

THE BEDLAM BIBLE

*"A Strange History of Madness
Inside the Eighth Block Tower"*

BOOK ONE: THE TOWER

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The Bedlam Bible — Book One: The Tower
*Including the stories: Hypnagogia, The Invalids, & Under
Green Brain*

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BOOK ONE:

THE TOWER

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Hypnagogia

There's radiation in the walls of our apartment building, at least that's what Buzz tells me. Buzz has been around these parts since the sixties, longer than I've even been alive. He lives in a section of the building called "The Cliff." He says everyone calls it that because there have been so many murders and suicides on his floor over the years. The Cliff, like the end...the edge, and all the people who have gone over. Really there've been murders and suicides all up and down this building, just The Cliff's are more memorable, I guess. Someone blows themselves or someone else away every couple of weeks here. It's just that kind of place. That's why Buzz swears there's radiation in the walls, making everyone crazy.

Our building sits in a part of town where there aren't even streetlights. The people who live in the

buildings surrounding us, they pretend we don't exist. Out of sight out of mind. We're scum to them, the armpit of town, surrounded by darkness. That's fine with us. We know our role and play the part just fine. The people on the outside call us "the trolls of Eighth Block," Eighth Block being the section of town we live in. But see, that's where they're wrong. We're not trolls by any definition of the word, no sir. See, people like us, the people of Eighth Block Tower, we don't exist in the same sense that everyone outside exists. We live by our own code, our own laws, and even have our own God [Sheeak, our God, has skin the color of Neptune. She feasts on dark matter. Dark matter is abundant in our universe, but not so much here on Earth. That's where Buzz and I come in. We're the ones that feed her, but I'll get to that in a minute].

The people here rarely ever leave the building, even just to get fresh air, or exercise, or a change of scenery, nothing. A lot of 'em just sit on their couches and watch the color bars illuminating from their TV screens, all slack-jawed and comfy, or listen to the faint low hum that projects from the television speakers. The hum pleases us, calms us. Can't say what it is, but something about it is just so soothing. Like a baby listening to his mother's heartbeat, it lulls us. On any given day, and at any given time of the day, anyone could walk into these apartments here and I guaran-damn-tee a television set is on, humming. People here in Eighth Block don't have jobs in the same sense that outsiders have jobs neither. All the jobs around here are more like chores than anything. We've all got something to do around here, something to pull our own weight. Charlie is usually the one that goes out and gets the mail, Sansa goes and gets the

booze and chips [seems like that's all anyone ever eats around here, potato chips], and Samantha makes sure the shit pipes don't back up. Charlie and Sansa are the only two in the building who actually leave on a regular basis. I heard when they go out, people are afraid of them. The outsiders know a resident of Eighth Block without even having to hear them speak. There's a certain glow we all have that gives it away. Buzz says the glow comes from the radiation in the walls. Buzz is always taking about the radiation in the walls.

Eighth Block has been around close to a full century now. Ever since the day it was built it's been a home for the weird, the odd, and the mutated. Buzz swears that the Madsen family, who originally lived here in one of the apartments on The Cliff many, many years ago, weren't mutants when they first moved in. He says the radiation got 'em. Everyone on the outside says us mutants have all been banished, forced to live within the walls of this tower, but honestly, I don't pay them no mind. I don't, because nobody from the outside ever moves into the apartments here in Eighth Block. No one from the outside ever comes in, and except for a handful of us running errands, we never really leave the building neither. So how is it we've been banished here? This isn't a prison cell, it's our home. Our families have all been here for several generations now. I try not to get too worked up when I hear someone accusing me of being a mutant. If being a mutant is a crime, then I am guilty as sin. If Eighth Block is my punishment, then I hope I rot in here. I love it. There's nothing out there on the outside but fuck, and I don't need fuck [at least not in this sense of the word]. I got everything I

need right here in this building. Buzz and I only leave when we go “fishing,” and even then, we don’t actually leave.

Once a week Buzz and I stand on the rooftop of Eighth Block Tower, have us a few beers, and fire up the shop vac. We screw all the hose extension accessories to each other and take turns holding the end of the hose as far as we can up into the night sky. We hold it up for hours on end some nights, waiting for the vac bag to fill up with dark matter. Sometimes it only takes us forty-five minutes or so to get a full bag, but most nights it takes hours. We call this process “fishing,” not because it’s anything like fishing really, but just because we have to call it something and “fishing” just sort of works. Buzz says we call it fishing because our brains are warped from the radiation in the walls. We don’t know any better.

When we’ve filled the vac bag full of dark matter, we finish what’s left of our beers and head back into the building. Usually I’m the one that has to lug around the vac, down the long hallways and the many sets of staircases that lead to Sheeak’s room. Buzz always offers to help, but also reminds me that his arms are too mutated from the radiation in the walls to really be of any use. Which is true. Buzz’s arms look just like tree branches, but leafless, of course. He can’t bend his elbows and his fingers are long and twiggy.

Once we get down to Sheeak’s room to feed her, we always find her lying on the floor, deflating, close to death. Buzz and I attach the hose of the shop vac to her intake valve and throw the machine into reverse, blowin’ all the dark matter out of the bag and into her body. She begins to plump up again. Once she’s eaten

all she can handle. Buzz and I toss the vac aside, crawl on top of her, and sleep the rest of the night away, cuddled on top of our God. Buzz says that Sheeak isn't really a God, just an inflatable mattress. He says we only think she's a God because of all the radiation in the walls. When he says stuff like that I secretly pray to Sheeak, begging her not to annihilate him as we sleep. I try explaining to her that Buzz is a little crazy because of all the radiation in the walls. I'm not sure that she hears my prayers, but so far she hasn't annihilated anyone, so that has to mean something.

One time, Buzz and I were fishing on the roof, got too drunk, and accidentally woke up God from His deep slumber. Not our God, Sheeak, but the God. The creator of the universe. See, I'd warned Buzz about the way he was holding the shop vac hose that he wasn't going to get any dark matter at the angle he had it pointed. Buzz grew cross and started complaining about how much holding the hose was hurting his shoulders, as if his shoulders were mutated too. I called him out on it. He said that if he had elbows then it would help alleviate some of the stress put on his shoulders. Always full of excuses. If it isn't the radiation getting him down, it's his mutation, and his mutation was caused by the radiation, and he always tells me, reminds me, pounds it into my head that it is all but his fault. Buzz is a great guy and all, but sometimes I'm not in the mood to hear him complain. Plus I was drinking a lot that night, so that probably added to my frustration a bit too.

Anyway, so there Buzz was, holding the shop vac like a crazy sunuvabitch, pointing it every which way but up. I started yelling at him, he yelled back, then next thing we knew, the hose sucked up a big

chunk of something, I think it may have been a big fat bird, like a pigeon or something. It got stuck about halfway down the hose, causing the vac bag to fill up with air and nearly explode all over the place. Buzz started screaming, actually full on screaming, thinking the dark matter was going to escape the vac bag and swallow us whole. I was half-sure that the vac bag didn't have any dark matter in it just yet, cause of the dumbass way he insisted on holding the hose, but just to be sure, I hurriedly threw the vac into reverse and the bird shot out the hose like a bullet from a gun.

That's when we heard it. The voice of God, speaking to us from the heavens above. That goddamn bird shot straight through the sky and plowed its way through the windows of Heaven, ruining everything for us down here on Earth, at least that's what I was thinking at the time. To make matters worse, I then began to think of all the dark matter we had harvested from the night sky in order to feed a God of our own, in a Heaven of our own, here in Eighth Block Tower. What if the dark matter was really grey matter? God's grey matter. I began to panic, thinking of a time when Sansa from apartment 1B showed me a picture of the universe and compared it to a picture of a brain cell. The two were nearly identical. She was trying to convince me that there was a real God out there, outside our world, not referring to the deflating blue one that lived down the hall. She thinks that not only is there a God, but all of us, the entire universe, is living inside Him, His mind. She said that we all don't exist in the way we think we exist and that God doesn't exist in the way we think He exists. At the time it all seemed too confusing for me, and I left the conversation feeling bummed that I couldn't

understand something a girl could understand. At the time I just wrote it off to the radiation in the walls, but now, after the bird shot from the hose straight through brains of God, I began to understand all the information Sansa tried to teach me so long ago. If the universe's dark matter was really God's grey matter, then that means that Buzz and I have been secretly stealing the brains of the Almighty, as He was sleeping, and feeding it to our air mattress for nearly a decade now. That made me feel horrible.

