



The Sirens Call

June 2013

issue #09



Featuring:

*Poetry, Short Stories,
& Flash Fiction of
Creepy, Crawly
Bug Horror*

*Original Art Work
& Photography
by Rae Beth Designs
Aesthetic Remains*

*Featured Author
Interview with
Aspen deLainey,
Author of the new
Erotic Romance
'Love 'n Lies'*

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Rae Beth Designs, Aesthetic Remains

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Spiders: An Editorial *Julianne Snow*

When we decided to give this issue of The Sirens Call the theme of Bugs, I wasn't sure I would be able to read all the subs that came in. There's just something about those creepy crawlies that makes my skin itch! It started a long time ago and while I can handle the insect world a little better now, that wasn't always the case.

As a young girl, we moved me from the city to the country. When I say young, I mean seven. I had the concept that where I was going was far removed from the hustle and bustle of city life, but I didn't know how deeply it would affect me...

I should probably thank them, mainly because my love for reading continued to grow out in the wilds of Ontario. That and my fear of many, many things!

Spiders. Who freaking knew that there were so many types of spiders? In the city, there were spiders of course – silly to think there wasn't. But the country held so many different and utterly grotesque species; I say grotesque because I'm writing this from the perspective of a much younger person. Here in the boondocks just outside the city, we have a variety I refer to as garden Spiders – mainly because you find them in the garden, among other places. They're really called Orb-Weaving spiders but sometimes the names you call things in childhood stick with you.

They have huge teardrop shaped bodies, smallish heads and long legs. They build the biggest webs I have ever seen, even stretching them between trees, waiting patiently for unsuspecting prey. I shudder at the memories of becoming that prey for even the briefest of moments...

Is anyone else beginning to feel prickly?

Not only are there garden spiders, but jumping spiders and wolf spiders. None of them are terribly huge in retrospect, but the younger version of me morphed them into gigantic eight legged monsters.

Gigantic monsters that began to haunt me, and hunt me, in my dreams. I can remember waking up in a panic, calling out to my mother, breathless and clammy. The wait for her to stumble to my bed was infinite in those instances.

Goosebumps? But it's not even cold... Okay now I'm itchy, what the heck is going on??

That feeling of impending doom before you mother bursts in to save the day. I think it's a feeling that we can all relate to on at least one level. In the light of day, your fears are never as vivid as when they've been covered by the cloak of night. In the dark, everything seems bigger – even the smallest spider, suspended just above your head on the thinnest thread of silk.

Anyone else beginning to think looking up might be a bad idea?

A gentle flick of a leg, the whisper of eight on your skin.

Paralysis ensues while you try to determine the origins of the sensation you think is moving across your face.

Each ancillary hair has raised the alarm – Intruder!

But you're paralysed into inaction. You can feel it crawling, invading the once tranquil surface of your skin...

Okay, I swear I felt something this time!

Spiders. They creep me out to this day; I've come a long way in my phobia but I'll never be cured...



Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series. An author of speculative fiction with roots deep in horror, she has pieces of short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications, OpenCasket Press as well as forthcoming anthologies from Hazardous Press and the Coffin Hop Charity Anthology.

Bugs – A Culinary Journey: An Editorial *Nina D’Arcangela*

Yeah, you’re right – I’m not really feeling that one either, but go ahead and munch away as you read. ;)

So the topic is Bugs... What’s so bad about bugs? Not much, really. They enrich our environment, keep the flowers pretty, occasionally they’ll corrupt a plant here or there, but the best thing about them – they eat other bugs! That’s right. A self eliminating genus. So why do we do the icky dance when we get too close to one? Simple: they buzz, they fly, they creep, they crawl, they show up everywhere we don’t want them to (like the shower, or hanging out above the bed) and freak the shit out of us.

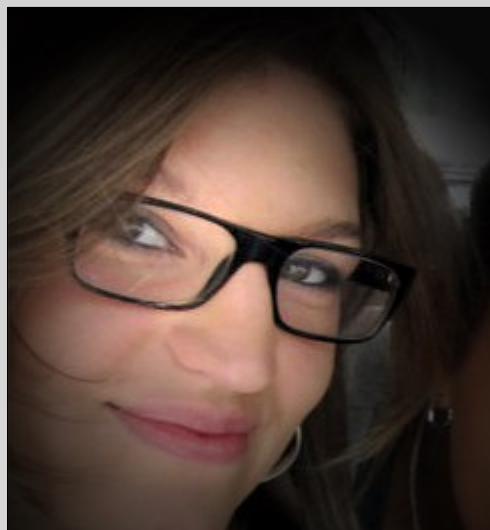
When I was a kid, one of the first films to really get under my skin and give me nightmares was ‘Them!’ Yup, the giant atomic age ant film about a horde of formicidae that mutate and plan to devour all mankind as we know it. I don’t remember how old I was, but I was young enough to still gleefully trust every word that fell from my dad’s lips as if it was liquid gold cascading from an eternal waterfall. So when dad said, “Hey, you wanna watch a movie with me?” and he had that particular grin on his face, I happily hopped up on the couch with my feet dangling, smiled back and squeaked out “Sure!” My dad is the greatest man in the world. I love him to pieces, but he has an evil streak a mile long, and it comes with a twisted sense of humor that’s slapping its tail in eager anticipation of any and all prey within reach.

He sizes me up sitting alongside him and says, “You’re gonna love this!” fully well knowing that I am extremely phobic about anything that buzzes, flies, creeps, crawls, and shows up where you don’t want it to. You can imagine my shocked horror (by this I mean paralytic fear) when I see the first grotesquely enlarged creature crawl across the TV screen. I have since learned to love giant bug films (the sicker, the better) and relish any moment I get to enjoy a little horror at dad’s side.

Bugs, here on this planet, sharing my world... Hey, I can’t say why I’m here, so who am I to say they shouldn’t be. The only thing I know for sure is that if I can gross dad out on any level, particularly with bugs, he should be proud that he raised his little girl right and twisted me into the deranged person I am today! Mom – we’ll talk about her some other time. Suffice it to say, she makes him look like a Keebler Elf when she’s got her mojo workin’. I come from good stock folks, and so do the stories in this issue. So read them, enjoy them, and hopefully get a little grossed-out by them.

Nina D’Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic things could be in her own head when the doll’s was so very vacant. As a reader of anything from splatter matter to dark matter; Nina is a lover of all things horror and scientific.

Nina is the Social Media Coordinator and one of the co-founders of Sirens Call Publications and Pink Pepper Press. She is a member of the writing group, Pen of the Damned, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography. You can find her on twitter at @Sotet_Angyal, on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/DarcNina>, on her personal blog at sotetangyal.wordpress.com, or by email at dark.nina@gmail.com.





Spiders *Vincent Bivona*

Jesse Roach took a sip of his soda and choked.

“What?” said Maria. “It’s not like I’m getting a sleeve. Just a little butterfly on my hip.” His girlfriend leaned back and pulled down the top of her shorts, exposing a smooth, tanned patch of skin. “See?”

“No,” Jesse said, pounding his chest and coughing, his eyes watering. “Not your tattoo. I think I just swallowed something.”

“Oh. What?”

Jesse opened the lid of the cup, looking in. Nothing but rocks of ice floated in the dark liquid like tiny icebergs. “I don’t know. It was hard.”

“Maybe it was ice,” Maria suggested.

Jesse shook his head. “No, it’s not small enough to get sucked up the straw.”

“Oh . . .” A devious smile crossed her face. “Maybe it was a spider.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I heard a story where one crawled into some kid’s straw, and he sucked it right up. That could have just happened now.”

Jesse visibly paled. “Stop.”

“I’m serious. Did you know that you swallow an average of five spiders a year while you sleep?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Maybe it’s five spiders in your life, then. But it’s definitely five.”

Jesse *had* heard something like that, but refused to entertain the idea that he had just consumed his first. “That’s disgusting,” he said instead.

Maria smirked, clearly enjoying this. “Disgusting, but true. They just crawl up the sheet, one furry leg at a time, inching their way along, and find the warmest place where they can lay their eggs. If it’s not the mouth, it’s usually the ear canal. They can burrow in there real nice, make a comfy web. It’s like a little spider condo, all the amenities included.”

At that exact moment, Jesse’s ear itched, and he jerked away from the table, slapping at it and crying out.

Maria had to stifle her laughter. “You’re getting paranoid,” she told him. “I doubt one would crawl into your ear so soon after you just sucked one up.”

He looked at his cup as she said this, if only to look away from her deranged smile. He didn’t really expect to find anything there. Then he looked at hers. To his surprise, as if validating her wild claims, there was a translucent brown spider nestled in between the clear plastic of her straw, its long legs stretched out in front of it like an eight-legged miner pulling its way down a mine shaft.

Unable to articulate his nauseous revulsion, he did the only thing he could do: opened his mouth and gagged.

Maria interpreted this as if her words had struck a nerve, and decided to probe him further.

“Yeah, they’ve also been known to lay eggs in open wounds. I saw this picture on Google Images once. It was pretty nasty. It was of a boil on this woman’s face, and it looked infected, ready to burst. The skin swelling, stretched tight. There was a story along with it. Apparently she had scratched a pimple on her cheek while she was sleeping. Instead of the spider laying its eggs in her mouth or ear canal, it laid them in the open cut. The cut healed, sealing the eggs inside. They didn’t show the picture of the boil splitting open and all the little spiders scrambling out in a million different directions, but you can only imagine what that must have looked like.”

No longer listening, Jesse lowered his head, peering at the spider slowly making its way down the clear tube of Maria’s straw.

“I hear they can lay almost a thousand eggs at a single time—”

A white, almost clear thread exited the spider's abdomen, darkening a section of the straw.

"—and they'll spin their webs on just about anything! If they're small enough they can find their way into your nose. I bet they'd make a web in there. It'd be perfect for them, all those little nose hairs to attach that sticky stuff to. I doubt they'd catch any flies, though. Maybe a booger or two. Hey! Imagine if you tried to clear your nose and you sucked it up? I bet that's happened once or twice before! I know you've felt something solid go up your nose and slide down your throat."

The spider twitched, clawing at the inside of the straw, trying to escape.

"They spin webs when they're nervous, too. Ever feel an itch on the back of your neck, or think that your hair is tickling the backs of your ears? That could really be a spider doing that. Or it might be the web it spun because it got nervous when you tried to brush it away. The thing is you'd never know because you can't see what's behind you. Kinda creepy, isn't it?"

Now the spider tried to turn around but found that its own web was blocking its path.

"Maria . . ."

"What if one crawls into your belly button and you bend over and it gets trapped in there?"

"Maria . . ."

"Or what if you go to take a poop and when you're done you find a spider floating in the water, splashing around, trying not to drown. I bet that's happened to you before. Did you ever wonder if that spider came out of you, though? If maybe you had somehow swallowed a bunch of spider eggs and they hatched and the spiders grew inside of you? If maybe that spider is one of a thousand crawling around your stomach or intestines?"

Maria paused, licking her dry lips. Trying to gross Jesse out was exhausting. She grabbed her soda and lifted the cup. Jesse helplessly watched as she brought the straw with the spider inside it up to her mouth. He wanted to warn her, to cry out, but he found that he no longer had a voice. He only watched in disturbed fascination as his girlfriend wrapped her lips around the straw and began to suck.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR- Vincent Bivona lives on Long Island. His favorite genres to write include horror, sci-fi, fantasy, thrillers, and mysteries. And as long as you keep reading, he promises to keep writing. Actually . . . that's not entirely true. He plans to keep writing anyway. But let's face it, he thinks it'd be nice if you read, too.



Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Smashwords,
Apple, Kobo, and Barnes &
Noble

A Hot, Wet End to a Long Dry Spell *Kerry G.S. Lipp*

I hadn't been laid in over a year. I won't tell you how long it actually was, but definitely over a year and pushing two. I figured it would finally happen for me over the summer. How could it not? Summer loving and all that. Didn't happen. I'd get numbers fairly often, but they never panned out. God, I'd pay all I had, even though it wasn't much, to have a girl, just one, tell me what my mistake was. But if you go asking questions like that, you come off even creepier than whatever triggered them to ignore you in the first place. So it goes.

I had theories about my failures and tried to improve whenever I blew it. And I was either learning or lucky because I finally had a girl coming over.

Tonight.

I got her number and we'd hung out once, had a few beers at happy hour. I brought a deck of Uno cards. My approach to women is ever evolving and I learned that busting out a deck of Uno cards on the first date is an excellent idea. Try it for yourself. You're welcome.

It worked, and I probably could've gotten her back to my place that first night, but my bedroom was a fucking disaster. Instead, I played it off like a gentlemen, I walked Brandy to her car, gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and left. I could tell I confused her, maybe even disappointed her, but I also intrigued her. Every guy probably tried to get in her pants on the first date.

I didn't.

Maybe my counterintuitive behavior was worth something.

Sexual hope was my co-pilot.

Regardless, Brandy enthusiastically agreed to meet me again, this time coming to my place where we'd hang and then head out for a bit. Hopefully, at the end of it all I'd have a cleaner bedroom to show her.

Which leads me to where I am now.

Fucked.

Not literally.

I'm a procrastinator. Always have been, always will be. You get to do whatever you want for as long as you want. Then you rush to get the shit done you need to get done as soon as the deadline puts its knife to your throat. In my experience, that kind of pressure conjures the best work.

The problem was that I waited too long to start cleaning my room. I thought I could whirlwind through it and have it at least presentable in a couple hours.

I was wrong.

I gave myself three hours to get it clean and take a shower before Brandy showed up. At first everything was fine. I'd taken out trash bags of empty beer cans and food cartons, done a couple loads of laundry, including my sheets, and stacked my stray books into somewhat neat stacks, putting my favorites on top, just in case she asked.

And then I saw the first one.

I'd seen them before in bars and stuff, I guess they're pretty common this time of year, but I'd never seen one in my bedroom.

I killed it.

A fruit fly.

It was slow and fat and lazy and I squashed it under my index finger. It left a greasy stain on my closet mirror. And as I studied the gummy streak, another flew in front of my eyes. I watched it, eyes going crossed at its fat buzzing body swimming through the air. I raised two open hands and clapped them together. I missed.

I sighed and wiped the clear smear from the dead one off the mirror with my shirt. And then

another one flew in front of my face. I clapped my hands together faster and harder, but I missed again. No bug guts decorated my hands when I checked.

My hands stung though.

I went back to cleaning the smear. And then I noticed it.

Noticed *them*.

How had I missed them all? A fruit fly army lined the mirrored sliding door into my closet. They were huddled together, bloated bodies dotting the entire frame. More clung to the dry wall, and I didn't want to think about how many might be living in the closet. I smashed the few I could with my fingers but there were too many, and like an insect hydra, every time I smashed one, the impact rattled the mirror or vibrated the wall, the sound scaring an infinite amount into exodus.

When I looked at my window, right where the blinds touched the frame, I saw a dozen more. They were everywhere. My room was kind of clean except for all these fucking fruit flies, but I couldn't bring Brandy up here.

No way.

I'm sure, just like every other creature on the planet they were somehow attracted to sex. Pheromones or whatever. I could only imagine the pillow talk we'd share as fruit flies darted at our drying privates.

It wasn't like there was a buzzing, biting cloud of them, but there were enough. And even though it'd be dark in here, no panties were coming down in front of a fruit fly audience.

I looked at the clock. I still had an hour.

An idea struck and I went downstairs to see what I had under the kitchen sink. When I opened the cupboard, I found an aerosol can of Raid. A nasty picture of a scary ant stared from the label. I didn't think there could be much difference between ants and fruit flies.

I was wrong.

"There's about to be a genocide," I said sprinting up the steps with the can and started spraying. I went berserk, coating at all the crevasses, all the places I'd noticed the little fuckers congregating. I inhaled the strong fumes, praying that the spray would kill 'em all. I picked up my phone to text Brandy, tell her that I needed an extra hour to get ready, to use that hour to kill the survivors and light some candles and get that bug poison smell out of the room, but when I slid my thumb across the screen I saw that I had a new text from her.

Hey, this has never happened before, but I'm running a little early lol. I'll see you in a little bit ;)

My nuts shriveled. The one girl I hadn't blown it with was coming over early. My room was full of fruit flies and smelled like Raid. My sheets were still in the dryer and I hadn't even taken a shower and shaved my now shriveled nuts. Fuck.

I tried to prioritize and put a to-do list together, but as I was trying to figure out priority one, the fruit flies started mutating.

MUTATING.

This story is about to get ridiculous and I wouldn't believe it either, not the flies and not what happened when Brandy showed up, but I lived it, and it's true. As I stood looking paranoid at all the shit that wasn't going to get me laid, the bugs that I sprayed with Raid didn't die. They started growing.

The bugs inflated like grotesque balloons. Their bulbous, segmented skin stretched like an air compressor was attached to their asses. They blew up, bigger and bigger, their bodies and heads. Their legs stayed the same size. Their legs looked like little hairs growing out of an obese balloon animal. Their bodies grew to ridiculous proportions, filling with some kind of weird fluid. Through their translucent skin I could see the liquid, bug blood I guessed, watched it sloshing around through the lens

of stretching skin. I poked one, scared it would burst all over. But it didn't. Instead it felt thick and warm, almost hot to the touch. I looked around. There were swollen fruit flies everywhere. The smallest the size of billiard balls, the largest like watermelons. Poking did nothing. I grabbed the box cutter that I use to open new Xbox games and tried to cut one. It didn't work, it made a little cut, but that cut instantly healed as the body of the fruit fly continued to grow.

This couldn't be happening.

They were all around me now, clinging to the walls and growing like blisters. Even with the lights out, I knew I couldn't hide this.

I picked up my phone to call Brandy and cancel when I heard a knock on the front door.

No fucking way this was happening.

But she pounded on the door again. Then I heard it open and she called, "Hellooooooooo anybody home? Jim?"

Megafuck.

In the last almost two years I couldn't even get a girl to text me back and now I had one here and my bedroom transformed into a mutant fruit fly farm.

"Yeah," I yelled from upstairs. "I'll be right down."

"Ok," she said.

In the slices of mirror between the gigantic, ballooning fruit flies on my closet door, I checked myself. I looked like shit. Face all red and sweaty and flustered. I wiped my sweat on a stray t-shirt and took a deep breath. I headed down the stairs.

I saw her, standing in the entryway, looking sexy, like she'd spent a bunch of time to look sexy, and I hated myself, hated the flies.

"Hey," I croaked, I could feel the sweat pouring down my temples.

She gave me a weird look and then slapped me in the face. Hard.

I flinched, yelled something.

"Got him," Brandy said showing me the splattered fruit fly on her palm.

"Big one too. Gross. Hey Jim sorry I'm so early," she said, smiling.

I tried to say something, but couldn't, my cheek stung but my disbelief at everything must've radiated.

"They only get that big when you..." she trailed off.

I stared at her, confused. She sniffed.

"Did you..." she started, "Is that ant spray?" she asked.

"It's all I had," I nodded.

"Uh oh," she said. "Are there more?"

"How do you..." I started.

"Had 'em at my house. My bedroom, still don't know how they got in there," she cut me off. "Did you use ant spray?"

My mouth just opened and closed.

"Shit," she smiled. "Can't use ant spray," she said, "makes 'em mutate."

"Yeah," I said, "they're everywhere. And they're huge."

"Sounds about right," she said. "Here," she said, and kissed me hard on the mouth, lots of tongue. "Just so things don't get awkward later," she said and started taking her clothes off.

I just stared as she stripped to bra and panties in front of me and then those came off.

"Strip," she demanded and I did.

"What the..."

"Everything you own is about to get bloody, wet, and probably ruined," she said, "might as well save a few of your clothes," she said. "Got a lighter?" she asked taking off up the stairs.

"Yeah," I said following her, flabbergasted, but watching her ass the whole way up. "It's next to the...."

"Aww you lit candles?" she crooned and turned, mashed her breasts into my chest and her lips into mine. "So sweet. I knew I liked you," she said picking up the lighter and the can of Raid next to the burning candles.

Brandy didn't even react to the mutated fruit flies clinging to the walls of my bedroom.

"Did you try to pop 'em?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Didn't work did it?"

"Uh....no."

"Yeah," she said, "took me a while to figure it out too. Can't believe I got that one when I slapped you, musta been a baby. You gotta burn 'em." She said raising the lighter and the can of Raid. She pointed it at the first fruit fly.

"Got anything in here that can't get wet? You better get it outta here now," she said.

I gaped.

"I'm serious," she said and nodded to my TV.

Clumsily, I grabbed my tv, my Xbox and my laptop, put them out in the hallway. Then I went back into my bedroom and watched this gorgeous, naked girl take aim with the can and the lighter.

"Watch this," she said and flicked it.

She blasted a spray of Raid and with a "whoosh" a gigantic flare shot through my room and torched the fruit fly she had in her optic crosshairs. It ignited, burned slow and finally burst like a wet grenade. The goo inside it splattered all over us and my bedroom. Warm as melted wax and smelled...almost fruity.

I wiped some of the goo out of my eyes, stricken.

"Fruit flies," she said and winked. "Get it?"

"What the..."

"Here," she said handing me the lighter and the can, "try one, it feels great."

"Aren't we going to burn the place down?"

"Nah, their bodies burn and the blood or whatever that is eventually puts it out. Nothing else will catch. Mmmmmmm doesn't that smell great? Like fruit punch."

"But that doesn't make any sense?"

"Yeah, I know, but that's the way it was at my house and look." She pointed to the carpet, she was right the chunks of fruit fly body burned and nothing else even smoked or singed. The heat was already making our naked skin sweat and glisten.

"This is crazy," I said and raised the lighter and the can.

"And one hell of a second date."

We took turns laughing and torching flies, feeling the warmth of their blood as they burst. At one point I went downstairs and brought up a twelve pack. We split it, covered in fruity goo and mutated chunks. Together we lost track of time and then it was dark out. We never stopped laughing.

There were still a few left on the ceiling, when we fell into each other, drunk and exhausted onto my wet, ruined bed and started kissing.

Their burning bodies flickered on the wall casting a warm glow sweeter and more romantic than candlelight. The flames spread to the ceiling and the bugs above the bed would ignite and pop like

fireworks bathing us in their warmth.

Brandy broke the kiss, smiled at me.

"So," she said, "You wanna clean up first or just fuck in the blood?"

Who was this girl?

"Should we at least..." I started.

"Can't we..." I tried again, and then I just gave up.

She just laughed.

I had so many questions, but I let them all go because they didn't matter at that moment. I watched a piece of burning bug slip from the wall and plop to the carpet. And I smiled wide as I felt Brandy's wet heat descend on my erection, and ran my hand through her sopping, blood-drenched hair and gave it an affectionate tug. She smiled, leaned back and moaned.

"Thanks for helping me," I said, enjoying the hot, wet end to my long dry spell.

She grinned a sinister grin and put a finger to my lips.

