

SON OF BEAST
GRAHAM MASTERTON

Helen dropped her pink toweling bathrobe onto the floor and was just about to step into the shower when her cellphone played *I Say A Little Prayer*.

She said, “shit.” She was tired and aching after sitting in her car all night on the corner of Grear Aly, waiting for a rape suspect who had never appeared. But the tune played over and over and she knew that the caller wasn’t going to leave her alone until she answered. She picked up the cellphone from the top of the laundry basket and said, wearily, “Foxley.”

“Did I wake you?” asked Klaus.

“Wake me? I haven’t even managed to crawl into bed yet.”

“Sorry, but Melville wants you down here asap. Hausman’s All-Day Diner on East Eighth Street. It looks like Son of Beast has been at it again.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. My feelings exactly.”

She parked her red metallic Pontiac Sunfire on the opposite side of East 8th Street and crossed the road through the whirling snow. It was bitterly cold and she wished that she had remembered her gloves. As she approached the diner, she shook down the hood of her dark blue duffel-coat so that the two cops in the doorway could see who she was.

Klaus Geiger was already there, talking to the owner. Klaus was big and wide-shouldered, so that he looked more like a linebacker for the Bengals, rather than a detective. His dirty-blond hair was all mussed up, and there were plum-colored circles under his eyes, as if he hadn’t slept, either.

“You look like you haven’t slept either,” said Helen.

“I didn’t. Greta’s cutting two new teeth.”

“The joys of parenthood, right?”

Klaus turned to the owner and said, “Mr Hausman, this is Detective Foxley, from the Personal Crimes Unit. Mr Hausman came to open up this morning about a quarter of six and found the back door had been forced.”

The owner took off his eyeglasses and rubbed them with a crumpled paper napkin. He was balding, mid-fifties, with skin the color of liverwurst and a large mole on the

left side of his chin. “I don’t know how anybody could do a thing like that. It’s like killing two people both at once. It’s terrible.”

Without a word, Helen went over to the young woman’s body. She was lying on her back with her head between two bar-stools. Her black woollen dress had been dragged right up to her armpits and although she was still wearing a black lacey bra, her panties were missing. Her head had been wrapped around with several layers of cling-film, so that her eyes stared out like a koi carp just beneath the surface of a frozen pond.

Like all of the nine previous victims, she was heavily pregnant – seven or eight months. A photographer was taking pictures of her from every angle, while a crime-scenes specialist in a white Tyvek suit was kneeling down beside her. He almost looked as if he were praying, but he was using a cotton-bud to take fluid samples.

The intermittent flashing of the camera made the young woman’s body appear to jump, as if she were still alive. Helen bent over her. As far as she could tell without unwrapping her head, she was young, and quite pretty, with freckles and short brunette hair.

“Do we know who she was?” asked Helen.

“Karen Marie Dozier,” Klaus told her. “Age twenty-four. Her library card gives her address as Indian Hills Avenue, St Bernard.”

There was no need to ask if the young woman had been sexually assaulted. There were purple finger-bruises all over her thighs, and her swollen vagina was overflowing with blood-streaked semen.

Klaus said, “Same m.o. as all the others. And the same damn calling-card.”

He held up a plastic evidence envelope. Inside was a ticket for Son of Beast, the huge wooden roller-coaster at King’s Island pleasure park, over two hundred feet high and seven thousand feet long, with passenger cars that traveled at nearly eighty miles an hour. Helen had tried it only once, and she had felt as sick to her stomach as she did this morning.

“That’s nine,” said Lieutenant-colonel Melville. “Nine pregnant women raped and suffocated in sixteenth months. *Nine*.

He paused, and he was breathing so furiously that he was whistling through his left nostril.

“The perpetrator has left us dozens of finger impressions. He’s so damn lavish with his DNA that we could clone the bastard, if we had the technology. He always leaves a ticket for the roller-coaster ride. Yet we don’t have a motive, we don’t have a single credible witness, and we don’t have a single constructive lead.”

He held up a copy of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, with the banner headline, 9th Mom-To-Be Murder: Cops Still Clueless.

Lieutenant-colonel Melville was short and thick-set with prickly white hair and a head that looked as if it was on the point of explosion, even when he was calm. Today he was so frustrated and angry that all he could do was twist the newspaper like a chicken’s neck.

“This guy is making us look like assholes. Not only that, no pregnant woman can feel safe in this city, and that’s an ongoing humiliation for this Investigations Bureau and for the Cincinnati Police Department as a whole.”

“Maybe we could try another decoy,” suggested Klaus. He was referring to three efforts they had made during the summer to lure Son of Beast into the open, by having a policewoman walk through downtown late in the evening wearing a prosthetic “bump.”

Helen shook her head. “It didn’t work before and I don’t think it’s going to work now. Somehow, Son of Beast has a way of distinguishing a genuinely pregnant woman from a fake.”

“So how the hell does he do that?” asked Detective Rylance. “Do you think he’s maybe a gynecologist?”

Klaus said, “Maybe he’s a gynecologist who was reported by one of his patients for malpractice, and wants to take his revenge on pregnant women in general.”

“I don’t think so,” said Helen. “Not even a gynecologist could have told that those decoys weren’t really pregnant, not without going right up to them and physically squeezing their stomachs. But if Son of Beast knows for sure which women are pregnant and which ones aren’t, maybe he has access to medical records.”

“Only two of the victims attended the same maternity clinic,” Klaus reminded her. “It wouldn’t have been easy for him to access the medical records of seven different clinics – three of which were private, remember, and one of which was in Covington.”

“Not easy,” Helen agreed. “But not impossible.”

“Okay, not impossible. But we still don’t have a motive.”

Helen picked up her Styrofoam cup of latte, but it had gone cold now, and there was wrinkly skin on top of it. "Maybe we should be asking ourselves why he always leaves a Son of Beast ticket behind."

"He's taunting us," said Detective Rylance. "He's saying, here I am, I'm going to take you on the scariest roller-coaster ride you've ever experienced. I'm going to fling you this way and that. You're helpless."

"I'm not sure I agree with you," said Helen. "I think there could be more to it than that."

"Well, look into it, detective," said Lieutenant-colonel Melville. "And – Geiger -- you go back to every one of those maternity clinics and double-check everybody who has access to their records. I want some real brainstorming from all of you. I want fresh angles. I want fresh evidence. I want you to find me some witnesses who actually saw something. I want this son-of-a-bitch hunted down, and nailed to the floor by his balls."

Helen went back to her apartment at 3:30 PM that afternoon, undressed, showered, and threw herself into bed. It was dark outside, and the snow was falling across Walnut Street thicker than ever, so that the sound of the traffic was muffled, but she still couldn't sleep. She kept thinking of Karen Dozier, staring up at her through all those layers of cling-film, the way she must have stared up at the man who was raping her.

