they don’t really believe me, this is gonna be quite a coincidence for people to swallow.”

Stan stood up and shrugged, holding the gun down by his thigh. “Maybe it’ll be a little tricky, Leelee -”

“Stop calling me that.”

“- maybe. But it’ll pass. You’re nuts, we’re innocent, and even if your fucking crazy parents look at me cross-eyed all the time, we’ll move.”

“Stan,” Holly said slowly, tracking him with her eyes as he prowled the room, “listen to me.”

“Sure.” He said cheerfully.

“You did this just to....*date*?” She laughed; a short, barking snort. “I mean, you murdered Billy, you’re going to kill me, just so you guys could fuck? Come on, Stan, isn’t -”

“*NO!*” Stan thundered, bringing the gun up to point right at her face. Instinctively, she backed up, right into Mary, who pushed her forward again. “No, you smartassed little cunt, that is *not* the only reason. We love each other, yes. And it’s easier this way, sure. But try to get it through your idiotic little pixie brain that *not every-fucking-one in the universe liked your fucking brother!!*”

Holly blinked.

“He was just like you, you little smartass. He thought everyone else was an asshole. He thought he was doing us all a favor just speaking to us.” Stan lowered the gun and started pacing. “Christ, how I started to fucking hate him. He was always right, he always knew the answer. Everybody liked him, for some reason. Even *I* liked him most of the time, which really made me sick. I hated him, but I liked him.” He paused to snort. “If that doesn’t drive you crazy, babe, nothing will. And then he started dating Mary, and I thought the universe was playing a joke on me.”

He walked up close to Holly. She wanted to back up, but didn't to avoid getting prodded by Mary again. *Stay calm. Holly. Billy, if there was ever a time a girl needed the ghost of her dead brother, this is it.*

"And then a remarkable thing happened, Holly." Stan said quietly, so close to her face she could feel his breath. "Mary fell in love with me, too."

He turned away and waved his arms. "Think about it! I thought the universe was against me. I *hated* him. I thought the script was written, I'd hate him and have to watch him be with her for the rest of my miserable life. And then everything changed. We started having an affair. She loved *me*, not your stupid fucking perfect-in-every-way *brother*."

If I manage to get out of this, first thing on my list is to prevent either of these freaks from breeding. With anyone, but especially with each other. She cleared her throat. "Then why not just run away together? Why kill my brother."

Stan smiled and raised the gun again. "I hated him, remember?"

"Holly," he went on in a patronizing tone, advancing with the gun pointed at her. "Relationships are all about trust, right? You meet someone and you learn everything there is to know about them -*everything*- and you still love them. If you learn all the dark nooks and crannies, all the weirdness, that people normally keep secret, and you still love them, then you know its real." He shrugged. "My darkest place was my hate for Billy. I told her about it because I wanted her to know everything. And then another remarkable thing happened."

Behind her, Holly heard Mary laugh. "I hated your brother too, Holly. He thought I was an idiot. He was just fucking me. He would have left me for someone else eventually, and I think we all know that."

You are an idiot. Holly thought. "Jesus, you're both nuts." What are the odds of two certified psychos hooking up with my brother in one lifetime? Maybe I'll get the chance to ask Billy about it in a few minutes. Whoa, shit-can that kind of talk, missy.

"Crazy about each other." Stan said, pausing about three feet away. "Well, Leelee, how's about here? Any last words?"

Holly cleared her throat, licked her lips. "Stan, please, let's just -"

Stan clucked his tongue. "Holly, I don't think you want your last mortal words to be *Stan, please, let's just*. You Dublens are so fucking smart, can't you come up with something better? You were going to prove I killed your brother, right? You were going to think rings around poor slow Stan and Mary, right? So isn't that huge brain of yours worth a few poetic last words?"

Holly stared at him. "I think I've said all my words, Stan. The rest is silence." *Okay, Holly. Okay. Okay. Get ready. Come on. Okay. Okay...*

She watched his finger on the trigger, took her best guess, and dropped to the floor with a thud. Above her, the gun went off. Behind her, Mary hit the floor heavily, gracelessly, dead.

Holly looked up. Stan held the gun on her, his face blank. Holly was frightened of him for the first time, with his face so empty. *He looks like whoever was inside him isn't there any more.* She half expected him to just topple over.

“Jesus Christ you’re a pain in the ass, Holly.” He said. His voice sounded like his face.

I know, she thought. But at least I’m not some half-bred psychopath like you, Stan.

“Close your eyes.”

She shook her head. “No, Stan, please -”

“*Close your eyes!*”

Holly took a deep, ragged breath. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

The sound of the gunshot made her flinch, which is how she knew right away she wasn’t dead, and managed to open her eyes in time to see Stan hit the floor in front of her. He was still staring at her, and his face hadn’t changed expression at all. She pushed herself along the bloody floor a few feet, until her back hit the wall. She leaned back against it and just breathed for a moment, looking at him, watching his blood mingle with Mary’s.

The rest is silence, Stan.

6

“Still smoking, sweetie?”

Holly didn't glance around. “Yeah, Dad. I'm young. I'm gonna smoke until I'm forty and then quit and dodge the bullet.”

“Hmmm.” She could hear her Dad fidgeting. “That Roger fellow just called again. He sounds very concerned.”

She sighed, watching the leaves trickle off the trees in the back yard.

“Okay, Dad. Don't worry about him. He was just a boyfriend. He'll figure that out eventually and go away.”

He was still fidgeting. “Lee, I know this whole thing has been -”

She stood up, turned, and flicked her cigarette away in one motion, and her father stopped speaking on cue. “Daddy, it sure has been. But I got Billy some justice, right? Everyone knows that Stan was a sick fuck -”

Her father looked away, embarrassed.

“- and that my brother died a wrongful death. That's got to be good enough. It must be; I haven't seen Billy since.”

He looked back at her. “I guess so, baby.” His eyes were shining.

Don't cry. For God's sakes, Dad, don't cry. If you make me comfort you I'll run away screaming. “It was a weird weird thing, and we'll always miss Billy, but it's over. I don't have a brother, I don't have any friends any more -”

“But -”

She shook her head. “Rose and Gail? Come on, Dad. They were real happy to take Stan's side. I know they didn't want to hurt me, really, but they didn't try to help me either. They're not really my friends. So, I don't have friends, really. My fault, I guess. I've got a clean slate, and I can do anything I want. That's a good thing, huh?”

He nodded. “It could be. Lee -” He paused to look away again. “It's just sometimes I feel like I've lost both my kids.”

“You haven't,” she said seriously, “yet.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and then nodded, reached out and squeezed her hand, and turned back towards the house. Holly watched him walk back into the kitchen silently, waiting, careful.