God grumbled immediately after we inadvertently shot him with a pigeon, and when He finally spoke He said, "Goddamn it, you two fucks! I was trying to sleep...when you guys...shot a bird...at my head! What the fuck's that about, man?" [I'm paraphrasing here. I don't remember exactly how He said it, but this is pretty close, I think]. Buzz and I nearly shit ourselves, we were so scared. I began to sip at my beer faster now, thinking it was probably going to be the last one I'd ever drink.

That's when He struck me down.

God pulled out a bolt of lightning from His quiver and shot it down to Earth, landing right here on the roof of Eighth Block Tower, or more specifically, right on me. Electricity surged throughout my body. My muscles stiffened and engorged with blood, and once I had absorbed all the electricity, all of God's wrath, I collapsed. Buzz, thinking I was dead, pulled out two AK-47's [he carried these guns everywhere he went] and hurled a barrage of bullets into the night sky in hopes that it would be enough to kill the Giant Bastard. Dead pigeons began falling from the sky in ridiculous numbers, smacking against

the roof of our building, surrounding us, and even falling and filling the streets below us.

Buzz tells me that once he finally ran out of ammunition, the war was over. God was either dead or unconscious again. Well, he says that now, but immediately after I regained consciousness he told me that we hadn't woken up God at all, that we had actually shot the pigeon through the window of an apartment in the tower across the street, and the voice we heard belonged to an angry tenant. Buzz said we only thought it was God because of the radiation in the walls. He says it's poisoned us. Made us to where we can't think right anymore. When we talk about that night though now, he doesn't remember it the way he originally told me when I came to. He swears up and down that it was God that brought the hammer down on us and has told everyone in the tower that he killed God, and that He was evil, and that we should all thank him for his heroics and his bravery. Buzz says we owe him our lives. I think there must be more radiation in the walls of his apartment than the rest of the building. He may or may not have killed somebody that night. We may never know for sure.

Whatever, however it happened, life would eventually resume, exactly as we had always lived it. Lucky for me, God [if it was God] didn't deliver the final blow that night, but I knew sometime soon He'd catch up to me, and my number would be up. I never stop thinking about it, even today. One day God is going to get His revenge on me, and when God gets revenge, He fucking cleans house. I won't have a chance.

Until then, Buzz and I choose to live our lives in the comfort of our home, here in the Eighth Block

Tower, surrounded by weirdos and freakaziods, just like us, who choose to live life the way we want to live it: sleeping on our God and eating all the rotisserie pigeon we can stand. The radiation from the walls continues to soak into our skin, and we glow happily and beautifully until the moment we all step down into our graves.

The Invalids

“Someone is killing all the women in our apartment building,” Samantha said, with a smirk. She was standing in a posed position, with her legs outstretched and her arms wrapped limply around the middle of her torso. “Real nasty too. Whoever it is, he’s really ripping ‘em apart.”

“What do you mean, *ripping them apart?*” Norm said, fumbling with his cell phone. He pointed at the ceiling. “Look up.”

Samantha lifted her head. He raised his phone and took a couple snapshots. She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know how else to say it,” she said. “The guy doesn’t just go in with a knife and make a couple jabs, he literally rips them apart. Arms, legs, head, everything. Popped right off.”

“So it’s a guy then?”

“Well, I mean I don’t know for sure, but come on, this has *middle-aged white male* written all over it.”

“How many have been killed?” he asked.

“Four, so far. One a night for the last four nights. Suppose he’ll be coming for me soon.”

“Four? Jesus,” he said. He took another picture. “You don’t seem too worried.”

“I can take care of myself. Always have.”

He chuckled.

“Yeah, but the guy lives here in the tower with us. That isn’t even a little unnerving?”

She looked at him suspiciously. The amount of arrogance in his words carried real weight, as if he knew without a doubt the killer was one of the residents and he wasn’t just making an assumption or trying to scare her into taking safety seriously.

“You know this guy or something?” she asked.

“What? No. He’s killing women in the building every night, so it’s only logical to assume he’s a resident here in Eighth Block Tower,” he said. “I can’t believe this is the first I’m hearing about it. I haven’t seen any squad cars around.”

“Oh, please. You know the police, Norm,” she said. “If people are getting killed in Eighth Block, they turn their heads. Always have. It’s almost like the killer is doing them a favor by taking us out. They can’t be bothered with saving us.”

“Well, we may be poor, but we’re still people. They should help.”

“You live here, right? It’s not because we’re poor. This place is completely fucked. All the residents are insane. We should be put out of our goddamn misery. I mean, really, what good would it do to save

any of us here in Eighth Block? What good are we doing? How do we contribute to society? Well, in a positive way, that is..."

"So you and me, we're the only sane ones, huh?" he said, and then laughed. He tugged at his collar, trying to signal for her to pull her shirt down, but she didn't respond to it.

"If you say so," she said.

"Take out your tits," he said, tugging at his collar again. She pursed her lips and shook her head.

"You're a fucking pig," she said, and then started after her purse.

"Wait, where are you going? You're not leaving are you?" he asked.

"That's a stupid question," she said. "You know that's exactly what I'm doing, and you know *why* too."

He held his hands up in front of her, desperately trying to think of a decent way to apologize before she made her way to the door. He was never too good at thinking while under pressure. She pushed past him.

"I told you I didn't mind you taking photographs of me for your little project as long as things didn't get weird," she said. "I thought I made it clear I wasn't into doing nudes or porn or whatever it is you're trying to get me to do right now. Gross. No thanks, man."

"But wait," he said. "That's not what I meant."

She laughed.

"Norm, you told me to take out my tits. How else am I supposed to interpret that?"

"I, uh," he stammered. "I just meant show a little cleavage. Not for you to take *all* your tits out. *Two tits*, I mean. I didn't mean to say *all* your tits, you

clearly have only two. Not that I was looking... *at them?*"

He trailed off into insanity.

"Not only are you a pig, you're also an idiot. We're done here," she said, and walked to the door.

As she was leaving, he caught sight of something he had never seen before. He wasn't sure how he'd missed it all those years living inside his apartment, because now that he was seeing it, it seemed to stick out, as plain as a bullet hole in a sheet of glass. Just above the front doorway, there was a black mesh pyramid, about the size of a fifty cent piece, and it stuck out at least a full inch from the sheetrock.

"What the hell is that?" he said to no one in particular.

She had just made it to the door as he muttered the question. She traced his line of vision to the pyramid jutting out from the wall just above her head and studied it.

"It's probably a smoke detector or something," she said.

He shook his head.

"Don't *you* live here in the tower?" he said, mirroring her comment from earlier. "Do you really think we have smoke detectors here? No way."

He studied the design of the object from about a foot away, as close as he could get in a standing position.

"How have I never noticed this before?" he asked, pulling up a chair to stand on so he could get a closer look. The object was not sealed or fastened to the wall in any manner, from what he could tell anyway. It looked to be resting there limply inside a

hole cut into the sheetrock. He pinched the pyramid between his fingers and pulled. It seemed to be anchored inside the wall somehow, even though it was loose to the touch, so he pulled again, harder this time. It worked. He removed the object from the wall completely.

“I’ll tell you what it looks like to me,” she said. “But if it is what I think it is, then this is creepy as fuck.”

He continued his study of the object’s design. There was a black cylinder, about an inch thick, that was attached at the base of the pyramid, previously hidden inside the wall. At the opposite end of the cylinder, there was a wire, about the same thickness of coaxial cable, and it was split, exposing smaller wires on the inside. *This must have been what was anchoring it to the wall*, he thought.

“What do you think it is?” he asked.

“Well, it looks to be a microphone of some sort,” she said.

He screwed up his face.

“A microphone? Really? But why would there be a microphone in my apartment?”

“Beats me,” she said. “But if you want my thoughts on who the perpetrator might be, I’d put my money on that chimp you hang out with all the time.”

He thought for a second.

“You mean Dale?” he asked.

“If that’s what you call him,” she said. “You two have a weird obsessive thing going on with each other. I’m honestly surprised he’s not here with you right now.”