She thought she heard a child crying out, and the slow clanking of a roller-coaster car, as it was cranked up to the top of the very first summit. But the child's cry was only the yowling of a cat, and the clanking noise was only the elevator, at the other end of the hallway.

She switched on her bedside lamp. It was 7:35 PM. For the first time in a long time she missed having Tony lying beside her. They had split up at the end of September, for all kinds of reasons, mostly the anti-social hours she had to work, and her reluctance to make love after she had witnessed some particularly vicious sex crime. She had found it almost impossible to feel aroused when she had spent the day comforting a ten-year-old boy whose scrotum had been burned by cigarettes, or a seventeen-year-old girl who had been forcibly sodomized with a wine bottle.

She went into the kitchen and switched on the kettle to make a cup of herbal tea. In the darkness of the window, she saw herself reflected, a slim young woman of thirty-

one years and seven months, with scruffy, short-cropped hair, and a kind of pale, watery prettiness that always deceived men into thinking that she was helpless and weak. She decided that she needed some new nightwear. The white knee-length sleep-T that she was wearing made her look like a mental patient.

The kettle started to whistle, piercingly. At the same time, her phone began to play *I Say A Little Prayer*. She took off the kettle and picked up the phone and said, “Foxley.”

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” said Klaus.

“What’s this? *Déjà vu* all over again? No, you didn’t wake me. I’m way too tired to sleep.”

“I’ve just had some old guy walk in from the street, says he can help us with You-Know-Who.”

“You have him with you now?” She had picked up on the fact that Klaus had deliberately refrained from saying “Son of Beast.” The Investigations Bureau had never released the information that the Moms-To-Be Murderer had left roller-coaster tickets at every crime scene, nor what they called him.

“Sure. He’s still here. He says he needs to speak to you personally.”

“Me? Why does he need to talk to me?”

“He says you’re the only person who can do it.”

“I don’t understand. The only person who can do *what*?”

“He won’t give me any specific details. Look – ” he lowered his voice “ -- he’s probably a screwball. But we’re really clutching at straws, right, and if he can give us any kind of a lead -- ”

Helen tugged at her hair. Her reflection in the kitchen window tugged at *her* hair, too, although Helen thought that her reflection did it more hesitantly than she did. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll be crosstown in twenty minutes. Buy your screwball a cup of coffee or something. Keep him talking.”

She drove across to Cincinnati Police headquarters on Ezzard Charles Drive with her windshield wipers flapping to clear the snow. Klaus was on the fourth floor, sitting on the edge of his desk and talking to an elderly man in a very long black overcoat. The man had a shock of wiry gray hair and rimless eyeglasses. His face was criss-crossed with thousands of wrinkles, like very soft leather that has been folded and refolded

countless times. An old-fashioned black homburg hat was resting in his lap, and his hands, in black leather gloves, were neatly folded on top of it.

Klaus stood up as Helen came into the office. "This is Detective Foxley, sir. Foxley – this is Mr -- ""

"Hochheimer," said the elderly man, rising to his feet and taking off his right glove. "Joachim Hochheimer. I read about the murder of the pregnant woman in the *Post* this evening."

Helen didn't take off her coat. "And you think you can help us in some way?"

"I think it's possible. But as I have already said to your associate here, it will require a considerable sacrifice."

"Okay, then. What kind of considerable sacrifice are we talking about?"

"Do you mind if I sit down again? My hip, well, I'm waiting to have it replaced."

"Sure, go ahead. Klaus – you couldn't buy me a coffee, could you? I think I'm beginning to hallucinate."

"Sure thing."

When Klaus had left the office, the elderly man said, "Young lady -- you may find it very difficult to believe what I am going to tell you. There is a risk that you will dismiss me as senile, or mad. If that turns out to be your opinion, then what can I do?"

"Mr Hochheimer, we're investigating a series of very brutal homicides here. We welcome any suggestions, no matter how loony they might seem to be. Well – sorry -- I'm not saying that *your* suggestions are loony. I don't even know what they are yet. But I'm trying to tell you that we appreciate your coming in, whatever you have to tell us."

Mr Hochheimer nodded, very gravely. "Of course. I consider it an honor that you are even prepared to listen to me."

"So," said Helen, sitting down next to him. "What's this all about?"

He cleared his throat. "As you know, hundreds of German immigrants flooded into Cincinnati in the middle of the nineteenth century, to work in the Ohio River docks and pork packing factories. Among these immigrants was a family originally from Reuthingen, deep in the forests of the Swabian Jura. They were refugees not from poverty, but from prejudice and relentless persecution."

"They were Jews?"

"Oh, no, not Jews. They were a different sort of people altogether. Different from you, different from me. Different from the rest of humanity."

“How – different?”

“Their bloodline came originally from Leipzig, from the university, which is one of the oldest universities in the world. In the fifteenth century, several physicians at the university were carrying out secret genealogical experiments to see if they could endow human beings with some of the attributes of animals, or fish, or insects.

“For example, they tried to inseminate women with the semen from salmon, to see if they could produce a human being who was capable of swimming underwater without having to breathe. They tried similar experiments with dogs, and horses, and even spiders.

“Today we think such experiments are nonsense, but we should remind ourselves that in fourteen hundred and thirty, people were still convinced that a pregnant woman who was frightened by a rabbit would give birth to a child with a hare lip, or that an albino baby was the result of its expectant mother drinking too much milk.”

“Go on,” said Helen.

“Almost all of the experiments failed, naturally. But one experiment -- just one -- was what you might call a qualified success. A young serving-girl called Mathilde Festa was impregnated with sperm from a horse-leech. The idea was that her child, when it was grown, could be trained as a physician, and suck infected blood from its patients’ wounds itself, without the necessity for leeches.”

What a nutjob, thought Helen. To think I got out of bed and drove all the way across town to listen to this.

“Forgive me,” she said, trying to sound interested. “I thought that leeches were hermaphrodites, like oysters.”

“They are, but they still produce semen. Some species of leech have up to eighty testes.”

“Eighty? Really? That’s a whole lot of balls.”

Mr Hochheimer closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were trying to be very patient with her.

“I’m sorry,” said Helen. “I’m kind of frazzled, that’s all. I haven’t slept in thirty-seven hours. And I’m beginning to wonder what point you’re trying to make to me here.”

Mr Hochheimer opened his eyes again and smiled at her. “I understand your skepticism. I told you that this wouldn’t be easy to believe. But the fact is that Mathilde Festa gave birth to what appeared to be a normal-looking baby, except that

his skin was slightly *mottled* in appearance. He was also born with four teeth, which were rough and serrated, like those of a leech.

“After his birth the physicians at Leipzig kept him concealed, because the university authorities and the church would have been outraged if they had discovered the nature of their experiments. But when he was four years old, the boy managed to escape from the walled garden in which he was playing.

