



GRAVE

JOAN FRANCES TURNER

ALSO IN THE RESURGAM TRILOGY:

DUST
FRAIL

GRAVE

Joan Frances Turner



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In loving memory of **C.**,
who lives on, somewhere else.



BOOK ONE

DOUBT

ONE

AMY

The world may be good as ended, but there's still a Shop-Wel pharmacy every fifty yards. That's a beautiful thing, really, to know that even after we're all dead, after we're all walking around dead, the potato chips and rubbing alcohol and tweezers and condoms and snack-pack ravioli will all live to see another—

I think I'm getting ahead of myself. It's hard not to, so much has happened in just a few months. Zombies, proper zombies—they already feel like the vaguest of memories. The world we thought we knew—is it already just any old story, a random folktale? Once upon a time, children, just a few short months ago, most people stayed dead when they died, but some just didn't. They rose up, tunneled out, wandered the earth like vagrants, killing and eating whatever got in their way: wild animals, pets, people. It'd been that way for hundreds of years, thousands. Their numbers grew, slowly, and living humans built fences, sounded

alarms, hired security teams with flamethrowers to hold them all back. Everyone knows that much, but nobody ever figured out *why* they were coming back, or what to do about it. There were laboratories, secret ones, or supposed to be secret, built to study the problem. A big one in Gary, Indiana, on the Prairie Beach side along the lake. You didn't ask what they did. Someone should have. We all should have.

But it's a little late for that now, and there's a deserted Shop-Wel sitting there right for the foraging and I was hungry. Starving, in fact, my stomach a sour shriveled pumpkin-seed in that way I'd never grown used to, even last winter after the plague, so when we stumbled into what remained of Sandy Shores and I saw the big red-mortar-blue-pestle sign, I turned straight off the road. My mother marched right behind me, skirting the door's shattered glass, and my dog, my ghost dog, Old Nick Drake, sniffed and picked his way inside. Stephen, Lisa, Naomi clinging to Lisa's hand—they peered frowning into the broad, intact side windows, looking for squatters and interlopers who'd got here before us, but the whole place, the whole town, was empty. You get a feeling after a while for when a place is truly deserted, for when that heavy-hanging sense of an aborted, interrupted *presence* around you, like rain thick in the air, has passed: not a sound turned echo, like just after a death, but an echo dispersed to failing memory, indistinguishable shadow.

Some store shelves were overturned, a few cans of something bean-thick yet runny exploded all over the floor, but it was half-hearted looting at best and we all fanned out, grabbing bagged boxed pull-top snacks, warm sodas still in the chill case (we left the milk strictly alone), bottles of antacids, arthritis tablets, aspirin. My ravioli was right there waiting on a collapsed metal shelf, a good dozen little containers or more; I sat down in the

aisle, wrenched the plastic top off one and finger-spooned it in, licking the side of my hand clean of gummy sugared tomato. Cheese-filled, this kind, coating my tongue in a thick salty paste.

Once upon a time, not long ago, there *were* zombies; this was their time, the sunset, this was when they all came out to play—I'd be looking over my shoulder with every bite. But not anymore. The labs sprayed something, like a pesticide, that was supposed to kill zombies dead for good. It killed them, all right. And most of humankind, too. A man-made plague. The only survivors were the few immune, like me, Naomi, Stephen, my mother, and the few others like my friend Lisa who got sick unto death, passed through the other side of illness, became something inhuman and impervious to disease, injury, mortality. Exes, I called them: ex-humans, ex-zombies. They were supposed to be untouchable, something that could never die, but we'd killed them, me and my mother and Stephen, they were coming for us and somehow we tore up their untouchable flesh and—

“Nick?” I said, and held out the little plastic tub for him to lick the sauce. “Don't you want any?”

Nick sniffed and declined it when I opened another one just for him, keeping his eyes on my fast-moving fingers—not like begging but like my hand was strange, dangerous, a thing needing vigilant inspection. That thick fur too deep black to carry a sheen, those watery sulphur-pisshole eyes taking every bit of me in... surely even ghost dogs needed to eat, but he hadn't since he first started following me, all those weeks ago. Not one bite, not that I'd ever seen. I picked up his can and started in, soft wet pasta like waterlogged paper, stringy bits of beef drowned in sweet tomato.

Once upon a time, there was a dog who'd been a spirit, a chimera, a ghost sent by Death itself to track a murderer. Casper the Unfriendly Bloodhound. Then, sometime between Ms.

Acosta's death and my own, he became true, living flesh. I didn't know how, wouldn't ask why, because he'd defended us, gotten us out of Prairie Beach alive; whether he meant to be or not, he was maybe the truest friend I'd ever had. The others didn't want to hear that, not for a second. The others had no idea just what they defied, when they tried to pretend Nick wasn't there.

"Anti-inflammatory," Stephen read from the side of a bottle, standing at the end of the aisle while the others hit the dry goods. "Might help your eye—"

"Nothing's gonna help this eye," I said, but I stretched out my sauce-smear hand anyway for two pills, swallowed them barely checking what they were. Stephen didn't look any great shakes himself, face bruised, cut throat scabbing over just like mine, blood not all his own dried stiff on his clothes and mouth, the fingers clutching a half-drunk Coke trembling with fatigue. I reached for a third ravioli and Stephen handed me a pull-top can of peaches and the rest of his bag of Hott Stix, as good a lunch as any I'd got in a long time; in Paradise City, the human settlement where he and I had met, where we both sang, tap-danced, and rolled over playing dead for our supper, they didn't bother with midday meals at all. The exes who ran the place, they only fed us human serfs just enough to keep us going, keep us distracted. The other humans, the frails, they rioted and set the place on fire after we left, that's what Lisa said and she had the singed smell all in her hair and clothes to prove it. I wanted to ask her about that, just what she saw and did before it all went up, but I knew she'd never give me a straight answer.

"Is there a pet aisle here?" I asked. I hadn't looked. "Dog food or kibble or something? Nick—"

"Can fend for himself just fine," Stephen said, gulping down more Coke and clutching the bottle like it might grow legs and

run away. He and Nick—they'd met only hours ago, but already Stephen's unease, his strange faltering hesitance in Nick's presence, snaked up between the two of them like a smell. "We don't need him getting used to one kind of food we might never find again. Dogs can eat anything."

"This dog *won't* eat anything," I retorted, and Nick just stared impassive at us both as I licked Hott Stix traces from my fingers, deep radioactive red against the orangey traces of tomato. I stuck powdery fingertips in the ravioli and stirred, a little cayenne for the sauce. "He's never eaten anything, even those squirrels he chased in the woods he just let go—"

"Then we hardly need to start worrying about him now, do we?"