“You think he’s obsessed with *me*?” he asked. “We don’t hang out *that* much... *do we*?”

“Oh, come on, Norm,” she said. “You two are basically Siamese twins. But whatever, it’s none of my business. I was just making an observation. Well, I’ll be seeing you around, I’m sure. Later.”

“Wait,” he said. “You’re still leaving, even after finding the, uh, *the thing*?”

He held up the microphone and then tossed it onto the couch. She looked at him in a confused manner.

“Yes, I’m still leaving. You’re still a pig,” she said. “Why would you think finding that thing would make me stay?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I dunno. It’s kind of like a mystery now. I thought we’d, like, try to solve it or something.”

She shook her head.

“Let’s not,” she said, then smiled sarcastically and opened the door. Standing on the other side, with a surprised look on his face and his fist up in the air in a knocking position, was Dale.

“Ha! Perfect,” she said. “Later, Dale!”

She pushed past him and made her way down the hall, headed to her apartment. Dale looked at Norm and smiled awkwardly.

“So... what was *that*, huh?” Dale asked.

“What do you mean? I was only taking pictures. Trying to build a portfolio so I can one day get out of this fucking tower.”

“Who was that? Is that the girl from the cafeteria?” Dale asked.

“No, her name is Samantha. We hang out sometimes. She’s just helping me with this project.”

“Sure, okay,” Dale said, then smiled. He tried pushing his way into Norm’s apartment, just as he had

done every day for the last year or so, but Norm stopped him from coming inside. He thought about what Samantha had told him, about how the two of them seemed obsessed with each other. That didn't sit well with him. He didn't really care so much about what other people in the building thought of him, but he couldn't help feeling uncomfortable at the realization that he was in an unhealthy relationship with one of his mates. He enjoyed Dale's company, of course, but he certainly didn't want Dale to get the wrong idea regarding their relationship. *A little space is necessary*, he thought, and pushed Dale away.

"Hey, I'm not really feeling too well at the moment," Norm said. "You mind if we do this another day?"

Dale looked hurt, but recovered almost immediately.

"Sure thing, man," he said. "Hope you feel better."

Norm nodded. Dale stood there awkwardly for a few moments.

"So...I'm going to shut the door now."

"Wait," Dale said. "Are you really sick or are you just not wanting to hang out with me?"

"That's a weird question. No, I'm really sick."

"Yeah, you say that, but..." Dale looked down the hallway, in the direction Samantha headed only moments before. "You were just hanging out with Samantha, so, uh, I was just wondering if something is up with you and me?"

You and me... ugh, Sam was right, Norm thought. Space was definitely necessary. Lots and lots of space.

“Why do you think she left? I’m sick. I need to lie down. Plus, it’s pretty late,” Norm said, slowly pushing the door closer to the frame.

Dale nodded.

“Okay then,” he said. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, or something. Get better! We’ve got humans to kill!”

They both laughed. Dale was referring to *Destroy All Humans!*, a video game Norm had picked up recently at the used game shop for five bucks where the main character was an alien visiting earth who destroys every human it sees. It was easily the best five bucks he’d ever spent. The amount of entertainment contained within that little game was worth ten times the price. It had basically consumed their lives for the last two weeks. Serving now as yet another reminder as to why they needed to pull away for a bit. *Jesus, we really do spend pretty much all of our time together*, Norm thought.

“Later!” Norm said, waving Dale off. He shut the door.

Seeing Dale felt awkward now. He hoped the feeling would eventually pass, because he truly enjoyed hanging out with him, he just wanted...well, *less of him*. He shrugged off the thought and turned on *Destroy All Humans!* Dale’s visit had gotten him in the mood for it.

As he picked up the controller, his phone dinged. It was a text from Samantha. It read: “Guess what I just found at my place?”

Following her text was a picture of a small black pyramid protruding out from her wall, along with another text that read: “Get your ass over here

right now, and don't say a single word when you get here."

It only took a couple minutes to get over to her apartment, as it was just down the hall, but already Samantha had busted out most of the sheetrock that once made up the inside of the front wall. When he walked in, she immediately held a finger up to her lips, reminding him not to say a word. She pointed to the microphone. It wasn't in the same place as it was in his apartment. This microphone was right in the middle of her front wall.

Samantha pulled out her phone.

"When I got home from your place, I was curious to see if there was something similar in my place too," she texted Norm. It took him a second to realize why she was texting him when the two of them were standing in the same room, but once he remembered the microphone, the *one reason* he was called over and was now standing in her apartment, he felt dumb. "I looked all over and couldn't find anything. I was relieved, well, until I looked behind the mirror."

Norm looked at the large decorative mirror now sitting on the floor, leaning against the battered wall. It looked expensive, with a wooden frame stained in such a way the rings inside the wood appeared dark, looking more like brushstrokes than true nature. It was an impressive piece. Something he wouldn't mind having inside his own apartment.

"The microphone wasn't there when I first hung the mirror," she continued. "I'm sure of it. So,

whoever put these microphones here, they've done it since I put up that mirror. That was two months ago."

"That's comforting," he texted back. "So why are you destroying your apartment?"

"I'm tracing the wire to its origin," she texted. "I want to know who's behind this."

"Oh, so *now* you want to solve the mystery?" he texted.

"Yes," she responded. "Because now it involves *me*. D'uh. Problem is, the source of the wire is somewhere below my apartment, down on the next floor, or possibly even farther. As much as I'd love to, I can't exactly destroy the entire building tracing the source of the wire. We have to come up with a plan."

The two brainstormed for a minute before Norm began typing.

"Do you have any sort of twine or string?" he texted.

She nodded and walked into one of the back rooms. He stood still, unsure if she wanted him to follow or not. He thought it best to play it safe and stay put. He'd already blown it with her earlier by being an idiot, and he'd be damned if he was going to do it again. She returned with a large ball of yarn, and shrugged her shoulders, silently asking him if he thought the yarn would suffice. He gave her a thumbs up and she tossed the ball to him.

He activated the flashlight on his phone, unraveled about a foot of yarn, and wrapped it generously around the phone, careful not to block the eye of the camera or the light. Once he felt the phone was secure, he tied a knot at the top and lowered it to the floor, on a single braid of yarn, testing its strength. He jerked the yarn repeatedly and the phone bounced

like a yo-yo. It seemed strong enough. He picked up his phone and video-called Samantha. Her phone buzzed and she answered.

He dropped his phone into the space between the two layers of sheetrock that made up the wall, slowly feeding it down by unraveling the ball of yarn, following the microphone wire down below her apartment. She watched its progress on her phone, seeing everything his camera was seeing in real time. He looked up at Samantha and she looked impressed. He was pleased with himself.

“Very nice,” she said aloud. He laughed and held a finger to his lips, reminding her to stay quiet. She looked embarrassed.

Almost immediately the flaw in his plan became apparent to them both: while they were able to trace the wire down through many flights, they weren’t exactly sure where inside the building the phone was, so the entire process was essentially pointless. Regardless, the suspense of following the wire, and the hope that eventually they’d see its source, was enough to keep them going. They continued feeding the phone down the wall until they finally spotted a point where the wire exited the sheetrock.

Norm shrugged his shoulders, as if to ask what it was they were to do next. She thought for a moment, then eagerly typed up a message on her phone and showed it to him.

“Secure it somehow so it doesn’t move, then follow me,” the message on the bright screen read.

He nodded and looked for a place to tie off the yarn, finding the leg of nearest piece of furniture, an

ottoman, did just fine. He followed her out into the hallway.

“I’m going to call your phone. Surely we’ll be able to hear it ringing through the wall,” she said in a whisper, just in case there were any microphones in the hall as well. Norm nodded and they made their way downstairs.

The plan worked without a hitch, even if it did take a while to pace every floor.

Upon entering the basement of the great Eighth Block Tower, Norm’s ringtone resounded throughout the entire floor, clear as a bell. He found it odd at first that they could hear it so plainly, and that they were able to see the flashlight feature shining brightly, illuminating the dark room, considering it was buried somewhere behind a layer of sheetrock. However, once they found it, things made a little more sense.

There was a hole cut in the wall, quite haphazardly, that was roughly the size of a basketball. Through this hole, a woven serpent of electrical wires spilled out, along with the lights and sounds of the suspended cell phone. Norm reached into the hole, which easily fit his entire hand, even with the many wires running through, and removed the yarn harness from his phone.