“The physicians found him two days later, in the attic of an abandoned house close by, in a deep coma. Beside him was the body of another small boy, so white and so *collapsed* in appearance that they couldn’t believe that he was human. Mathilde Festa’s son had bitten this small boy, and had sucked out of him every last milliliter of blood and bodily fluid and bone-marrow, until the unfortunate child was nothing more than an empty sack of dry skin and desiccated ribs.

“What was even more remarkable, though, was that Mathilde Festa’s son had grown to nearly twice his size. He had been only four years old when he escaped from the garden. Now he looked like a boy of eight.”

“This is beginning to sound like something by the Brothers Grimm,” said Helen.

“A fairy-story, yes. I agree. If they had strangled Mathilde Festa’s son there and then, as they should have done, that would have been an end to it, and nobody would ever have believed that it really happened.”

“But they didn’t strangle him?”

“No – at least two of the physicians were determined that their life’s work should not be lost. They believed that the death of one small boy was a small price to pay for successfully inter-breeding one of God’s species with another. They smuggled Mathilde Festa and her boy to Munich, and from Munich they took him to Reuthingen, deep in the forest, where he grew up as a normal child. Or as normal as any child could be, if he were half-human and half-leech. Mathilde Festa christened him Friedrich.”

“I hate to push you, Mr Hochheimer, but it’s getting kind of late and I’m very tired. How exactly is any of this relevant to the Moms-to-Be Murderer?”

Joachim Hochheimer raised one hand, to indicate that Helen should be patient. “When Friedrich was grown to manhood, he took a wife, a very simple-minded farmer’s daughter who hadn’t been able to find any other man to marry her. They were very happy together, by all accounts, but they were persecuted by other people in Reuthingen, because of the strangeness of Friedrich’s appearance and also because

of his wife's backwardness. Children tossed rocks at their cottage, and whenever they went out people shook their fists at them and spat.

"One day, when she was walking home from the village, a gang of young men attacked Friedrich's wife. She was pregnant at the time with Friedrich's first child, almost full term. The young men dragged her into a barn and one of them raped her. Or *tried* to rape her."

He hesitated, and squeezed his hands together as if he couldn't decide if he ought to continue. His leather gloves made a soft creaking sound.

"Go on," said Helen. "I deal with sex crimes every day, Mr Hochheimer. I've heard it all before."

"This, young lady, I don't think that you *have* heard before. As the young man forced his way into Friedrich's struggling wife, her waters broke. Her womb opened and the baby inside her seized her attacker's penis with his teeth.

"The young man was screaming. His friends helped him to pull himself out. But the baby came out, too, its teeth still buried in his penis, and even when his friends battered the baby with sticks, it refused to release him. He fainted and his friends ran away.

"The next morning, Friedrich found his wife lying in the barn, desperately weak, but still alive. Close beside her, sleeping, lay a young man, naked, almost fully-grown. Beside him, amongst the bales of straw, lay something that was described as looking like a crumpled nightshirt, except that it had a face on it, a face without eyes, and tufts of hair."

Helen sat back. "Well, Mr Hochheimer, that's quite a story."

"A description of what happened was written in great detail by one of the physicians from Leipzig, and his account is still lodged in the university library. I have seen it for myself."

"You think it's true?"

"I assure you, it is completely true. The descendants of the family of which I spoke are still here in Cincinnati."

"Well, it's a very interesting story, sir. But how can it help us to solve these murders?"

"It said in the *Post* that you have been unable to track down your suspect in spite of a wealth of evidence. It said that you have even tried decoys pretending to be pregnant, but your suspect seems to know that they are not genuine."

“That’s correct.”

“Supposing a decoy *were* to be genuine.”

“That’s impossible,” said Helen. “We can’t possibly ask a pregnant woman to expose herself to a serial killer. What if something went wrong? The police department would be crucified.”

“Ah! But what if the pregnant woman were quite capable of defending herself? What if her unborn child were quite capable of protecting her?”

Helen suddenly understood what Joachim Hochheimer was suggesting. It made her feel as if she had scores of cicadas crawling inside her clothes. At that moment, Klaus came back with a cup of coffee in each hand.

“*Foxley*?” he frowned. “Are you okay? You look like shit.”

She ignored him. Instead, she said to Joachim Hochheimer, “You’re seriously suggesting that some woman gets herself pregnant with one of these – leech-babies? And allows the Moms-to-Be Murderer to rape her...so that it -- ?”

She imitated a biting gesture with her fingers.

Joachim Hochheimer shrugged. “There would be no escape for him. Perhaps you think of it as summary justice, but what choice do you have? To allow him to continue his killings? To allow even more innocent young women and their unborn babies to be slaughtered?”

“Jesus,” said Helen.

Klaus put down the coffee-cups. “You want to explain to me what’s going on here? What’s a goddamned leech-baby when it’s at home?”

Again, Helen ignored him. “Why me?” she asked Joachim Hochheimer. “Why did you come to see me?”

“I read an interview with you, the last time a young pregnant woman was murdered. You are young, you are unattached, you have an award for bravery. I don’t know. I suppose I just looked at your picture and thought, this could be the one.”

“And how were you proposing that I should get pregnant?”

“The Vuldus family have a son who is only two years younger than you. Richard Vuldus.”

Helen stared at him. The desk-lamp was shining on his eyeglasses so that he looked as if he were blind.

“It’s impossible,” she said. “Even if I believed you -- which I don’t -- it’s totally out of the question.”

Joachim Hochheimer stayed where he was for a while, nodding. Then he stood up and said, “At least you know about it now. At least you have the option to try it, if you change your mind. Here – take my card. You can usually reach me at this number during the night.”

He put on his homburg hat and left the office. When he had gone, Klaus said, “What the hell was *that* all about?”

“You were right,” said Helen. “He *was* a screwball. One hundred and ten percent unadulterated FDA-rated screwball.”

She spent the next four-and-a-half days checking every single mention of the roller-coaster Son of Beast since its official opening on May 26, 2000 – on the internet, in newspaper cuttings, in transcripts of TV and radio news reports.

When it had opened, Son of Beast had broken all kinds of records for wood-constructed roller-coasters. The tallest, the fastest, the only woodie with loops. It had cost millions of dollars to construct and used up 1.65 million board feet of timber.

She had almost given up when she came across an article from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* from April 25 two years previously. **‘Son of Beast Killed Our Baby’ Man Loses Lawsuit.**

“A judge yesterday threw out a \$3.5 million lawsuit by a Norwood man who claimed that a ‘violent and hair-raising’ ride on the newly-opened Son of Beast roller-coaster caused his pregnant girlfriend to miscarry their baby.

“After his girlfriend confessed to the court that the roller-coaster ride had not been responsible for her losing the child, Judge David Davis told Henry Clarke, 35, a realtor from Smith Road, Norwood, that he was dismissing the action against Paramount Entertainment.

“Jennifer Prescott, 33, admitted that she had booked in advance to have her pregnancy terminated at a private clinic in Covington, KY, and had used their ride on the King’s Island attraction to conceal what she had done from Mr Clarke.