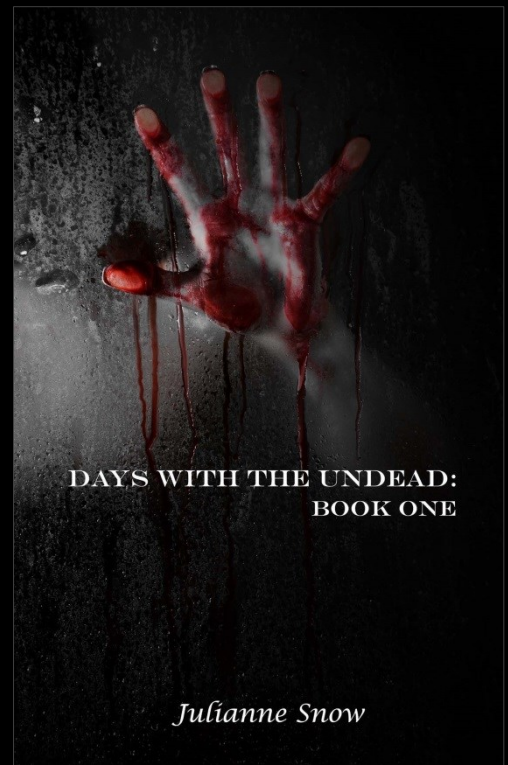
I smiled and pushed into her.

Questions and consequences could wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kerry teaches English at a community college by evening and writes horrible things by night. He hates the sun. His parents started reading his stories and now he's out of the will. Kerry's work will appear in several forthcoming anthologies including The Best of Cruentus Libri Press. His story "Smoke" was adapted for podcast via The Wicked Library episode 213, and pioneered TWL's inaugural explicit content warning. KGSL blogs weekly at www.HorrorTree.com and will launch his own website www.newworldhorror.com sometime in 2013. Say hi on Twitter @kerrylipp or his Facebook page: New World Horror – Kerry G.S. Lipp.

Days with the Undead: *Book One* Julianne Snow

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Smashwords, Apple,
and Barnes & Noble



Centipede *Cyma R. Khan*

"You can't stay mad at me forever Jay," Robbie said, his feet crunching desiccated leaves as he moved through the forest. The warm sun felt nice after a long spell of winter and Robbie was happy to be enjoying the country air, clean and sweet smelling, a place he had always felt connected to, even if his best friend since third grade was still mad at him.

"I can be mad at you for as long as I want actually," Jay shot back, his eyes examining the ground as they walked.

Robbie noticed him looking. "What is it?"

"You stepped over something," Jay said suddenly, and his face went pale. There was a nervous tremor in his hands.

"Don't tell me that stuff still bothers you?" Robbie asked, lifting his leg to inspect the underside of his boot. "It's just a bug, Jay! See? We've talked about this before...you've had enough therapy sessions...you're stronger than this!"

"Right," Jay managed, looking away, but the anxiety hadn't left his face. "You're right. I shouldn't be worrying about this."

"Anyway," Robbie started where he had left off. "As I was saying, you can't be mad at me forever. We have a history and we've been friends for so long...I mean...going out with the girl *you've* always been in love with...dick move okay? And I'm sorry for that. I don't know how many times I've said it already, Jay. I'm not even going to try and justify it...but it just...*happened* you know? She was there and I was lonely...it didn't mean anything."

"I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse," Jay said. "Finding out that you hurt me over something that didn't even mean anything to you."

"Wow... I'm just making this worse..." There was another squish from the ground below Robbie's foot, but only Jay's ears seemed to have picked up on it. When Robbie realized what was going on, his gaze came to stop at the ground where a centipede was trapped between his boot and the earth. Robbie grated his boot hard against the bug in an attempt to kill it. Then he looked at Jay whose face was even paler than before. "Jay," Robbie tried to comfort him. "Come on...you can't be afraid of these things all your life..." Before he could finish his sentence, Robbie fell and his body started thrashing about like it had caught on fire, even though there was nothing visible hurting him.

"Robbie?" Jay went over to him, worried. "What's wrong? You're scaring me Robbie! Tell me what's wrong?"

In a span of a few minutes, Robbie was flat on the floor on his back, his body convulsing from lack of oxygen. Jay bent to sit beside him and checked his boot. The sole had a huge hole, a hole that was oozing blood – whatever it was that had caused this hole, had burrowed through Robbie's foot as well. When Jay turned his friend's lifeless body over, the first thing he smelled was the stench...

The back of Robbie's skull had a hole the size of a very large orange, and his brains were spilling through because something had turned them to mulch. Jay hooked a couple of fingers through the skull-hole and when he took them out, the brain mulch was on them. Closing his eyes, Jay slid those fingers inside his mouth, getting the first taste of his friend's brains. He noticed the centipede, peeking out from the mulch and when he placed a finger in front of the insect, it crawled up over it. Jay smiled and patted the bug. "I thought there wasn't going to be any left for me," he said. "But you did good!" He placed his finger near the earth. The centipede crawled off it, and disappeared into the thicket, and Jay walked back over to Robbie, wanting to get to his brains before he started to reek...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR _ Horror Fiction Writer. Passionate about books and movies.

Influences Dostoevsky, Clive Barker, Chuck Palahniuk, Stephen King. More information available on Author Page - <https://www.facebook.com/CymaRKhanAuthor>.

Mental Ward

STORIES FROM THE ASYLUM



Sirens Call Publications

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Eaters *Tim Wellman*

It had been another rotten day and Emily took the long way home through the old abandoned saw mill to avoid running into anyone else. Forced to eat a bug, again, but those three girls who held her down would pay this time. Emily had had enough. All she needed was a plan and one had been forming in her mind for weeks and today came the final blow, it was time to put it into action. She looked behind her but no one was following and even if the bullies had seen her go into the mill yard they wouldn't have followed. She was the only kid in the neighborhood unafraid of the stories and myths about the place.

"Hey, old man!" she yelled. She looked into the darkness of the large metal building, dilapidated, rusting to pieces, but somehow still there after fifty years of disuse and neglect.

"Go away ya stinkin' little brats!" a voice came back.

She watched the large opening as a scrawny, dirty old man appeared. His hair and long beard were gray except the places where nicotine had stained them brown, and his clothes were ragged and ill-fitting. He was skinny, too skinny to be alive, and yet he was, somehow, even thriving. "It's me, old man," she said as he stepped out into the light.

"Oh, Emmy," he said. "What's happened to ya, girl? You's all dirty and scuffed up." He motioned her over and ushered her into the building. "Were it them girls, again?" He brushed some of the leaves and dirt off her back with his wrinkled and spindly hands.

Emily nodded. "They held me down and made me eat a bug."

"I been eatin' bugs fer years, young'un, ain't nothin' wrong with bugs," he said. He looked down at the child, barely six years old, the new kid in a strange town, the poor kid in a rich kids' school. Her innocent face, framed by her bobbed dark hair and bangs, was smudged with dirt and scratched along her chin. Her dress, already old and well-worn, was torn and dirty. "But I reckon if'n ya ain't keen on 'em, ya shouldn't be made ta eat 'em."

"I want a jar full," she said. Her voice was calm. She had discovered the old man on the first day of school as she was being chased by some other girls. Emily didn't know what kind of man he was, good or bad, but he had helped her so he was a friend. And after a few more visits, he let her into his secret place. It was in a basement room, no windows, only one door, and the room was no bigger than a bathroom, but it was special. The old man, for years, had experimented. He was insane, probably, Emily knew that, but he had a dream. She wasn't interested in it, but his failed attempts to *achieve* it were perfect for her plan. "I want a jar full of the *eaters*."

"Jus' whatcha plan on doin' with 'em?" he said. "Ya knows them thangs is only good fer killin'. I told ya I bred 'em all wrong." He motioned her to sit down on an up-turned five gallon pail, and he lit a cigarette and sat down across from her. "I ain't sayin' ya cain't have 'em."

"I thought about it for a long time, old man," she said. "I gave them more chances than they deserved."

He shook his head and took a long puff, then exhaled it through his nose. "Damned kids these days got no respect fer nothin'," he said. "'Cept fer you, ya's different from them little demons 'round here." He stood up, walked to an old rusted cooler and pulled out a can of soda and walked over to Emily. "That's the last root beer." He handed it to her. "It ain't somethang ya can go back on, ya know. It's murder, plain an' simple." He grabbed an old camping lantern, pumped it several times, then lit the mantle with his lighter.

She took a big drink. "Might be, might just be self defense," she said. "It's gotta be done, though, no matter what you call it."

"Ya got a plan fer not gettin' caught?" he said. He motioned her to follow him and they walked toward the metal stairwell leading to the basement floor.

"I got a plan," she said.

He pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock on the old rusty door and then pulled it open and they both entered the small space. Along the walls were glass aquariums and large jars, and inside, some filled, some only sparsely populated, were bugs. There were millions, all told, perhaps billions. "I thought these was gonna save the world," he said. "Least make me a million bucks."

"Not many people want to eat bugs, old man, even if they *do* taste like chicken," Emily said. "Though the ones I've been eating taste like shit."

"You watch that mouth a your'n," he scolded. "Ain't no way fer a sweet little girl ta be a talkin'." He picked up an old canning jar with a lid that had had holes punched in it with a nail, looked inside, then shuck it a couple of times. "I told ya how mean they is," he said. "Ya's see'd it with yer own eyes. A jar like 'is half-full could take out most a your school b'fore they manage ta squish 'em all. An' once they's out ya ain't gettin' 'em back in."

"The ones I need to take care of will all be in one place together," she said. "I heard them talking about their mother's taking them to a dress shop in town this evening."

He opened the lid of the jar, walked to one of the aquariums and lifted the screen top. He pushed a metal scoop into the mass of deadly insects, filled it, and then emptied it into the jar and quickly screwed the lid down. He held it up and held the lantern closer. "They shoulda fed the world," he said. "But, I reckon they'll do ya a good job fer what you's needin'." He handed the jar to Emily.

She didn't look at them. She'd seen them in action before, devouring rats or pieces of rancid meat, swarming, afraid of nothing. They were active and relentless hunters. The old man called them *eaters* because he had meant them to be *eaten*, but something went wrong, fed the wrong drugs, bred the wrong way, something had turned the ordinary beetles into little killing machines, but the name still fit.

She started out the door and the old man followed her, carefully locking it again before they both walked back up the steps. "I'll see you later, old man," she said. She walked away without looking back.

"Will ya be comin' 'round anymore?" he said. "I reckon I'd kinda miss ya if'n ya stopped."

"I'll be around," she said. "Go buy some more root beer."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Tim Wellman is a writer and artist living in the hills of West Virginia. After studying creative writing for four years at Marshall University, editing the school's literary magazine, and winning several school and state awards, he decided to be a rock star guitarist. Failing miserably, he decided to become a comic book artist. After failing miserably again, he decided to work with his hands and now owns a small engine repair shop. He has not failed miserably at that... yet. He has recently published his first novel, a weird west steampunk adventure called, *Milk Of Ruin*, and is working on a collection of horror short stories, all featuring evil little girls, called *Precious Monsters*.

Now I Lay Me Down To Reap



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Alone in the Desert *Alex Clarke*

Bruce often wondered how the world had fallen to such deep, abyssal depths. Had it been the mounting heat of the sun? Did its continual volume of super-sized fusions produce more and more energy until the Earth's atmosphere was no longer equal to the task of deflecting its enhanced ultraviolet? Or had it been the raping of the Earth's atmosphere by its human inhabitants and not the sun at all? He couldn't be sure. However, more disturbing than not knowing the answers to such trivialities was living in the nightmarish aftermath of whatever had truly happened, that was a reality Bruce was certain of.

When once man had ruled the world, it was now dominated by abominations of the sky, wasps, in particular. Bruce often despaired at this truth. Why had this happened in his lifetime, during the brief little snapshot of his cosmic existence? It could have happened any time before, it seemed, so many billions of years before. But alas, there is no time like the present, so now made perfect sense in a chaotically cosmic sense. Indeed, the Earth seemed to be equalizing, triumphantly returning to its infancy. Maybe that's why the temperature had risen all over the world: some sort of natural defense mechanism spurred on by nature itself.

Yes, that made the most sense to Bruce. Nature had unleashed its fury in an attempt to eradicate the noxious parasites of humans. Bruce understood what a parasitic relationship was: the idea that something thrives whilst its companion meets its demise. It was a poetic irony, but it was symbolic of life, symbolic of life on Earth.

Bruce, lost in these thoughts, stood and gazed blankly out the lone window of the concrete dome he called home. Thick, concrete walls were the only way to stay truly safe, stay truly hidden. Insects can detect certain things: fear, sweat, sweets. But a foot of concrete kept their inquiring senses in the dark, kept human existence in the unknown.

"You're only torturing yourself," said Selena, his love, plainly.

"Who knows, maybe I'll venture out there someday, step into the light of day," Bruce returned, still gazing out the thick glass.

Selena laughed behind him before delivering her statement with cynical excitement: "You're not brave enough." She laughed again harder, heartier.

Bruce sighed. Sometimes he thought the only thing worse than being condemned to thriving in the night, when the ravenous wasps weren't as active, was being trapped in a concrete tomb with Selena's condescension. Bruce thought her a pessimist, but Selena always took offense to that label. She'd say she was a realist, and that was that.

Bruce diverted his hardened gaze from the window and turned to Selena. "Yeah, I suppose you're right," he replied, feeling defeated.

"I know." Selena looked up from the tapestry she was splicing together and pulled another smile, then flashed a wink. Her bright, blue eyes produced such a tremendous sheen Bruce could hardly stay disgruntled with her for long. Those eyes always brought him a sense of joy.

"How's the progress on your little project coming?" Bruce asked.

"It's getting there, day by day."

"When will you tell me what it's of?"

"Well, when it's finished, you'll see. Until then, avert those eyes, mister."

Bruce obliged her request and meandered over to the couch. He spent the remaining hours of daylight by gazing out a window above an abandoned TV. Wasps incessantly hovered by the lens in their gangly manner: their legs curled in the air, bodies rounding at the thorax. Occasionally one would collide with the window, and each of these collisions injected a healthy dose of joy into Bruce. They were the highlight of everyday. One more wasp down meant one wasp closer to emancipation. Bruce often

wondered what number would have to be reached before the volume of wasps would no longer be fatal to mankind. Numbers represented such a fine line. Like oxygen levels or the tilt of the Earth, a small, fractional variance would be the difference between fresh and toxicity, between life and no life. Yes, numbers were a peculiar business.

Bruce waited and waited for the sun to go down. He watched the sky shift from bright blue, to pale blue, to black. Watched the sun's color temperature change from yellow, to orange, to blood red. It was the same process every day; the same waiting game.

With night came freedom from the concrete tomb. Wasps and insects retreated to their fortresses during the night, much like humans did during the day. It was the temperature. The temperature during the day was warm enough that wasps could fly about freely, as if they had laid claim to the whole world. It was also the global temperature. The global temperature had risen in great enough measures that all areas of the Earth now no longer underwent drastic seasonal changes, so the wasps had sufficient means to flourish. It was under these perfect conditions, the raising of a few degrees, a few numbers, that the insects, and particularly the wasps, came into power. And they eradicated almost everything as their numbers grew, including humans, who grew increasingly susceptible to not only the volume of the stings, but the potency with which they were inflicted. No longer were only a few allergic to stings, but the majority. But not even the minority, the immune, dared chancing daylight; being swarmed and stabbed to death by ravaging stingers was a displeasure no one chose to suffer.

Bruce raced around the concrete tomb hurriedly. He could feel the shake of Selena's head atop her shoulders as he rushed, but he didn't care. He was excited, just as he had been every night prior. Bruce knew Selena didn't enjoy the fresh air nearly as much as he did, knew that most didn't, in fact. But none of that mattered; they weren't going to stop him from living.

Bruce jumped into his Kevlar suit and returned to the door to wait for Selena. She always took forever to change, and it pained Bruce the same every night. He waited all day every day for this moment, while she didn't seem to care one iota.

"You know, I don't much feel like going out tonight. I think I'd rather work on the tapestry," she said, returning from the bedroom not wearing any protective gear.

"What?" replied Bruce, angrily.

"Yeah. I just don't feel it tonight. Reward's not worth the risk."

"Unbelievable," said Bruce. "Just unbelievable." He turned, unwound the submarine like lock of the door, opened it, and stepped into emancipation.

Even through the Kevlar suit Bruce could feel the cool air, could taste the freshness of it, too. He took a deep, long drag of air in to his lungs, half to calm himself over what he perceived to be a sleight by Selena, and half to taste the freedom.

Bruce always thought the view of the land to be yet another paradox. Stretching in all directions lay a vast desert plain. The paradox wasn't the desert, however, but the oases scattered about its nearly desolate landscape. They grew lush and wild and beautiful, despite continuous ravaging. Surrounding these oases were many small domes, their tops protruding from the rolling mounds of sand and sediment like inversions of craters on the Moon. Most of the domes were now vacant, however. They were concrete tombs, where fathers and mothers and sons and daughters lie, forever imprisoned. This sight always brought a sense of dread to Bruce; it was a bleak reminder of his future existence. The imminent certainty of death was approaching sooner than he cared to admit. Food supplies were dwindling rapidly. Selena and he had reserves enough for another a couple months, maybe half a year at most if they rationed. They could find sustenance from berries if hard pressed, but no long term solutions had yet presented themselves; they were dying, slowly.

That was why Selena worked on the tapestry, Bruce knew. It was something that would stand the test of time, would remind God's second children of the beauty his first children had the capacity and skill to create.

Bruce started his stroll across the desolate plain, following the same path he had every night for the past two years. He walked by the concrete bunker of the Johnson family, then the Carter family, then the Smith family, and on and on. He thought about each of them as he walked; it helped him hold onto humanity, to life. He would have enjoyed the walk better with his love, Selena, though. With her in tow the emotions would have been amplified, and he always longed for that great flood. How he wished there would be another great flood, to sow the Earth once again with water, to flush away the wasps and their stingers. But no amount of hoping, or wishing, or praying brought that desire to fruition.

He was alone, in the desert.

Rounding the final leg of his jaunt, he saw the vague shadow of a newly constructed wasp nest hanging limply from a tree branch. His body shuddered. The wispy vomit silk was the size a human body, its insides surely festering with activity. Bruce's mind drifted back to when he'd first seen the treachery of the wasps, first seen them in all their primitive glory. He remembered how a large cluster had swirled around a strolling man, much like he was strolling now, and how the man had been lost in their spinning madness. Endless strobes of yellow and black, yellow and black. The swarm descended, presumably as the man fell to his knees, and then flattened out when the man hit the ground. The screams of the man were still palpable within Bruce's mind, even here, even now. The man had begged for help, for mercy, but the insects' treachery knew no bounds, knew nothing other than hunger and fear.

Even through the swirling eye of the storm, Bruce could register how mangled the man's body was, could see cerise syrup welling from freshly pierced flesh. The fury of the wasps eventually waned down, and most then began crawling upon the deceased body, more bloody pulp than solid form, tearing flesh from it for nourishment.

By the time Bruce returned home Selena was already in bed. Bruce thought her to be having an agreeable dream, because her face had serenity painted upon it. There was no strain, no wrinkles; it was flax and pleasant. Bruce wiggled into bed beside her and pulled himself close.

When morning came, Bruce woke to his lonesome. He rarely woke alone; it was usually he who got up first, ready and waiting to stare out the window and pray for night to come. But such customs weren't practiced this morning.

Confused, Bruce rose from bed and wandered down the cool aisle way.

"Selena?" he asked.

No response.

"Selena?"

Still no response. He sauntered to the end of the aisle and looked to the table, where Selena normally resided when working on her tapestry; she wasn't there.

"Here," Selena said softly, serenely. It was the voice of a dream.

Bruce looked to Selena in horror, instantaneously registering her intention. She'd succumb to the insanity of the concrete prison, he thought. It'd taken two years, but lunacy had devoured her mind, like cancer.

"Selena, don't. Please..."

"Don't be afraid, Bruce."

Selena heaved open the huge, concrete door. The morning light of the day washed the room in a wave of iridescent colors Bruce hadn't seen in their entirety for two years, in warmth he hadn't felt for two years. Bruce pulled himself from the barrage of colors and looked to Selena, but he couldn't discern

Selena's features in the bright light waxing her body. He held his hand to the sun, vainly attempting to shade his eyes so he could see the gorgeous blue eyes of his love. Maybe if he just stared into her eyes she wouldn't wander into deliverance.

But still her eyes remained hidden. She turned and exited, closing the door behind her.

"NO!" Bruce shouted. Bruce ran to the window, tears streaming freely down his face. Hanging in the window he saw what Selena had been crafting the past few months: her gift to future. The tapestry was of him, standing at the window, staring out into the world. The bottom corner of it was inscribed: *To my love, Bruce. Be brave.*

Bruce removed the tapestry from the lens through which he saw the world and watched Selena glide effortlessly across the desert. Her arms were outstretched at shoulder height, and her head was thrown back in ecstasy as she approached the sun.

Bruce's eyes continued producing tears: his great flood had arrived.

The wasps came shortly thereafter. He watched as they arced across the sky in a horrifying blur; their density blotted out the sun's light. The legion of wasps swirled in the air above Selena and then descended, slowly, as though they knew the torment they were burdening Bruce with. Bruce turned from the window, too horrified to watch the maelstrom. Through the film of liquid resting atop his eyes he could see the tapestry of him, by his wife, on the ground. He fell to his knees and held it to his face. Her scent was present in the art, present within his mind.

Bruce rose from the ground, purpose trembling within his marrow. He went to the door and heaved it open. The warmth washed over him, as did the beauty. He started across the lost paradise, running. Wasps started with him, too. A sting here, a sting there; pain and pleasure became synonymous. His throat began swelling, adding challenge to his task. But that didn't matter; he must be brave, must make it to Selena, if only to hold her hand for just a moment before the end.

He reached the vortex of yellow and black as she fell to her knees. Bruce sliced through the storm, enduring all the poking and prodding the voracious wasps had to offer. He wrapped her tightly in his arms.

"You...you made it," she said. A soothing smile stretched across her face; blood lingered at the corners of her lips. If there was pain in her body, her face didn't show it.

Bruce could feel his body shutting down now. "Of course," he said, kissing her forehead.

"You were brave, so brave," she replied, extending her hand toward his cheek. "No tears. This is beautiful."