“Shut that thing off, will ya?” Samantha said. “We definitely don’t want anyone knowing we’re down here. I mean, I don’t want to sound paranoid right now, but I have a feeling all this ‘Big Brother’ tech isn’t here to keep the people in the tower safe.”

Norm looked around the room. The entire back wall was lined with tables, all holding stacks of electrical equipment. Some of it he was able to

identify the function of right away, such as the computer, printer, and audio mixing board, but most of it looked foreign to him. In a way, it kind of looked like a homemade NASA ground control station, or maybe a tech repair office, or something similar. He started to examine the equipment a little more closely when a troubling thought suddenly occurred to him.

“You don’t suppose all of this is somehow connected to the murders that have been happening lately, do you?” Norm asked.

“I didn’t want to say it, but yeah, how could it not be?” she asked.

“I mean, technically the two things could be happening simultaneously and not be connected at all, but—“ he was cut short.

“It *has* to be connected,” she interrupted. “It makes too much sense not to be connected. Women are randomly killed in our apartment building by some unknown killer. Then we discover these hidden microphones and suddenly the killings don’t seem so random anymore. Perhaps the killer is picking off all those who know something...something the killer is trying to keep quiet.”

Norm’s eyes lit up with both fear and excitement. The mystery had him feeling exhilarated.

“Sam, do you know what this means?” he asked, unable to hide his excitement. He did not wait for her to answer. “It means we can save these people! The ones he’s targeting, maybe we can get to them before he does.”

He’d never felt as if he mattered all that much before, but now he had a chance to be a hero, a *true* hero. For a moment he wondered if all this hero business was just selfish thinking. Was his excitement

only surfacing over this sudden realization of his purpose in life? Did the thought of *saving people* actually bring him joy, or was he only relieved to finally find a reason for his own existence? A shudder of anxiety swept through his body, faster and colder than the rush of blood, as a million self-loathing thoughts flickered inside his head. He shook them off and decided his excitement was justified. He was genuinely excited to help these people.

“So now you agree that the killer is a man, huh?” Samantha asked, laughing.

“Well, you do have a point. Like you said, this certainly has *middle-aged white male* written all over it.”

“Yeah, probably so, but if we’re really going to figure this out, we have to keep an open mind here. We don’t know all that much just yet,” she said. “Do you know anything about the equipment over there?”

“Not much, but enough that I should be able to play back some of the audio. Trevor, a buddy of mine, records demos in his apartment. Some of this stuff looks like the hardware he uses, only on a much larger scale.”

“Try it,” she said, and nudged him toward the shrine of electronics.

Norm pulled out his phone and again activated the flashlight feature. Upon first glance, he immediately realized why he was unable to recognize most of the equipment.

“Wow. This stuff is ancient,” he said. “Some of these machines are decades old. I’m talking 70s, maybe even 60s.”

“Can you work with it?” Samantha asked.

“I’ll give it a go. No promises, though.”

He shined the flashlight at the back wall and took a closer look at the many wires running in through the large hole, from which only minutes ago he'd located his phone. Most of the audio cables seemed to be feeding into old analog reel-to-reel tape recorders. There were eleven of these machines in total: five on top of the table and six smaller ones underneath. Three of the larger ones were powered on, reels turning, and each contained four illuminated microphone level displays, the first of which showed a needle bouncing back and forth rapidly on each machine. He assumed the four displays meant the recorders were four-track, and the bouncing needles indicated the machines were currently in session.

"I could be wrong, but I think these three right here are recording as we speak," he said, shining his flashlight on the whirring reels.

He spotted a pair of large, over-the-ear headphones resting on the table by one of the computer monitors, and motioned for Samantha to come close. He grabbed the headphones and pushed its plug into the jack of one of the recorders. A tinny voice bathed in a low hum of static crept out of the cans.

"Holy shit! Listen," he said, and held the headphones between them so they both could hear the voice.

"Who is this?"

"Do I know you?"

"Do I?"

"I've been to Al's, yeah."

Norm looked at Samantha, unsure of what to make of the disjointed conversation. She was staring off into darkness, entranced. She held up her finger, as if to say *'wait.'*

"He's on the phone. That's why we're only hearing one side of the conversation," Samantha said, then returned to her trance.

The voice continued:

"Wait, you don't know me."

"So why did you call me?"

"Is this some sort of prank?"

"What's happening here?"

Samantha looked at Norm. A look of fear glazed over each of their eyes.

"Do you recognize the voice? Anyone we know?" she asked.

It didn't sound familiar to Norm, but he thought he'd give it another go.

He continued to listen:

"Yeah, yeah, the good stuff. I read your messages."

"I don't even know who you are or what you look like."

"Yeah, okay. Yes."

"No, I don't know him. At least I don't think I do. Maybe we can trace each of these wires back to their sources?" he said, knowing it wasn't the best plan, but unsure of any other suggestion.

Samantha spotted something odd in the corner of the room. There were multiple shelves lining the

wall, all containing tall stacks of plastic wheels. More audiotape reels. Hundreds of them, possibly even a thousand or more.

“Look at that,” she said, walking over to the shelves. She picked one of the reels up and read the label, a line of masking tape, two inches long. The words, crudely scribbled in black Sharpie, read: *Lynda, 5/2/16, evening*. Norm placed the headphones on the table and joined her at the line of shelves.

“What is that?” he asked.

Samantha pulled a few more reels off the shelf and read the labels. Written on each of them was a girl’s name, date, and time of day.

“Looks like a collection of conversations, sorted by whatever female he’s targeting. Fucking sicko,” she said, pulling more reels off the shelf to examine them.

“Shit. This is heavy,” he said. “Anyone we know?”

Samantha’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She held up one of the spindles labeled: *Samantha, 7/29/16, morning*.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said, then ran to a dark corner of the room.

“What the fuck?” Norm muttered to himself, shuffling through the stacks of reels, looking for more with her name. There were easily twenty or more, and he had only gone through a couple of stacks. He could hear Samantha vomiting from across the room.

“Are you okay?” he asked, standing still, respecting her privacy. He was pretty sure she didn’t want him watching her empty her stomach onto the floor.

“No, I’m not fucking okay. How could I be?” she said, almost in a scolding tone. She briskly walked back to the shelves with fire in her eyes.

“I’m taking them. That fuck isn’t going to sit here and masturbate to me, or whatever the fuck he does with these things,” she said, scooping a stack into her arms. Seeing this troubled Norm.

“Hey, I know this is fucked up. *It is,*” Norm said, placing his hand on Samantha’s shoulder. “But look at the reels on those machines over there.”

He pointed at the three recorders humming with life.

“The tape on all three of those reels are nearly spent,” he continued. “Which means that sicko is probably going to be down here to replace them soon. We can’t be here when he returns. We also can’t leave any evidence showing we were down here at all. If he knows someone is onto his twisted little game, it’s going to make it harder on us to catch the bastard.”

Samantha exhaled, seething in anger, but knew Norm was right.

“Let’s put everything back where it belongs, like we were never here, and go and get help, some weapons, or something. Right now we’re powerless,” he said.

She nodded and returned the reels to their place on the shelf.

“I *will* get those tapes, Norm. Even if it’s the last thing I do,” Samantha said. “And if I see that fucker, I *will* tear out his throat.”

Norm understood her anger, but never did he dream that she was capable of such violence. Seeing her now, rage in full swing, he believed what she was saying was actual truth. She wasn’t just ballooning

some mild frustration, not at all. She really would kill this man, or die trying.

They cleaned the place up, ridding every trace of their presence. They straightened the stacks of reels and removed the headphones, placing them back in the spot he found them.

“Are we good, here?” Norm asked, looking around the room, checking everything twice.

“I think so,” she said. “I mean, I puked over there, but I don’t know what to do about that. Maybe he won’t notice?”

“Christ. I hope not,” he said. Sweat formed in bullets at his forehead. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

She nodded in agreement.

The two of them raced up the stairs, anxious to get back to the safety of their apartments. At least they’d have some sort of protection there: kitchen knives and a baseball bat. Right now, they felt as if they were both naked and bleeding inside a shark tank. Upon reaching their floor, Samantha turned away from Norm, starting to run in the direction of her apartment. He grabbed her arm and she stopped.