“Mrs Prescott is estranged from her husband Robert Prescott, also of Norwood. She told the court that she started an affair with Mr Clarke in November last year believing him to be a ‘kind and considerate person.’

“But he became increasingly possessive and physically abusive, and she had already decided to leave him before she discovered that she was expecting his baby.

“She invented the roller-coaster story because she was terrified of what Mr Clarke would do to her if he discovered that she had deliberately ended her pregnancy.”

Helen printed out a copy of the news story and took it into Lieutenant-colonel Melville’s office.

“What do you think?” she asked him.

Lieutenant-colonel Melville read the article, took out his handkerchief and loudly blew his nose. “Mr Clarke has a pretty good resumé, doesn’t he? A history of domestic violence. A motive for attacking pregnant women. And a reason for using the name Son of Beast. Let’s pick this joker up, shall we, and see what he has to say for himself?”

But there was no trace of Henry Clarke anywhere in Cincinnati or its surrounding suburbs. He had left his job at Friedmann, Kite Realty Inc only two weeks after he had lost his court action against Paramount. He had left his house in Norwood, too, leaving all of his furniture behind. His parents hadn’t heard from him, not even a phone call, and he had told none of his friends where he was going.

He had sold his Ford Explorer to a used-car dealership in Bridgetown, to the west of the city center, but he had taken cash for it and not exchanged it for another vehicle.

“I have such a feeling about this guy,” said Helen, the week before Christmas, when she and Klaus were sitting in the office eating sugared donuts and drinking coffee. “He’s vanished, but he hasn’t gone.”

The sky outside the office window was dark green, and it was snowing again. People with black umbrellas were struggling along the sidewalks like a scene out of a Dickens novel.

Helen went to the window and looked down at them. “That could be him, under any one of those umbrellas.”

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you,” said Klaus. “Do you want this last donut?”

Helen wasn’t letting her imagination run away with her. On Christmas morning the body of a young pregnant woman was discovered underneath the Riverfront Stadium. Her head had been wound round with four layers of Saran Wrap, and she had been raped. Her name was Clare Jefferson and she was 23 years old.

Helen stood underneath the gloomy concrete supports of the stadium, her hands in her pockets, watching the crime scene specialists at work. Klaus came up to her and said, "Happy Christmas. Did you open your presents yet?"

The red flashing lights on top of the squad cars were a lurid parody of Christmas-tree lights. Helen said, "*Ten.* Shit. Isn't he ever going to stop?"

One of the crime scene specialists came over, holding up a roller-coaster ticket. "Thought you'd want to see this."

She couldn't sleep that night. She took two sleeping-pills and watched TV until 2:30 AM, but her brain wouldn't stop churning over and her eyes refused to close. She had arranged to see her parents tomorrow in Indian Hills Village, to make up for missing Christmas lunch, but she knew already that she wasn't going to go.

How could she eat turkey and pull crackers when that young girl was lying in the mortuary, with her dead baby still inside her? Son of Beast had raped and suffocated ten women, but altogether he had murdered twenty innocent souls.

She switched on the light and went across to her dressing-table. Tucked into the side of the mirror was Joachim Hochheimer's visiting-card. She took it out and looked at it for a long time. He was a lunatic, right? If 16th-century physicians had managed to cross a woman and a horse-leech, surely it would have been common medical knowledge by now. At the very least it would have been mentioned in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*.

And even if it really *had* happened, and Mathilde Festa really *had* managed to give birth to generations of descendants, surely the leech genes would have been bred out of them by now?

And even if they hadn't been bred out of them, and it was still genetically possible for a woman to become pregnant with a creature like that, could any woman bring herself to do it?

She sat down on the end of her rumpled bed. She thought: *if this is the only way that Son of Beast can be stopped from murdering more women and unborn babies, I'm going to have to find the courage to do it myself. I can't ask anybody else.* Not only that, it was the twenty-sixth day of the month, and she was ovulating. If there was any time to conceive a Vuldus baby, it was now.

She picked up her phone and punched out Joachim Hochheimer's number.

He opened the door for her. The hallway was so gloomy that she could hardly see his face, only the reflection from his eyeglasses.

“Come in. We thought that you might have changed your mind.”

“I very nearly did.”

Inside, the apartment was overheated and stuffy and smelled of stale *pot-pourri*, cinnamon and cloves. It was furnished in a heavy Germanic style, with dusty brocade drapes and huge armchairs and mahogany cabinets filled with Eastern European china – plates and fruit-bowls and figurines of fan-dancers. It was on the top floor of a 19th-century commercial building overlooking Fountain Square, right in the heart of the city. Helen went to the window and looked out, and she could see the Tyler Davidson fountain, with the Genius of Water standing on top of it, with curtains of ice suspended from her outstretched hands. All around it, dozens of children were sliding on the slippery pavement.

“The Vuldus family rented this apartment from the shipping insurance company who used to occupy the lower floors,” said Joachim Hochheimer. “That was in 1871, and they have lived here ever since.”

He came up her and held out his hand. “May I take your coat?”

“Listen,” she said, “I’m really not so sure I want to go through with this.”

He nodded. “It is a step into the totally unknown, isn’t it, which not many of us ever have the courage to take. If you feel you cannot do it, then of course you must go home and forget that I ever suggested it.”

“Is he here?” asked Helen. “Richard Vuldus?”

“Yes, he’s in the bedroom. He’s waiting for you.”

“Maybe you can give him my apologies.”

“Of course.”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. But then Helen’s cellphone played *I Say A Little Prayer For You*. She said, “Excuse me, Mr Hochheimer,” and opened it up.

It was Klaus. “Foxley?” he demanded. “Where the hell are you?”

“I had an errand to run. I’m free now. What do you want?”

“We just had a first report from the ME. Clare Jefferson was two hundred seventy-one days pregnant. About three days away from giving birth.”

“Oh, God.”

“Not only that, Foxley. She was expecting twins.”

Helen closed her eyes, but inside her mind she could clearly see Clare Jefferson lying on her back in the dark concrete recess underneath the Riverfront Stadium, her head swaddled in plastic wrap, her smock pulled up right over her breasts, and the red emergency lights flashing. Inside her swollen stomach, two dead babies had been cuddling each other.

“Helen? You there?”

“I’m here.”

“Are you coming into headquarters?”

She cleared her throat. “Give me a little time, Klaus. Maybe an hour or so.”

“Okay. But we really need you here, soon as you can.”

Helen closed her cellphone and dropped it back into her coat pocket. Joachim Hochheimer was watching her intently and he could obviously sense that something had changed.

Helen said, quietly, and as calmly as she could, “Maybe you can introduce me to Richard.”