The little edge to Stephen's voice was something I was growing used to, the prick and jab of a rusty safety pin that slipped loose whenever he was nervous, tired, felt the absence of memory inside him acute as the emptiness of a room: the diffuse, bleak emptiness of a room where someone died. We'd both died that day, he and I, but it'd happened to him, to my mother, again and again, the very act of it an acid eating through their memories, their selves—dead today. Because the lab didn't just study zombies, back before the plague. They also lured in or kidnapped human beings: addicts, prostitutes, homeless people, prisoners, anyone and everyone filed under Riddance, Good. Like my mother. Like Stephen. They experimented on them, killing them over and over, bringing them back to life again and again. It destroyed their memories, their sense of who they once were, their minds' avenues stretching back only to the lab's own sandy-shore backyard. Most test subjects just plain died.

And now, even though there were meant to be no more labs, they'd done it to him again. And to me. We'd died, this very day,

and come back again this very day, and real human beings, like I'd thought I was for so long, they couldn't do that. I thought that over like I'd been trying not to and then grabbed another can of fruit, even though I had the distended, slightly ill feeling I'd already eaten too much.

"Nick got me this far," I said, and left it there because I didn't want a fight. "But I guess he's not sick. He doesn't look sick, anyway. Take some of those things for your own face, your jaw looks awful."

"You look worse," he replied. Rancor faded, easily as it flared, his fingers so light at my temple pulling strands of hair away from my swollen eye. "Billy packs a nasty punch, I should know."

"I don't want to talk about Billy," I said, and flexed my sore stained fingers that Billy and Mags, the king and queen of Paradise City, tried to break, to bite right off like the zombies they still were inside. Mags that I'd killed, when her kind—those who got the plague, survived it, and came out transformed—were meant to be impervious, immortal, when their flesh knitted together in seconds right before your eyes and nothing in this life could kill them. But I'd killed her. And killed something inside Billy, who loved her and only her, when I did it. Ms. Acosta, back in Lepingville, she and I were the town's only human survivors and she'd had no family, but maybe there was someone else, a Billy to her Mags. Maybe now that spring had come, a friend, a long-lost someone, would go looking for her and find her body how I'd left it and—

I don't want to talk about Billy. Ever.

Stephen sat in the aisle next to me, gulping the rest of his Coke with his back half-turned on Nick. Lisa came over, sway-footed with the faint bruising of exhaustion beneath her eyes, stepping gingerly over a splat puddle of exploded chili cans.

“I propose we stop here, for the evening,” she announced, spitting out the words harsh and hard like her plague-twisted tongue couldn’t help doing. “Maybe the night. Naomi’s worn out—”

“No, I’m not,” Naomi said, from the other end of the aisle. Kids her age—I’m only seventeen and the energy shooting from their ears still makes me feel old. She was cradling a flimsy coloring book, a little box of crayons, a bag of potato chips half her height. “Can I color while you sleep?”

Lisa actually glared at her, the unique feverish hostility of love all in her eyes. Just like she’d looked at me, back in the woods this morning when she came for me. Rescued me. Naomi was another of her rescues, motherless and fatherless and thrown on Paradise’s awful mercies before Lisa stepped in; she’d lost a daughter of her own, Lisa had, long before all of this started. Leukemia. Only three, four years old. Sometimes I thought Lisa tried, a lot harder than she should, to forget Naomi wasn’t really Karen, her dead little girl. Just like she tried so hard to forget I wasn’t really Judy, Jenny, whatshername, her little sister.

“If you even think of wandering off by yourself,” Lisa told Naomi, “while we’re sleeping? If you even vaguely contemplate considering it? I will kill you. I’m not kidding, I will take both my hands and wring your little scrawny neck—”

It shouldn’t have been funny to hear her talking like that, an ex-human with all her strength to an actual little girl, but Stephen laughed and I laughed and Naomi, unafraid, just swelled with indignation. “I’m not wandering anywhere!” she declared, swiftly setting down her chips and toys like we were about to accuse her of shoplifting. “I want to stay with the doggy.”

The doggy, quite politely, wanted nothing to do with her, but she was a stubborn kid and Nick was patient enough that she

kept trying. He looked up from where he sat with paws pressing at my thigh and gave her a searching stare that lit her up with false hope, made her run over to clutch him round the neck and bury her face in its furry crook. He suffered it in silence, like he always did. Stephen, a little flicker of disquiet crossing his face at the sight, bent his head and finished off my ravioli.

Soft rustlings, a shuffling sound, as my mother came dragging down the aisle; she had backpacks slung over her arm, plain utilitarian red and blue, plus sparkle-flowered pink nylon stuffed with cans, pills, boxes, bottles tenting and spiking the thin porous cloth. An armful of those cheap six-a-pack white cotton socks, fleece blankets, jars of vitamins. I remembered the safehouse back in Leyton, the kit bags of ready supplies I'd had to toss aside when I thought something was after me (and it was), and regretted all over again the tornado Lisa and I got caught in leaving town, everything we took as our own flung into the trees and smashed beyond repair. Nick, though, Nick had been there all along, whether I saw him or not; following us, following me, making sure we got where we were going. Following me like he had since I'd killed Ms. Acosta. Leading me toward my own, briefest of deaths.

The thing that had followed me here, flushing me out and chasing me miles across the county until I ended up in Prairie Beach, the lab's backyard—my birthplace, my new birthplace—maybe it had planned the tornado, another obstacle to push me closer into its path. You should've warned me, Nick, I know you verr only follow-ink orrd-uhs but your master... you should've warned me how vicious he can get. Your master. My master. I reached an arm up silently to my mother and she sank down cross-legged beside us, deflated and fading fast.

“Bedding,” she said, nodding toward the blankets as she set them down. “There's travel pillows too. I can't go any farther than

this. Just now.” She glanced toward Lisa. “Sorry.”

“Why apologize?” Lisa asked, in the same careful, measured tone, the formality of two friends mending fences after a horrible, friendship-ending fight. Only hours they’d known each other, and already this guarded intimacy that could shatter at the slightest push. “I need to sleep, too. Whatever they say, nobody here’s superhuman.”

Her eyes flitted to Nick, still suffering Naomi’s petting with a dignified indifference, then she looked away. I pretended I didn’t see it, getting up to help lay out our makeshift bedding. I brushed my mother’s shoulder reaching over her and she raised her hand like I had, stroking idly at my arm; I combed fingers through her hair, tugging out tangles as though she were my little girl instead. Checking, constantly, like we had been since the lab, to make sure we really were both still there.