Bruce fell to the ground, his arms unable to bear her weight any longer. The pain was heavy at his back now. He could feel his flesh being ripped into the abominations' mandibles. He reached for Selena's hand and, fumbling through the sand, claimed it. He gripped tightly, but she didn't return the intimacy; she was gone. Bruce rolled to his back, set his gaze upon the sun, and waited for emancipation, alone in the desert.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Clarke was raised in a small town outside of Seattle, Washington. Many of the horror stories and films he ingested as a kid seemed to take place in towns like the one he called home, so the fictions seemed fact to him, and all the more terrifying. He is, however, thankful for the fright these tales brought and the inspirations that followed. He only recently discovered writing in his last year or so at college, but since discovery he has allotted a sizeable portion of his spare time to learning the craft. He enjoys reading the works of Clive Barker, watching movies, exercising, and writing. He can be reached by email at: mr.zander@hotmail.com

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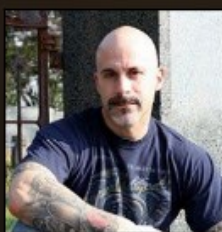


A collection of Horror writers that explore pain, horror and angst through poetry, muse, and short stories every Tuesday.

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The Heart Scarab *Lindsey Beth Goddard*

Professor Kelly took a deep breath and savored the aroma. He loved Egyptian mummies. The one before him was especially well preserved. The petrified corpse was a spitting image of a living man. It appeared to be sleeping, cheekbones jutting from its atrophied face, withered lips frozen in a permanent sneer.

“And what have we here?” An amulet lay against the mummy's chest. Hematite designs sparkled on the obsidian surface. The stone formed a shape the professor quickly recognized as a beautiful heart scarab.

He scratched his chin. His bushy eyebrows drew close together as he studied the jewel. The god king's tomb had been raided, stripped down to nothing but the hieroglyphic-covered walls. How did the robbers overlook such a breath-taking artifact?

The beetle-shaped pendant was held in place by a necklace of precious metals, woven together and looped around the back of the mummy's neck. The braided metal ended in two hooks that secured the massive jewel on each side. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around the stone. He wouldn't dream of stealing the relic. It belonged with its owner of four millennia. He only wanted to take a closer look.

He lifted the stone from the mummy's chest. Dust exploded from the side of its face. The narrow mouth opened wide. The jaw bone popped as a gaping hole formed below its sunken nose. Professor Kelly gazed into the cavern of its mouth and saw only blackness. But then... the blackness moved.

In a frenzy of scrambling legs, the arthropods emerged from the mummy's shriveled lips. Their rigid, black limbs moved stealthily forward, covered in spiny hairs. He caught glimpses of their red, beady eyes beneath the glossy exoskeletons that covered their half-dollar sized bodies. They surged from the corpse's centuries-old throat. Ten, fifty, a hundred, easily a thousand and still coming.

Professor Kelly pulled away. He backpedaled across the room. Beetles swarmed around the mummy on all sides, glistening on the table and floor like an oil spill that rippled with life. Some of them reached his feet and began climbing his khaki trousers. Their legs felt prickly even through the fabric of his clothes. He flailed his limbs and threw his clothing off, but the scarabs kept coming. They climbed over one another, a plethora of antenna prodding his skin as they raced each other toward his face.

Tears welled in his panicked eyes. He clenched his mouth shut, writhing on the ground in a mound of insects. When they managed to push past the barrier of his lips and invade his body, the professor knew he was done for.

The pharaoh opened his eyes for the first time in four thousand years. A shiver ran through the body that temporarily housed his soul. His spirit was restless inside this flesh, a million beetles trapped in a nest that didn't feel like home.

The god king set out in pursuit of a younger, healthier vessel. The scarab beetles squirmed in his gut.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR _ Lindsey Beth Goddard has been published in: *Night Terrors* (Kayelle Press), *Welcome To Hell* (E-volve Books), and *Mistresses Of The Macabre* (Dark Moon Books) and online in *Sirens Call*, *Hogglepot*, *Dark Fire Fiction*, *Niteblade*, and *Yellow Mama*. Upcoming appearances include *Mental Ward: Echoes Of The Past*, *Fresh Fear: Contemporary Horror*, *Quixotic: Not Everyday Love Stories*, and *Dark Moon Digest*. When not writing, she enjoys interviewing fellow authors, playing with her three children, and watching horror movies. For more information, you can visit her website at: <http://lindseybethgoddard.com>.



The Egg Sac *Ken MacGregor*

It was warm for the start of spring, and the sun shone past fluffy white clouds to fall on a little girl playing in her backyard. A small, wiener-shaped dog tagged along at her heels, stubby tail wiggling. Helen Thompson was playing Tinkerbell, jacket unbuttoned, flapping out to the sides like wings. She was waving around a twig she'd found and casting spells all over the place. She turned Arnold the dachshund into a pony and filled the round, plastic pool with green Jello. Next, she made the whole house purple, her favorite color. She was on a roll.

Helen skipped over the fence that bordered the yard. She fully intended to turn it into a castle moat filled with alligators and sharks. That would be a good way to keep Bobby-the-Booger next door from bothering her. He had such a stupid face!

In a corner of the fence, Helen saw something weird. It made her forget all about Bobby. It was a white something-or-other just about eye level with her. It was stuck to the fence, tucked back, almost invisible from most of the yard. If Helen hadn't come up from the angle she had, she never would have seen it. It looked like some kind of bag or sac, filled with something mysterious. She raised her magic wand.

Helen poked at the sac with the long twig. The stick caught in the gooey surface of the oblong bag. Helen wasn't sure, but she thought it might be spider eggs. It looked like the picture of the one in 'Charlotte's Web,' a book her Dad read to her at many bedtimes. She imagined hundreds of little aeronauts sailing away, waving at her, calling to her in their tiny voices. *Goodbye, Helen! Thank you! Salutations!* Helen smiled at the thought. She lifted the sac, still stuck on the twig and carried it inside. It was bigger than the one in the book. No way could Wilbur fit this in his mouth! Helen went straight to her room, hiding the sac in her closet. It was early March, so she figured the eggs would hatch in the next month or so, just like in the book. She couldn't wait to meet all her little spider friends.

She forgot about the egg sac within a week.

Helen and Vicky, a fellow first-grader were playing Go Fish in Helen's room. Helen couldn't stop staring at Vicky's strawberry-blonde hair. It was shiny and silky like an American Girl doll's hair. Helen's own hair was mouse brown and sat on her head like a dead thing. Six years old, and already the fires of jealousy smoldered in her heart.

"Go fish," Vicky said. Turns out she didn't have any tens. Helen reached for the cards, spread out face-down in a pond shape. Her hand stopped, distracted by her ears. There was a sound like ripping paper towels from the closet. Vicky heard it, too. Both girls looked that way. Suddenly, Helen remembered the egg sac. She smiled. It was so cool that Vicky would be here to see this! Helen stood up and did a little excited jump.

"It's okay," she told Vicky. "I know what that is. Watch!" Helen strode to the closet and flung open the door in a *ta-da!* fashion. She watched Vicky's face for a reaction, just knowing the little balloonists would come flying out on the breeze. It made no difference that there was no breeze in the room. When you're six, imagination is king.

Vicky's eyes got huge. For a moment, she just stared at the open closet. Then she screamed. It wasn't a cute little-girl scream either. This was pure terror. Helen was confused by this reaction. She leaned over to look through the door. In the back of Helen's mind, she was aware that she could hear footsteps coming up the stairs fast. Vicky was still screaming.

Helen's closet had a small dresser in it full of toys and art supplies she rarely used anymore. There was a dollhouse in there, too; it was broken, a little dusty. Helen's winter boots were piled on the floor, four pairs. Helen had a real passion for boots of all kind. Helen knew all this was in her closet, but couldn't see any of it. Spiders, brown and black the size of acorns covered every surface. Thousands of

segmented legs wriggled on the walls, floor and ceiling. Helen shuddered.

Her bedroom door burst open and her dad came in. He stopped and stared, trying to process what he was seeing. Vicky wasted no time. She flew through the open door, dodging around Mr. Thompson's legs. *At least she stopped screaming*, Helen thought. Helen's dad scooped his daughter into his arms, pulling her back from the arachnid horde. He frantically brushed them off her arms and legs, carrying her out of the room. He was seconds too late. The tiny creatures were caught in Helen's clothes; they were under her arms; there was no way her dad could get them all.

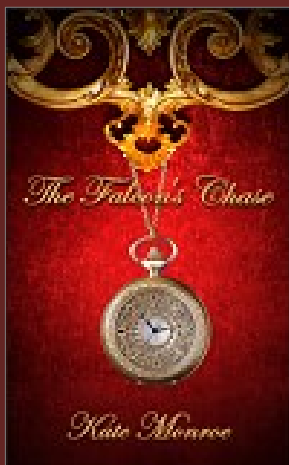
The bites hurt, more than anything the little girl could imagine. Tears streamed down her face, jaw clamped shut against the pain. Helen whimpered in her daddy's chest. He held her to him, swearing as he, too was bitten. Helen could feel a burning, then numbness spread out across her body. Her dad stumbled, caught the wall, then fell to one knee. Helen looked at his face; it was twisted with pain. "Daddy," she whispered, "I'm sorry. It's my fault." Her dad shook his head, but it was and she knew it. She had this wonderful fantasy about tiny, friendly spiders spinning words into webs. *Some Girl! Terrific! Radiant!* Helen's mind was getting fuzzy. Her vision blurred. She clung to her daddy, who clung back as hard as he could. Both of them were fighting to stay awake, to stay alive.

A spider crawled by Helen's face, mandibles opening and closing, like it wanted to be fed. Then, it joined the writhing mass of furry bodies heading down the hall. With the last of her strength, Helen turned her head to see where it, and the hundreds of its brothers and sisters were going.

Downstairs. Mom is down stairs. The front door is downstairs. The rest of the world is downstairs. Guilt washed over Helen. She felt about as far from terrific and radiant as possible. Next to Helen, her dad took short, labored breaths. His skin was turning an unhealthy greenish color. She never meant to hurt her daddy. She never meant to hurt anyone. These spiders were bad news. Helen wished she really was Tink, so she could wave her magic wand and take it all back.

Helen shed one last tear and closed her eyes forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's stories have appeared in several speculative fiction anthologies, including *A Quick Bite of Flesh*, *The Dead Sea*, *Horrific History*, *Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition*, vol. 3 and *Barnyard Horror*; his work has also appeared in magazines and podcasts. Ken is a member in good standing of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. Ken will sometimes reread a piece he wrote and shudder in revulsion or glee (often both). He lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan with his wife, Liz and their children Gabriel and Maggie. He can be found on Facebook (Ken MacGregor - Author), Amazon and Goodreads.



The Falcon's Chase

Kate Monroe

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CreateSpace, Smashwords, Apple,
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Paradox

Bound By Blood

Paradox Series book 3

Patti Roberts

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Small Mercy *Zack Kullis*

The vibrating cell phone buzzed across the bar, moving and sounding like a metallic insect. Jason had just finished another whiskey when the phone started its dance.

“Good hell,” grumbled Jason, “even the phone is starting to sound like one of those damned things.”

Jason picked up his phone. It was a text message from Brent – his landlord. The message said it was time to meet. Jason hated that guy, hated everything about him. Brent had been getting on his ass for months so they could talk about the wall. Three months ago Jason had asked his geeky landlord if he could take out a wall in his downstairs apartment so he could put in a pool table. Brent said no. “You are forbidden to take down that wall. It is a load bearing wall, consequently an integral part of the stability of this building...”

A week later Brent had gone to some kind of insect convention and Jason demolished the wall. Jason hoped the meeting wasn’t to talk about the wall, because it was a little too late. “If he can have his bugs,” said Jason as he walked to his door, “then I can have a pool table.”

Just mentioning Brent’s bugs tweaked Jason’s temper. A slowly building fury started to rise from the pit of his stomach where he constantly fought to keep it suppressed. Jason struggled to keep his emotions in control as he recalled the breathing and coping techniques from his myriad of failed anger management classes.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Brent’s insects made enough noise for a whole forest of bugs. Breathe in. Jason stepped out his front door and walked over to the steps. Breathe out.

Jason put his weight on the first step and it creaked with age. But, in his mind, it sounded like bugs. Their sound was worse than nails on a chalkboard. They skittered, clattered, chirped and fluttered all night and all day. He could visualize thousands of legs, antennae, pincers and wings squirming and writhing in a horrid mass of noise.

He took another step. Then another. Jason focused on his breathing as he scaled the rest of the steps. The short walk up the stairs should have been enough to get him to calm down. But it wasn’t. He would be okay as long as he kept his cool with Brent. And, Jason thought, as long as he didn’t have to look at or listen to any bugs.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Jason pulled it out and saw that it was another text from Brent.

‘Are you coming up or not?’

Jason felt like he was going to explode. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been so pissed off. His volatile emotions raged. Sweat broke out all over, and he felt an almost unbearable desire to hurt something. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to handle this meeting. Jason was about to turn around and go back down the stairs when his landlord’s door swung open.

“Good evening, neighbor. Were you just going to stand out there?”

Brent stood in the doorway with a smug look on his face. Jason crammed his phone into his pocket and wiped sweat off his face as he replied. “Nope, just getting ready to knock. Are you sure you want to do this now? It’s not the best time for me.”

“Well,” Brent sighed, “we could either do it here, right now, or we can do it tomorrow night in your apartment.”

Jason’s heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t do that. Brent would see the wall had been torn down. Jason didn’t have money to fix it. “Okay, but can we do this fast?”

Brent smiled and stepped aside so Jason could walk in. “It won’t take long.”

The front room had a small couch, table, and a small kitchen off to one side. There was a door on one end of the room, and then a large door right in the middle. Where in the hell were all of the bugs? Jason voiced his next thought.

“I thought your bugs would be really loud in here, but they’re not.”

“The walls are insulated,” Brent replied. “I wouldn’t want to bother any visitors with too much noise.”

Jason held back his reply. ‘Yet your tenant has to listen to that shit all day and all night.’

Brent walked towards the side door. “There is something you need to see. Come on.”

Jason followed him to the door. Brent opened the thick door and walked into a huge room. Jason just stood there. It was like he was about to step into a nightmare. A horrific smell hit him at the same time as the hellish noise. He felt like he was being pushed over the edge.

Chirping. Clicking. Rustling. The crackle of sand on exoskeleton. The muffled scratching of mandibles, pincers and legs. There was humming and other sounds that Jason couldn’t begin to describe. Brent turned on a few lights and called out.

“You need to come in here.”

Jason walked into the room and stared in shocked awe. Tanks of all sizes and shapes were lined up along the walls of the huge room. More tanks sat on tables and the floor as equipment and lights put it all on ghastly display.

Brent turned and looked at him. “This, Jason, is what a professional entomologist has in his living space.”

“That’s a shitload of bugs.”

“You can call them bugs or insects if you’d like,” Brent huffed. “But the term insect is kind of vague. Historically the definition of entomology has included the study of...”

Jason stopped listening as soon as Brent went into geek-speak. He was too busy trying to grasp what he was seeing. His eyes were captivated by a glass tank that was full of some kind of worms. They were crawling and squirming around, climbing all over each other and what they must have been eating. Jason could hear it all perfectly. He started to sweat again.

“Those are mealworms,” Brent said as he noticed Jason’s diverted attention. “They are mostly for food. Let me show you a few of my favorites.”

The conglomerate of insect homes took up the entire center of the large room. Jason’s eyes were wide and his heart thundered deep within his chest. This was too much. Brent grinned knowingly before he spoke.

“This is the best private display of its kind in the country. It’s also very heavy,” he said as he glared at Jason. Brent continued. “This tank has the Hercules Beetle. They grow over six inches long. I have 15 of them. This other is the Exatosoma Tiaratum, or the giant prickly stick insect for you layman.”

Jason didn’t notice the verbal jab and went to the next tank.

“This glass cage is full of Scorpionflies. Many of these species would get pretty nasty if they were to get out. Those are Solifugae, sometimes called camel spiders. I have 21 of them. These,” he said as he pointed towards another tank, “are Brazilian Treehoppers. They are rare, but I have three.”

The buzzing, chirping and scatter-noise all around him was more than Jason could handle. He clenched his hands into tight fists and worked on his breathing. He was going to lose it.

“Those are Botflies. Their eggs get attached to animals, or humans, and hatch once they sense the body heat. Then they burrow into your flesh and eat their way deeper inside. A nasty way to die I imagine.”

Brent continued to showcase the tank’s occupants. “These are the Devil’s Flower Mantis. Those are Antlions, and then we get to my two favorite tanks.”

Jason stopped and looked at the two tanks. They were the largest in the room. One tank held the largest wasps he had ever seen, and the other was just full of ants.

“My pride and joy. These are Maricopa Harvester ants, and those are Japanese Giant Hornets. The

Maricopa Harvester ant has the most poisonous sting of any insect. With the number of ants in that tank, they could easily kill both of us."

Jason tugged at his shirt. It felt like it was cutting off his breathing. He had to get out of here. The noise and smell were driving him crazy. He wanted to kill every last insect in here.

"These hornets are all about the size of your thumb. It is an aggressive, violent beauty that kills without mercy. A group of 30 hornets can decimate 30,000 honey bees in about three hours. The hornets find a hive and attack, severing the heads from every bee, one by one, until the entire hive is dead. Then they eat. Isn't that amazing?"

Jason stopped. "I need to go. Now."

Brent stood in front of Jason and looked up into his face. "Not until we talk about your wall. Do you have any idea how heavy all of these tanks are? You took out that wall after I explicitly told you not to. There are stress fractures in the ceiling of your apartment!"

The anger was boiling over now. The accusation, the buzzing, ticking, chirping and clicking of millions of bugs, it was all coming to an ugly head. "How did you know?"

"I went into your apartment while you were at work. You took the wall down to put in your damned pool table, and now there are stress fractures in the ceiling." Brent started to shout and jab a finger into Jason's chest. "You will pay to have it fixed and THEN I will decide if you can stay or not."

Jason's fists were balled so tightly they hurt. His face was hot. Fury exploded and his mind went dark. There was only incoherent yelling and violence.

He hit Brent in the gut, grabbed his hair to straighten him back up, and slammed his fist into the skinner man's face. Blood and teeth fell to the floor. Jason grabbed Brent's head and slammed it into the side of the tank of ants. He slammed it over and over until the tank broke. A wave of ants, broken glass, and crap from inside the tank fell onto the floor with the unconscious landlord.

The ants swarmed all over Brent's body. But it wasn't enough. Jason was blind with rage. He found a metal bar and went through the entire room, smashing and tipping over every tank and cage. His last stop was the hornet tank. Jason knocked it over and ran like a madman when he heard the crash and the buzz of angry hornets. In less than ten seconds he had locked and shut all of Brent's doors and ran down the steps to his apartment.

Jason closed his door, went to the bar, and grabbed the whole bottle of liquor. It was going to be a long night.

It was in the early hours of the morning when the sound woke him up. The bug noise was much louder than it had ever been. But there was another sound that had been loud enough to wake him. Jason struggled to sit up and realized that he had passed out on his couch.

The skittering and clatter of the bugs sounded different. It was much louder, somehow closer. That's crazy, he thought. There had to be another explanation. A deep moan rumbled through his apartment and shook the walls and ceiling. Jason looked around before he glanced up at the source of the noise.

"What the hell?"

Jason could see a large crack that ran across the entire ceiling. He was about to stand up when another rumble shook the walls. The ceiling caved in with a crash. Brent's tanks fell through the ceiling, pulverizing the couch and crushing Jason's legs and hips.

Primal screams filled the apartment as Jason tried to drag himself out from under the tank. He was pinned. Jason watched in horror as a smashed cage teetered on the edge of the hole in Brent's floor before it fell down and crashed upon his head.

He must have passed out again. Jason was flat on his back. He felt movement. It started out like a tickle, an itch, but then came the first bite – the first of many. Fire bloomed across his gut. Jason propped his head up and watched as a wave of ants quickly climbed his torso. They swarmed over his arms and hands.

Jason started to swat at them, but it was no use. His joints and muscles were getting stiff, and he couldn't lift his arms very far off the floor. A loud buzz was followed by a Japanese Giant Hornet that landed on his face. He shook his head, shouting and cursing. The hornet took off and then landed on his nose and jammed its stinger into his lip. It felt like his entire body was on fire. Jason wasn't able to stop the bugs. More hornets started to land on his face, neck and chest, each stinging him multiple times.

His lips were swollen, his breathing labored, and he screamed in mortal agony. "Mnuhh!"

It was all for nothing. His eyes started to swell shut, his face a bulbous mess of puffy flesh. He couldn't move, but he sure as hell could feel all of the pain. Jason watched the macabre show through the slowly closing folds of his face. Giant camel spiders rushed over the debris and crawled up his belly, biting and crunching an occasional ant along with his exposed skin. Then he saw the flies. Botflies swarmed around him.

Jason watched a few land on his swollen skin. Clarity of mind was an awful thing. He knew they were laying eggs. He would be dead soon, but it didn't matter. He was going to be worm food. Jason watched the squirming mass of bugs assault his body. Hornets and ants stung his exposed skin. He was blowing up like a bloated carcass on the side of a hot road.

He wished for the end to come. Just before his eyes swelled shut completely, Jason saw a grotesquely fat fly make its way towards his mouth. His inability to see punctuated his other sensations. He felt the fly buzz as it squeezed passed his puffy lips. It continued to buzz and move around in his mouth. Jason tried to push it out with his tongue. 'Please', he thought to himself. 'Please give me this small mercy and get it out of my mouth'. The large Botfly buzzed into his throat and lodged itself in his windpipe.

Jason choked on the fly with his final thought – small mercy my ass.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Zack Kullis has lived and traveled abroad, but calls the USA his home. Writing has been a passion of his ever since he was a little boy. Zack works for the FBI, and some of the cases he has worked on have involved indescribably heinous and callous people.

Zack writes to keep his sanity. It gives him a way to share the myriad of stories that frequently roam through his head, and it also allows Zack to vent and express his feelings toward the world we live in.

Twitter: @ZKullis

Blog for short stories: <http://www.zackkullis.com/>

Blog for likes and miscellaneous thoughts: <http://zkullis.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/zack.kullis>





For Sale *Nina D'Arcangela*

"Mark! Mark, get back here – you've gotta' check this out."

Fumbling with the lock-box on the front of the house that Mr. Wilkson, the realtor, had given them the key to, Mark shouted, "Okay, just give me a minute," and muttered under his breath how much he hated house hunting.

"Really babe, you've gotta get back here. There's a barn that's almost as big as the house itself, wait until you see it. You're gonna love it. I'll meet you inside." Mari, Marks wife, was never the patient type nor was she one to wait on someone else to do what she wanted. You could say she was a bit impulsive – one of the traits Mr. Wilkson liked about her the most. He knew the Damone's would be the perfect couple to visit this out-of-the-way property.

Mark yelled back from the porch, "Wait, hon, I'll be there in a sec. Based on the shape of the house, the barn might not be safe..." Mark looked down onto the porch at the door handle and lock that had just fallen off and muttered, "Ahh fuck, I hope it's not a 'you break it, you bought it' deal."