“Don’t you—” he started to say, but she pushed her finger to his lips. She pulled out her cell phone, pointing to it, reminding him it wasn’t safe to have an audible conversation anymore. He nodded and pulled out his cell. As he was typing, Samantha impatiently waved her hands, motioning for him to hurry.

“Don’t you think we should stay together? Better our chances in case something happens?” he texted. He was trying to sound like a hero, some great protector, though secretly he knew he was probably more scared than she was.

“He’s not after you. He targets women, and I don’t need a savior. I kind of hope that sicko *does* show up at my place tonight. I’ll fuck him up,” she texted. Norm looked horrified as he read her response. Samantha smiled at him, kissed his cheek, and ran down the hall. She turned around briefly to give him a thumbs up, then disappeared around the corner.

His stomach dropped. He was all alone.

He unlocked his apartment door, slipped inside as quickly as possible, and locked it again.

Sleep didn’t come easy.

Norm was rudely awakened by a stirring hiss and the sharp end of a blade pushed up against his throat. Samantha was standing over him, her face an inch away from his.

“I’ve got you now, fucker!” she said, pushing the blade hard enough to sever a couple layers of skin.

“Samantha? What the fuck are you doing?” Norm yelled.

“Remember what I told you in the basement?” she asked. He wasn’t sure where she was going with it. “If I ever saw *that bastard*, I would tear out his throat!”

He was confused.

“Yeah, so?” he said.

“So... I’ve come to rip out your throat, you... you... lady killer!”

She pulled the knife away and held it high in the air, as if preparing to swing the blade with such force it would likely decapitate him.

“What the fuck, Samantha? I haven’t killed anyone! Stop!” he yelled, trying to push her away, but he was unable. It was then he noticed his arms and legs were fastened together with rope, in a forward-facing hogtie position.

“Samantha! What’s going on here?” he yelled.

She paused. Something changed. Suddenly she looked scared.

“Where is it?” she asked.

“Where is what? Samantha, what’s happening?” He continued to panic.

“Where’s the cut on your arm?” she asked, pulling at his clothing, trying to get a better look at his right shoulder.

She slapped him in the face.

“Where the fuck is it?” she screamed.

“I honestly don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!” he yelled. “Get me out of this!”

“No. I saw you. You walked passed my door. *I saw you.* I saw you through my peephole. I watched all night,” she said, almost in a daze.

“What? I’ve been *here* all night,” he said. “In all honesty, I’ve been too scared to leave!”

She continued, ignoring him.

“You went right past my door and headed down the hall. You had a knife in your hand. A big Bowie knife. You were looking to kill someone. I could see it in your eyes. *Your eyes, they were vacant. Full of madness.* Norm, you were out to kill. To end a life.”

Norm laid on his couch, horrified and helpless. He could tell she wasn’t fooling around. She saw someone, and she truly believed that person was *him*.

“I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, I did,” she continued. “I wanted to believe you were out

hunting for the killer, that lunatic holed up in the basement of the tower, but I followed you anyway, just in case. I had a knife too, Norm. It wasn't as big as yours, but you never saw it coming. I waited to see what you were going to do. If you would've headed downstairs, I would have said something to you. I would have known where you were going and I would have helped you... but you didn't go downstairs. You went right past the stairwell and kept walking."

His heart was racing so fast he felt it might kill him before her knife had the chance.

"Then you stopped, Norm," she said, still staring into nothingness. "You stopped right in front of Carrie Longman's door. You dug your knife between the lock and the doorjamb, trying to pry it open. You were going to kill her, Norm. And you would have if I hadn't stopped you."

"Samantha, you know that's not true. I'm no killer! You've known me for years! You know I'm not capable of fucking murder!" he yelled.

She shook off the daze and dug into her pocket. She pulled out her cell phone and held it up in front of his face. What he saw sent a cold shiver right through his core.

"That can't be. Samantha, *who is that?*" he asked, already knowing the answer, just unable to believe it.

"It's you, Norm," she said. "It's. *You.*"

"It can't be," he said, trembling.

She slid her finger across the screen and showed him five more pictures, all backing her wild story. It was him, in the hall, holding the biggest hunting knife he'd ever seen. She was right about the eyes, too. Something wasn't right. There was an

emptiness there that screamed evil. The way they stared, glossed over and full of smoke, it didn't seem human.

"Samantha, that can't be me. It just can't," he said. "I've been here the entire night. There must be some other explanation."

She turned away from him and returned the phone to her pocket.

"You know, Norm, I thought the same thing," she said. "Even though you were right there in front of me, right in front of my goddamn face, I still questioned if it was really you or not. Something just didn't feel right. That's why I took the pictures. I thought maybe it was this fucking *tower* again, getting inside my head the way it does, the way it gets inside us all. I thought maybe I'd take a few pictures, look at 'em again a little later, sometime when *the tower* didn't have hold of me, and see a whole new face, one that wasn't yours. *It's still your face, Norm. Maybe the tower* wants me to kill you. Maybe it wants you dead, Norm. You ever get that feeling? Like *the tower* has made its way inside you? Christ, I can feel its electric fingers digging deep inside my brain as we speak."

She paused and turned back to face him.

"After taking those pictures though, I thought maybe it had done the same to you. Maybe *the tower* got inside of *you* and was forcing you to kill all those women. Maybe you didn't know any better. I thought of a million things all at once, Norm. I wasn't sure what to do. All I knew was I wasn't going to stand by and let you or anyone else kill another person here in Eighth Block. It wasn't going to fucking happen. When you dug that blade into Carrie's door, I couldn't

stop myself from pouncing. I tried to get to your neck, straight off. I didn't want a fight. I wasn't sure if I could even take you if there was a fight. I wanted to end it with one clean cut across the neck. In and out. Over. Done. *But I missed.* I don't know how it happened, everything from that point on is a blur now, a memory consumed and buried by rage, but *somehow* I missed. Instead, my blade dug deep inside your arm, right there at the shoulder, and you immediately threw me off. I fell back and banged my head on the wall. It almost knocked me out, I hit so hard. You took off down the hall in a sprint and disappeared down the stairwell. I looked for you everywhere, on every floor, except the basement, but you weren't there. I looked for a trail of blood, something that would lead me to you, but I found nothing. It was like you just *vanished.*"

"What about the basement? Whatever it was, it probably ran into the basement," Norm said, still convinced it couldn't have been him in the photographs.

"I wasn't about to go into the basement alone. It would have been like walking into a hornets nest. I'm smarter than that," she said. "I came up here, to your apartment, in hopes I could dig through your things, try to find some sort of evidence, something to pin you to the crimes so I could know for sure who and what I was dealing with. You can imagine my surprise when I saw you here, asleep on the couch. Rage boiled within me. Fuck evidence, I had *you*. I was going to get you to confess, then rip out your throat, just like I promised."

“Samantha, I swear on everything I love, I did not murder those women. You have to believe me,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know if I believe you, Norm,” she said. “But that cut on your arm... *it’s not there*. I cut you deep too. What the fuck is happening here, Norm?”

“Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with me. You said it yourself, the killer has a gash in his arm. I don’t. I’m not the killer, Samantha. You have to cut these ropes off of me. Let me go!” he said, letting fear and frustration get the best of him.

She let out a blood-curdling scream.

“Will you shut up! I’m trying to think!” she yelled.

“Let me go, Samantha! Cut these fucking ropes off of me!” he yelled back.

She walked to the closet, where he kept his tools, and pulled out a roll of silver duct tape. It was then he discovered the rope tied at his wrists and ankles was his own, right out of his toolbox.

“Samantha, you better not! I won’t be able to breathe!” he pleaded, but she ignored him. She pulled on the end of the roll and cut off about six inches of tape with her teeth, slapping it hard against his mouth. He was silent now.

“If it turns out it wasn’t you, I’m sorry, but I need to think right now. This tape is your savior, Norm. If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’ll end up killing you anyway. I’m just in that kind of mood.”

He exhaled loudly through his nostrils. She tossed the roll of tape to the floor and walked towards the back of his apartment.