Before the plague, before I found out why she didn’t have and never talked about family, my mother was a security worker, an anti-zombie patroller. A good job, important, great pay for a single mom. That’s when she killed my own father, even though he was already dead. Undead. Stretching his hand out to her, trying to say her name. She killed him not because he was something different, outside us all, but because on the inside, where it counted, he was exactly like her. She like him. And all of us, together, only human-shaped shells around a—

We kept finding excuses to touch each other but it was like we were doing it from across a chasm, the barest, split-second brushes of fingertips like gathering sustenance for more months, years, of being entirely alone. It was her choice to leave me, to walk out when I was fifteen, after she killed him, because she thought she was too dead a thing to raise a living child, half-crazy from obliterating something too much like herself; I understood that

now, a little, understood the killing part of it all too well, but still, she left. Left me to the elements—and the elementals, while she was at it. If she hadn't—

If she hadn't. If I hadn't. If the whole world were bunnies and rainbows and disease hadn't scorched it down to dirt and salt. I folded a blanket, made a smaller thicker square of one for Naomi, just to have something to do with my hands. Stephen had already taken several and wrapped them around his shoulders, indifferent to this effort to make the linoleum beneath us soft.

“So what exactly is this sister of yours going to do?” my mother asked, handing out pillows. “I mean, when we show up.”

Lisa's sister, the ex-zombie. The one that we'd all fled the remnants of Gary to try and find. Because Lisa claimed she knew something about everything that'd happened to us all, that might still keep happening. Lisa shrugged, her arms jerking in a little whip-snap as she tried airing out her fleece. No point in that, it all smelled of dust and mold and stale corn chips. “Nobody's in any danger of getting roasted over a spit, if that's what you—”

“I never said that.” My mother's voice was sharp, impatient with tiredness. Full of rusty pins and needles of its own. “I've seen as much as anyone during all this, I'm not—”

“Kidding. I was kidding. I swear.” Lisa pulled at a lank handful of hair, ragged and uneven from past tuggings, still acrid with the lingering smell of ash. “She'll rant about how I'm dragging the whole world in like a lot of stray cats, do I think she's running a fucking foster home, then she'll pipe down to a dull grumble and maybe actually listen when I talk.” She gave me and Stephen a wary look. “Let me do the talking. She doesn't like people—even when she was human, she always liked animals more. And she was never diplomatic. It's nothing personal.”

“She'd better not be looking for a body servant,” Stephen

muttered, punching a pillow trying to get it to soften up. “Or a cook. I’ve had a bellyful of that.”

“She’ll be looking to be let be,” Lisa said, adding another blanket to Naomi’s pile. “Don’t even try talking to Linc, her friend Linc. He’s a quiet fellow anyway, Silent Cal, but he’s a stubborn son of a bitch who just won’t see reason, Renee’s at least a little more—”

“She wants peace and quiet, but here we are to tell her the world’s turned upside down, and we need her to do Christ knows what to help fix it, and if she doesn’t, then something or other might happen, we don’t know what, or then again it might not.” Stephen considered this scenario, giving me a look close to amusement. “And she won’t have certain *issues* with—”

“I thought we agreed on where we were going.” My mother looked not just wary but stricken, like someone standing under a crumbling ceiling watching another of its struts weaken, collapse. “For God’s sake, hours of walking just to—”

“I didn’t say to turn back.” Stephen turned on his side toward the shelves, his back to us all, clutching the pillow with tense fingertips. “I just said, I’m not expecting anything when we get there but more shit. You go on and handle it, Lisa. Just like you said you would.”

Silence, for a moment, as Stephen made a great show of settling in for siesta. Then Naomi crawled onto her blankets, murmuring futile endearments in Nick’s ear and crunching handfuls of potato chips. I lay next to my mother, Nick a warm bit of pillow at the tops of our heads, and dutifully closed my eyes because there was nothing left to say to each other. I was vibrating with nerves and no way I’d ever sleep but it was less awkward this way, I’d just let my thoughts go adrift and—

When I opened my eyes again, my shoulders were aching, the

thin fleece rucked up uncomfortably at my back, and the store windows looked out on darkness. I rose slowly to my feet, snaking with great care from our pile of limbs so I didn't wake anyone, and discovered too late how pleasantly warm that little nest had been. Crayons forgotten, Naomi lay with her chip-stuffed mouth half-open and arms not quite circling Nick's neck; he surprised me with his closed eyes and the gentle rise and fall of his chest—wouldn't eat but he was happy to sleep. Of course, there was nothing *but* sleep, where he came from.

Lisa and my mother were stretched out rigid, thin wooden planks side by side in a buckling old floor; Stephen was his own nest of fleece, a tuft of dark hair sticking out of the top. I smoothed the tuft down and went down the aisle, still wrapped in my own blanket, slowly approaching the door. Foolish to consider waking Nick for protection, foolish to think what was outside might've tired of us when I knew—we know firsthand, don't we, Nick—that such things never tire, but maybe he changed his mind and wandered off to bother other Paradise City refugees, wretched crazy Natalie we'd left behind at the lab—

The lab wanted to unlock control of life and death, let folks choose how long they lived and when they'd die with no rot, no decay, no sickness or age. My mother the lab rat got away; she escaped. She had me. And then my father died. And then years later, after she killed what was left of him, she lost her head, ran away without me, and they found her. And kept her. Their property. Their rules.

And now, it'd started again. Natalie, another of the lab rats—the last surviving rat—still just a kid, but she learned as they worked on her, she remembered what she'd been taught. She lured us in, Stephen and me, killed us and brought us both back, held my mother half-hostage so she could hold some perverted

family reunion: I owed her that much, really, she gave me my mother back. And we got away. And here we were, all the family I had left, off to find Lisa's family; there were answers there, Lisa said, supposed, hoped. Me, I couldn't imagine what anyone, anywhere could tell us. If I'd learned just one useful thing, this past autumn, winter, spring, it was that nobody ever *tells* you what you need to know. You have to work it out yourself, without words. You have to acknowledge you always knew it, all along, and just couldn't stand to admit it.

The sky outside the pharmacy was a deep, chalky ashen-black, the half moon and dottings of stars sparks of hot white flame in smoldering charcoal. The man stood there in the middle of the empty street, bare silvery head and bare pale toes pointed toward our makeshift lodgings, waxen hands folded against his expanse of long black coat. And his face... he had no face; every time I tried concentrating long enough to discern mouth, eyes, the shape of chin or forehead, it was like my own eyes couldn't help sliding away, seeing only a half-scribbled pencil sketch crumpled in the trash.