Around back, Mari had managed to wedge one of the warped barn doors open just enough to squeeze through the crack. As she wiggled her way all the way through, it dawned on her that in her excitement, she'd put her flashlight down to wrestle with the door and forgotten to grab it again. Giving the door an extra heave with her shoulder from the inside, she shoved it open a smidgeon further. It was enough to let in a little more light, but not enough for her to reach the flashlight. Mark would have to grab it when he got there. In the meanwhile, she could see all sorts of things stored in the murk now permeating the huge space.

In various piles, she could see old furniture, an antique nursery set, strange lab equipment, and a collection of steamer trunks that must be worth a fortune. In the far back, where the light barely reached, it looked like someone had forgotten about an old car of some sort. "Oh, man, Mark is gonna' love this!"

Taking a few steps forward, she thought she heard the sound of something drop. It sounded like a stone had fallen onto the wooden floor. Rethinking whether she should go any farther on her own, she paused for a moment to listen but didn't hear anything else. Maybe she should at least go back for the flashlight; she could probably wiggle just enough of herself through the opening to grab it. Thunk.

"Yup, definitely going back for the flashlight!"

Turning around, her foot caught the handle of a bucket and an earsplitting racket followed as a bunch of what she assumed were painting supplies crashed down around her, nearly giving her a heart attack. She tried to laugh off the freight as she picked her way through the pile of debris between herself and the door. "Smooth move, Mar – death by renovation tools is not the way you want to go." And then she heard it again, the hollow sound of something solid hitting the wooden planks behind her.

Then another, and another. "Oh, crap. What else did I topple over?" She was just about to yell out to Mark when she felt something tickle her ankle.

Leaping out of her skin for the second time in the last two minutes, she did the 'slap it off me' holy-shit dance from hell as a shiver passed over her. Even she had to admit she was starting to feel a little uncomfortable.

More thunks, more itchy crawly feelings, and Mari started to panic. She flung herself toward the door, it was only an arm's length away, but her foot caught on a painter's pole and sent her sprawling face first into the darkness.

Thunk, thunk, thunk. Louder, faster, more deliberate now. Mari turned her head to look behind her and saw large, black shapes detaching themselves from the wall and landing on the floor. Her first thought was that they looked like crickets, but they were huge. Huge, shiny, and blacker than the blackness around her! Then she remembered watching a show on the Discovery Channel about

spelunking and how sometimes explorers come across pockets of harmless cave crickets. These god damned things looked just liked them, except there didn't seem to be anything harmless about them!

Mari tried to crawl toward the door, but was nearly paralyzed by the sound as the mass of crickets leaped from the walls and rushed toward her. Turning back to the door, she screamed frantically for Mark as the thundering insects overtook her body. As they filled her mouth, her screams fell silent.

Finally admitting defeat at the front door, Mark decided he'd seen enough of this place. It was time for him and Mari to get the hell out of there before that pain in the ass Wilkson showed up and tried to pressure them into buying this shit hole in the middle of nowhere.

After making his way around back, he saw the barn Mari was talking about. As he got closer, he noticed her flashlight on the ground just outside the barely opened door. He also heard what sounded like furniture being dragged across the floor inside. What the hell was that woman up to now? Reaching out and pulling the door open farther with one hand, and grabbed the flashlight with the other as he stepped inside.

"Mari..."

After fixing the broken lock on the front porch, Mr. Wilkson went around back to see what needed tidying up there after the Damone's visit to the property. He had a special affinity for this old farm house; it had been in his family for generations. It wouldn't do to leave the yard a mess. Walking through the weeds towards the barn, the realtor shook off his jacket and called out to his cousins, rubbing the teeth on his scapular wings together, wooing them into silence once again with his own chirping.

He closed the barn door, threw the hasp, and dropped the lock that he'd removed earlier that day into place. Best to let them finish their meal in peace. He'd come back tomorrow and clean up the mess.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic things could be in her own head when the doll's was so very vacant. As a reader of anything from splatter matter to dark matter; Nina is a lover of all things horror and scientific.

Nina is the Social Media Coordinator and one of the co-founders of Sirens Call Publications and Pink Pepper Press. She is a member of the writing group, Pen of the Damned, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography. You can find her on twitter at @Sotet_Angyal, on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/DarcNina>, on her personal blog at sotetangyal.wordpress.com, or by email at dark.nina@gmail.com.

Carnage: After the End – Volume 1

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NORTH DARK



LANE KARESKA

Love Letters *Donald Jacob Uitvlugt*

Zavir rested his head against the concrete wall, his eyes focused on a point just past the naked yellow light bulb. His captors liked to turn the bulb on and off at random, just to disorient him, to disrupt his sense of time. Not that it mattered what day it was. He knew he was going to die here.

He wasn't going to make it easy for them, though. There was more food here than the thin soup and hard bread they served when they wished to. One had only to be clever, clever and not too squeamish. Zavir lay as still as he could, not even twitching a finger. There. Movement out of the corner of his eye. They didn't like the light, but hunger drove one to do foolish things. Even when one was a cockroach.

It approached tentatively, testing the way with antennae aquiver. It could not resist the tantalizing morsel in front of it. Human fingernails. It moved closer.

Zavir's hand shot out. The cockroach tried to squirm away between his fingers, but he brought up his other hand. Each time the cockroach wriggled out, thinking it had escaped, he took hold of it in his other hand. The irony of what he was doing did not escape him, the prisoner become the captor. But he needed to eat.

He brought his meal to his mouth. He blinked. No, he was imagining things. He brought the insect so close he could feel its legs twitch against his lips. He pulled it away. The letters were still there. He squinted to make out the words on the cockroach's back:

*Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.*

Zavir mouthed the words as he read them again, tasting them. The archaic diction gave them an exotic flavor, a spice sizzling on the tongue. He certainly knew what it meant to die to all the world. He read the words a third time. The dull red-brown letters barely stood out from the brown of the cockroach's body. He knew that color all too well. Dried blood.

Zavir repeated the words in his head until he had them memorized. He brought the cockroach to his lips and swallowed it with the words. He chewed, taking the message apart, breaking it down. Making it his own. It warmed him to the core.

Only after eating the roach did Zavir start to wonder who had written the message, and how, and why. He did not envision his captors planning anything so elaborate. Their usual methods were much less subtle. It was unlikely the roach had traveled from outside the prison. Thus the message had come from someone inside. He knew the writer was a woman. No man had such penmanship, such a delicate touch with the brush. Was she writing a love letter to a fellow captive? Words of encouragement thrown like a bottle into the ocean? Or writing only to keep herself sane? Zavir did not know.

Zavir envisioned her plucking her hairs and tying them together to make a brush dipped in her own blood. Was the wound self-inflicted or caused by their captors? Zavir imagined the words burning inside her, boiling in her blood, forcing their way out.

Would she write again?

Zavir kept the words inside him. They warmed him through the cold nights. They kept him company when the lights were off. They were the secret strength within his bones when his captors questioned him. He had a name. Even though he didn't know what it was, the woman who wrote on the cockroach had a name. That could not be taken away from them.

He lay on the floor of his cell, shivering, but with a smile on his face. He dozed off, he did not know for how long. When he awoke, there was a cockroach right in front of his nose. This one also bore a rust-brown message.

*From hence, your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.*

He studied the words, tasted them, treasured them. He saw the cockroach for what it was only as it started to crawl away. He sat up and snatched at the insect, but it scurried away through a crack in the cinderblocks. Zavir rested his head against the wall. He touched his face and found he was crying.

It took him a moment to figure out why. It wasn't that the cockroach had gotten away. It wasn't even that he had missed the words, though he longed to take them into himself and nourish his heart with them. He wept for their writer. What had happened to her since last she wrote? The mention of each part made him think that their captors had hurt her, seriously. Would this be the last message he received from her?

That was not the only reason he wept. The writer's words were like a kiss in the dark. He had made contact with her, if only for a brief moment. To not eat her words left them unfulfilled. He whispered the two sets of words to himself and let his tears flow freely. At the very least he would not forget them.

One of his captors had seen him cry. They thought they had gotten to him. They began questioning him in earnest. He started so strong, so very strong. But without the nourishment of the second set of words, he broke. He bled and he wept and he talked. He bared his soul to his captors, laid open to them the deepest secrets of his heart.

He recited the phrases from the cockroaches over and over again. He felt as if he had betrayed their writer. As if he had exposed her to the rape of their ears and recording devices. But he could not keep his traitor tongue from speaking the words.

Those words were not what his captors wanted to hear. They beat him until he could not stand, beat him until he could not see, beat him until he could not speak, and then they threw him back into his cell to die. His head hit the floor and he fell unconscious.

Dried blood flaked from his eyes as he blinked them open. He felt insects crawling all over his body, tasting his toenails, nibbling on his skin, feasting on his scabs. He was dying. He knew it, and he welcomed the cockroaches to their feast.

A cockroach crawled across his nose. It could not be, but it was. His jaw could not move but he sounded the words in his head.

*Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read.*

He let out a soft moan. The cockroach scuttled down Zavir's face and into his slightly open mouth. Zavir swallowed. The words went down into him and he died. He died, but he was not alone. He died with a smile on his face and warmth in his heart. He died, but he was loved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast of the United States, but mostly in a haunted memory palace of his own design. He strives to write what he calls "Haiku Fiction," stories small in scale but with big impact. His short stories have appeared in a number of print and online venues, including Necrotic Tissue and the Wily Writers podcast, as well as the anthologies A Fistful of Horrors and the award-winning WolfSongs 2. "Love Letters" first appeared in the Journal of Unlikely Entomology, Issue 2.5, their Valentine's Day mini-issue. If you enjoyed the story, let Donald know at <http://haikufiction.blogspot.com>.



Ice Lice

Mathias Jansson

Deep down in the ice
in the dark arctic cold
we found a small black core
preserved since ancient time

When the ice melted
the fragile shell
vaporized in my hand
into dust of nothingness

Soon we saw red streaks
under our skins
and the itching started
with unbearable pain

We scratched our skins
with bloody fingernails
we tore our bodies
into a meaty mass
but nothing could ease the pain
it drove us insane
these damn lice from hell

Requiem

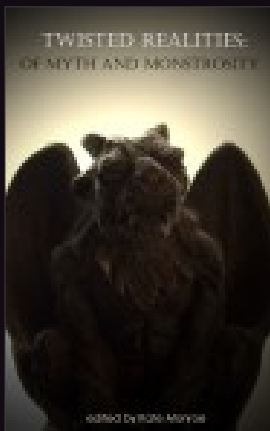
Mathias Jansson

As a ghost I stare
at my open grave
tears are falling
and a priest is saying a prayer

As in a dream I fall
back down in the dark
when I wake
I am buried alive
in a small place
filled with bugs
spiders, maggots and woodlice
creeping over my face

And my scream of fear
is silenced
by thousands of legs
crawling in my mouth

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine SNM Horror Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press as Just One More Step, Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3. Homepage: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/>



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SUMMER FEAR

Gloria Bobrowicz

The Honey Bee,
The Bumble Bee,
Scare me half to death.

Worker Ants,
Red Ants,
Fascinate,
Steal my breath.

Their place in nature,
Forming colonies,
Protecting their own.

Creepy crawlies,
Give me goose bumps,
Not the top of the food chain,
So why do we fear them so.

Apocalypse comes,
Cockroaches prevail,
They outlive us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria is the Editor-In-Chief/Co-Owner for Sirens Call Publication and Pink Pepper Press. If you send in a piece for consideration, Gloria is the first voice you'll hear from. She responds to all submissions, and is SCP's first line of defense. While bubbly and super friendly, with the patience of a saint, push her too far and you will get a little nip. Gloria is also a freelance editor. In her spare time she reads for pleasure without her red pen, and devotes much of herself to her family. She has been a huge horror fan since she was a child, and loves books related to true crime - particularly the serial killer variety.

You can reach Gloria on Facebook, Twitter, or by email at the following:

FB: Gloria Bobrowicz

Twitter: @GlorBobrowicz

Email: Gloria@SirensCallPublications.com



DYING DAYS 3

Armand
Rosamilia

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Birds & the Bees *Thomas Kleaton*

“How long before we get to grandma’s house?” said Lacy. She was all of eight years old, smart and inquisitive. This was her first road trip since her parents’ breakup, and she was in high spirits. She tousled her brownish-blond hair with her index finger, her bright blue eyes returning to the SUV’s DVD screen where *Garfield The Movie* was playing.

“A couple more hours, sweetie. Now just sit still and be quiet,” said Irene, glancing nervously over her right shoulder at Lacy. She straightened up, her eyes focusing on the rear-view mirror, where the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon.

Cruising down I-20 now, having left I-85 over an hour ago, Irene mused dreamily about the new life she and Lacy would be beginning without her soon-to-be-ex-husband Bill. July would have been their ninth anniversary. *July*, she thought. *The month for fireworks!* Virginia, Irene’s mother, had not liked Bill from the beginning. *He’s got shifty eyes*, she’d said. But Lacy, whose eyes were the same color as her grandmother’s and who was definitely the apple of her eye, had arrived a year later and softened Virginia’s attitude toward her father. Later events, however, would prove Virginia had been flawlessly correct in her assessment of the character of one Bill Witner.

Irene and Bill had endured their little spats over the years, petty arguments here and there, but toward the last the fighting had escalated in intensity. Bill’s late hours had been a *hot* subject. Lacy would retreat to her room, holding her Garfield doll and wishing the clamor would cease. Her thoughts would wander to her grandmother at times like these, who never said a cross word to her. She held a special fondness for Virginia, which was accentuated by her infrequent visits. Lacy would do *anything* to garner her attention.

The marriage had seemed to be working out (*yes, and some people think it’s entertaining to watch dogs fight!*) up until a month ago when Bill had absentmindedly left his cell phone on the bedside table in his rush to get to the bathroom. Hearing it tweet, Irene had scrolled through the risqué text he had just received. A bitter squabble had ensued, in which Bill had confessed to an affair with his dental hygienist, Cathy.

“Are you *sleeping* with her?” Irene had screamed, her cheeks flushing red. “Because if you are, it’s going to cost you. *Plenty!*”

“Oh, yeah,” he’d hollered. “When’s the last time you put out? Do you know how many times I’ve come home exhausted, just to tolerate you sitting there watching those stupid talk shows? And when’s the last time you wore something sexy for me?”

“When’s the last time you could get it up?”

They’d stopped fussing abruptly. Lacy had been shadowing them outside their bedroom door, tears streaming down her innocent face, her delicate hands covering her ears. Her response was simple: “I want you to stop.”

“Just get out, Bill,” Irene had said. “Haven’t you caused enough trouble already? Just get your ass out!”

Just like that, she’d thought. *I gave you nine years of my life, not to mention a beautiful daughter. Nine years of my life! And what thanks do I get? You can’t keep your hands out of your hygienist’s pants! Not some exotic beauty queen or even an old girlfriend, but your frigging hygienist, for goodness sake!*

“We’re almost there, honey,” Irene said, turning onto a rutted paved road in the small town of Cragford, AL. Lacy looked up curiously from her movie, *Garfield-A Tale of Two Kitties* this time, and watched three crows vacate the power line they had been perched on. 20T was all Irene had time to read on the small black and white sign as they jostled over a concrete bridge. *I wonder how much a broken heart weighs*, she thought.

Off to her right, Lacy saw a broad creek meandering away from under the bridge. Tall oak trees and white-blossoming dogwoods lined the creek, and as Lacy surveyed something beyond the trees, it clarified itself into a small, white clapboard house. The tires crunched on gravel as Irene pulled into the driveway. Virginia was already standing on the porch.

"Grandma! Grandma!" Lacy cried, climbing down out of the CR-V and scuttling toward the small figure of a woman who was descending the wooden steps. The bottom step creaked as Lacy ran into her grandmother's waiting arms. Virginia was a small woman, no more than 5'4" tall, no more than a hundred and ten pounds. Her grey hair was cut stylishly short.

"My goodness, Lacy," she said. "Let me look at you! Eight years old and all grown up!"

"Irene slammed the rear gate of the Honda, shuffling toward the house carrying two nylon bags containing their clothes. Virginia and Lacy were now resting on the steps. Bluebirds flitted across the yard, fascinating Lacy.

"Hi, mom," said Irene.

"Hello, Irene," she said, waving her hand in a gesture for Irene to sit down. "You look positively beat."

"Does it show," she said, plopping down. It was hot sitting in the late June sun, and Irene could feel perspiration breaking out on her scalp. "It's been a rough four weeks."

Virginia followed Lacy's gaze, which drifted over the Snapdragons gracing the sides of the steps. They exploded in pastel orange, yellow, and red-violet blooms, and the scent of Cape jasmine drifted on the air. Huge bees, yellow and black, scurried back and forth over the flowers, buzzing when they would take off from one bloom and fly to another. *Bees, bees, busy little bees*, Lacy sang. She was reminded of one of her very favorite books, *Buzzy the Bumblebee*.

"Why don't you come in and have some ice cream," said Virginia, hugging her granddaughter.

"Yay!" squealed Lacy, smoothing her Hello Kitty shirt with her hands. She tromped across the porch, letting the screen door wheeze shut behind her.

"Come on in the house, Irene," said Virginia. "We'll talk in the kitchen."

Lacy paused briefly on her way back from the bathroom to examine the array of picture frames draped across her grandmother's antique dresser. There was her late grandfather, James, in his army uniform from his days in Vietnam, smoking a cigarette while leaning on his rifle. There was a picture of her mother from her high school days, wearing a band uniform. 1994 was emblazoned in gold in the lower corner. A photograph at the rear captivated her. She carefully separated it from the others and strolled to the kitchen.

Lacy plopped down in a chair and spooned some Blue Bell vanilla ice cream into her mouth. She pushed the picture across the table: "What's this, grandma?"

In the photo Virginia was smiling, holding her hands up, palms flattened out. Two sparrows were busily pecking away at the birdseed she held.

"Oh, that's from years ago," said Virginia. "When I was really into feeding the birds. Your grandfather used to laugh at me so! Said I had a talent for attracting wildlife. A *special* talent." She pushed the picture frame back toward Lacy. "Now finish your ice cream, and you can go and play in the yard for awhile."

"But I want to know about the *birds*," said Lacy, squirming in her seat.

"Okay, dear," said Virginia. "You have to fill your hands with birdseed and stand very still. If you're lucky, the birds will eat out of your hands."

Her curiosity seemingly satisfied for the moment, Lacy got up and placed her empty bowl and spoon in the sink.

"I think I'll go play now," she said, sprinting toward the door. She brushed by the screen door and

down the steps in one fluid motion, leaving Virginia to yell after her: "Watch out for snakes!"

"I begged you not to marry that horse's ass," said Virginia, matter-of-factly, filling her cup with Folgers from the coffeemaker. She stood back, pulling a grey hair from the side of her mouth. "I knew Bill Witner was bad news the minute I laid eyes on him. What are you going to do now?"

"I told him that if he ever screwed around on me I'd leave him. My lawyer's well on the way to selling the house and splitting the assets. Let's see if his little whore can get him out of this one. *And I'm asking for sole custody of Lacy.*" Irene did not look forward to placing Lacy in front of a judge for her decision about who she wanted to live with. She imagined the judge looking down sternly from his bench. *Lucy Witner, who do you want to live with, your mother or the jackass?* Irene smiled inwardly. "I've still got a good job at the bank, and I don't think he'll give me too much hassle about child support, working with that accounting firm. We'll make it."

"It's going to be hard on Lacy. Have you told her yet?"

"She knows. She's so impressionable. I hope she isn't damaged. I suppose our bickering is why she's so attached to you. I just want the divorce to happen quickly. The sooner it's over the less damage will be done to her psychologically." *And, she thought. While Bill's trying to get into his hygienist's pants, I'll be getting into his wallet.*

Lacy lay sprawled on the ground beneath the blackberry brambles in the backyard, watching the bumblebees dig greedily into their whitish blossoms. High cumulus clouds rolled lazily across the blue sky. Thoughts of her father filled her head, and a subtle breeze cooled her face. Her vision blurred, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. She still loved her father, but he could be mean when he wanted to be. *Bad Daddy, she thought. Yelling at mommy like that!*

She bolted upright, spotting the ancient garden shed, a small building with weathered oak planks and a rusty tin roof. Her grandfather had cut a crescent into the upper portion of the door as a joke. *Birdseed! I'll bet there's some birdseed in there!* She opened the door on creaky hinges and stepped inside. A mouse that had been foraging, frightened by her entrance, scuttled for the safety of its burrow.

Irene peered out the kitchen windows, seeing ominous dark grey clouds moving in from the west, and a brisk breeze was beginning to stir the trees. The late evening sunlight was slanting through the breaks in these clouds, coating the room with a lustrous orange-yellow sheen. "I wonder what Lacy's up to. She's been out there all afternoon."

"She's probably walking through the vegetable garden out back. I saw her playing under the blackberry bushes earlier."

"Probably," said Irene, returning to her milk and German chocolate cake. She looked doubtful.

As if on cue, the screen door into the kitchen scraped open. Looking almost directly into the sinking orb of the sun, they saw Lacy step into the room. She was a mere silhouette, the invading sunlight fashioning a corona around her luminous hair. Her tiny arms were outstretched, and Irene sensed movement all around her head, tiny figures, which gave Lacy the appearance of a serpent-haired Gorgon. *Lacy, who would do anything to impress her grandmother.*

"Grandma! Look what I did! Isn't it neat?" she said, smiling primly.

Fear seized Virginia's heart with chilly fingers. She mumbled something as her hand went to her mouth, managing only a slight *oog* sound. Irene's brown eyes were huge, accenting her burnt-blond hair. She knocked her glass off the table getting up. *If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair,* she thought crazily, and screamed.

Lacy drifted gracefully across an imaginary stage, listening to the clapping of the audience rise to a crescendo. A diadem of blackberry blooms encircled her hair, and a three-tier array of brambles and blooms formed a crude corsage pinned to her shirt by thorns. Blackberry vines twisted around her pants legs like ivy climbing a trellis. Several blooms were tangled in her shoelaces.

She was wearing an old pair of faded gardening gloves, and a pair of rusty shears hung haphazardly from her right pants pocket. In each hand she held a large Snapdragon bloom, and she pointed these forward as elegantly as if she were a queen preparing to knight someone with a gleaming sword. *Buzzing and crawling around on the blooms were at least a dozen bumblebees.*

Black-faced bumblebees.

“Don’t move, Lacy,” Irene managed. She scrambled under the sink for a can of wasp killer. “Be perfectly still.”

Bees were already cruising around in ever-increasing arcs, attracted by the perfume worn by Irene and her mother. A bee veered toward Virginia, who, in her terror, began swatting empty air.

The hollow drone of buzzing wings filled Virginia’s ears as more bees circled her head. One hovered in front of her. She could clearly make out its black face. It landed on her chin. Another bee that had joined the foray landed on her neck and, agitated, stung her. When she bleated in pain, yet another angry bee coasted onto her tongue, stinging her repeatedly.