Samantha never liked using Norm's bathroom, or the bathroom of any single guy she knew. It always felt dirty, even though most of the time it didn't necessarily *look* dirty. She'd find herself focusing on microbes, things that couldn't be seen with the naked eye. As far as she knew, all single guys were chronic masturbators, and based on the contents found in the cabinet beneath Norm's bathroom sink, he didn't seem to own any cleaning chemicals besides a single tube of disinfectant wipes. It was better than nothing, she supposed, but still not enough to really get the job done. *There must be semen everywhere*, she thought, and reached behind her to flush the commode.

She laid the knife on the edge of the sink so she could wash her hands. It rocked and light danced across it as it did. These small Eighth Block bathrooms annoyed her. She gave up getting ready in her bathroom long ago, which was why half her bedroom was dominated by her dresser vanity. She pushed a healthy amount of antibacterial soap into her hands from the container on the back of the sink, and twisted the knob on the faucet. Brown water spat out for a few seconds before running clear. She lathered the soap in her hands.

Although she didn't know for sure, through the splashing and high-pitched squeal of water running through the faucet, she thought she heard a faint sound of something kicking about inside the apartment, somewhere just beyond the bathroom door. She twisted the knob to turn off the water, wrapped her soapy fingers around the handle of the blade, and listened in total silence for the sound to resurface. Her breath quickened to fuel her wildly

beating heart and she found herself concentrating more on maintaining her composure than on whatever it was creeping about outside the door.

There it was again. The sound of splitting wood, or someone snapping off a table leg, perhaps to use as a weapon, or maybe it was the sound of Norm breaking free from his restraints...

Her mind raced. There were so many possibilities, and what was even more important than trying to figure out which of those possibilities was reality was the fact that *all possible realities* resulted with someone running loose inside the apartment while she was trapped inside the bathroom. *A rat in a cage*. She knew she had to do something, but was unsure where to begin.

She threw out her hand and flipped down the light switch. Although standing in pitch darkness, waiting for her hunter to make his rounds, sent her rushing anxiety to nearly uncontrollable levels, she figured her only chance of survival would be *the element of surprise*. Before, if someone came in through the door, *they had her* — but with the lights off, she had a small, however crucial, advantage. In the time the killer was moving through each room, moving every piece of furniture, looking for her, her eyes would become adjusted to the darkness. In those first few seconds of blindness he'd experience upon opening that door, she'd have *perfect vision*. She couldn't hesitate. Whatever was standing on the other side of that door once it opened would *have to die*. If she stopped to assess the situation, even to just get a glance at the intruder's face, she could very well be killed, and she wasn't about to risk that.

She waited in silence for the doorknob to turn.

Her eyes focused.

Water and soap foam pulsed between her fingers and ran down her blade with every beat of her heart, her grip on the handle was so tight.

As the creaking of footsteps came closer, a thought looped inside her mind: *Please don't be Norm. Please don't be Norm. Please don't be Norm.*

The knob turned and the bathroom door flew open.

She took a breath.

The next thing she remembered was standing over a body. If there was a struggle, a fight, for the life of her, she couldn't recall. She seemed unharmed, at least she wasn't feeling any physical pain, but the pumping adrenaline coursing through her veins could have been masking it. She ran her hands over her body, checking for open wounds. There weren't any. Her hands were trembling, and for a split second she thought of tossing the knife to the floor, but knew better than to make a stupid mistake like that. If she learned anything from horror films, it was that the killer can, and often does, strike again, even if they appear totally lifeless.

She took a step back and turned on the bathroom light, sure to have a good grip on her knife. The body was flat on the floor, face up, bottom half in the bathroom and top half in the hallway. She was right in her assumption that the killer was a man. He wore a pair of tattered jeans, a black v-neck t-shirt, and a camouflage jacket. A large Bowie knife rested at his feet.

Samantha stepped over the body and moved out into the hallway. Just above the four-inch gash in the killer's neck was the motionless face of her friend, Norm Davis.

She turned and vomited on the carpet.

"What the fuck, Norm?" She threw back her leg and kicked him hard in the ribcage. "You sick fucking bastard!"

Her hair fell down on her face and stuck to her lips, attaching to the vomit she never bothered to wipe away.

She fell into a trance, of sorts, thinking of all the women in Eighth Block Norm had slaughtered, and the manner in which they were killed. He butchered them. Chopped them into pieces. Norm wasn't just a madman, he was a complete sicko. In all the years she'd known him, there wasn't a single clue, not one red flag, that gave her any inkling that Norm was living with such a troubled mind. He seemed so normal, especially for a resident of *the tower*. She supposed it was just like she'd always heard: *it's always the ones you least expect*.

Still, seeing his face there, speckled in red from the blood gurgling gash running through his neck, things didn't sit well with her. Something didn't feel right. There were too many questions, too many pieces missing from the puzzle.

Unconsciously, she wiped the vomit from her lips on the sleeve of her hoodie, and immediately regretted it. Her lips suddenly tasted metallic, as if her sleeve was soaked in some sort of chemical. She examined it and found her once grey hoodie was now dark purple. Norm's blood, about a gallon of it in

total, had absorbed into every piece of clothing she was wearing.

“Seriously?” she muttered to herself, then spit several times on the floor. It didn’t seem to help. She could still taste his presence as small traces of gore moved around inside her mouth. Leaping over the body, she rushed to the bathroom sink.

As hot water rushed out of the spigot, Samantha failed to notice she had made two vital mistakes: she turned her back on the body *and* let go of the knife.

A blade pierced the skin of her right shoulder from the back, and pushed its way through skin of her chest, feeling more like flame than steel. By the time she looked down at her wound, the knife was no longer inside her. Slowly, the pain began to set in. Before she even had time to process what was happening, the killer brought the knife down on her again. Completely by chance, she managed to avoid it, as she spun around and pushed herself against the wall.

It was Norm. Somehow he’d survived his near decapitation and was again trying his damndest to end her life.

“Stop it, Norm! Why are you doing this?” she shouted, the words sounding more like a plea than an actual question. The way he stared, unaffected and without sympathy, shook her to the core. This was not Norm. Norm was affectionate, playful, passionate...*warm*. Every last one of those qualities were absent now. Standing before her was some broken version of him. *An invalid*.

The killer didn’t respond to her question. Instead, he reared his arm back to swing the blade at

her a third time. She ducked and grabbed desperately for her knife as it teetered on the edge of the sink. The killer's blade dug deep into the door frame, cutting through with such force it tore a chunk away and sent splinters of wood raining down on Samantha. Her fingers fumbled along the edge of the sink as she tried locating the handle of the knife without taking her eyes off Norm's hands. The knife tumbled to the floor.

Norm swung his blade at her again, but she threw her body flat against the floor, banging her head on the toilet bowl, so again he missed. The blade dug deep into the wood of the cabinet below the sink and remained lodged there. Samantha grabbed her knife and jammed it into Norm's wrist, pinning him to the cabinet as well. Oddly, this didn't cause Norm to yelp or even wince in pain.

Something was wrong.

Samantha pulled herself to her feet, removed the knife from Norm's wrist, and pushed his head down into the sink. She stabbed him in the neck as many times as necessary for his head to become completely detached from his body. By the time it had, there was more blood on her and the walls of the bathroom than there was left in Norm's body.

He fell to the floor, lifeless.

Right then, she would have taken the body and chopped it up into so many pieces the bastard wouldn't have had a chance to spring up on her again, but right at that moment she discovered the Norm from the second attack was not the same Norm from the first attack, as both the bodies were now there on the floor, next to each other.

The tower.

This fucking tower is in my head, she thought.

*I can't let it get to me.
Those things, they aren't Norm.
They're nobodies.
Invalids.
Whatever they are, they'll keep coming.
I have to move.
If I'm going to live, I have to go straight to the
source.*

Straight to the basement.

Kill the killer.

If I'm going to live, it's the only way.

She pulled off her blood-soaked hoodie and tossed it to the floor. For a moment she thought of rinsing the blood from her face and hands, but there didn't seem to be any point. There was plenty more blood to be shed, and more importantly, she wanted the killers to know as soon as they looked at her that *she* was going to be the one to spill it. It was bad enough these things were killing all the women in Eighth Block, but now that they were attacking *her*, it was personal. She didn't have a moment to spare.

She walked into the living room and cut away the rope wrapped around Norm's hands. He removed the duct tape from his mouth.

"Jesus, Sam. I saw them come in. You oka—," Norm started, but was interrupted.