One of Natalie's sketches, he looked like, the ones pinned all over the walls of her laboratory prison room (my mother's cell, Stephen's, what had they looked like, had they even had windows like hers?). He'd been following us since we left the lab and Prairie Beach, so quiet and just far enough behind us we could almost forget—but turn around, let your sights drift to the side, and there he was. Never came an inch closer. Never retreated one step. He was all loyalty and all constancy, and what he wanted from us, where he needed us to go, we wouldn't find that out until it was right upon us, just like how Nick led me lamb-stupid toward my own death but I still never suspected it'd be from Natalie's knife—

He shifted from foot to foot, whitish feet narrow and bony

with one of the big toes bulging a bit, crooked upward; human feet with all their asymmetries and imperfections, their color not artifice but anemia. It wasn't Death. I'd seen Death, the thing, the entity, taking the forms of so many different dead people, but this wasn't Death and I'd known that in my bones before Death ever told me so. It wasn't what Stephen thought either, a Scissor Man, one of those damaged lab experiments recycled for guard duty, cleanup crew, goon squad. This was something waiting for us to forget ourselves, turn our heads, realize only too late the cold hardness we lay upon wasn't the lino floor of an abandoned pharmacy, but the stone of a sacrificial altar.

Soft rustlings behind me, rodent or canine or human; I didn't turn around, I was too busy trying to fix in my mind some shape, any shape, for the features of that candle-wax face. Stephen came quietly up beside me, hair still standing on end, gazing at the man in black with an equanimity he could never manage with Nick.

"We should have slept in shifts," he said, his shoulder pressing against mine in a faint bony tap through layers of matted fleece. "He's bound to try and come inside."

"He won't," I said. I was very sure of that. "He's had the perfect chance already, but there he is."

"I wish he *had* come in," Stephen said, and in the compressed tightness of his voice I sensed the yearning for more fights, more fists and feet, release from the clenched-up, tooth-aching tension of not knowing where we were going or what we'd find or what our uninvited guest might do when we got there. "He wants something from us? Let him try and grab it, I mean, we're all right where he wants us, right now—"

"We've got no clue what he wants," I pointed out. "Maybe it's not even us. It's got to be something where we're going."

I pressed a palm to my bad eye, wincing at the tenderness

like a burn, the vague nausea that came both from pain and the nasty spongy sensation of swollen flesh. Hands hurt. Eye hurt. Arms, throat, back, madly itching feet, skin still winter-cracked after dozens of lotion-slicks and weeks of spring—I'd given up on all that, on the soft constant throb behind one temple ever going away. Stephen pressed his own palm over mine.

“He must know me,” he said, and as he gently pulled my fingers away, his own jumped, twitching with tension. “It must be someone I knew from before, at the lab, wanting to grab all the lab rats before that Natalie gets us back. There must be different factions, fighting, even now—I know there were. Before.” A derisive little sound, aimed at himself. “Even if I've got no names. Or faces.”

Stephen's ruined memory was the wound he kept worrying at because it never healed, the blistering stone stuck in his shoe. Every time they experimented on you, you lost more of yourself, lowered inch by inch into Lethe until your head went under, until what little was left of you drowned. “It isn't,” I said, again, for the fourth or seventh or sixty-third time. “It's nobody you knew. It's nothing like what you think. He just appeared, like he's always been there, like he can't help but—you have to trust me about this, Stephen. This is exactly what happened with Nick.”

From the corner of my eye I saw Stephen crane his neck, looking behind us where Nick still lay, then swivel back to gaze at me.

“Nick's a real dog,” he said, and the “real” was like a politeness, something we'd all merely agreed to say was true. “You keep saying that, even though he appeared out of nowhere and he never eats anything and he stares right through you and me and everyone like some kind of four-legged laser beam—”

“We wouldn't be here if it weren't for him.” I was muttering

under my breath, so nobody else would wake up, and the words came out almost in a hiss. “I know you haven’t *forgotten* he got us away from Natalie, back in the lab, he—”

“Your mother got us out. Not him.” His brows had knitted up tight, the old thundercloud lowering over his face like another fresh bruise. “Lucy got us out of the lab. Without her, we’d still be wandering in circles.”

“I’d never have *found* the lab without Nick.” Frustration drew my temples, my aching forehead, even tighter. “I’ve never have found you, my mother... it’s just, he knows things, okay? He’s keyed into something we aren’t, at least not like we should be, and he can sense what might happen next, like a smell, and lead me to—”

“So which is it?” Stephen’s eyes were hard with a sudden, untoward triumph, a cop who didn’t care his confession was coming by the business end of a baton. “Which is it? A real dog? Or some sort of—” He flung a hand at the air. “—ghost? Like that, that phantom, that Angel of Death you said you saw—”

“*Said* I saw—I saw it, Stephen, I saw *him*.” All those weeks I thought I was crazy, that I’d snapped inside from the blood on my hands and in my mind and that it was all a hallucination—I’d seen it all turn real, delusion made flesh, and now Stephen wanted to take that away from me. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t *fair*. “I saw him and I keep seeing him because he’s here, everywhere around us, Natalie might be fucked in the head but she was totally right about—”

“Is Nick real, or isn’t he?” More baton, every word a hard, stinging tap. “Which is it? You can’t have it both ways, Amy—”

“I can’t?” I bit back a shout. “Everything that’s happened, I can’t? Since when? Where the hell have you even been during all this, for Christ’s sake?”

I glared at him, waiting for him to lose his temper in earnest and give that baton a real swing. Just try it. Why was he acting like this, why now? He'd believed me since before the lab, all the way back in Paradise; we'd known each other and believed each other on sight and now he was backtracking like all the others had been right, everyone who'd dismissed us both as tainted, stone crazy. It couldn't be he'd forgotten, forgotten so soon everything we'd seen, could it? Maybe he really had, maybe it was all his memory. But Lisa, and my mother, I could tell they didn't really believe me either. (Naomi, she didn't count; six-year-olds would believe anything.) Everything that happened, everything we'd seen just hours ago—why didn't any of them want to believe me?

Stephen reached out a hand again, touched my hair with slow caution like he was certain I'd jerk away. I stood still, just watching, and he stroked it, rested fingers on my shoulder, let his arm drop back down to his side.