Irene, in a zealous attempt to expel the bees from her mother, took aim with the wasp killer. A blur of black and yellow stung her forearm as she brought the can around and the stream of insecticide went wild, showering her mother’s eyes. The scent of bug spray permeated the kitchen. *She imagined the bees fleeing from a giant can of Raid, like the commercials she had watched so often as a child.*

Virginia collapsed into one of the chairs, her eyes watering, making a gagging sound. Her face was beginning to turn blue as she choked on her own swollen tongue. Bees were crawling over her. *Looks like Blue Bottle Flies on road kill,* Irene thought.

Trembling, Irene snatched her purse from the table, slapping at a bee parked on it. She groped for her cell phone to dial 911 and the bee, enraged by the attack, hovered furiously above her eyebrows, stinging her forehead. She slipped in the spilled milk and went down hard on her hip. The cell phone skittered across the linoleum. Her hands caressed her eyelids, which were already swelling shut.

Lacy stood fretting in the center of the kitchen, bumblebees clambering over her clothes. Her blue eyes shifted between her mother and grandmother, a look of sorrow permeating her delicate features. “*I couldn’t find any birdseed, grandma. I couldn’t find any birdseed...*”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Thomas Kleaton grew up in Crescent City, CA. He is of German and English descent. He works as an auto technician and reads and writes horror in his spare time. His stories have appeared in Death Throes Webzine and SNM Horror Magazine. He currently lives near Auburn University, AL. He has a Facebook account under pen name Thomas Kleaton. Email contact: thomaskleaton@centurytel.net.

Carnage: After the End – Volume 2

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace,
Smashwords, Apple, and Barnes & Noble





The Unfortunate Heartbreak of Faritook the Earwig *Jason Sturner*

Faritook stood on an old log in the woods of a campground, cleaning one of his antennae. Shanamook was about to come along at any moment, and he knew he had to look his absolute best if she were to stop and talk with him. When finally she emerged from the decaying bark, Faritook released his antenna and it sprang back into place. His thorax tightened with anxiety and he edged closer to where she would pass.

But Shanamook shuddered when she saw him. She was creeped out by Faritook, uncomfortable with the way he always stared at her, his mandibles moving as if eating something invisible. And although they'd seen each other a few times in passing, nothing more had ever transpired between them. They were just two earwigs that passed on the log.

Faritook wavered nervously as Shanamook approached him, his prepared compliment ready to be spoken. Shanamook was desperate to make him understand that she just wasn't interested. An idea came to her, one she knew would rattle Faritook's central nerve cord forever. When she got close to him she stopped, casually plopped her reddish brown abdomen against the bark, and excreted explosively, causing a nearby centipede to bolt away screaming. She wiggled out the last of it and proceeded on her way, convinced Faritook would no longer want her after such a gross-out.

But Faritook's antennae began to twirl with excitement. "Hello Shanamook!" he said as she passed. "You're looking quite beautiful this afternoon."

Shanamook's compound eyes double bugged out. Was he *blind*? She was in disbelief, could think of nothing to say, so she ignored Faritook altogether and kept walking. What else could she do? After reaching a patch of orange fungi she glanced back: Faritook just stood there with extended mandibles, staring at her cerci. "What a roach!" she clicked to herself.

After Shanamook disappeared behind the fungi, Faritook raced into a nearby fissure, not wanting to be seen. He paced along the length of the crack, antennae dragging, trying to figure out what he'd done wrong (the image of her unladylike excretion now a suppressed memory). Had he not spoken the words correctly, politely, and genuinely? Why had she ignored him? Perhaps it was the way he looked?

Faritook got an idea, and a short time later, was rummaging through the closet of his bachelor chamber. "Where is it? Where is it?" he muttered, using his pincers to toss out all kinds of crap he'd collected from a nearby campsite. "I know you're in here somewhere!"

It was only after he'd made a complete mess of the place that he found what he was looking for: a piece of red frill taken from a discarded toothpick. He went over to a shard of mirror and wrapped the frill around his neck like a scarf. I look *good*, he thought to himself. Sophisticated. Debonair!

"Now she'll just *have* to stop and talk with me!" he said with confidence.

At about the time Shanamook was due to return, Faritook stood on the earwig trail with his slick new scarf blowing in the wind. "Any minute now," he said with eagerness. But after half an hour, Shanamook had still not returned. Faritook began to worry. Was she lost? Hurt? Drained by a spider? In the belly of a woodpecker?

Faritook cried out: "Shanamook, where are you? Why have you not returned?"

A passing banana slug stopped in front of Faritook and said, "Hey...Fari...took. Saw...Shana...mook...not...long...ago. She...is...okay. Do...not...worry. She...is...—"

"She's what!" Faritook interrupted.

"She...is...at...—"

"She's at what! Where is she? You fool!"

"Minta...mook's...place," the slug finished.

"Mintamook's place? But what would she be doing at *Mintamook's* place?"

"I...don't...—"

“Never mind!”

“Right. No...time...for...chit...chat,” the banana slug went on.

“Got...to...be...at...end...of...log...by...twi...light. Sons...of...*bitches*...rac...coons.”

But Faritook was already on his way to Mintamook’s, out past the orange fungi in a heavily decayed area beyond the colony. When he arrived at the entrance he noticed a peculiar thing: the hole leading to Mintamook’s chamber was stuffed with moss. That’s odd, Faritook thought, it doesn’t look like it’s going to rain.

A moan came from deep within the hole, and Faritook ran around the moss in distress.

“Shanamook!” he yelled, “What is Mintamook doing to you!”

But Faritook knew. He knew because he’d seen it all before: the cruelty of his species, the pain they often inflicted upon one other. Yes, Faritook knew – knew that his beloved Shanamook was being tortured in the dark wet depths of the underbark!

“I’ll save you!” Faritook yelled as he pried out the moss with his pincers. As soon as the hole was open he leapt in, legs-a-blur as he ran to Shanamook’s rescue. His antennae flew back and his scarf blew off. Nothing could stop him.

The passageway was very dark, lit only occasionally by the smeared bellies of fireflies. Light from a chamber at the far end fluctuated with movement and Faritook sped towards it, determined to become Shanamook’s hero. When he reached the entrance he enlarged himself and burst into the chamber.

“Take your filthy legs off her, you damn dirty bug!”

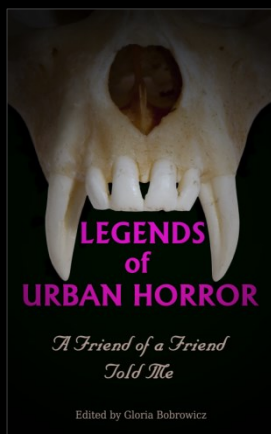
Shanamook and Mintamook turned their heads with a screech, their antennae shooting straight up into the air. But Faritook screeched loudest, for Shanamook sat limberly on a patch of moss, her six legs spread eagle. Mintamook was in front of her, leaning forward, her head near Shanamook’s ovipositor.

“Get the hell out of here, Faritook!” they yelled.

“Or I’ll tear your puny thorax out!” Mintamook added, opening her pincers.

Unable to regain his composure, Faritook turned and ran down the corridor as fast as he could – completely confused, totally heartbroken, his reproductive organ stiff as a rose thorn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jason Sturner grew up along the Fox River in northern Illinois. He is of European and Native American descent. Of his many jobs, the most interesting were bird bander, graphic designer, and botanist. His stories and poems have appeared in *Space and Time Magazine*, *Star*Line*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and *Liquid Imagination*, among others. He currently lives near the Great Smoky Mountains. Website: www.jasonsturner.blogspot.com.



Legends of Urban Horror: A Friend of a Friend Told Me

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CreateSpace, Smashwords, Apple,
and Barnes & Noble

Tents *Julianne Snow*

Looking out my front window I can see them. Just hanging out in their tents. Like disgusting little campers on vacation in my rhododendrons. It makes my skin crawl!

That's it, I've had enough! I'm going to call the exterminator and be rid of them once and for all. If only I could stop watching them for a moment, I could find the number and give it a call.

But I have to watch them. How can I keep track of them if I don't?

I just saw one of them look at me - I swear I really did. They've erected one of their tents close to my front window and it looked me straight in the eye as I kept vigil. I have never seen such cunning until now.

They know I'm watching; I can feel it in my bones. And now I think they're watching me. I can barely stand to leave the window... I've starting taking notes on their movements. Trying to figure them out. What is their plan? In the past two days they've taken over another one of my rhododendrons.

That's it! Domination. They want to possess my yard for themselves. We'll I'm not going to let that happen. Not on my watch, no way.

Where is that number? I have to get back to the window; they could be making their move as I search. Got it! Now back to the window.

"Hello? I have a problem. They're trying to get into the house; they've already surrounded me in the yard so I need you to get here as quick as you can..." I breathe quietly into the phone.

"Yes. In the yard. Come quick before they get me. They've set up their tents and they know I'm in the house." I try to make them understand.

"Thank you, thank you! I'll stay inside until you get here. Hurry!" I place the phone into its cradle and retake my position at the window, waiting for the sounds of sirens in the distance.

Spiders... *Julianne Snow*

The spider spins its sticky strands, ever focused on the suckers who stroll hazardously close. A simple jostle of a string sends the message of visitors, each one a casualty of the silk. Spin and spin; spindly legs working steadfastly to isolate, cosset, and stockpile. Hesitating for a second, the spider springs. Skinny legs support the stout soma of mastication. Single snips and smacks of spider lips show no surrender, scoffing down each morsel of slurped self-indulgence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - It was while watching Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of 6 which solidified Julianne's respect for the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own.

Days with the Undead: Book One is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. Along with many zombie shorts published on her blog, she has a story in *Women of the Living Dead* as well as two zombie pieces; a standalone short and a collection called *Glimpses of the Undead* releasing the summer of 2013. Julianne's second novel in her *Days with the Undead* series will also be released in 2013. Stay tuned!

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Including our
most recent issues
celebrating
**Women in Horror
and Men in
Horror!**



Food for the Masses *Alex Chase*

Dean felt his legions crawling across his flesh, skittering around eagerly as he watched the female bartender from The Hive, a popular club, walk through the subway terminal. He had been following her since she got off work, managing to avoid being detected even as he switched from the F train to the D train with her. But he was no fool. No, the scrawny little redhead had no chance of detecting him. Crawling through shadows as quickly and quietly as his servants meant that was far too stealthy for the likes of her to become aware of his presence.

The thousands of tiny insects that scurried across his body moved faster, responding to his body's secretion of increased adrenaline and predatory pheromones. Yes, they could smell that they would soon feed, their appetites whetted by the prospect of fresh meat. *Soon, children. Soon.*

Dean first crossed paths with the twenty-something-year-old at SuperFoods. The scent of her youthful body immediately quickened his pulse and sent a surge of blood to his groin. The chittering of this colony and the throbbing in his pants nearly caused him to attack her right there in the store, though he restrained himself. Passing him by without a glance, the woman would never have suspected his true power, as he was still trapped in the human body he'd been born with. At five-foot-nine and 175 pounds, he wasn't a threatening sight- though his working in dark magicks had changed that. He was the master of the fire ants, and when the time was right, the legends of the chosen one joining their ranks would be made real. He would become the Fire King.

The svelte bitch sauntered up a dirty stairwell towards the street. Dean couldn't help but stare at the delicious swell of her rear. Framed, or perhaps constrained, by the taut fabric of her jeans, with powerful legs that terminated in dangerously sharp stilettos, she radiated confidence as well as dominance. Supple and firm, her body was no doubt full of nutrients. Oh, she would be quite the conquest indeed, just the morsel they had been looking for.

Perhaps she'll be the final victim?

Emerging into the cool night air of the city streets, Dean sidled to the left, along the crumbling brick wall as he skirted the halos of lamplight that threatened to give him away. Ahead, the voluptuous treat he'd selected for tonight's meal ran a manicured hand through the fiery red pixie haircut atop her head.

Dean's heart nearly stopped as the phone rang, and he barely suppressed a sigh of relief when he realized it was hers. She took out her phone, none the wiser to his presence, and cheerfully said, "Hey mom, what are you still doing up?"

His gaze fell on a small tattoo at the base of her neck. It was a peace sign with 'RIP Michael Eisner' written above and '9 – 11– 01' below. The mark was of no concern to him. *There will be time to mourn your losses after The Rise, not that you'll be alive for that.*

"Relax mom, I'm fine. I've been living here for what, six years? You can stop calling to check up on me!" A bright laugh escaped her lips and it rang out across the street as she turned to her left and cut down an alley. The ants that scuttled across him began moving even faster. It was apparent that they too could smell how full of health and happiness and *life* she was and god *damn* if she wasn't going to be a worthy choice!

Unable to resist his urges any longer, he darted up behind her and grabbed the soft, inviting flesh of her shoulder, spinning her around. For an instant, Dean was afraid he'd followed the wrong woman, as he'd forgotten how beautiful she was from the front. Smooth, pale, unblemished skin adorned her lithe body and her off-the-shoulder shirt perfectly showed off the tops of her perfect albeit small breasts.

A clatter resounded as her phone dropped to the ground and Dean pressed her back against the wall, their brief scuffle obscured by a beaten up dumpster. Ignorant to his designs, the little tramp had no knowledge of the glorious cause she was about to become a part of. Tightening his crushing grasp around her throat, he smiled as he watched her try and fail to scream.

“Yes,” Dean said quietly, drinking in her fear. “Yes, you’ll do nicely.”

Watching her squirm, Dean began to laugh, listening to her mother’s voice yelling ‘hello’ from the dropped phone. “Yes, writhe and struggle if you wish, because all you are is a mindless little thing who thinks the world revolves around her. I know your type, the hot young bitch who thinks she runs the world because most people can’t take their eyes off her chest. Tonight is going to be different though. You will burn alive for your life of sin. Now, go my minions, and cleanse this world of yet another corrupt being.”

Dean’s army of fire ants swarmed down his arm, crawling onto her supple body. A wild excitement swelled in his stomach, coursing through his veins as more ants crawled across her. Soon, he buried his face in her cleavage to suppress the sound of the deep laughter that tore its way out of him. Hundreds of venomous ants crossed her milky skin, biting as they swarmed her. Dean pressed his body against her, feeling his erection twitch painfully as the woman attempted to scream. Still laughing, he let go; there was no need to hold her any longer.

The woman collapsed, her body unable to withstand the assault of the venom that coursed through her veins. His legions crawled into her mouth and ears, bit her eyes as they rolled back into her head, and soon found their way between her legs. Every cavity and crevice was subjected to the ants’ brutality. Writhe in agony, but unable to scream, the paralyzed woman choked on her own saliva and prayed that death would come soon.

Dean began to laugh. This was the fate that arrogant people deserved- to have the bodies they take for granted ripped apart and the lives they don’t appreciate cut short.

He, too, had been such a person once, but had since been enlightened. In the blackness of the night, a demon had come to him, explaining that the time of humanity’s reign over Earth was ending, and that he had been chosen to lead the True Beings to power. The ants had become the purpose of his life, and as long as they fed, he would live forever.

Spasmed on the ground, his latest victim watched helplessly as his boot smashed through her discarded phone. The steady crunch of gravel beneath her murderer’s feet echoed inside the woman’s skull as he walked away, not bothering to look back.

Dean was back at his apartment, which was devoid of furniture, aside from a single chair and a twenty-inch TV perched atop an old milk crate. Though the news was playing indistinctly in the background, he had his head buried in yet another thick, dusty textbook. Piles of books surrounded him, their subjects covering things from entomology to demonology and many others in between, though he carefully avoided politics and psychology. The former was nothing more than the study of fools engaging in pointless quests to prove themselves the most powerful and influential of all their allegedly equal counterparts, with every man and woman in the field swearing to protect the interests of their people and rarely, if ever, living up to their promises. Even human monarchies had become abusive, tyrannical nightmares that led to mass uprisings and general chaos.

The latter was an even more offensive pseudoscience. Its founders and even modern ‘professionals’ insist that human thought originated with primates and that egocentrism is the natural and most logical behavior for human beings. But they are wrong, oh yes, how wrong they are to not see that true societal perfection lies in a complete lack of self- in an undying and unwavering servitude to a single governing entity. By separating social power from humanistic concerns.

The morons on Capitol Hill and their equally imbecilic counterparts rotting away in laboratories as they experiment monkeys would never understand the perfection of ant society- not without his helping them. Only through death and bloodshed, through sacrifice of the most worthy individuals, can the True Beings regain their rightful place as the highest predator in the food chain.

It would not be long before this happened either, as he could feel the agitation in his subjects. Their numbers multiplying, their bodies growing, their venom becoming more dangerous by the day, Dean knew that the time of their rising was eminent. Humanity would fall, and he would lead the few believers to paradise.

"Ow!" Dean cried out, shifting his heel. There, scuttling through the floorboards, was a half-inch long fire ant.

But that wasn't right. It couldn't be a fire ant; he'd made a pact swearing his eternal fealty to the in order to realize his dream. In return, it was said that the ants would never bite their ruler.

Then came the clack of dangerously sharp stilettos on the floorboards behind him. He swatted at another stinging bite on his neck, leaping to his feet as he turned to face the figure behind him.

"Hello, Dean." Standing before him was the woman from the alley. Bright red ants were crawling in and out of dime-sized holes in her flesh. Bulges twisted and squirmed beneath her epidermis as the tiny insects burrowed through her muscle tissues. Moving toward him, his heart began to race as much from his subjects suddenly turning on him as from the deliberate, exaggerated sway of her hips. Staring at him with blank, white eyes, she gave him a tight-lipped smile as she shut off the TV.

"You... I... What...?" Stumbling backwards, he tripped over a precariously stacked pile of books, landing on the floor with a thud.

"The ants will not bite their leader, remember?" As she said this, a small waterfall of ants tumbled from her mouth, scattering as they hit the floor. Another two burning stings alerted Dean to more biting. Hyperventilating, he began to silently pray to every angel and devil he could name in hopes they would bring the ants back to their senses and acknowledge his divine right to rule them. Her fiery red hair seemed to wave and flicker as if actually alight, though he saw it was just dozens of the insects crawling across her scalp.

"This is impossible! I am the leader! You were just another sacrifice, another petty bitch!" Dean screamed, leaping to his feet and shoving the woman. On contact, her skin seethed and several dozen curious insects exploded from her, jumping onto and sinking their mandibles into the man who dared to strike her. Falling back to the ground, Dean tried to scream again, but was cut short as his vocal cords constricted and his muscles locked up. His nerves seemed to ignite, desperately begging his brain to find a way to escape, though one did not exist.

"No, Dean," she said, leaning over him and allowing another score of ants to cascade down onto his writing body. "You are no leader. You are just a pathetic little thing that couldn't find a way to be happy, so he decided to make everyone else miserable. You couldn't live, so everyone else had to die. But you were wrong. You were not chosen to be a leader, you were chosen to be a vessel."

He looked up at her with pleading eyes. They begged for mercy, but moreover, they begged for answers.

A light chuckle escaped her lips. "Why, you ask?" Stepping over him, she walked to his front door, glancing back as he began to spasm. "It's simple, really. Every colony needs a queen."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is New Jersey based writer and student who enjoys using literature, especially horror fiction, to get at what it really means to be human.

To date, he has had thirteen short stories accepted for publication, which have been featured in anthologies such as *Bellows of the Bone Box* and *50 Shades of Decay*, and is in the process of finalizing his first novel. When not writing or editing fiction, he enjoys dabbling in non-fiction and media writing. He is a member of the Horror Writer's Association. You can find him at www.facebook.com/AlexChaseWriter, @alexchasewriter and theendlesschase.wordpress.com.



Come Into My Parlor *Timothy C. Hobbs*

The year-long hibernation was over. Hunger reverberated throughout its body as it began to awaken amid the moldy earth, the dust, and the darkness.

The high point of Halloween for the residents of Hico, Texas was the one night opening of Gus Peterson's Spook Barn, an event started years ago. The old barn was dilapidated and not used other than on Halloween. It was a great location for The Spook Barn. Its crumbling beams, littered old and musty straw, profuse spider webs, and roosting birds and bats only added to the atmosphere.

It was anticipated that this year all two hundred and fifty souls living in the small community of Hico would brave The Spook Barn before the night was over. Peterson, his wife and two sons, Ernest and James, went all out to fix up as many scares and screams as they could.

When the first car arrived, Gus shooed his family into their hiding places and awaited the earliest customers.

Gus, dressed in werewolf garb, growled and snarled as he took the five dollar admission from each of the three teenage boys and their dates. Gus raised his head and offered a blood curdling howl to the delight of the girls and the snickers of the boys as the group passed through the heavily cobwebbed entrance.

Gus looked out through the eye slits of his mask and saw three more carloads approaching.

As the second group, this one a young married couple and their parents, came walking up, the sound of a screeching chainsaw could be heard from inside along with shrieks of terror.

"Sounds like another good one this year, Gus," one of the couple's father's said.

Gus shook his hairy head. "You bet" came out muffled from under his mask.

The night progressed splendidly. As Gus had expected, just about everyone in town had turned out.

The people of Hico remained after the The Spook Barn was officially closed for the night. The small town residents ate hardily from a long table set up with fried chicken, roast beef, mashed potatoes, an array of vegetables, and pecan and pumpkin pies. The atmosphere was that of a harvest celebration. The people talked pleasantly about the bountiful fall crops and how blessed they had been.

Gus pulled his oldest son Ernest to the side.

"Where's the Davis brothers and Herbert Tolar? They're the only ones from town not accounted for," Gus asked Ernest.

"I expect Herbert ain't in too much of a hurry to get here," Ernest said as he chewed on a tough piece of roast.

"You mean he drew the short straw?"

"Yes sir. I suppose I shouldn't have told you, but I think you should know why the Davis boys will be bringing him here shortly in a subdued condition."

"Subdued?"

Unable to pulverize it, Ernest spit out the bit of roast. "The rest of the council figured Herbert would wait until everybody was out here then make a run for it. That's why the Davis brothers stayed behind to watch him. They called me earlier on my cell and told me they caught Herbert trying to do just that. They hog-tied him and put him in their pickup's bed."

Gus shook his head. "I won't tell nobody you told me ahead of time, son." He then sighed and added, "You and James best see if that thing is awake."

"Yes sir."

At a quarter of midnight, all the people cleared the table, and then they walked to their respective vehicles; they returned later dressed in dark, brown-hooded robes. Torches were lit around the barn. The people then gathered together in a circle.

Just before the witching hour, seven people dressed in white robes came out of the barn. Along with Ernest, Gus' other son James was one of them. The group of seven approached the circle.

"The sacrifice has been selected. The season is secured," James proclaimed.

The crowd made a collective murmur of approval just as a pickup drove up.

Two men got out of the truck and removed a squirming captive from the pickup's bed.