The bedroom was furnished in the same grandiose style as the rest of the apartment, with a huge four-poster bed with a green-and-crimson quilt, impenetrable crimson drapes, and a bow-fronted armoire with elaborate gilded handles. On either side of the bed hung oil-paintings of naked nymphs dancing in the woods, their heads thrown back in lust and hilarity.

Richard Vuldus was standing by the window looking down at Fountain Square, wearing a long black cotton robe with very wide sleeves, as if he were a stage magician. He was tall, with long black curly hair that almost reached his shoulders. Helen saw a diamond sparkle in his left earlobe.

“Richard,” said Joachim Hochheimer. “Richard, this is the young lady I was telling you about.”

Richard Vuldus turned around. Helen couldn’t stop herself from taking a small, sharp intake of breath, almost like a hiccup. He was extraordinarily handsome, but in a strange, unsettling way that Helen had never seen before. His face was long and oval and very pale, and his eyebrows were arched, almost like a woman’s. His nose was thin and straight, and his lips were thin but gracefully curved, as if he had just made a deeply lewd suggestion, but said it in such a way that no woman could have resisted it.

He came up to Helen with his robes softly billowing. The cotton was deep black, but very fine, so that with the bedside lamp behind him, she could see the outline of his muscular body, and his half-tumescent penis.

“Joachim!” he smiled, holding out his hand to her. “You didn’t warn me that she was beautiful!” His eyes were mesmerizing: his irises were completely black, and they glistened like polished jet. His voice had a slight European accent, so that “beautiful” came out with five syllables, “bee-aye-oo-ti-fool.”

“I’m Helen,” said Helen. Her heart was beating so hard against her ribcage that it actually hurt.

“I know,” said Richard Vuldus. “And I know that this cannot be easy for you, in any way. But I assure you that I will do my best to make you feel at ease. Even if what we are doing today is not out of love for each other, it is out of love for innocent people, yes, and unborn babies who do not deserve to die?”

“I – ah -- I guess we could put it that way.”

“Perhaps you would like a drink?” Joachim Hochheimer asked her. “A glass of champagne?”

“I have to go on duty later. Besides...if we’re going to do this, I’d rather just get it over with.”

“Of course,” said Richard Vuldus. He came closer to her and now she could see what Joachim Hochheimer had meant by *mottled*. There were faint dark-gray patches around his temples, and across his cheekbones, and down the sides of his neck. He had a smell about him, too. Not unpleasant – in fact it was quite attractive – but different from any other man she had ever known. Musky, but metallic, like overheated iron.

“I’ll leave you alone now,” said Joachim Hochheimer. “If there’s anything you need -- if you have any more questions -- ”

“There is just one thing,” said Helen. “What do *you* get out of this? Don’t tell me you’re just being public-spirited.”

Joachim Hochheimer looked surprised. “I thought that was obvious, dear lady. What *we* get out of it is a new member of the Vuldus family – one with new blood. We have been trying for generation after generation to breed ourselves back to purity, and we are not too far away from that now. They cursed us, those physicians, all those centuries ago, by inter-breeding us. But the time will eventually come when all of the monstrosity is bred out of us.”

Richard Vuldus took hold of her hand. His fingers were very cold, but they were strong, too. "You will be doing our family a great service, Helen, and we thank you and admire you for it."

Helen nearly lost her nerve. Not only would she have to make love to this strange young man, she would have to carry his baby, and when she was nearly ready to give birth she would have to risk her own life and her baby's life to trap Son of Beast. Even if she succeeded she would be faced with a nightmare. She would have to find a way of explaining to what had happened to Son of Beast, and a way of making sure that her new child escaped, and was safely returned to the Vuldus family.

It was madness. It was all madness. She was just about to turn around and ask for her coat back when Richard Vuldus laid both of his hands on her shoulders, and held her firmly, and looked directly into her eyes. His eyes were so black it was like looking into space.

"The day we take no more risks, Helen, that is the day we lie down and die."

She didn't know what to say to him. Behind her, Joachim Hochheimer quietly closed the bedroom door.

"Come," said Richard Vuldus. He led her over to the side of the bed, closer to the bedside lamp. He touched her hair, and her cheek. "Do you know what I see in you? I see a woman of such complexity. A woman who needs to show what she can do, but has not yet discovered a way to do it. Maybe this will be the way."

He drew her soft blue-gray sweater over her head, so that for a moment she was blinded. When she emerged, he gently teased up her hair with his fingertips.

"You should grow your hair," he told her. "You would look like a dryad with long hair. Free and wild. A child of nature."

"Can we just -- ?"

"Of course."

He tugged down the zipper at the side of her skirt, and unfastened the hook-and-eye. She stepped out of it, so that she was standing in front of him in nothing but her blue lacy bra and black pantyhose. He kissed her forehead, although she didn't want kisses, in the same way that prostitutes never wanted kisses. This was business, not love. At least she supposed it was business. She began to feel light-headed and disoriented, as if she hadn't eaten for two days.

With his long, chilly fingers, Richard Vuldus released the catch of her bra. Her breasts were small and rounded and high – drum majorettes' breasts, Tony used to call them. Richard Vuldus touched her nipples and they crinkled and stiffened.

“You should imagine now that we have been friends for a very long time,” he murmured. “Maybe we knew each other at college. We were never lovers, but looked at each other from time to time and knew that if things had turned out differently, we might have been. Now, tonight, many years later, we have met again by accident.”

He slipped his fingers inside the waistband of her pantyhose and gently tugged them down to her thighs. He cupped the cheeks of her bottom in both hands, and then he let his left hand stray round to her vulva. One long middle finger slipped between her lips, touching her clitoris so lightly that she barely felt it, but it was so cold that she became aware of her own wetness. She shivered – but against all of her instincts, she was aroused.

He lowered her into a sitting position on the bed. Then he knelt down in front of her, and drew her pantyhose all the way down and off her feet. As he did so, he took hold of each foot and kissed it in turn, his fingers working their way between her toes, his thumb pressing deep her insteps. She had gone to a reflexologist once, to relieve her tension, but she had never had her feet massaged like this before. Every time the ball of his thumb rolled around the bottom of her foot, she felt as if he were kneading her perineum, between her vagina and her anus, and the sensation was almost unbearably erotic. She began to feel delirious with pleasure.

He stood up, and leaned over her, and kissed her forehead. She found herself tilting her head back so that she could kiss his neck, and then his chin, and then his lips.

“There is such darkness in the world,” he whispered. “There is darkness so deep that sometimes we have despaired of ever finding our way out of it. But tonight you and I will light a light, no matter how small, and everything will gradually brighten, and we will see again.”

“Kiss me,” she said, and as he kissed her, she plunged her hands into the soft blackness of his robes, and felt his body underneath, his hard muscles, his ribs, his hips.