“Scissors,” he said. “Your mother found some.” He jabbed an absent, almost brutal finger at his own throat. “And one of those little sewing hooks, that pulls out stitched threads. We can get rid of these, they itch like crazy when—”

“Tell me about it.” All the way here over miles of road, congealing into one big expanse of potholes always circling the same dead steel mill, coke plant, used car lot—all that way, the soft ceaseless itch was like a tiny nest of millipedes, scuttling endlessly back and forth across my windpipe; my fingers kept twitching to crush all their dry dead filament-legs into powder, tear them from the burrows they'd scored in my skin. I pictured something laying eggs there, like a zombie hatching beetles and flies, and shuddered. “Tomorrow, before we leave.”

“Tomorrow,” he repeated.

He stood there for a moment, awkward, all the anger drained

away. Then he leaned forward, gave my mouth a fleeting kiss, and walked back to the tangle of limbs, warm blankets, low steady sleepers' breath. I didn't turn around. We both needed to be alone, just now.

Tomorrow. If we kept our pace, we might cross the county line tomorrow, find the beach farther east at Cowles Shores, meet Lisa's sister and those friends of hers and it'd all be a big old party—ex-humans, ex-zombies, real live people all sharing and caring and merry like Christmas. Just like Paradise City, one big happy family of gimcrack lords and shellshocked serfs and how had I ever managed to kill Mags, to do that to poor murderous Billy whom she'd left behind in her impossible dying, *how?* Lisa's sister sees things we don't, knows things we don't, that's Lisa's story and so we'll find out everything, somehow, if we just keep walking and walking toward her for the rest of our lives, then all of this will be explained. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

Toenails, clicking softly behind me, and then something leaning against my shin: Nick, waiting discreetly until Stephen was settled in and sleeping before fleeing his presence for mine. Rough, shaggy, unkempt fur, the bones beneath it hard smooth planes and the flesh warm and solid and alive: a real dog. Every bit as real even when he was still something that melted into air, just like Death appearing and disappearing before my eyes, just like that man outside I couldn't see and couldn't stop seeing was nothing corporeal, but he was still real as real.

Flesh isn't reality; I'd figured that out with startling speed once I realized I wasn't crazy after all—it's just a testimony to reality, something you can touch and feed and love and hurt as a stand-in, a symbol, for the thing that's really there. Like Lisa's statues, inside the ruined church where she'd insisted on stopping on the way here. I'd craned my head inside, as we all stood there

awkwardly waiting for her to finish, and saw her crouched silently before an impassive ash-gray Virgin Mary, thin slender fingers on one of its outstretched hands all broken off (someone surely tried to eat them, at the worst of the plague). It wasn't the statue getting the love, of course—that was just the stand-in. We're all just statues of ourselves; all our bodies, souls solidified. The sculpting clay rots away, all that was there before it still stands. Before he was there, Nick was there. Both at once.

Souls. I hadn't been raised that way, to think about souls. We were agnostics. I'd thought I was, anyway.

They weren't getting rid of Nick. They all wanted to, I knew that, all but Naomi (and I'd appeal to her if I had to, if they all told me Nick had to go, I'm not proud). He helped save us, back in the lab, gave us our avenue of escape, and this is the thanks he gets. Even if the only reason he saved us, just like last time, was to deliver us to something else, to what's waiting outside. To that statue of a man, all livid wax and impassive stone... but those knobby feet aren't any artwork, stop just fucking standing there and move, for Christ's sake, twitch a finger, sneeze cough fart do *something* halfway human before I—

Nothing. And nothing.

Lisa's sister knows things we don't. *Lisa* says. I wonder if she knows, if the man outside knows I've killed three people, all in a row, in just under a year: one for autumn, two for spring. That's serial killer numbers. Who'd ever believe how it happened? You'd have to be crazy, snapped, to think any of it was true. And it's *all* true.

"Three," I told Nick, a soft murmur though this was a confession he'd already heard over and over again, before ever I spoke it aloud. "An ex and two humans makes three."

He stretched his head up toward my palm and I stroked his fur, ran a hand up and down his snout.

People aren't very imaginative, really; they like stories best when they know they're true. And what I know to be true, is this: like everyone else's, my own flesh and blood is just a statue, a stand-in for what I really am, but I don't know what that real thing *is*. I never have. I confessed it to Stephen, that feeling of unoccupied housing and hollow plaster-space all inside me—inside him too, just like me, such an overpowering rush of love and relief when he said *Then it's not just me*—but the spaces don't magically fill up just because a mother, a lover, a sort-of older sister come to help you, listen to you, try and save you. There's something inside me that was never human, never right, long before any of this happened, and I could blame it for making me a killer, but I chose that fate. A choice made from rage or fear or a warped notion of justice is still choosing. The hollowness inside me didn't make me evil. I did that. I chose.

No matter where I am, whatever I do or think or feel, it's always like I'm somewhere else at the same time, the way Nick is flesh but still a ghost, the way the man outside is following our path but on his own road entirely. Life hits me in the face, overpowers me physically or psychically like it hasn't stopped doing since I thought my mother died, but even as every part of me feels it, even as it thuds through me like my one truest heartbeat and I choke on it all, drown in my own blood, somehow I'm always somewhere else, standing aside, forever watching the watcher inside me. Depressed, I bet someone would say (had said and said and said, after my mother disappeared, tone-deaf broken records all). No. That's such a useful word, *depression*, a damp musty flattened-fleece blanket to throw over anything someone else doesn't want to think is real. I might very well be *depressed* but I'm much more than that: I'm absent. Absentminded, but also absent-bodied, here, and not. Living in the moment, as everyone

does because they have to—and yet, I’ve never been here. I never have, all my life, been entirely here.

Is that why it seems like I can see things, sometimes, before anyone else can? Jenny-Jessie-Ginny-Lisa’s sister, whatever her name is, does that happen to her too? Nick, Death himself, they weren’t even the half of it. Though I knew now it had really happened, that I hadn’t imagined it, what it *meant* I didn’t know at all. You, outside, you faceless thin-fingered slab-footed thing only yards away, but still somewhere I can’t follow—do you know? You must. I’ve died once already, walked unknowing straight to my own execution. Is it happening again, are you taking me there again? Taking all of us? Stephen’s right: if you are, then just walk right in and do it now.

Come on. Do it. You can hear me. I know I don’t have to say a word for you to hear what I’m thinking.

The spring that had started off so hot, dry and hot, was rolling over itself and going cold; the wind outside picked up, rattling the shattered door’s metal frame, rushing up the legs of my jeans, whipping the blanket-edges hard around my ears. The man outside was still. Even as the tree branches bent and twisted under the assault, his sickly-pale moonlight hair, the hem of his long black coat, they merely stirred, ruffled faintly, and then subsided.