Words mixed with panic came from the crowd. "He must not be struggling." "He must go willingly." "He will ruin the sacrifice."

Herbert Tolar was shoved toward the barn, his face stricken with terror.

Ernest joined James and took Herbert from his captors; they motioned for someone to step forward from the circle. Herbert's wife and three daughters obeyed.

"Would you rather they go in your place?" James asked Herbert.

Herbert stared pitifully at his family. In a moment he shook his head no.

"Untie him," Ernest said to the others dressed in white. Two came forward and removed the ropes.

Herbert began to weep. "Please," he begged. "I don't want to die."

"Die for the good of all," the crowd chanted, Herbert's family verbalizing louder than the others.

Herbert lowered his head. He turned and walked toward the barn with James and Ernest. Inside of the old building, they stripped him of his clothes and took him to an old door hidden by the rear shadows of the barn.

"You must enter of your own will," Ernest commanded.

Herbert started to plead again but stopped. Knowing his lot was cast, Herbert slowly turned the doorknob and stepped inside; he then closed the door behind him.

There was little light in the room. Most of it came from the burning torches outside. The shadows cast by the torch light undulated along the thick covering of webs that obscured most of the area, making the gossamer seem alive and breathing.

Herbert fell to his knees. In a trembling voice he implored, "Come and take me. Protect our land, our crops, and our harvest for one more year. Seal it with my blood, my flesh, and my bones."

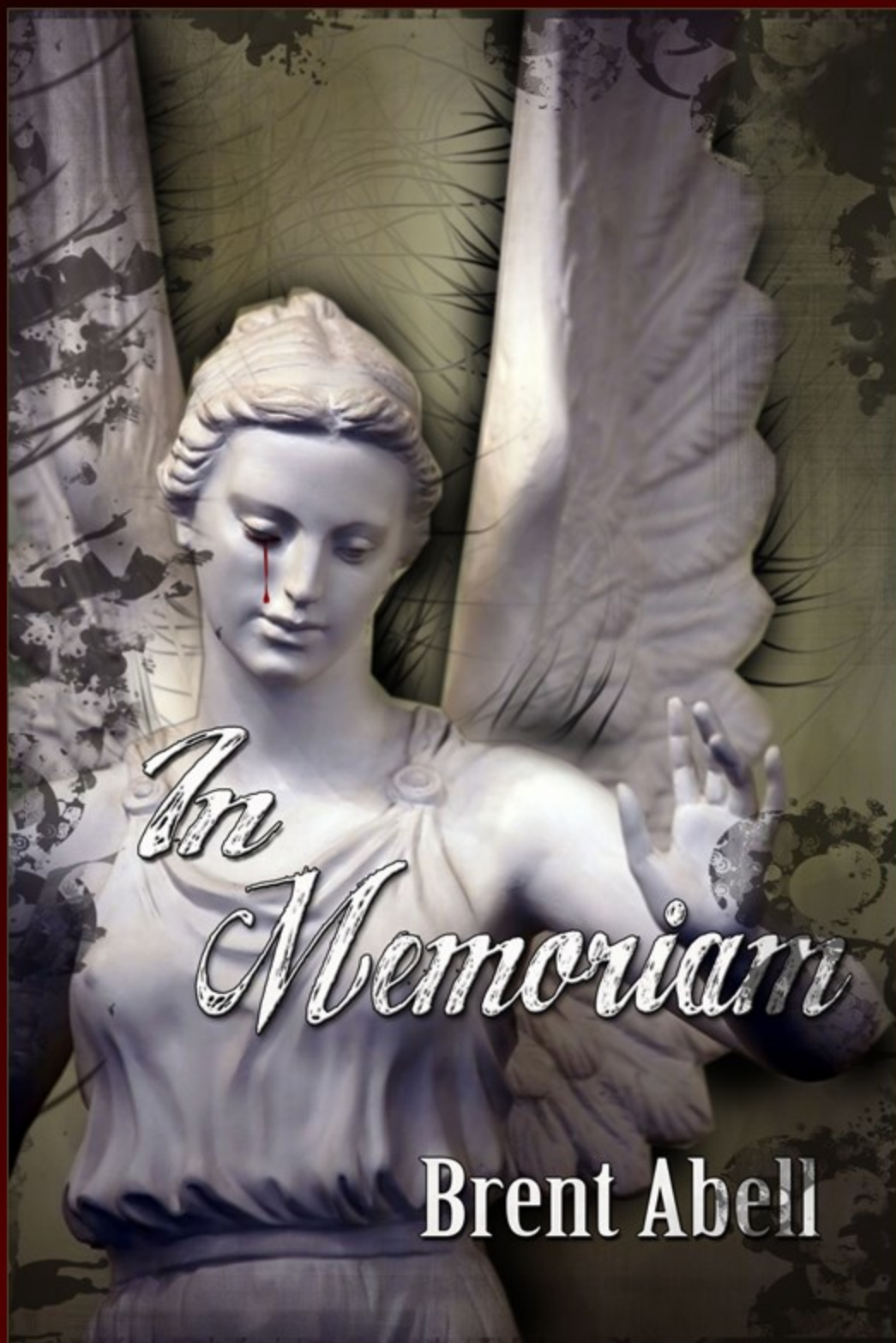
Herbert heard a soft mewling; he then saw a giant grey form begin to crawl forward.

An old saying from childhood came into Herbert's mind as fangs penetrated his head and injected paralytic venom that rushed quickly throughout out his body.

"Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly" faded in Herbert's brain as eight legs embraced him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Timothy Hobbs is a retired Medical Technologist living in Robinson, Texas. He has had short stories and poems published in New Texas (an annual literary collection of Texas writers) in 1999, 2000, and 2002, a short story and flash fiction piece in Dark Tales, a U.K. publication, and a short story in *spinetinglermag.com*, an on-line Canadian magazine. He has also published a short story collection, *Mothertrucker and Other Stories* and a novel *Veils* through Publish America in 2008. His novels *The Pumpkin Seed* and *Music Box Sonata*, and a novella *The Smell of Ginger*, were published by Vamplit Publishing in the United Kingdom and recently republished by Visionary Press. His new novel *Maiden Fair* was published by Netherworld Books in the United Kingdom in 2013. Tim's author page can be viewed at Amazon.com.

"Abell should feel proud that he's mixed such painful emotion so artfully into true unabashed horror." ~ Amazon Reviewer



Available on Amazon, Smashwords & CreateSpace

Revenge *L.E. Jamez*

Visiting a client for the first time always gave Bill goosebumps. What would he find? Ants, rats, mice, wasps, or something else? Walking up the path slowly, his eyes would dart over the ground, the walls, roof eaves searching for a tell tale sign of what he had to look forward to. Today it felt like all his Christmases had come at once. Everywhere he looked there was an indication of unwanted guests. Rat and mice droppings covered the path, ants scurried about carrying their heavy loads.

He knocked on the front door and waited, mentally calculating the amount of money he could successfully charge. A small woman opened the door, smiling Bill held out his hand, "Afternoon. Ms. Byron?" the woman just looked at Bill, then his hand, her fingers moving and swaying as if she were playing a piano. Shaking his head Bill realised he had been staring at her hands, mesmerised by the unusual movement. "You called enquiring about my services, and can I say you did the right thing." Lowering his hand, he gestured towards the garden, "There is plenty of evidence of pests around your grounds."

The woman backed away from the door with no words, shuffling on legs that twitched and moved so violently, Bill was convinced that she would fall. "Ms. Byron?" Taking her silence for acceptance, Bill entered the house, eyes darting everywhere. His heart sang as no matter where he looked he saw signs of severe infestation, cockroach casings, rat droppings, dead flies, spider webs in every corner. Moving further into the house Bill became aware of the air, full of dust particles and mites that were even now attacking his sinuses and throat. Coughing slightly he called out "Could I possibly get a glass of water?"

The tickling at the back of his throat worsened causing Bill to stumble into the wall, "Please.....glass.....water," he croaked between coughing spasms as he slowly slid to the floor. He watched through tear soaked eyes as the woman he thought of as Ms. Byron slowly changed into a seething mass of cockroaches, ants, beetles and spiders and started to scurry over the floor towards him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LE Jamez is a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, who has been obsessed with horror from an early age. Recently she decided to share her love of horror with the world and her first collection of flash fiction 'Kitchen Antics & Other Tales' was released as an ebook in May 2013. Feel free to stalk Laura on twitter via @lejamez and Facebook www.facebook.com/officemango.

Bellows of the Bone Box: A Steampunk Anthology

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace,
Shashwords, Apple, and Barnes &
Noble



Old Henry's Worms *Jon Olson*

The hatchet cut through and buried itself in Old Henry Gorman's head. The old man's body fell to the ground landing on his back with a thud then splat as his crushed skull followed suit. The life was fading fast from his eyes but not before they met the eyes of his killer one last time, then rolled up inside his head. Blood flowed freely from the wound and it began to soak into the soil of Old Henry's garden located behind his trailer. The trailer sat in a small secluded clearing of the woods just outside of Westwood, Nova Scotia and the seclusion was one of the reasons Drew Lawrence chose to rob it. The thirty year old had met Old Henry on a couple of occasions posing as a fisherman in need of bait. Old Henry harvested the worms in the garden with the sole purpose of selling them off to fishermen. He took great care of them and on more than one occasion people heard him talking soothingly to the worms. It was rumored that he had amassed quite a stack of money over the years which Drew was counting on. He was fresh out of prison and needed a quick score to get himself back on his feet.

Drew grabbed a shovel that was lying beside the garden and drove the spade into the loose soil.

"You know something, old man," Drew said as he tossed shovelfuls of dirt to the side, "you made this so easy. You lived... secluded from the rest of the world and... you maintained this garden so well that... I'm hardly breaking a sweat digging your grave."

Thanks to his large frame from brief stints of manual labor, the shallow grave was dug in no time. Drew dragged the old man's body over to the gaping hole and kicked it in. He became aware that his bladder was full and giggled when he urinated on the body as a finishing touch.

"I thought you might be thirsty." Drew said. He tossed his head back and laughed.

Once he had his fly zipped up, Drew tossed the shovel away and stormed towards the trailer eager to find the old man's stashed fortune. He didn't look back at the grave but if he had, he would've seen that something was not quite right with the soil. Hundreds of small wet reddish-brown wriggling tips with traces of Old Henry's blood began protruding through the recently broken ground to the surface creating a rippling effect throughout the entire garden.

"Where the fuck is it?" Drew screamed.

He had spent that last hour and half rummaging through the run down trailer. The kitchen and living room were essentially one room divided by a poorly kept counter. Cupboards had been ripped open with dishes and other containers thrown about. The only piece of furniture in the living room was a ratty green couch and Drew had torn all the cushions apart as well as the back padding to no avail. He was now in the bedroom and wasn't having much luck there either.

Frustrated, he grabbed a porcelain lamp off of the wooden dresser in the bedroom and threw it against the wall. It smashed and the pieces scattered in all directions. Drew was breathing heavy and his ears burned bright red as his blood pressure climbed. He ran his hand through his sweaty brown hair and tried to think.

Where would someone hide money? Where would someone-

He cocked his head to the side and looked at Old Henry's single bed. The wool blankets hung loosely off the sides, and as Drew followed the fabric down something caught his eye. Thundering over, he bent down grabbing the bed frame and flipped it over. Cut into the wooden floor was a small door. He could see that there was light shining up from underneath through wide gaps in the floor boards.

Getting on his hands and knees, Drew began to search for a handle or something to pull the door open with. He didn't have to search for very long when he felt a crude handle cut into one of the boards and he managed to squeeze his fingers into it. Gripping it, he slowly pulled the door open and could see a small ladder descending into what looked like a small dirt cellar.

"Bingo."

Drew lowered himself into the small opening and searched with his foot until he found a rung on the ladder. Climbing down, thoughts of what he would find entered Drew's mind. He pictured a large safe filled with bills of different denominations and large buckets filled with coins. A chill went through him as he reached the last rung due mostly to the cellar being very damp and cold. Turning around to face the rest of the room, Drew's expectations dropped.

The floor and walls of the cellar were not reinforced by anything but the soil with a sparse root system poking out here and there. At the far wall was a badly constructed wooden table that held a small safe amongst a pile of soil encrusted plastic containers. A small single light bulb hung from the ceiling with the cord running up through one of the gaps between the floorboards and it acted as the only source of light. To Drew, it was like the rest of Old Henry's belongings: complete shit. He stormed towards the table, feeling rage building again, with his eyes on the small safe. A quick thought that the floor seemed very uneven entered his mind but was quickly pushed out.

The floor and the walls were in fact moving.

Drew reached out and swatted most of the plastic containers off of the table onto the floor. He grasped the small safe and pulled it towards him. A glimmer of hope sparked inside as the safe felt heavy like it was full and Drew cried out in excitement when he discovered the safe wasn't locked. He lifted the latch and opened the door.

"Henry, you son of a bitch," Drew said smiling.

Inside the safe were stacks of dollar bills, neatly sorted into piles according to their denomination. He reached inside and pulled out a small stack of hundred dollar bills, thumbing through them like he was shuffling cards. The big grin on his face gave way to laughter as Drew's suspicion was finally confirmed. He scored the Big One.

Dirt sprinkled onto the table from the wall and Drew brushed it away with the back of his hand. More dirt dropped onto the table and then a worm plopped on top of the safe. Drew looked at it, and promptly crushed it with the ball of his fist. He felt its insides squirt out smearing onto his skin and when he lifted his fist he looked at the squished invertebrate with smug superiority.

"Stupid worm," He laughed some more as he went back to inspecting the contents of the safe, "this is it, Drew. You did it. You hit the big time."

A sound began to resonate through the cellar like the pitter-patter of rain. It started off slow at first but then picked up until it sounded like a down pour. Small objects began to land on Drew and he turned around to see worms falling through the floorboards into the cellar. There were hundreds of them. He looked down at the floor and the floor was alive in a sea of wet and reddish-brown segmented tubular bodies. When he looked harder Drew realized that they weren't just falling from the ceiling but were also coming up through the ground.

Using his right forearm as a shield from the falling worms, Drew put the money back inside the safe and then cradled it in his left arm. It was heavy but he managed to hug it against his body as he started to make his way towards the ladder. He started stomping at the worms at first but soon found that keeping his balance amongst the moving floor was growing more difficult.

The cellar was filling fast and by the time he reached the base of the ladder, he was already knee deep in night crawlers. He grabbed a rung with his right hand and was about to start climbing when the door at the top suddenly slammed closed from the weight of the worms.

"What the hell?" Drew cried.

He was faced with a tough decision to make. To climb the ladder and open the door, he would need both of his hands which meant that he would have to put the safe down. When he looked down at the slithering and rippling mass of worms that was now up to his mid thighs, he knew he would probably lose the safe.

I can come back for it, he thought.

Drew dropped the safe and it slowly sank into the wet and reddish-brown abyss. When it disappeared he grabbed hold of the ladder and started to climb. Worms were crawling on all of the rungs which made getting his grip difficult and pulling his legs out of from depths of the massive night crawler congregation took a lot more strength than he anticipated. Rung by rung he slowly ascended the ladder until he was near the top. Drew reached up with one hand and tried to push the door open. It budged a little bit but was weighed down heavily by more worms. Realizing that it would require both hands, Drew carefully balanced himself and extended his arms up. He pressed his palms against the door and after a quick three count he pushed as hard as he could.

The door opened completely and Drew cried out in triumph, but when the door banged against the floor it sent a large wave of worms tumbling down through the doorway. Most hit him in the face and when he tried to swat them away with his hands, Drew lost his balance. His hands swung out trying to grasp onto anything to keep from falling but all he caught was air and worms. He fell from the ladder but it wasn't a long descent as he landed on top of the rising worms. They started to crawl into the openings of his clothes, wriggling down his body and even finding their way into his groin.

Drew tried to sit up as his hands diving underneath his clothes trying to eliminate the intruders but suddenly felt the worms underneath him thinning out. He began to sink into the mass as the worms parted beneath him and Drew became more desperate.

"No! Let me go!" he cried.

He was swallowed into the mass and then they filled in over the top of him. It was dark and the only sound he could hear besides his own panic stricken screams was the worms slurping as they crawled over top of one another. His screams were muffled as they filled his mouth, his tongue tasting dirt and a hint of blood. As he bit down he could feel their innards oozing between his teeth while a few smaller ones were crawling along his bottom gum line. Drew gagged as they wriggled up his nose and nasal cavities, with some even crawling down the back of his throat. His breathing became labored and within seconds each breath was a gasp that brought in a new flush of worms.

The worm's constant movement allowed trace amounts of oxygen to trickle down to Drew which his lungs screamed for but wasn't enough to prevent death from coming. Instead, it only served to prolong the wriggling suffocation underneath the massive, collective body of Old Henry's worms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Aside from being a horror/dark fiction author, Jon also works full time as a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L Stanfield International Airport. While he mainly writes short and flash fiction, he has recently completed his first novella and is also hoping to branch out to do some work in comics/graphic novels. When he is not working or writing, he can be found at his home in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife and four cats.

Twitter: @jonolsonauthor

Facebook: www.facebook.com/authorjonolson

Blog: jonolsonauthor.wordpress.com





A Bug's Life for Brannigan *Shaun Avery*

Brannigan was feeling the mellow midnight buzz of having consumed just enough drink and just enough dope when he saw the cockroach.

Which was nothing new, of course – not in *this* flat, at least. He had become accustomed to taking his twice-monthly baths with at least three or four dead bugs floating in the water. As far as he could remember, though, this was the first time he had seen one of them on the TV.

Not on top of the actual set.

Oh no.

But *inside* the screen.

It was the first time he had heard them speak, too.

Because that was when the cockroach looked out at him from TV land and said:

“Hey, Brannigan.”

This was pretty weird, he supposed. But mixing alcohol and drugs tended to do funny things to his mind, so he just went along with it.

“How you doing?” he replied, and raised a can to them.

The can was empty, he realised.

When had he drunk that?

Who knew? The hours, minutes and seconds of his life, they all blurred into one. And when you drank and smoked as much as he did, that whole could be *very* blurry indeed.

Brannigan reached down the side of the chair, groping for the pile of cans that had been sustaining him these past few days.

All the while, the insect on the screen watching him.

His fingers finding nothing, he looked over the side.

Saw that there were no cans left.

“Crap,” he said.

But never fear!

The fridge always held more. Much more.

So he went to stand.

But found that he couldn't move.

“Sorry about that,” the cockroach said. “But we need you to stay where you are for the moment.”

Many would have rebelled, at this point. Many would have been scared to find the use of their limbs taken away from them. But Brannigan was used to not doing much with his body, so he didn't really mind.

Instead, he just sat and watched.

On the screen, the cockroach was becoming not just a cockroach. He was growing in size, and standing on his two hind legs. Also, a stage had been revealed behind him, the camera view now panning out to show it, and chairs were being laid out before the stage.

He kept watching.

Saw hundreds of *other* enlarged cockroaches sitting in the chairs, looking towards the stage. Where the first insect, the one that had spoken to him, was now standing.

Brannigan blinked.

But when his eyes re-opened, the display on the screen still lay before him.

He hadn't left the house in weeks. Hadn't left his chair in days, not even for toilet breaks, just doing what came naturally into his clothes. But even *he* was starting to get a little crept out by this. He kind of hoped his mind was going, just like Sandy had always warned it would. For what was the alternative?

The cockroach on the stage said, “My fellow insects – please turn and give Lot 37 a wave.”

The insects on the screen, in the chairs, turned and flailed their front legs in his general direction.

As crazy as it was, he tried to return the gesture.

But found his limbs still unresponsive.

And inside his TV, the seated insects turned back to face the one onstage.

“An interesting one, this,” It said. “As you know, we’ve been watching Lot 37 for a while. And not just because the squalid conditions of his living quarters are like heaven to us.”

This prompted a mild chuckle from the audience.

“No,” It went on. “What makes Lot 37 so attractive to us, and the reason we have been given the chance to hold this auction, is the absolute waste he has made, and continues to make, of his life.”

As the lot in question, Brannigan tried to splutter out a response here.

But succeeded only in catching a whiff of his own rancid breath.

The audience insects seemed to be growing increasingly animated and restless now. Brannigan, on the other hand, felt panic beginning to take over. Hallucination or not, he didn’t like what this insect was saying. Or where this seemed to be going.

“We’ve all seen what’s on offer,” it continued. “We’ve all spent a lot of time in his flat, watching him. Now, who wants to start bidding on the life of John Brannigan?”

It looked around the audience.

“Who can do a better job in his skin than he has?”

The audience burst into pandemonium then, dozens of them jumping from their seats and vying for the lead insect’s attention. But before they found a winner, Brannigan finally succumbed to the inevitable and passed out.

When he woke, he knew that it was all true.

That it had not just been a hallucination.

He knew this because he was in the body of a cockroach.

And his old body was crouched down, looking at him.

“All we had to do,” his former voice said, spoken by its new owner, “Was tell the auctioneer what we would do, given the chance to own your body, to be human. The one who pitched the best John Brannigan Life Plan was the winner.” The mouth on the face smiled. “That’s me.”

His old legs drew themselves to full height. The voice becoming fainter as the mouth moved further away.

“We have to keep our promises, of course,” his voice went on, “or else there’ll be another auction, and someone else will get the chance to take my place as you.”

The mouth paused.

“But that’s not going to happen,” the creature that had usurped his identity then continued. “See, I intend to actually *leave* this flat.” It looked down at the clothes it wore, trousers and shirt congealed to flesh by a mixture of sweat, urine, faeces and remnants of food and drink. “Though I think I’ll take a nice hot bath first.”

The smile returned.

“Then I’m going to get a job. Make friends. And that girlfriend of yours, Sandy? I’m going to treat her the way she deserves to be treated. Yes, that’s right – I’m going to do all the things with your body and your time that you never did. And as for you?”

Brannigan looked up with his new insect eyes.

And saw the huge foot that had once been his stomping down towards him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Shaun Avery is a crime and horror fiction fan with numerous anthology appearances lined up for the coming year, as well as wins in fiction, non-fiction and comic scripting competitions and a recent shortlisting in a screenwriting contest. He can write vampire and zombie stories with nary a single sleepless night, but penning this insect-based tale gave him a few shivers. He hopes it does the same to you.

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Penumbra *Jason Sturmer*

An eclipse brought dusk to the morning. As sunlight waned from the busy farmstead, shadows drifted across the windmill, trees, and barns like ghostly slugs. A series of intensifying tremors shook the foundation of the settlement, sending workers fleeing in all directions. Moments later, the tremors subsided, and a thin body fell from the darkened sky, landing in the shadow of a grain silo.