He straightened up, and drew the robes over his head like the great black shadow of a raven flying overhead. The robes fell softly onto the floor and he was naked in the lamplight. He was wide-shouldered, but his stomach was very flat, and Helen could see the definition of every pectoral and deltoid and bicep as if he were a living

diagram of the human body. He was completely hairless -- no chest hair, no underarm hair, no pubic hair -- and his skin was smooth and faintly luminous, with a pattern of those darker patches down his sides and around his thighs.

His penis was fully erect now, and it was enormous, with a gaping plum-colored glans, already glistening with fluid. Helen reached out and took hold of the shaft, and gripped it tight, and his distended veins felt like the twisted creepers around a tree-trunk.

She lifted her head, so that she could kiss his penis, but he gripped her shoulder and pressed her back. "Not that way," he said. "We must conserve everything we can."

She said, "You're incredible. I never met a man like you before. Ever."

He climbed onto the bed next to her. He said nothing, but firmly turned her over onto her stomach. Then he knelt behind her and took hold of her hips and lifted her into a crouching position.

"I am the father of your child," he said. "I am nothing more than that."

With that, he parted the cheeks of her bottom with his thumbs, and positioned the head of his penis between the lips of her vulva. Helen lowered her head. She felt as if the pattern on the quilt were alive, and that its swirls and curlicues were crawling underneath her like green-and-crimson centipedes.

Richard Vuldus slowly pushed his erection inside her, and it felt so large that she couldn't help herself from gasping. He drew himself out again, hesitated for a second, and then pushed himself inside her a second time, so deeply that she could feel his naked testicles against her lips.

God, she had never had sex like this before, ever, with anybody. She almost felt as if she were going mad. The blood pumped through her head so hard that she could hear it, and she started to tremble. Not only was her body completely naked, but her soul, too. She felt subjugated, dominated, but lusted-after, and needed. She pressed her head down against the pillow and reached behind her with both hands, spreading the cheeks of her bottom even wider so that Richard Vuldus could penetrate her deeper. There was a brutal urgency in Richard Vuldus' lovemaking, and he forced his penis into her faster and faster. She was so wet that they were both smothered in slippery juice.

Helen could feel an orgasm beginning to rise between her legs, and her thighs started to quiver. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth and gripped the

quilt tight. All the same, it hit her before she expected it, like a huge black locomotive coming out of the darkness with its headlight glaring and its whistle screaming.

“Ahhh!” she shouted. “*Ohmygod ohmygod aaahhhhhh!*”

As Helen quaked and jumped, Richard Vuldus climaxed too. She actually felt the glans of his penis bulging, and the first spurt of sperm. He pumped again, and again, and again, as if he had been storing up this semen for years, and could at last release it, every drop of it, and find relief.

He continued to kneel behind her for a few seconds, his hands grasping her hips, but then he slowly rolled over and lay on his back. Helen rolled over, too, and lay close beside him.

“You, Richard Vuldus, are simply amazing.” She reached out to touch his lips with her fingertip.

He took hold of her wrist and moved her hand away, gently but firmly. “This was not for love, Helen. Not my love for you, nor your love for me. This was for justice, and revenge.”

She stared at him, and then she sat up. “You mean to tell me that meant *nothing* to you?”

“It meant everything. More than you can know.”

She hesitated for a moment. Then she climbed off the bed and retrieved her clothes from the floor.

“Thank you, Helen,” he said, softly.

She pulled her sweater over her head. “Don’t mention it. I’ll let you know if you’ve succeeded in knocking me up.”

When she left the apartment, Joachim Hochheimer took hold of her hand, and tried to raise it to his lips, but Helen pulled herself away.

“Thank you, *gnädige Fraulein*,” he said. “We are forever in your debt.”

Toward the end of January, she began to feel tired, and her breasts began to feel swollen, but she was still not convinced that Richard Vuldus had succeeded in making her pregnant. He had made love to her only once, after all; and besides that, she was beginning to convince herself that she had dreamed the whole incident. She had gone back to Fountain Square several times during the evening, and she had seen no lights in the Vuldus apartment. She had called Joachim Hochheimer, too, but nobody had picked up.

“What’s bugging you?” Klaus asked her, as they sat in First Watch café one morning, eating bacado omelets and drinking horseshoe coffee.

“Please?”

“I said, what’s bugging you? You haven’t heard a word I’ve been saying.”

“I don’t know. Sorry. I feel weird.”

They had driven only a few blocks down Walnut Street before she tugged at his coat and said, “Stop the car! Stop the car, please!”

She just managed to open the door and lean over the gutter before she was sick – half-chewed bacon and avocado and eggs, in a steaming gravy of hot coffee.

That evening, she took a home pregnancy test, and yes, it was positive. She stood staring at herself in her bathroom mirror. My God, what have I done? What kind of a baby is growing inside me?

She went back into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. At that moment the phone rang.

“Detective Foxley? Helen? This is Joachim Hochheimer speaking.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Everything is well, yes?”

“It depends on your point of view, Mr Hochheimer.”

“You are expecting Richard’s child, is what I mean.”

“Yes, Mr Hochheimer.”

“Thank you, dear lady, from the bottom of my heart.”

She put the phone down. Almost immediately, it rang again.

“Foxley? It’s Klaus. S.O.B. has done it again.”

“Where?”

“The Serpentine Wall, Yeatman’s Cove. Do you want to meet me down there?”

“On my way.”

She pulled on her sweater and took her duffel-coat out of the closet. She was just about to leave the apartment when her stomach tightened and she felt a rising surge of nausea. She hurried into the bathroom, knelt down in front of the toilet, and brought up a fountain of chili and cheddar cheese.

Klaus said, “You’re *pregnant*? You’re kidding me? By whom? You didn’t tell me you had a new boyfriend.”

“It’s nobody I’ve ever talked about.”

“So what are you going to do? You’re not going to *have* the kid, surely? How are you going to be a single mom and a detective at the same time? I mean – I’m assuming that the guy isn’t going to marry you. Maybe he is.”

“No, he’s not going to marry me.”

Klaus swirled the remains of his beer around his glass and shook his head. “You’re full of surprises, Foxley. I have to give you that.”

“I surprise myself, most of the time.”

“Well,” said Klaus, “just make sure that you check with me before you choose your maternity clinic.”

“Why’s that?”

He took a roughly-scrawled diagram out of his inside pocket. “I may be wrong, but I’ve been looking into the records of the various clinics which were attended by Son of Beast’s victims. There’s nothing in any of them to suggest that Son of Beast could have hacked into any medical records. But today I realized that his eighth victim was a patient at the same clinic as his first victim, and his ninth victim was a patient at the same clinic as his second victim, and so on. It appears to me that he has a list of seven clinics and that he’s picking his victims from each clinic in rotation. I could be wrong, but it’s beginning to look like a pattern.”

Helen took the diagram and frowned at it. “So he wouldn’t necessarily need any access to medical records. He simply goes to the next clinic on his list and follows his victim out of the building when she leaves.”

“It’s beginning to look that way.”

“But why should he do that? That means that we can predict which clinic he’s going to pick his next victim from, and we can stake it out.”