What are you?

He uncurled his fingers. Stretched them out, long and straight. Then folded them again, resting so decorous against his coatfront.

What am I?

Still and decorous, like prayer. I don’t pray. Not like Lisa. There’s nothing out there that wants to hear it.

Where are you taking us? And wherever it is, will I end up back where I was, all alone?

The moonlight dimmed and faded as the wind increased, the clouds growing thicker in preparation for rain. Whatever fell from the sky, however furious the rush of water, he'd never soak to the skin, it'd never touch him. As the first large, fat drops came down, I went as close to the doorway as I dared, stretching a hand outside just to watch the water roll down my palm, my sleeve go damp and then dark, clinging to me saturated and wet; not like him, never like him. No matter what I was, not him.

I wrung the cloth out as best I could and retreated inside, to try and sleep.

TWO

NATALIE

They were gone.
Everyone was gone!

It wasn't fair, I didn't plan it this way—I was going to stay at Paradise City long enough I'd get to be Amy's friend, I'd explain things to her. Where she really came from. Where her mother really came from (I couldn't believe it, how much they both looked alike, I'd searched months and months for anyone else from my real family, my lab family, and here they just fell right into my lap). We were going to be friends. She'd bring Stephen along, of course. I was so happy when they fell in love but of course they would, they're the same type, same blood, how would they not fall in love forever? How could she not see right away we were supposed to be friends?

But I couldn't stand how they treated me in Paradise. I couldn't take it anymore, humans treating me like dirt when it's folks like *me* should be telling *them* what to do, so I left early and

then Phoebe, that rotten crazy bitch Phoebe, *she* jumped the gun and told the lab workers, my workers, about who Amy really was. She guessed it, she turned them in.

If I ever found Phoebe, I'd kill her. I sat there rocking back and forth, under the big pine tree in the woods behind the lab where I'd gone to cry, and I prayed and hoped that she'd died in that fire. I kept hearing that the humans set Paradise City on fire—they couldn't stand things there anymore either. I hoped they all died in it.

It wasn't my fault things turned out this way!

I was going to show Amy everything, the laboratory space, the dissection rooms, the rooms where I grew up. Where her mother stayed, all that time, when they were experimenting on her. I saw Amy sneaking around looking, the nosy bitch who thought her shit doesn't stink—except *he* wouldn't want her if she were that kind of virgin, the kind who never did anything wrong and never had any dirt on her. Smile and smile and pretend that blood on your teeth is just a little old lipstick smear. *I* made her just like Stephen, like her mother, like me. *I* did!

I did it, and why wasn't she happy? How could she not be happy! I killed her, dropped her like a stone sinking drowning in a sea no one but us can cross, and then I dove right in and retrieved her from the full-fathom-five bottom where no one but us can dive. I brought her back from all that brand new and one of us. I made her *what she was always supposed to be* and gave her a mother, a boyfriend, a best friend just like her. We could've been best friends, if she'd just let me explain! She was always inside out all her life, without ever knowing it, and I turned her true face out to the world and if I could've just explained that, if she'd just *shut up and let me talk*, she'd have understood and been happy about it. She'd be my best friend.

And she would have talked to *him* about me. Death, the Friendly Man, who came and went and was there for me and loved me all the time I was growing up and then he was gone, he just vanished—I was always so good, but he left me. I loved him and it turned out he was nothing. It was like thinking you had a pet bird, a big beautiful black bird strutting along on a pure-white parapet right outside your window, back and forth, any time day or night you cared to look, and then he collapses into a heap of black feathers and falls like a stone and when you rush to catch him you realize, he never was: it was always a heap of rotten feathers, a dirty discarded rag, an old leather boot squashed and huddled up on itself like something nesting. What a joke. What a nasty trick—

I had to stop crying so hard, I felt sick. Choking on snot like some nasty lab bitty-baby. It was usually so pretty up here on the ridge, the white gravel road winding outside the lab and the whole sweep of dunes and water right in front of you, the woods and the lab yard dark green shadows behind. It was like having your own country estate and I would've shown Amy the Aquatorium, its columns concrete gray instead of marble white but still like a pretty little Greek temple cake-crumbling into the sands. Up on the second floor where it's all open space you can see the whole horizon, all the way out across the lake to Chicago. Chicago's gone now, I suppose. I never even got to see it.

It was nice here, though. Didn't need Chicago. The lab would have beach parties here and I got to go too, for summer solstice and the Fourth of July and Labor Day and Birth-Day, the day they found out one of their experiments could bear a living child—did you know that, Amy? Did you know dozens, hundreds of people you never even knew gathered here for *your birthday* with barbecue and sparklers and cake and you got everything, you always got everything. Your mom might've run away but she was

still contributing, they were still researching her in the wild. You too. I could've showed them to you, all the files and field notes they kept on you and your mother. I even saved some of them after the plague hit and the sick people were looting the lab, so hungry they were eating paper. I was saving them for you, Amy! All of it!

I decided to burn them. Never mind Birth-Day, you all could go ahead and die out there without my secret of what could bring you back, and I'd have a Death-Day, I'd take everything about you and burn it all up. Right away. I crawled out from under the pine tree, trudged over the weed-gone lawn and through the back door, and I was home. My home.

There were rusty red streaks still smearing the floor, my floor, where I'd fought with that filthy thing Amy called a pet dog, but here were all my drawings, my desk with the special locked drawer she didn't open, my little filing cabinet. My doll. There'd been boxes of files about Amy and her mother but what I'd salvaged just filled up that one little desk drawer. The thought of how she hadn't even thought to look in there, passed right over *herself* by spying on me, it made me feel even better as I jabbed the drawer-key into the lock.

Bent warped key, soft cheap metal, the lock rattling loose in its base—it was all so cheap, all the used-up banged-up things they gave me, not like precious Amy's barbeque-sparklers-layer cake Birth-Day with no expense spared. Didn't matter, not anymore, what I had here was worth ten thousand parties. I had everything that was left: her mother's real name, experiment logs, some of those reports Amy's pediatrician and her dad's sister and a couple of neighbors sent in because humans really are tattling scum who'll do anything for a little money, hospital records—the damn drawer stuck halfway open; I'd stuffed too many papers inside. I

snaked fingers in to try and edge the papers away from the drawer seams, ease them out—

Cold in here, like those high-up windows I could never force open had suddenly broken, given way in a storm, letting early March air rush in. But it was almost May. I'd been sweating trying to break open my own stupid lock but my arms and back went tense with the chill, a fresh strong punishing breeze with a damp green smell of springtime, and then I started to shiver. So cold, even in dead January this room never got so cold. The drawer wouldn't move, I couldn't get my fingers far enough in to grab. I hated this desk, I hated this room, I was such a special-special experiment but not like that bitch Amy, who got her own white desk with flowers on it and a chair to match when she was twelve (her aunt tattled about the birthday, her aunt tattled about everything), all I ever got was this gray metal ugliness with a shortened leg they were going to throw away—

“Turn around,” he said, behind me.