A young slave, having watched the body fall, sensed something familiar in its aspect and ran towards the silo to investigate. She wasn't the only witness. Three soldiers had also observed the figure, had even been close enough to see it hit the ground . . . and moments later spring to its feet. Shaken, the figure made brief eye contact with each of the soldiers before escaping down a nearby hole, the excavation of an underground storage chamber. What concerned the soldiers most, however, was not that the body had survived the long fall, but that it was significantly larger than them, bore a pair of white wings and, most troublesome of all, possessed the abhorred skin tone and odor of a slave. As it was their duty to guard and protect the settlement, the three soldiers quickly entered the hole to track down and eliminate the threat.

Meanwhile, the distillation of sunlight remained constant. The farmhands, by nature anxious, chose to remain in hiding until signaled back to work. The three soldiers, on the other hand, continued their pursuit of the winged creature along a subterranean tunnel, unaware that the curious slave was not far behind them.

The soldiers soon reached the dimly lit storage chamber and peered inside: the creature was at the far end, clawing at the dirt walls in an effort to extend the tunnel. They entered discreetly, but the thing sensed them and turned around, popping open its wings and enlarging itself. The soldiers, in a quick, coordinated move, closed in on their target like a pack of wolves.

In response to the soldiers' actions, the eclipse produced a long stream of vibrations that burst through the darkened sky and impregnated the farmstead. Moments later, a soldier came stumbling out of the chamber and limped toward the slave, collapsing just a few steps away. The body went still, and the slave, not sensing any danger, stepped around the body and entered the chamber.

A reddish figure was pressed firmly against the far wall, its large wings contorted and severely damaged, its limbs twitching silently, its mouth agape, oozing fluid and stench. It was evident that the thing had defended itself vigorously, as two of the soldiers had succumbed to bodily gashes while the third, as she had seen, died in the tunnel. The slave approached the winged creature and looked it over. It was dead. It was also female.

The slave stared at the corpse for a long time. Although the creature was quite different than her, and although it lay lifeless before her eyes, she could not help but register a kinship with it. For one thing, its skin was pale red, just like hers. There were other physical similarities as well, and this affected the young slave greatly; so much so, in fact, that she sensed an influx of strange knowledge and a shift within her instincts, the combination of which made her realize that she did not belong at the settlement.

The slave left the chamber and returned to the surface. The eclipse had passed, and many workers had gone back to their assigned labors. Others rushed by on their way to the underground storage chamber to retrieve the crumpled corpses. It wasn't long before they were dragged to the surface and quickly dismembered, the black parts and the red parts carried into the system of tunnels beneath the colony.

Another eclipse occurred a short time later, again preceded by intensifying tremors that gave the impression of amplified footfalls. The young slave had since revolted against her captors and was now on the roof of a barn, a dying worker in her murderous grasp.

In an attempt to analyze its essence, the slave gazed up at the object in the sky. What she saw bore a

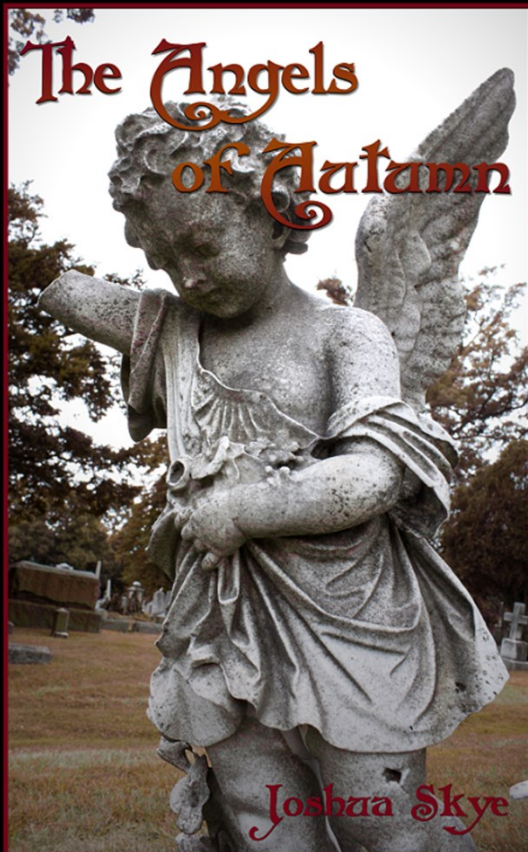
gruesome pink head topped by an entwined mass of thin antennae. A slowly swirling appendage lingered just inside a rounded opening beneath a set of what might have been eyes, though she couldn't be sure. The head itself was connected to a wide, rounded body from which dangled two long limbs that sank beneath the horizon. It swayed back and forth ever so slightly, allowing random beams of sunlight to shoot out from behind its immense form.

This, she realized, was the entity that had dropped her within the tall transparent walls of the farmstead, had taken her away from her home, from her own kind.

The hole in the creature's face began to expand and contort, releasing a high-pitched stream of vibrations that the slave could not decipher. Then it raised one of its long appendages, inverted a glass container, and dumped a countless number of red bodies into the narrow landscape of the farmstead.

The slave, watching this, tossed aside the black corpse and ran down the side of the barn to reunite with her brothers and sisters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jason Sturner grew up along the Fox River in northern Illinois. He is of European and Native American descent. Of his many jobs, the most interesting were bird bander, graphic designer, and botanist. His stories and poems have appeared in *Space and Time Magazine*, *Star*Line*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and *Liquid Imagination*, among others. He currently lives near the Great Smoky Mountains. Website: www.jasonsturner.blogspot.com.



The Angels of Autumn

Joshua Skye

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Shashwords,
Apple, and Barnes & Noble

Titan Alex Woolf

It all began with a misunderstanding – a simple lexical ambiguity that led to a cataclysmic error on my part, and now here I am, locked in a warehouse pumped with an atmosphere straight out of the Paleozoic era. Oh, and did I mention there's a killer on the loose?

I'm jumping ahead. Let's begin with that misunderstanding. It happened during a phone conversation three days ago with Rob Daniels, an old college friend.

"I've developed this new enlargement technique," he told me.

Well, I'm a fashion photographer by trade, so naturally I assumed that by *enlargement*, he meant...

"I'm testing it on Saturday," said Rob. "I could do with your expertise, assuming you're not out in the wilds somewhere with your gun..."

I should explain that in my spare time I like to hunt. I used to joke that I shoot women on weekdays and animals at weekends. In truth, I'm not that much of a hunter any more – not since I began moonlighting for the Forest Service. I'd never admit this to Dad, but nowadays I spend most weekends firing tranq darts from helicopters at the bears and wolves we used to kill for fun, so that conservationist do-gooders can fix radio collars to them and track where they go. Turns out that saving the critters pays better than killing them. Anyhow, it never occurred to me that it was my expertise with a tranq gun, rather than a camera, that Rob was hoping to make use of.

Rob gave me the address of a warehouse. It turned out to be a dull, single-story slab of grey, corrugated metal stuck in the middle of moorland, with nothing but a narrow ribbon of tarmac and a few phone wires connecting it to the nearest town twelve miles away. As I pulled into the virtually empty car park, the warehouse's only door slid open and Rob emerged. His pale, lined face split into a welcoming grin. He looked older than I expected, but then I hadn't seen him in a while. Our paths had diverged since college. Rob had spent his adult years in the lab being a physicist, or in his suburban semi being a husband.

"Mike! How are you?" His handshake was cool and tepid as a baby seal's.

"I'm okay, Rob. You're looking well."

His skin had the clammy, translucent look of someone who'd spent too long in striplitted basements.

"Thanks. You, too."

"How's Marie?" I asked him.

"No better," he replied vaguely.

I was grateful when he didn't elaborate.

We entered the warehouse, and I gasped. It was like the set of a big-budget sci-fi movie. Enclosed within the warehouse was another building made entirely of glass. Its transparent walls began some ten yards inside the warehouse's walls, and its flat ceiling hung about the same distance beneath the metal roof. The interior of the glass building was filled with huge tanks, pipes, consoles, monitors and cabinets filled with flickering lights and trailing wires like clumps of colourful spaghetti. In the centre was a big round glass column, about five yards wide and maybe ten high, pulsating with white light.

Enlargement? I was thinking. *More like he's harnessing cosmic rays or planning to teleport himself to Mars...*

Rob pressed a button in the glass wall and a section of it slid open with a high-tech hiss. It slid shut again as soon as we were inside. The glass room was warm enough to feel, within seconds, the stipple of sweat on my forehead. I followed Rob towards the transparent, light-filled column, which was emitting a low hum that undulated in pitch in sync with the pulsing light.

"Does it have to be so warm in here?" I complained.

"I'm afraid so."

I glanced at Rob, but he didn't elucidate.

The column was disappointingly empty when we arrived there, except for a small dark blob on the concrete floor. The blob moved, and I took a sharp, involuntary step backwards. "I've never seen one that size," I muttered.

The beetle was a good six inches in length, with a deep red, almost black wing case and long, curving antennae that waved about its head in blind, questing motions.

"Titanus giganteus," Rob said. "Commonly known as the titan. One of the largest of all known beetles. Those mandibles can cut pencils in half," he added cheerfully, "and slice into human flesh."

I wiped my forehead. The coffee tasted cold and sour on my tongue.

I've never cared for insects of any shape or size. I'm an outdoorsman, so I've encountered my share of aggressive critters – boars, bears, wolves, you name it. But not one of them gives me the jitters like coming upon a raging hornets' nest, or finding ants swarming all over my boots. I remember once, on a hunt, puking up my breakfast at the sight of a recently killed boar with its head literally alive with maggots.

Maybe we're designed to always seek ourselves in other life forms, and insects, with their armoured, segmented bodies, their mandibles like medieval torture implements, the loathsome quickness of their movements, are simply too alien for our tastes. Anyhow, coming upon one like this, on a scale approaching that of a kitten, was doing strange things to my stomach. I felt the need to sit down, press a cool flannel to my face. But there were no chairs or flannels in sight.

Rob moved to a console facing the column and pressed a button. The hum intensified to a quiet scream, and the white light turned a misty ultraviolet – so misty, our little six-legged friend disappeared from view.

"Time to enlarge," he murmured.

Before I could ask him exactly what he meant, the hum returned to its former low, quiet pitch and the ultraviolet mist faded back to ordinary light. The interior of the column was visible once more, and I saw immediately that things had changed in there.

The beetle, *Titanus giganteus*, was now the size of a cow.

My first reaction was panic: I could feel my stomach knotting and buckling, the hairs on my neck spiking up like sticks in a petrified forest. I became so tight inside I thought I might crack. A scalding heat seared my thigh and I realised I'd spilled my coffee. I wanted to run. Yet I was impaled by the sight of this creature, which seemed from another world. Every line and dimple in the long, leathery wing case was now revealed in painful, exquisite detail, as were the jagged serrations of its folded, crouching legs, and the ever-narrowing segments of its antennae, still waving and twisting like electrified cables. Worst of all: the brutal elegance of that glossy, ebony head with its mandibles the size of bull horns, their deadly sharp points opening and closing like pincers. A line of short, purplish-red bristles sprouted between the mandibles like a grotesque moustache. The large oval compound eyes, matte black, reflected nothing – no understanding, just cold. Hunter's eyes.

And then, quite abruptly, I began to laugh, perhaps a little hysterically. Everything was clicking into place. How stupid of me!

I've perfected a new enlargement technique. That was what he'd said. *I'm testing it on Saturday. I could do with your expertise.*

I was staring at a photograph, nothing more – a moving, three-dimensional photograph. This had to be some revolutionary type of hologram, an imaging technique that could blow things up to enormous

size and retain every detail with crystal clarity. He wants my opinion – my professional opinion – as a man who understands images. So let's start acting professional. He could have enlarged a fountain pen or a deck of cards. He just happened to choose a beetle. So don't let him think for even a moment that I was fooled, or frightened.

Forcing my stiff face into a grin, I ventured closer to the glass column. "This is impressive, Rob. Seriously! Fantastic resolution. The colour reproduction looks perfect. What are you using here? Lasers?"

Suddenly, as if sensing my presence, the monster skittered forwards so that the tips of its antennae seemed to scrape the inside of the glass.

I jerked back, my heart going like a hammer drill in my chest. I laughed again, to cover my embarrassment. "Jeez, it almost seems real."

"It *is* real," smiled Rob.

I turned in time to see the sparkle in his eye, and that was when I knew – or thought I knew – where he was going with this. It looked so real, it might as well be. That was the point. "I hear what you're saying, Rob. It *is* real. It's the real deal. You've done it. This beats everything – HD, blue ray, imax, 3-D. They can throw away their stupid glasses. This is the future of home entertainment, not to mention the applications for science and art. You're going to clean up with this thing!"

I was dreaming now – dreaming of a time very soon when flat paper magazines and photographs and screens would seem as quaint as gramophone records. The model I shoot on a Barbados beach on Saturday will be walking, true as life, through Birmingham living rooms on Sunday. I was euphoric, no longer scared. But I had to know more. What had he done here? How had he achieved this effect? I could see no mirrors or laser beams or any sort of recording medium. This couldn't be holography. Some sort of moving volumetric display perhaps? Or tomographic reconstruction? But then where were the projectors? I had to get a closer look.

"Hey, can I get inside there?"

"No," said Rob firmly.

On the console in front of him was a large, square, green-lit button. Clearly printed on its stainless steel surface was the word *OPEN*. Before he could stop me, I reached for the button and pressed it.

"No!" screamed Rob. "It's not yet in torpor."

"What?"

There was a loud hydraulic hiss as the glass column rose slowly from the floor. I expected the beetle image to flicker and vanish, but it didn't. Instead I was struck by a wave of hot air and a loud clicking sound as the magnified bug came straight at us. I felt the lash of a whip across my cheek, a piercing stab in my leg, mandibles like enormous crab claws opening and closing inches from my face. My body collapsed into a primal liquid terror. Everything went soft like dough, even my bones. I could taste vomit. Then came a giant black buzz of agitation all around me, a whining, thumping, clattering roar like a helicopter taking off. The hot, dusty downdraft battered me to the floor and as I lay there, dazed, looking up, I saw the silhouette of a giant beetle, wings spread wide, segmented underbelly curving down towards the floor.

The wings shimmered with rapid motion, translucent with delicate brown veins. They seemed too slight to raise such a beast, yet up it went in great jerky surges – until, with a sickening crack, it bounced off the glass ceiling and began to fall. I screamed as the body, its thin legs flailing, fell like a stone straight towards us.

I couldn't tell what happened next – but I guess its wings must have started working the air again. They flittered hideously as it buzzed and wheeled in panicked circles around the room, way too low, crashing into the glass column, overturning cabinets, smashing equipment to the floor. Finally, it disappeared from view, behind a large bank of monitors some thirty yards from us.

I lay there, stiff with fear, trembling uncontrollably.

Enlargement! Actual, physical enlargement! But how?

I couldn't even bring myself to check out the wound in my leg. It felt like a jagged hole in the side of my calf. My cheek stung. And at the tops of my legs I felt a shameful wet prickling I hadn't experienced since I was six.

I watched as Rob climbed to his feet and pulled a lever on the console. There was more hissing, this time coming out of a nearby vent.

"I've only got enough dimensional rescalant for one enlargement," he muttered. "I need this one to survive, so we have to create an atmosphere it can survive in. It's got to be warmer, and more oxygen-rich. More like how it was on Earth five hundred million years ago."

"Enlargement," I groaned. "I didn't realise..."

"What were you thinking?" said Rob, his eyes fixed on a screen in front of him.

"You said you could use my expertise. I thought..."

Rob flicked his head towards something behind me. On a table lay an X-caliber gauged CO2 rifle and a pack of five 8.0cc type 'P' tranq darts with gel collars. "I called you here so you could tranq the titan while it was in torpor – that's the insect version of sleep. Then I was planning to transport it to my lab in the city for further tests." He surveyed the overturned cabinets and the wrecked equipment. "Now, thanks to you old friend, things have got a whole lot more complicated." He picked up the rifle and handed it to me. "In about twenty minutes, the heat and the oxygen-rich air in here are going to start getting uncomfortable for us – and very comfortable for the titan. You'd better make sure you tranq it before then."

I stared at the gun in my still-trembling hands. "I want to get out of here," I said. My voice sounded hollowed out, like a ghost. I staggered to my feet and caught sight of the blood-soaked hole in my trouser leg. My calf muscle screamed as I put weight on it. I began lurching towards the glass sliding door and the warehouse entrance.

"Forget it," said Rob. I stopped and turned. His stare was as dead and cold as the titan's. "We're now in lockdown mode. The computer knows the insect has escaped, and it's sealed the outer door."

"Then unseal it," I demanded.

"I can't. It's been programmed not to respond to any human override command until the insect is tranquilized and secured."

My jaw dropped.

"I knew," Rob explained, "that if something like this ever happened, I'd be tempted to save my skin and run. I had to guard against that possibility." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder towards the bank of monitors. "That thing over there is far more important than you or I. We owe it to science to capture it alive."

"Fuck science," I said as I limped slowly to the glass sliding door – it was getting too hot to move with any speed. I pulled at the door, but my hands slipped in the condensation. I banged on the glass, but made hardly a sound. Twelve miles from the nearest town! I'd never felt so lonely or scared.

Somehow, my sweating, shaking fingers managed to load a tranq dart into the rifle. I raised it to my shoulder and took aim at Rob. "There's enough etorphine in here to bring down a bull elephant," I growled. "At this range, it could kill you. Now open the fucking door!"

Rob shook his head. "If you kill me, your chances of getting out of here will drop to zero."

And that was when the lights went out.

Absolute darkness.

"Oh Jesus!" I whimpered.

“Computer’s using all available power to keep the insect alive,” I heard Rob say. “It’s got excellent night vision. You’d better get going, Mike, because pretty soon the titan’s going to have all the advantages.”

Dull green emergency lighting came on. I could see Rob’s outline in the shadows. As he was speaking, I heard a whirring, clicking sound coming from behind him. The greenish darkness above his head was suddenly filled with violent shuddering motion.

Crying like a child, I pointed the rifle muzzle towards the shadowy tumult. Before I could stop my hands shaking enough to get off a shot, I saw Rob’s body arch. He seemed to have grown wings. Like a dark angel, he began to rise. Then I saw the razor ends of the mandibles closing on his neck. His scream was brief, followed by a liquid gurgle, and a bump, as his head hit the floor. The rest of his body continued to rise, hanging limp from the titan’s legs and mandibles. Blood spurting from a severed artery sprayed the face and eyes of the beetle.

I fired, and heard the satisfying *thunk* of a dart hitting home. Peering up into the murk, I saw the projectile. It was planted deep in Rob’s belly.

That was twenty minutes ago. Since then, things have got slowly worse. Now it’s like an oven in here. I feel terrible – dizzy, nauseous. It must be the loss of blood, or else the foul, primeval air that’s getting pumped into this place. Pretty soon, the bug’ll get hungry again. But I’ll be ready for it. I’ve managed to load another dart and I’ve got the gun here by my side. If I can just keep awake, and keep breathing...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Woolf has been grossed out and fascinated by the bug world ever since he was five and witnessed a large beetle getting eaten alive by ants while on holiday in France. When he grew up he became a writer of fiction and non-fiction, mainly for young people, and has had over sixty titles published in various languages, including books on spiders, Nazis, asteroid strikes, ghosts, aliens and much else besides. His fiction includes Chronosphere, a time-warping sci-fi trilogy, Aldo Moon, featuring a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, and Soul Shadows, a horror novel about cannibalistic shadows. For further details about Alex and his writing, visit his website alexwoolf.co.uk, follow him on Twitter at @RealAlexWoolf or on Facebook.



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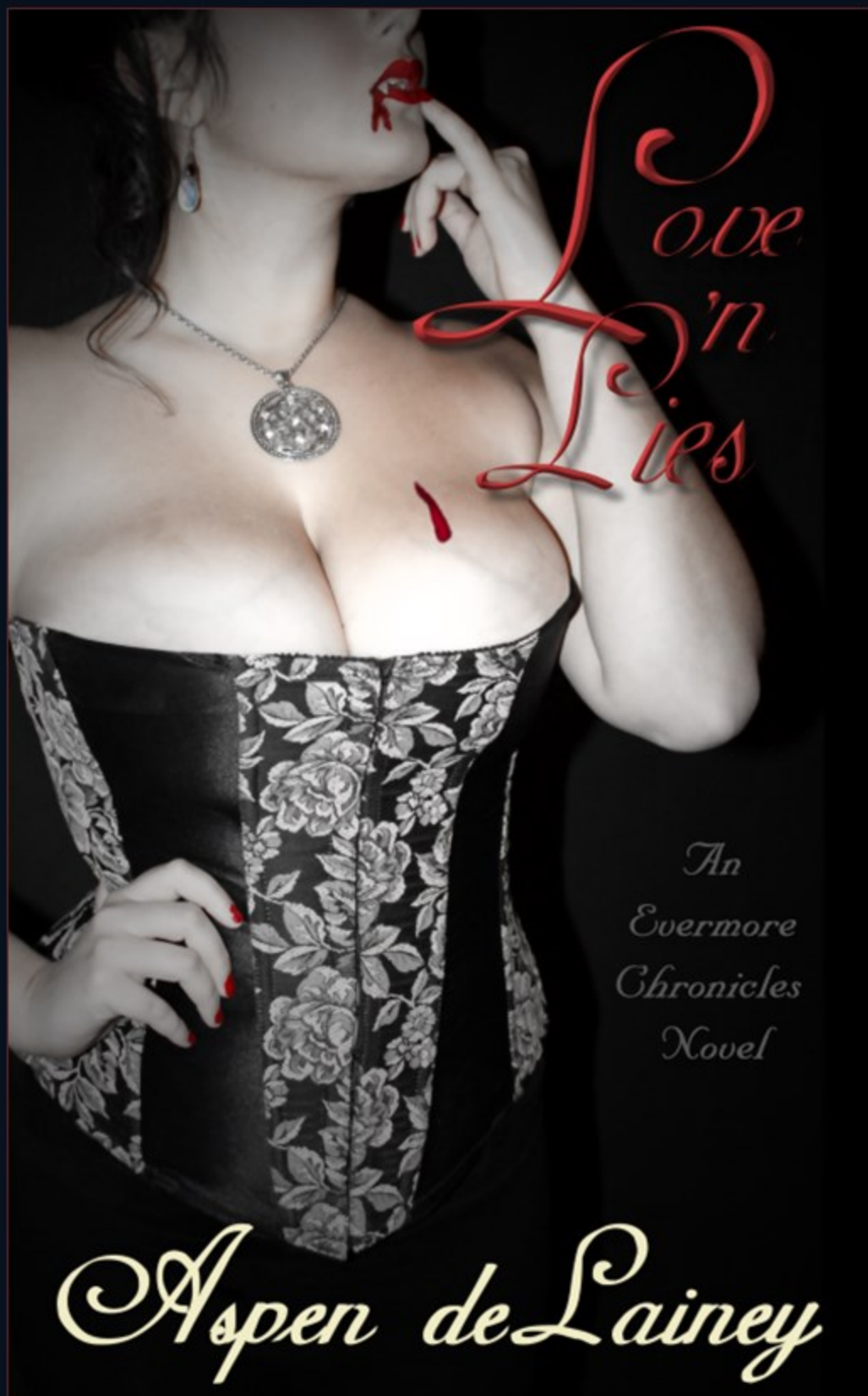
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Coming Soon from Sirens Call Publications



Interview with Aspen deLainey, author of Love ‘n Lies

Aspen deLainey describes herself as mature, having already lived more than half of her life (unless her youngest son is correct and she can merge with some AI soon and keep on trucking). Although she may have grown older, no one has been able to force Aspen to totally grow up. She believes she's managed to keep her *joie de vivre* and an interest in the *new* all around her. Aspen's not about to say she'd set in stone by any means, believing herself to be more flexible than most women her age.