“That’s right. And the next one is...The Christ Hospital on Auburn.”

But when winter melted away, so did Son of Beast. After the killing of a 31-year-old mother-to-be at Yeatman’s Cove, there were no more Moms-to-Be murders for seven months, and they began to wonder if he had given up, or left Cincinnati for good.

Eventually, Lieutenant-colonel Melville decided that the stake-out at The Christ Hospital was no longer cost-effective, and assigned the surveillance team to other duties.

For Helen, that summer seemed to last for ever, one sweltering day after another, week after week, month after month. The city was suffocating, and this year there was

a teeming plague of cicadas, sawing away noisily day and night, and penetrating every crevice of every building, cramming themselves into office ventilation systems, and tangling themselves in people's hair. The windshield of Helen's Pontiac was permanently smeared with cicada guts.

Meanwhile, the baby inside her grew and grew. Her sickness passed, but she still felt exhausted, especially when the baby started to wriggle and heave inside her all night. Every Thursday afternoon she went to The Christ Hospital, waited for fifteen minutes in the ladies' room, reading a book, and then left. If Son of Beast were still in the city, watching and waiting for his next opportunity, she wanted to make sure that she gave him a victim with regular patterns of behavior.

She didn't actually attend the maternity clinic. This birth had to be off the books, unregistered. All the same, she bought books on pregnancy and made sure that she took plenty of vitamins and kept her blood-pressure down. She developed a desperate craving for five-way chili – spaghetti, chili, cheese, kidney-beans and onions – and she found it a daily struggle to keep her weight down.

It was a lonely time. She kept away from her friends and her family because she wanted as few of them as possible to know that she was expecting a baby. And as the months went by, and Son of Beast failed to reappear, it seemed to be increasingly likely that she had suffered this pregnancy for no purpose.

Only Klaus came round regularly to see her, and each time he brought her flowers, or a box of candies. In August, when she was eight months' pregnant, he brought her a little blue-and-white knitted suit, with a hood.

“How do you know it's going to be a boy?” she asked him.

“Because I can't imagine you having a girl.”

On a thundery afternoon in the first week of September she drove up to The Christ Hospital as usual and parked her car. It was only 4:30 PM but the sky was black, and lightning was flickering over the hills. She was walking toward the hospital entrance when she noticed a man in a gray raincoat standing under the trees. She made a point of not looking at him directly, but when she went through the revolving doors into the hospital lobby, she quickly turned her head, and she could see that he had been watching her.

She went to the ladies' room and sat in one of the cubicles. Baby was being hyperactive today, churning and turning inside her. There was no reason to suppose that the

man in the gray raincoat was Son of Beast, but somehow she felt that the time had arrived, that the cogs of her destiny were all beginning to click into place. Baby turned over again, and she began to feel deeply apprehensive.

She waited for twenty minutes. Then she left the ladies' room and walked across the lobby and out of the revolving door. It was raining, hard, so that the asphalt driveway in front of the hospital was dancing with spray. There was no sign of the man in the gray raincoat.

She pulled up her hood and hurried toward the parking-lot as fast as she could. Lightning crackled, almost directly overhead, followed by a deafening barrage of thunder. She reached her car and unlocked the door, and was just about to climb in when somebody's arm wrapped itself around her neck and lifted her upward and backward, throttling her.

“You’re going to do what I tell you!” said a thick, sinus-blocked voice.

“I gah – my baby -- *gah* -- can’t -- !”

“You’re going to come around to the back of the car and you’re going to open the trunk and you’re going to climb in. You got that?”

“I can’t – breathe – can’t -- !”

With his right hand, the man reached around and twisted her car-keys away from her. “If you don’t do what I say, I’m going to cut your belly right open, here and now. Give me your cell.”

“Please – I -- *gah* – “”

“Are you going to do what I tell you? Give me your cell!”

The man was compressing her larynx so hard that Helen could see nothing but scarlet, and stars. She fumbled in her pocket and took out her cellphone, and handed it to him.

“You’re going to do what I tell you, right? And you’re not going to scream, and you’re not going to try to run away?”

She nodded.

The man shuffled her round to the back of the car, as if they were a clumsy pair of dancing-partners.

“Open the trunk. Go on, open the trunk. Now get in there. Hurry it up, before somebody sees you. And don’t try anything stupid.”

Awkwardly, she lifted on foot into the trunk. As she did so, however, she twisted around and yanked her gun out from under her coat.

“*Freeze!*” she screamed. But the man was too close to her, and far too quick. He grabbed her wrist with both hands and twisted it around so hard that it ripped her tendons, and the gun clattered onto the ground.

“You’re a *cop*?” he shouted at her. “You’re a fucking *cop*?”

He pushed her violently into the trunk, next to the spare wheel, and shoved her head down.

“You’ve been trying to trap me? Is that it? You got yourself pregnant on purpose, just to trap me?”

Helen tried to lift her head but he jammed it down again. Then he slammed the trunk-lid and she was left in darkness.

She heard him climb into the driver’s seat and start the engine. Then he pulled out of the hospital parking-lot and made his way toward Auburn Avenue. As he drove, Helen was swung right and left and jostled up and down. She tried to work out which direction he was taking, and how far they had driven, but after a while she gave up.

He seemed to drive her for hours, and for miles. But at last he slowed down, almost to a crawl, and she could hear traffic, and sirens, and people’s footsteps. He must have taken her downtown, to the city center.

He turned, and turned again, and then she felt a bump, and the car drove slowly down a steep, winding gradient. An underground parking facility, she guessed.

At last the car stopped, and she heard the man climbing out. The trunk opened, and he was standing there, looking down at her, a fortyish man with gray hair and a heavy gray moustache. He had a broad face which reminded Helen of one of her uncles, but he had piggy little eyes and thick, purplish lips, as if he had been eating too many blueberries.

He had brought her down to what looked like the lower level of an office building. It was gloomy and cold, with dripping concrete walls and a single fluorescent light that kept flickering and buzzing as if it were just about to burn out.

“All right,” the man ordered her. “Out.”

“You’re not going to hurt my baby?”

“What do you care?”

“You can do whatever you like, but please don’t hurt my baby.”

“Oh, my heart bleeds. When did any woman ever really care about her baby? Now – out.”

Helen climbed out of the trunk. The man reached up to pull down the lid, and as he did so, Helen dodged to the left, and started to run. Almost immediately, however, he caught up with her, and seized her arm, and tripped her up. She fell onto her back on the rough concrete floor, her head narrowly missing the rear bumper of a parked Toyota.

She twisted and struggled, but the man clambered astride her and pressed her down against the floor, with his knees on her upper arms. He was very heavy and strong, and even though she had graduated best in her class in unarmed combat, she found it impossible to throw him off.