His voice was soft, quiet, velvety-damp just like the air: sharp and freezing as all of January, rich and scent-filled like the middle of May. It made my head spin. You, again. After all this time. Go away, it was Amy you really loved. All the work we did here, the work I was still doing, was so I never had to love you again.

“Turn around, Miss Beach,” he said. Even quieter.

Natalie Beach. That was how we got written up in the files, us lab rats, like medieval people whose last names were all *Of-The-Nearest-Village*. I never found out what my parents were really called, or what happened to them. I yanked two-handed at the drawer, felt its frame buckle and warp.

“You can leave now,” I said. Cool as March, keeping all my love to myself. My fear. “I don't need you anymore.” Let the drawer snap loose from the frame, go flying from the desk like a

tooth pulled from a mouth with twine and a slamming door. “You only ever pretended to be my friend, go talk to precious Amy if that’s who you—”

“Amy will die soon.” Soft as soft now, a sneering croon, like a lullaby for a baby its mother hates from birth. “That much, at least, will make you happy. Be a polite little freak of nature and turn around.”

My teeth banged together with the cold, clicking sharp and hard like the teeth of the zombie I’d seen die out in the woods when I was six or seven: it succumbed to old age, rotted and crumbled down to a walking skeleton, shaking itself to powder there in the April violets and needle-stick beach grass. I’d never be warm again, I’d never—I threaded my hands into my sleeves, sweatshirt fleece spotted and ruined with dog’s blood and mine, and cringing and shivering in all my love and fear, I turned around.

Death can take on any face he wants, when he calls on you, the face of any dead person he’s already claimed as his. Gray hair, this time. Little wire-rimmed glasses. Khakis and neatly tucked-in flannel shirt, the clothes of a lab man heading out for field work. A nasty, torn-up nylon backpack, bulging and stained dark brown with something’s old blood, slung easy over one shoulder. He smiled at me and my skin went numb with the encroaching ice.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said.

Feeling your heart leap up and dance for someone you’d sworn to hate is like hurting so much you pass out, your own insides tormenting you into oblivion, and then getting hauled upright and forced awake so the torture can start all over again. His colorless eyes saw straight through me and into my jumped-up heart and my fingers were tinged blue; it wasn’t him doing that, this part of the world was well used to frost in May. I shoved

my hands in my pockets and clenched my fingers, rubbing against the cloth to try and coax them back to life.

“Hell of a greeting,” he said, “after so long away.”

His voice had a weight that stretched out its softness, distorted it, like fistfuls of coins in a sock. “I called and called for you and you never came,” I said, backed against the warped desk drawer like he’d come for my papers, Amy’s papers. Like he gave a damn about things like that. “When I was younger, and they were still experimenting on me. After the plague, when I was the only one left here. After I started our experiments again. All that time.” I laughed. “We’re getting rid of you, that’s the whole point. We’re figuring out how to control when life ends, how to keep folks from dying at all. And I, me, I’ve found out how to make it happen, what the real secret is to cheat death—and it’s right here, on this beach. It’s right here. So I don’t need you anymore.”

He was standing across the room and then suddenly he was right next to me, inches away, and I never saw him move. Nose to nose, no human breath from him to warm my freezing face, and his raised-up hands didn’t touch me but somehow I still went stumbling backwards grabbing at the air, clutching the desk for balance as he pulled the broken drawer out so smooth and light. He didn’t touch my papers but they spilled out anyway, of their own accord, fluttering all over the floor in a dry drifting snow.

“Well?” he said, and slammed the drawer shut so hard the whole desk, my arms gripping it, shuddered. “Aren’t you happy you’ve got your Friendly Man back? Here-boy good-boy coming running whenever you want him?” Smiling, smiling wider, his words a throaty hiss. “Baby cried and cried for papa, now baby’s got him back.”

This wasn’t his house, he couldn’t talk to me like this. This was *my* house, all my laboratory now. He’d always been so nice

to me before. “I told you, I know what you’re about.” Stronger, louder than that, dammit, Grandma who ran all the scientific testing on me always said to straighten up and look people in the eye. I’m using my loudest straighten-up voice right now and I still sound like a weak little girl. “I know what your secret is, I know why this beach is so important to you. We found it, all of us here, the lab found out how to control life and death. It’s right here in the sands. I’ve killed two people, with my own hands, and brought them back alive. I don’t need you anymore—”

“Baby’s got papa back and if she’s very, very good, he’ll swear never, ever to leave her again, no matter what she does. Isn’t that just what you always wanted, deep down in your rotten dragged-back stinking dead insides? Or maybe there’s some second thoughts now, rattling around that tiny little mind?” Slam, went the drawer, slam again, his stretched-out arm shoving and banging it shut. Again. Again. “Aren’t you glad you’ve got me?” Again. “How d’you like me?” Again. “D’you like your blue-eyed boy?”

That slamming drawer vibrated all through me like a blow, a hard bruising fist, but I couldn’t let go of the desk. No matter where I turned my head, we were face to face and his light clear eyes, stolen human-mask eyes, they tugged at something in me like I really was rotten inside, rotten as the dead things that survived the autumn sickness, and that was the part of me that yearned to have him back. “I think you have to go away now,” I said, and something dragged the words out of me, in a whisper, like they were all flattened and scraped against a cold concrete floor. “This isn’t your house anymore. We dug up your secret. We know how to make dead people live again—not as zombies. As *people*. You can’t stop it. And you have to leave.”

He tilted his head, his eyes soft with amusement. “Go away now,” he repeated. Slam. “Is that begging, perhaps? Is that how

you tell me you're scared, under all that idiot talk about my *secrets*?" Slam. Slam. "Don't just spit out nonsense you've heard the grownups say. You're far too old for that." Slam. "Old enough to talk." Slam. "Reason." Slam. "Argue. Old enough to die. But then, nothing on earth's ever too young to die."

Slam, thud, slam, reverberating through my arms and shoulders and back and jaw, wrenching me between his hands like I was a dry half-broken branch. The drawer banged home and pulled back faster and faster and then it was a volley, a frenzy of clanging steel and jolting blows shredding me into splinters and I screamed, my fingers flying away from the desktop frantic to save me. I stumbled backwards, didn't fall, wrapped my arms around myself but they couldn't keep me still; I shook and trembled with the rattling echoes inside me, the screech of tortured metal ringing in my ears.