Aspen lives in the Foothills of Alberta with her husband, two of her four children, a dog, a lovebird and a glaring of semi-feral cats. You will often find her watching the wildlife happily feasting in her vegetable garden in the early morning dawn. Being a lover of nature, and all things natural, she wouldn't trade her country lifestyle for all the beans on the stalk.

A die-hard believer in fairy tales, Aspen hopes her fairy godmother is the Muse. Lending credence to this notion is one of Aspen's earliest memories: writing a story for her little brother in crayon on a favored picture book and earning a spanking as her first critical review. Never deterred, Aspen continued to make up stories, and hone her craft, until finally letting a few escape her clutches in 2010.

Welcome Aspen and thank you for answering our questions today.

Sirens Call Publications: What made you decide to become a writer?

Aspen deLainey: I have a vivid imagination. I always embellished the truth, and got caught more times than I want to remember for 'not telling the truth'. I was a chubby kid, bullied more often than not, so books became my friends. I'd get lost in whatever world I'd found between those pages, to the point where I often disconnected totally from Earth, wouldn't even hear me being called. I know I learned to read early because I was caught passing notes just days into grade one to the only other kid in the class who could read and print.

Our house had many books, and my dad got those Reader's Digest Condensed books every month. So I read everything I got my hands on. My mother tried to restrict my reading to 'age-appropriate' material, thankfully my father overrode her most of the time. I mean, how many kids read *Wuthering Heights* at eight by choice? Or find and manage to read their father's stash of *Hustler* at eleven without being caught?

But writing, itself?

Well, I have a memory of writing a story down, in crayon, because my little brother wanted me to tell him that exact story again. We'd been playing quietly on my parent's bed while Mom, pregnant with my littlest brother tried to nap. So I was only about three and a half. I did get a spanking for that story. Not because I wrote it, but because I wrote it on a book.

Creative writing in school caught my whimsy. I loved having the freedom to write about anything and get graded for it! I remember my grade five teacher telling everyone else in the class they had to write at least two pages, and telling me no more than twenty. He'd read my story out to the class every time, too. When I was in grade seven or eight, I got a severe ear infection and lost my balance for most of a year. Kindly neighbor ladies brought boxes of books to keep me busy – mostly early Harlequin. Every one of them was the same storyline, exactly. I thought I could do better, so I started to write my own. Let me tell you, my parents were not impressed. More than once my mother has told me to leave writing to the experts. She is still embarrassed about me publishing anything.

I did find that once I got reading historical fiction, I found making up stories to go with the dry dates

we had to memorize in school for history won me friends because we all remembered those dates for the exams easier if we remembered my story.

Once I had kids, I'd make up stories for them, especially if they needed to understand some social difficulty. It is always easier to hear about some fictional character having the same problems and dealing with it than having a parent telling you how you should be handling it yourself.

So, in the end, blame my kids for me getting published. They haunted me, insisting I start writing down my little tales. Then, when I had a bunch of them written, my daughter told me she'd delete all of them if I didn't send some of them out. The rest is history.

SCP: What is *Love 'n Lies* about?

AdL: I think *Love 'n Lies* is about coming of age and accepting choices. Not that I'm sure or anything. I only wrote it.

I mean, Leticia is not very old in the vampire scheme of life. She's only been living on her own for about ten years, and she's still dependant on her Uncle for help and approval. She hasn't decided her life path at the beginning of the story, though one is forced on her by the end which thankfully she embraces wholeheartedly. And, the story has a deeper theme, about lifestyle choices, that I've brought out by making Leticia overweight and having her need to find the reason a vampire can gain weight at all and so start the process to reducing.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Love 'n Lies* before they read it?

AdL: Though this is just a story, I did add quite a bit of realism; ie the Calgary Stampede, the whole bar scene during Stampede, the city I set this story in (Calgary of course). Because I have worked in the medical field for many years, I took a medical problem, gave it to a vampire after asking a doctor I know about blood-carried cholesterol, and tried to write a fun story with an underlying serious theme. I did a fair amount of research; not just about cholesterol, but about vampires and other paranormal creatures, in every culture and mythology before I finalized this fiction. So enjoy the story. It was truly fun to write. And I hope it's as fun to read.



SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

AdL: You know, I tried being a planner. Really, I did! I start a story with an idea of where I want it to go. I've even set out spreadsheets where every chapter is mapped. Not that they ever go that way. This story got away from me many times. My family can attest to my writing late into the night because "I want to see how this scene plays out". I hadn't planned to have a showdown between Justin's evil warlock and Leticia. That just happened. The two fight scenes didn't get planned, either. So I guess you can say I'm a pantser. I do start with a spreadsheet, after I write either a beginning

or an end of the story. But once a story has started to go its own way I use the spreadsheet more for keeping track of any people who enter, and for the background I find I need. See, all my stories have a, let's call it genealogy, a backdrop world history so I don't get totally lost.

And I should say I'm a method writer who plays out scenes with her hands. Also, I have to dress the part, so if I'm doing serious writing I'm in a skirt or suit with pearls, YA writing I wear jeans and t-shirts with funny saying on them. For *Love 'n Lies* I spent a fair amount of time in this sexy (to me) long black and red negligee, or these pretty lacy corsets and short shorts with dangly earrings. Yes, the right jewellery is important to me as well.

SCP: If you could cast *Love 'n Lies*, who would you choose to play your main characters of Leticia and Justin?

AdL: I'd love to see Molly Quinn (plays Alexis Castle on the TV show Castle) play Leticia. She plays that Alexis character with mischievousness and a deep-seated seriousness that I'd love to see Leticia portrayed with. Though I will say she'd have to gain weight to play Leticia.

Now Justin is harder to cast. He needs to be very self-centered, athletic, good looking with a slim build, have immense sex appeal, be able to portray childish surprise and have the ability to turn everything into what he needs. So maybe Taylor Lautner, the werewolf Jake on Twilight? Or Zachary Quinto, Spock on the new Star Trek?

SCP: How would you like readers to see Leticia?

AdL: Leticia is a strong young woman. She is something of a loner, though she does wish for close friends. I think she's quirky, fun-loving to an extent, but underneath she is very serious. She is very intelligent and wants to further her own studies, but in areas that she's interested in, not some well-rounded university's idea of a field of inquiry. She thinks of others, in that she doesn't want Justin to scare her housekeeping brownies, she interferes in Rand's problems when she considers them getting out of hand; she listens to other people and tries to help.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

AdL: Paring a story down.

See, when I write it's something like word vomit. Everything goes in at the beginning. Finished *Love 'n Lies* is probably only a third of the story as it sits on my computer. It broke my heart some days to sit and decide to take out thousands of words. But they didn't carry the story along so they had to go. Now, I don't ever throw those other pages out. I might need a scene I wrote in this book for another story in the Evermore Chronicles.

I almost said time management is my hardest challenge. But, as I looked around my house, I realized that I'm a lousy housekeeper because my writing is more important. Everything else loses to my writing. I stay in touch with friends by email because I don't want to give up the time to drive and see them, or clean the house and invite them over. Hubby darlin' tiptoes past me if I'm hunched over the keyboard and makes dates with me by sticking notes to my screen. My kids learned to grab my attention by asking something really bizarre. My dog has learned to turn my chair around with her head when she wants attention, or needs to go out. She's a big dog, so she has no trouble.

Now I'm not a total hermit. I act, in movies and TV shows. Really! But that's because sometimes I need fresh eyes for a scene or information that I can only get by seeing somewhere new or interacting with the world. I've been at some awesome locations and met some really neat people on set, which of course I use in my stories.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Love 'n Lies* apart from other books of the same genre?

AdL: There is a real societal problem underlying the story of *Love 'n Lies*. Leticia has to solve this problem, just as parts of society have to solve it in the real world.

Sure, I write sex scenes. I've been told they're pretty good. I give a bird's eye view of Calgary during Stampede. Maybe enough to entice readers to come and join the fun. I think I've written a fun story. I wanted something upbeat and entertaining just like everyone else who writes this genre. But I want my readers to think about the underlying theme after they've finished the book.

SCP: What can readers expect from the rest of the books in the Evermore Chronicles? How connected are the Chronicles?

AdL: I plan that The Evermore Chronicles will be loosely interwoven stories about many of the residents from the Evermore Keep. My citizens of these stories will all be from the paranormal and I probably will write in several genres. Leticia is seen in my next story about a werewolf. She'll make a brief appearance in the story about a troll, though Esmeralda (another character, a wizard, in *Love 'n Lies*) will have a larger part I think. Silvius will be a constant. But that's because he is the Magi of Evermore. All my characters should make brief appearances in each others' stories if they happen around the same time. But each story will be stand alone. That I promise. They'll all be fun stories where the paranormal try to fit into our real world. But on their own terms.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

AdL: I'm always reading. I devour books. Lately I've been frequenting my library during my weekly shopping trips – hey, I live in the country, so any time I go out it is a major trip of more than a half hour one way to the nearest town or an hour to the city, so I try not to leave home often.

I just finished the *Imager* series by Modesitt Jr. Loved it! And I'm waiting for the third book of the *Lies of Locke Lamora* – the second kept getting put off, but well worth waiting for.

I will read anything if someone puts it in front of me.

Right now I am rereading *Ender's Game*. Last week I reread most of Glenn Cooke's *Garett Files* series. Yes, I have them all.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

AdL: I love reading Jim Butcher's *Dresden* stories. Have them all. I'm a Tolkien fan from way back. Not just the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* stories, either. I read *Game of Thrones* when it first came out, but haven't had time to watch the series. I've read most of Mercedes Lackey's stories, Robin Hobb's stories are wonderful. Anne McCaffrey, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Andre Norton were childhood pals. Glenn Cooke and Terry Pratchett take up lots of space in my bookshelves. Surprisingly James Joyce books dwell here, along with Shakespeare and the *Canterbury Tales*.

By choice I read sci-fi, fantasy and murder. I love cookbooks, not to cook from but just to read. I like to read history, historical fiction, but not if they didn't do their research. Starting to enjoy some steampunk, but I'm picky, again know your history before you screw around with it!

There are few authors I'm not willing to try at least once.

I should admit that I have a personal library of more than 3000 books, most of them read several times. I reread books, sort of consider them old friends.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

AdL: Can I say I've been totally amazed at how fast my stories have been accepted once I found the courage to send them out? Ok, once my daughter promised to delete them if I didn't.

My very first story sent out, *Be Mused*, got accepted within a month of being sent into that cold dark internet. I've had a few rejections. But every story rejected found a home somewhere else. Some stories I cringe when reading on the net because I've grown better as a writer and those early stories seem a little crude now. Not the stories themselves, but the words I used.

So, yes, I can say I've been successful. And surprised!

SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are starting out?

AdL: Oh yes!

Never say die! Write on. Keep writing. For every publisher who says no, there are two who will accept your work. I'd almost say that the web has made life a little easier for starting authors. Instead of waiting months for a publisher to send back that rejection, you can get a reply in days. And now there are so many publishers to choose from with so many explicit desires that I find finding the correct one almost tailor-made.

That first story, once accepted, is enough to keep you at your stories. It was for me.

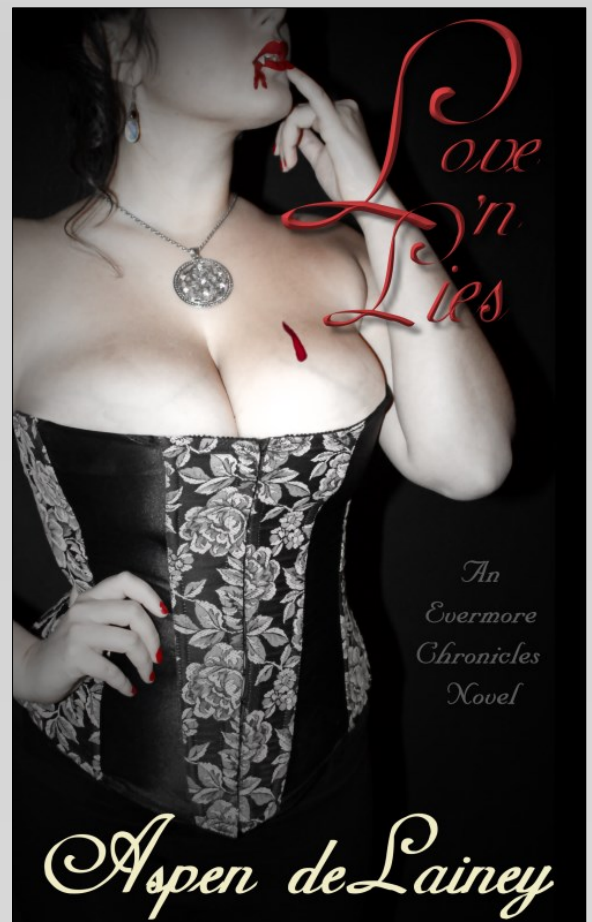
My daughter recently started writing. She mentioned her trouble with that blank page and tiny cursor blinking away as if saying 'come on try me'. Her problem reminded me of the way I got over the blank page trials, and I'll pass it on. Who knows, it might help someone else.

I told her to just type mishmash for half a page. The page isn't nearly as daunting after it's cluttered with words, numbers or symbols. So your 'real' words don't feel as lonely or as wrong at that point. And don't worry at the beginning of a story whether you've got the right words. They'll come. Maybe you'll be throwing out pages of story when you hit your stride. It happens.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your books knowing? How should they feel?

AdL: I'm hoping they walk away with a smile on their faces. I do try and introduce new 'true' facts into my stories, maybe new locales and new parts of a country they've never seen. I'd love them to consider my characters friends, who they might see walking down the street of their town. And if nothing else, maybe they have new sex positions to try out. I had to see if they worked, after all.

Thank you Aspen for answering our questions. Love 'n Lies will be available from Sirens Call Publications in July.



An Excerpt from *Love 'n Lies* by Aspen deLainey

This whole fiasco happened because I'm lonely. Not friend lonely. Believe me, I have lots of friends. Heart lonely.

I woke up near the end of June; in, of course, Calgary, Alberta. You know, that cowboy city in the great white north; Canada.

Right in time for The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth, the Calgary Stampede. That's when every citizen and all the tourists in this crazy city dress up in their favorite cowboy ensemble.

Honest!

Men wear plaid western shirts, string ties, and blue jeans. Women wear either blue jeans or blue jean skirts, western plaid shirts or their flooziest bordello-type top—the one they'd wear for Klondike days in Edmonton in a couple of weeks. And everybody wears cowboy hats. Some even wear cowboy boots.

I mingled with all those Stampede cowboys downtown the first evening, wearing my new jeans. My bustier's only real western claim: the denim strips supporting the lace. This time it really needed the support, as I overflowed magnificently.

It's a party here! For ten days straight, I kid you not! This city pretty much shuts down corporate headquarters to celebrate. Even the tourists visiting just to see 'the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth,' namely the Calgary Stampede Rodeo, dress western and party.

I walked downtown Calgary, listening to the echoes of drunken yahoo's, laughter and the clip-clop of horses being ridden through the streets. The leftover odor of ubiquitous pancakes, sausages, eggs, bacon and champagne-orange juice, served at every street corner, lingered. Stampede breakfasts are tradition, after all.

I drew stares. But I corralled most of my come hither attitude tonight. No time to dally, no time for sensual imbibing. Tonight I would only disappoint.

For tonight, I started my diet.

I needed an out of the way space to just watch the crowds for a moment. To get a good spin on my lasso. I picked the alley just up ahead. I'd duck into that one, hide until I got a good spin on my lasso. Once I had it going really good, I'd exit, stage centre—like an actress; winning applause with my rope trick. Perfect plan, right?

But back in the shadows of my chosen alley, near the dumpster, a little man relieved himself.

I recognized the facial features, bowed just a little, welcoming him to my fair city; in his own language, I hoped.

"Jeez, I know my Mandarin's better than that," I carped to myself as he startled. He bowed deeply to me, without answering. His eyes darted around for an escape route back into the safety of the main crowd.

I raised my lasso higher, smugly swinging the loop over his shoulders, herding him deeper into the alley, away from any prying eyes.

Hey, it's taken me years to learn to rope even a post. I'm proud of my skill and didn't get to show it off very often. During Stampede, any kind of pseudo cowboy skill rates high for showing off. Being able to swing a mean lasso is mine!

I pulled him into an embrace that fooled anyone brave enough to look for more than a few seconds. I took advantage of his effort to push away. His strain lifted his throat into a perfect arch as he recognized the flash of my teeth signaling my intent.

I only nibbled, savoring that sweet rush, that trickle of heart's blood.

He fainted. I held his sagging form long enough to finish. I didn't kill him. I just needed a healthy, pick-me-up sort of snack. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, straddling his limp figure.

“Be hungry in twenty minutes, just like the joke,” I burped, fanning the smell away. “Too much Wasabi.” I tucked him behind the dumpster, covered, so he wouldn’t be found before he woke up. Imagine the tales he’d have to tell when he returned home. Bitten by a vampire at the Stampede *and* lived to tell about it.

Good for the tourist business. That’s me!

He had been in the right place at the right time. From the taste of him, I’d say he probably came straight from the Orient. So, according to the calorie counter I’d devised, I’d stayed within the acceptable limit.

This diet thing all started, you know, just recently. I woke up after my Sleep (you know the kind, every decade or so we vampires take that year-long hibernation-type nap to regenerate and age—just a little), to find *fat*!

I’m not talking little love handles here! No siree Bob. My scales showed this formerly trim and almost ageless frame carrying an extra 25 kilograms—that’s 56 extra pounds or my personal favorite, just over 4 stone.

Of course I denied it totally. My scales had to be faulty. That dwarf-beaten, polished gold-plate mirror lied. It had to have!

But my wardrobe agreed, showing me the inescapable truth. I tried on everything, to the very back of my closets. Nothing fit! I stood posing in front of that damned mirror, front view, side view, moaning over the unfairness of it all.

All the while sucking on a cold blood snack. Uncle Cy had loaded my fridge with these bagged snacks just before I woke. He’s got some deal going with the Blood Bank Services, I swear. ‘Cause we get these just past their ‘best before’ date blood bags. Instant food; without the bother of hunting up a human.

After I waded through literally mountains, of mail, found my credit cards in good standing (thank you again Uncle), phoned in validation and computer ordered (yes, even *we* can be computer literate) a selection of my necessary new size Stampede street-wear, to be delivered the next evening (isn’t it wonderful you can specify time of delivery now?). I fed on another of the oh-so-handy refrigerated Red Cross blood packs to take the edge off my hunger.

Look, I know I’m guilty of pigging out just a little before my Sleep—I consider it hibernation readiness. I hate waking up ravenous. But this bulk! Just totally out of proportion. Vampire metabolism is fast. I know that. I have never experienced weight gain before, not in almost two hundred years! Waking usually saw me hag-thin, an almost skeleton; flesh hanging from my frame.

I researched online until my parcels arrived, sipping on a few more snacks, napping every couple of hours. There had to be some reason I had gained all this weight. Maybe some illness bit me while I lay comatose?

I found oodles of ‘lose inches’ sites.

That’s not what I typed in! I wanted information, not diets. ‘Fasting resulting in weight gain’, I queried. “Look computer.” Yes, I know I talk to my computer. “Just the facts. The cold hard facts. I can take it!”

Eureka! Almost at once I found a site about cholesterol. HDLs, LDLs. All the bad, all the good. Even hypothetical reasons some foods caused more fat than others. This looked promising.

My reading took me through the red-meat plus processed carbohydrates resulting in the high cholesterol diet of the North American couch potato.

Just what do you think I’ve been feasting on all this time? Well, duh! Easiest meal to obtain. I’m guilty of indulging on the ‘super-size-that’ population for my meals. They’re slow moving, easy to pick up, and tasty.

I made a quick call to Uncle; the regular ‘Hi, I’m up, thanks for looking after everything’ type of obligatory call we all owe our relatives when we emerge. Then I got down to business. “Say, Unk. Have any of the family put on a little weight in the last while?”

When he admitted a couple had, I asked if anybody had looked into this HDL and LDL conundrum. After a no, I told him what my googling started to turn up.

“Leticia honey. You’re one of our smarter kin. You should look into this further,” he advised. “Your sister Ginny won’t even leave the house.”

I laughed as I hung up. Bet it looked good on her.

Now I am sure the Edmonton area, where Uncle and Ginny live, is happy about that. Edmonton has a lot more missing persons than Calgary. Ginny has never been very particular how she leaves a meal, leaving Uncle to clean up after her. She doesn’t care if her meal lives or dies after she’s finished with them. That’s why she’s still living at home. Where someone can clean up after her. And keep vampire presence a secret a little longer.

Me, I’m trying to keep a low profile here. I prefer my meals have pleasant memories when they wake up. As I am the only vampire, so far, in this city, I don’t need every drained vic assault ending up on my doorstep. That is if the human cops ever find out there’s a vampire living here. Or the Weres decide to make an example of me. Which they would if I left desiccated bodies in my wake.

Thanks, but no thanks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Aspen lives in the Foothills of Alberta with her husband, two of her four children, a dog, a lovebird and a glaring of semi-feral cats. You will often find her watching the wildlife happily feasting in her vegetable garden in the early morning dawn. Being a lover of nature, and all things natural, she wouldn’t trade her country lifestyle for all the beans on the stalk.

A die-hard believer in fairy tales, Aspen hopes her fairy godmother is the Muse. Lending credence to this notion is one of Aspen’s earliest memories: writing a story for her little brother in crayon on a favored picture book and earning a spanking as her first critical review. Never deterred, Aspen continued to make up stories, and hone her craft, until finally letting a few escape her clutches in 2010.

Love ‘n Lies is Aspen’s first work in The Evermore Chronicles, the concept for which was developed while she was employed in the seniors’ medical field. Do paranormal beings suffer from medical problems also? What happens to aging Vampires, Wizards, Trolls and the like? The questions begged to be answered... And of course, their stories needed to be told.



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Excerpt from 'Love 'n Lies'

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