“Women -- ” he panted. “You conceive babies, don’t you, but you only give birth to them so long as it suits you. You don’t give a shit about human life. All that matters to you is your own convenience. In fact – *you* – you’re worse. You’ve used your baby to try to trap me. You don’t even care that your baby is going to die, when you die. How fucking sick is that?”

“Please -- ” Helen begged him.

But the man lifted her head and banged it hard against the concrete. Then he banged it again, and again, until she was half-concussed and she could feel the wetness of blood in her hair.

He took a roll of Saran Wrap out of his coat pocket, and he pulled it out and stretched it over her face. She was so stunned that she couldn’t stop him. She tried to take a breath, but all she managed to do was suck the cling-film tighter.

The man wrapped her head around and around. Helen couldn’t move and she couldn’t breathe and she could barely see. The man loomed over her as if he were in a fog.

In spite of her training, she panicked. She thrashed her head from side to side and kicked her legs. But the man opened her coat, and dragged up her blue corduroy maternity dress, and then he pulled her pantyhose down around her ankles. Her blood was thumping in her ears, and all she could hear was a deep, distorted echo, as if she were lying at the bottom of a swimming-pool.

She couldn’t see the man unbutton his own coat, but she felt him lever her thighs apart. He pushed his way inside her with three grunting thrusts, until he was buried

deep. Then he leaned forward and stared at her through the cling-film, his face only an inch away from hers. He looked triumphant.

Suddenly, she felt a warm gush of wetness between her thighs. At the same time, there was turmoil inside her stomach, as if the baby were rolling right over. The man screamed like a girl and pushed against her chest.

“Aaaghhh! Christ! Let go of me! Let go of me! For Christ’s sake you witch let go of me!”

Helen felt an agonizing spasm, and then another, and then another. The man kept on screaming and cursing and trying to pull himself out of her. Helen tore at the Saran Wrap covering her face, and managed to rip most of it away. She took a deep swallow of air, but then she started screaming, too. The pain in her back was more than she could bear. She felt as if she were being cracked in half.

There was a moment when she and the man were locked together in purgatory, both of them shrieking at each other. But then suddenly the man managed to heave himself backward, and Helen felt her baby slither out of her. The man fell onto his side, crying and whimpering, his heels kicking against the concrete.

Helen sat up. She was so stunned that everything looked jumbled and unfocused, but she could see that the man was fighting to pull something away from him.

“Get it off me! Get it off me! Get it off me!”

She held onto the Toyota’s bumper and tried to pull herself up. Gradually, her vision began to clear, and what she saw made her slowly sit back down, quaking with horror.

Between the man’s legs, biting his penis right down to the root, was a black bladder-like creature with glistening skin. It was the same size as a new-born baby, but it wasn’t human at all.

The man was slapping it and pulling it, but it was obviously too slippery for him to get any grip, and the thing was stretching and contracting as if it were sucking at him.

“Christ, get this off me!” the man screamed, and it was more of a prayer than a cry for help.

In front of Helen’s eyes the black bladder-like creature swelled larger and larger, and as it did so, the man’s struggling became weaker and jerkier. After only a few minutes he gave an epileptic shudder and his head dropped back, with his neck bulging. But the creature wasn’t finished with him yet. It continued its stretching and contracting for almost twenty minutes more, its formless body growing more and

more distended, until it was nearly the same size as he was. Then it rolled off him with a wallowing sound like a waterbed and lay beside him, unmoving.

Helen felt another twinge of pain, and another, but after a third contraction her afterbirth slithered out. It was black, and warty, unlike any afterbirth she had ever seen before. She kicked it away, underneath a car. If there had been anything in her stomach, she would have vomited.

After what seemed like hours, she managed to stand up. She crept over to the man and looked down at him. He looked like a parody of a man, made out of pale brown paper, like a broken hornet's nest. Even his eyeballs had been drained of all their fluid, so that they were flat.

She sat down again, resting her back against a pillar. What the hell was she going to do now? She could retrieve her cell from the dead man's body and call Klaus. But how was she going to explain what had happened here?

She looked at the creature. She doubted if it was going to lie there for very much longer, digesting the fluids that it had sucked from its prey. What was she going to do with it if it started moving again?

She heard the sound of a vehicle driving down the ramp. A black panel-van came around the corner, its tires squealing, and stopped a few yards away from her, with its headlights full on. The doors opened and Joachim Hochheimer appeared, closely followed by Richard Vuldus, both wearing long black coats.

"My dear lady," said Joachim Hochheimer, reaching out his hand to help Helen to her feet. "How are you feeling?"

"How did you know that I was here?" she croaked. Her throat was so dry that she could barely speak.

"We have been following you every day, ever since you became pregnant."

"I never saw you."

"Well, let us say that after all of these centuries of persecution, we have learned how not to be noticed."

Richard Vuldus went straight over to the creature and hunkered down beside it, laying his hand on it with pride and awe.

"We have done it, Joachim! At last we have purified the genes."

Helen took Joachim Hochheimer's elbow, for support. "What *is* that disgusting thing?" she asked him. "I thought I was carrying a baby all that time...not a thing like that. I feel sick to my stomach."

“You shouldn’t be revolted, detective. It is not a baby, no, but a horse-leech, *hirudo medicinalis*. The Vuldus family have been trying for generations to return to their original form, and with your help they have achieved their aim at last. This horse-leech will now breed others, with the size and intelligence of humans, but all the qualities of a leech.”

“But how is it going to survive? Where is it going to live?”

“Caesar Creek lake. It covers two thousand eight hundred acres, and there are dozens of inlets where it can conceal itself, and flourish. Richard, you must help me lift it into the van, before its skin dries out too much.”

“And what about *him*?” asked Helen, nodding at the flattened body of Son of Beast.

“Don’t worry...we will dispose of him for you. He will vanish as if he had never been born.”

Joachim Hochheimer helped Helen to climb into her car, while Richard Vuldus retrieved her keys and her cell from Son of Beast’s coat. He gave her his wallet, too. Helen opened it and found six tickets for the roller-coaster ride, and a Kentucky driver’s license in the name of Ronald M. Breen. But there was no doubt that the man in the ID photograph was Henry Clarke, one-time realtor of Smith Road, Norwood.

“You have our deepest gratitude,” said Richard Vuldus.

“Sure,” said Helen. She started the engine and backed up. Richard Vuldus raised one hand to her, in salute, but she didn’t wave back. She drove up the ramp, out of the parking-lot, and into the afternoon rain.

She drove slowly back home to Walnut Street, trembling, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Girl Was ‘Sucked Dry’ Says Coroner

A 17-year-old girl Waynesville girl whose body was recovered from Caesar Creek Lake early yesterday was said by the Hamilton County Coroner to have been completely drained of all her blood and all bodily fluids.

Dr Kenneth Deane was at a loss to explain what had happened to her, but said there was evidence that she had been bitten by a ‘very large aquatic creature with serrated teeth.’

Cincinnati Post, March 17.

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