He reached an arm toward me, to jolt and break me just like he had that desk, and I cringed and squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them again, he was holding something out—my papers, the whole lot of them from all over the floor, gathered up tight and crumpling in his fist. He couldn't have picked them all up so fast. Bits of them fell to the floor again, like torn-off corners, and then, there in his hand, they all crumbled so softly into pulp, into dust.

"You won't need these anymore," he told me, watching them disintegrate. "Amy won't need them either. Not where she's going. There's nothing your researchers"—that word, in his quiet mouth, was a snake poised to strike—"can tell anyone anymore, to do them any good."

My desk was ruined now, the frame buckled and bent and the lock-up drawer twisted nearly in half, hanging forlorn from the edge of its runners like it'd melted. The vibrations of it were still banging all through me, my whole skin prickling and painful as

the warmth, spring warmth, slowly flowed back. I wasn't going to let him think he'd really scared me.

"We can do lots of things now," I said. "We can bring dead people back. I can. Us lab rats, we're new, a new kind of human. When we die, we can bring each other back. This isn't your house anymore. We've kicked Death out."

"You think you have me figured out," he said, and he was cheerful again, quietly genial, his face thoughtful as he surveyed the tiny anthills of dust littering my floor. "Because you know. You're in possession of all the facts."

He smiled, a real smile, open and sweet like the old days. "You know all the facts. Well, know this, when the time comes: you had a chance to stop me. All you had to do was leave this place—let it sit, find another roof, tell each other all sorts of ghost stories about the God-knows-what-went-on-here as it rots in the sand. You did, for a bit, last fall—remember, when the folks trying to shelter here gave up, headed east? But then you came back." He didn't move a step but he was still inches from me again, eye to eye. "You came back. My little prodigal daughter, crying for her fatted calf. Telling old father he's not welcome in his own home anymore, he has to clear out."

Something stirred in the dust piles, the little paper trails: shifting, settling, crawling out of the center. Ants. They were actual anthills now, all around us, with tiny black dots busily heading in and darting out as they set up housekeeping at our feet.

"You threw me out," he said, and watched impassively as a line of ants reached the summit of his shoe. "Can't even set a foot out of doors without getting kicked out of my own home—you can't even imagine how long it took me to get used to it all, to make what's mine really *mine*, but you don't care. Don't give a damn. So I'm out." His voice was so soft, so suffocatingly soft.

“All your experiments, setting up to take the Grim Reaper’s scythe away, so I can’t claim a single solitary soul until they decide when to die, how to die, all on their own. And *then* you have the gall to turn around and beg, sob, cry for me to come back, daddy, come baaaack—and I do, I do just that, and after all that fuss you throw me out. You want me gone that badly? Maybe I’ll just go. Forever. Not *one single part of me* ever to return.”

The ants struggled over the scuffed toe of his shoe, its dirt-caked sides, in a futile search for food. His other foot reached out and nudged; a cluster of ants scattered, running frantically back and forth, their sandhill a flattened heap and the rice-grains of their eggs crushed to glassine specks of powder. He laughed.

“Don’t,” I said. A weak little whisper. I hadn’t meant to say it.

“My first mistake,” he said, smiling too hard and too wide, “was thinking all this was over and done. All that nasty upstart lab-rattin’ of years and years, grabbing at my scythe and spitting in my face, the plague took good care of all of that and all of you—” He chuckled, a smothered explosion. “And the best part is that it wasn’t my doing, it was all of yours. I just admired from a distance, laughed my head off, reaped one truly stunning man-made whirlwind. Because I was foolish enough to think that *finished* it, that nobody left standing would ever again defy me like that, face to face. You, though—you’re dragging all your kind right back into it, a little palace coup, dangling it in front of them knowing they can’t refuse—so!” He shrugged, let his painfully stretched-out mouth relax. “You’ll all have to suffer. Every one of you, everywhere. You could have left, you could have stopped this. You had the chance. You, Natalie. And you threw it away.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said. Ants trekked around my toes, seeking the hiding places they’d lost. “I don’t.”

“Of course you don’t. But that’s all right. That’s half the fun.”

He was too far away for his arm to reach but still right there in my face, a dizzying mirror-refraction turned solid, patting my shoulder all good-kiddo with happiness dancing in his eyes. “And when you realize just how wrong you were—sorry, you just blew your last chance! You, my sweet Amy, all her funny little friends—”

“Amy,” I said, and I was supposed to be cool and nonchalant and make him understand just how unwelcome he was but that name made tears threaten to spill all over again, ignited an angry little coal in my chest. “It’s always Amy, Amy gets presents and friends and *you* and why do you like her better? You help her, you rescue her, I know it’s you who sent that horrible ghost dog to guide her here and get her out of—why? Why is it never *me*?”

His hand on my shoulder tightened and from each pressing fingertip a plume of crawling unpleasantness, the sickly heat of nausea, went traveling down and through me like a little nest of snakes.

“Because,” he whispered, “she might’ve turned her back on me, but she never spit in my *face*.”

He was back where he was supposed to be now, on the other side of the room, self-contained as a bird strutting over the soft loose ridges of sand above the lake. Right there in front of me and completely unreachable, like the thick, dark borderline where lake met sky.

“I wouldn’t waste time envying Amy, if I were you,” he said. Squatting down, laying an opened palm against the infested blood-spattered floor. He hadn’t even asked whose blood it was. “She’s going to die too. That should make you happy. They’ll all die, everywhere, thanks to you—no matter what happens, you can rest assured it’s all you—but I admit it, some deaths you regret a lot more than others. Some of those others? You just don’t give a

damn at all.”

He looked up at me. “I love a killer. But what I hate, more than anything else alive, is a thief. Like you.”

The thick ribbon-clusters of ants crawled in a steady, obedient line up his fingers, into his waiting palm, no panic or retreating when he closed his fingers around them and kept opening them up empty. All of them, so dutiful and happy, diving into the abyss. Then he took up his rucksack and was back on his feet.

“I’ve got things to do,” he said. “I’ve got to leave, I’m a busy man. Thanks to you.” His eyes flashed with a dark hollow sheen, then softened. Warm and kind as the old days. “But don’t you get lonely, now. I’ll be seeing you again. Very soon. Before we all part ways forever.”

He turned on his heel and vanished, leaving me there in the cold and the dust.