"Shhh. We don't have much time. They could be back any minute," she said. "I'm going down there. I'm ending this. You don't have to come with me, but I do need you to do one thing."

"Sure. Whatever you need," he said.

“Can you get me a pillowcase or something and fasten it around my neck to use as a sling? One of them got me in the shoulder. Just the weight of my arm alone is killing me.”

Norm took a look at the blood-soaked hole in her shirt and nodded.

“Sure, I can do that,” he said. “Can you cut my feet loose?”

She bent down and cut the rope away from his ankles.

“Just a sec,” he said, then ran into the hallway to the linen closet. He grabbed a fresh pillowcase from one of the shelves and disappeared into the bathroom.

“Holy shit, Sam! You cut this guy’s head clean off! Fucking hell!” he yelled.

“It’s not a guy, Norm. It’s nothing, nobody. An invalid. See for yourself,” she yelled back at him so he could hear her.

“I’ll pass. Thanks,” he said. “What do you suppose they are? And why the fuck do they look like *me*?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I’m fixing to find out. Those things are working for someone. It’s the only explanation I can come up with. Whoever, whatever, is behind this, it’s stopping tonight. Even if it turns out it’s this goddamn *tower* making us crazy, *it’s coming down*. Someone or something has to pay for all the lives that have been lost.”

Norm returned to the living room carrying the pillowcase and a small leather bag. He was jogging, careful not to waste any time, or to anger Samantha. The image of the murder scene, of the two slain killers gurgling blood on his bathroom floor, was permanently burned into his retinas. He couldn’t stop

thinking about it. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her.

“You cut his head clean off,” he repeated. “Holy shit, Sam.”

He unzipped the black leather bag and shuffled through its contents.

“Well, what else was I supposed to do? The thing was coming at me with a fucking Bowie knife! It was either me or him,” she said. “It damn sure wasn’t going to be me.”

“Still. That’s pretty fucking violent. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“That makes two of us,” she said. “I guess you really don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re pushed against a wall.”

“I guess so,” he said, focusing more on the contents of the bag than their conversation.

“What’s all that?” she asked.

“A med kit. You’re hurt pretty bad. I’m at least going to clean you up before you head down there,” he said.

“No, Norm, I don’t have time for this,” she said, moving toward the door.

“If you plan on dying, I guess you’re right, but if you plan on living after all this is said and done, then surely you’ll still want to be able to use that arm. Am I right?”

She sighed.

“I suppose so,” she said. “But please be quick.”

“Sure thing,” he said, waving for her to come sit down on the couch next to him. He took a closer look at her wound.

“Now, don’t be alarmed,” he said. “I’m going to tear part of your shirt away from the wound so I can clean and bandage it properly. Alright?”

She nodded.

He ripped the material of the shirt from her shoulder and tucked the frayed ends into her bra strap, as to not expose her any further.

“Sorry, I’m not trying to be weird,” he said, feeling awkward.

She smiled.

“You’ve always been weird,” she said, laughing. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He laughed and cleaned the area around the wound with a wet wipe. She winced in pain.

“Sorry. I’m trying my best not to hurt you,” he said.

“You’re fine. I’m just dreading when you get to the one on my back. It feels like fire.”

He moved to look at the wound in her back. It was easily twice as long as the one in the front.

“Shit, Sam. It’s worse than I thought. I didn’t know he cut right through you,” he said, getting up off the couch and moving toward the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’ll be right back. I just need to get something to close you up.”

“Please hurry, Norm,” she said, tapping her knees together nervously.

“Ah, here we go.”

Norm ran back to the couch, holding a small tube of super glue in his hand. He finished wiping each wound clean before removing the cap from the tube.

“What do you think you’re doing with that?” she asked.

“Relax. It’s just to seal the wound until we have time to sew it shut properly. It’ll be fine,” he said.

She took a deep breath.

“You know, this will probably sting a bit, so why don’t you talk to me.... say anything at all. Just to keep your mind off it,” he said.

“Okay. What should I talk about?” she asked.

“Whatever. Hurry. I’m about to start.”

She looked around the room, looking for something to spark a conversation, noticing the splintered wood of the front door.

“So that’s what it was,” she said. “When I was in the bathroom, I heard a cracking sound. It’s how I knew something was running loose inside the apartment. The door. Guess they broke in, and by the looks of it, using the same method the other one used to try and break into Carrie Longman’s place. Just thinking of those creeps gets my skin crawling.”

“You think *you* were scared?” Norm asked, applying the first coat of glue over her chest wound. “I watched the knife dig in and out of the door, all while helplessly hogtied and gagged on the couch. I nearly soiled myself when I saw it was *me* breaking in!”

She hissed and pulled away from him.

“Damn, that smarts,” she said, blowing on her wound. “Getting stabbed fucking sucks.”

He laughed, but quickly his smile faded.

“Can I ask you something, Sam?” he asked. She looked at him curiously and nodded her head. “When you killed them, did you know they weren’t really me?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Come on, you know what I’m getting at,” he said, starting to get frustrated. “Did you cut that thing’s head off thinking it was me, or did you know it was something else?”

She turned away from him.

“Well, I guess that answers it,” he said, returning to dressing her wounds. “Right... okay then.”

He taped a large square of gauze over the wound on her chest, then started to work on her back.

“Norm, are you serious right now?” she asked. “Think of the position I was in. If someone, *anyone*, even if it was *me*, came charging at you with a knife, you would have done the same thing. You wouldn’t have thought twice.”

He shook his head.

“No, see, that’s where you and I differ,” he said. “I know you. I know you’re not capable of such horrendous crimes. There never would have been any doubt.”

“That’s just not realistic,” she said. “These things, they seem otherworldly. It’s truly some bizarre, fucked up, science fiction shit happening here. It’s only human nature to suspect the most logical and easiest explanation before anything else. I don’t think you’re being fair about this.”

“Okay, so you see the killer coming at you, and in defense you attack and kill the killer. That’s not what I have an issue with,” he said. “It’s that you took it *ten steps further* and decapitated who you thought was *me*.”

“You’re acting like a child,” she said. “This is a ridiculous conversation.”

“If you feel that way, fine, but it still hurts me. I guess I always thought I meant *something* to you. I don’t. It’s fine. I’ll get over it.”

She stayed silent.

He fastened another square of gauze over the wound on her back with tape, slid the pillowcase under her arm and fastened it around her neck.

“You’re good to go,” he said, not making direct eye contact with her. “First chance you get, have someone who knows what they’re doing stitch you up. You’ve got a nasty wound there.”

She nodded and pulled herself to her feet.

“You know, Norm, you annoy the hell out of me,” she said. His eyes widened in shock. “You text me all hours of the night, never invite me over to play video games, and you stare at my tits more than you look into my eyes.”

“Oh, come on, that’s an exaggeration,” he said. “I don’t stare at your tits... *that much*.”

“My point is that even though you annoy me sometimes, it doesn’t mean I think you’re a bad person. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever suspected the killer was you. In fact, it wasn’t until seeing it for myself that the thought even occurred to me that it *could* have been you. I don’t know what the fuck is happening with those things, those *killers* out there. I don’t know if it’s something supernatural, or if it’s this goddamn *tower* working our minds the way it does, but I’m going to get to the bottom of it. And you’re here to see me do it because I *didn’t kill you*. I gave you the benefit of the doubt. And that’s a hell of a thing to do after seeing the things I saw. You have to agree with that, right?”

Norm felt embarrassed. She was right and he knew it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right. I’m acting childish. It just kind of fucked with me emotionally to see my head get cut off by one of my closest friends in such a violent rage.”

She laughed.

“I can imagine,” she said, smiling. “I should go.”

She walked toward the door.

“Wait,” he said. “I’m not about to just sit here while you go down there alone. I’m coming with you.”

“You sure? Don’t feel like you have to,” she said.

“I’m sure. One thing though: *what about weapons?* We need something more than a couple of knives.”

“No worries,” she said. “I’ve got us covered. Follow me.”

Samantha reached into the trash chute and removed a blue gym bag that was hanging on a magnetic hook. She tossed the bag to the floor.

“What’s that,” Norm asked.

“It’s what’s going to get us out of that basement alive,” she said. “Go ahead, open it up.”

He bent down and unzipped the bag. Inside were three fully loaded handguns.

“Holy shit! Where’d you get these?” he said.

“When we came up from the basement and went our separate ways, I called up an old acquaintance. Buzz. He lives up on *The Cliff*, so he’s as bonkers as they come, but the guy has an arsenal.”

“Nice,” he said. “How much did it cost you?”

“Just an old inflatable mattress,” she said.

“A mattress? Seriously?”

“Told you *he’s as bonkers as they come*. I tried giving him cash, but he didn’t want it. I listed a million things I was willing to trade with him, but the air mattress was all he was interested in.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Good deal,” he said, and handed her two of the guns. “Figured since they’re your guns, you’d want the extra one too.”

She buried one into the waistband of her jeans and took the other into her only functional hand.

“Hopefully we won’t need ‘em anyway,” she said.

He tossed the empty gym bag down into the trash chute.

“You ready?” she asked, taking a deep breath.

“As I’ll ever be,” he said.

She kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks for coming with me, Norm.”

He blushed and nodded at her.

As they headed down the long, dark stairwell, he couldn’t help but wonder if those words would be the last thing he’d ever hear her say.

Upon reaching the basement staircase, they were surprised to be greeted with the faint smell of smoke. Samantha’s pace quickened.

“Oh, no he doesn’t,” she muttered to herself, and jogged down the stairs.

“What? What is it?” Norm asked.

“That bastard is burning the evidence,” she said. “He’s on to us. He’s probably heard everything. I’m not about to let him get away.”

“Oh, shit,” he said. “You’re probably right.”

He ran down the stairs and caught up with her. Samantha was already primed for attack, with her arm outstretched, gun in hand, and finger on the trigger, as if she couldn’t wait to pull. Her eyes were squinted and she was looking around the darkened room evenly, appearing more like some trained soldier than a nobody weirdo from Eighth Block. Norm, on the other hand, removed the gun from the waistband of his jeans and shifted it about clumsily in his hands. He’d never really held a gun before, and now that he was, it just didn’t feel right, like his hands were committing some unforgiveable sin. He knew it was senseless, thinking such nonsense, but he couldn’t shake it. He found that holding the weapon in both hands helped to keep his quaking hands steady, even though he was sure he looked ridiculous. He felt like Don Knotts in *The Shakiest Gun in the West*. A complete idiot.

“Told you,” Samantha whispered, pointing over at the tables that once held the reel-to-reel recorders they inspected earlier. She was right, somebody was destroying the evidence. Equipment had been smashed and wiped clean from the tables, scattered now in pieces across the floor. The twisted serpent of microphone wires that once spilled out of the wall had since either been removed or pushed back inside so that now only the gaping hole was visible. The many stacks of tape reels over on the shelves had also disappeared.

“We can’t let him get away, Norm. We just can’t,” she whispered. Norm nodded in agreement. She held the gun up in front of her face. “Whatever it takes.”

A faint orange glow flickered along the edges of a closed door across the room, illuminating the pillows of smoke wafting out of the room like dragon’s breath. Norm felt as if they were preparing to walk into the pits of Hell. He gripped the gun tighter, fearing his sweaty palms would cause him to drop it in a moment of panic. If it weren’t for Samantha’s ceaseless determination to serve justice, he would have ran back to his apartment the second he smelled smoke. He found being a hero didn’t come naturally to him. In fact, just the thought of what it took to be a hero in that moment not only overwhelmed him, but it felt downright impossible. *I will probably die tonight*, he thought, and dread swirled around inside his brain until he couldn’t think straight. It wasn’t until he heard the sickening crack of a bone being snapped in two that he was able to snap out of his trance.

“We have to do this *now*. You ready?” Samantha asked, moving closer to the door before Norm even had the chance to respond.

Another sickening crack resounded from behind the closed door. The closer they got to the room, the more sounds they noticed. Something was moving about on the inside, but could only be heard between each of the loud cracks, which seemed to be happening every few seconds. Every sound was muffled slightly by a constant low hum that seemed to be emanating from the entire expanse of the wall, as

they could hear it on either side of them as they approached the door.

Samantha placed her hand on the door and immediately pulled it away.

“It’s warm. The fire is close. Be careful,” she said, pulling the collar of her shirt up over her nose. “You might want a take a breath before I open this door.”

Norm took her advice and also pulled the collar of his shirt up over his face. Samantha lifted her leg and kicked the door, as close to the handle as she could get, and it flew open after only three kicks.

They were immediately swallowed by the gnashing maw of smoke.

In the few seconds he was able to see, before the smoke stung his eyeballs and blinded him with tears, Norm spotted the source of the smoke, a small blaze barely bigger than a campfire, burning just before a stairwell. The stairs ran up to a set of doors, an exit leading to the outside world. Both doors were propped open with scrap pieces of wood. The low humming sound, he found, was emanating from several large fans set up across the room, all facing in the direction of the open doors, in an attempt to blow the smoke out of the building. The short glimpse was enough to see the room was filled with several mysterious figures, all standing around, and from what he could tell, curiously unmoving, but the smoke got to him before he could make out any other details.

The two of them fled the room almost as quickly as they had infiltrated, gasping for air between bouts of deep guttural coughs.

All at once, the dense veil of smoke swelling out the room split in two and a dark figure came barreling

through, charging straight towards them. The figure wore a black rubber apron, a gas mask, and held a crowbar high above its head, ready to swing. Norm threw up his hand, an attempt to alert Samantha of the brooding threat looming over her shoulder, but quickly realized it was too late for warning. Norm dove into her, tackling Samantha to the ground. The crowbar swung just above their heads. Their brains remained tightly contained within their skullcaps, courtesy of a few milliseconds and quick thinking on Norm's part.

"Norm?" the mysterious figure said, sounding shocked to see him. It was a man's voice.

Samantha quickly pulled herself to her feet and aimed the gun at him.

"Sam, wait!" Norm yelled. "Don't shoot just yet."

Her finger just slid over the trigger before Norm stopped her.

"What? Why?" she asked. "This fuck is the one we came for. No doubt."

Norm studied the stranger's body, looking for any indicator that would give away his identity. His body size and shape was average, that of half of everyone in the entire building, and most of his clothing and skin was covered by the apron and gas mask, which made it impossible for Norm to reveal his identity.

"Take off the mask," Norm said.

The man shook his head.

"You don't want to know. Just walk away and leave me be," he said, still gripping the crowbar in both fists.

“You’ve got three fucking seconds to drop the crowbar and pull off that mask before I send so many bullets hurdling through you that not even your mother will be able to identify your corpse.”

“Go ahead,” the man said, standing motionless. “Maybe it would be for the best.”

Samantha’s eyes squinted. Norm touched her arm.

“Hold up, Sam,” Norm said.

“What the fuck, Norm? You in with this guy or something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not,” he said. “I think I know who it is though. That voice...”

“Norm, please, just walk away,” the man said. “I never meant for it to go this far. I’ve done some terrible things. Leave me be and I’ll get rid of everything. You won’t hear from me again.”

“Dale?” Norm asked, hoping his assumption was wrong.

“Jesus fucking Christ. I told you he was a weirdo,” Samantha said, still with a tight grip on her gun.

“Norm, I’m begging you,” Dale said. “Just go. You were the last person I wanted to get mixed up in all of this.”

“Take off the mask,” Norm repeated.

“I can’t let you see me like this. Please, go,” Dale said.

“What are we waiting on, Norm?” Samantha asked. “If you don’t want me to kill him because you two share jerk off sessions with each other, I’ve got news for you. I’m pulling this trigger.”

“Jerk off sessions?” Norm asked.

“Well, whatever it is you guys do for hours on end when you’re together. I really don’t want to know.”

“You jealous, bitch?” Dale asked, seeming angry now.

Samantha laughed.

“I told you he has the hots for you,” Samantha said. “I bet that’s why he mutilated all those girls, to get closer to you.”

“What? That doesn’t even make any sense,” Norm said.

“Sure it does,” Samantha said. “He’s in love with you. He knows you well enough to know you’re straight and could never love him the way he loves you. He figures his only shot is to eliminate all the competition. The women. He’s killing them to pressure you into homosexuality.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard! You can’t be serious!” Norm said.

“Hey, I agree with you,” Samantha said. “There isn’t any logic in it, but that’s where my money is. How right am I, Dale? Bull’s-eye?”

Norm looked at Dale. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Dale said.

“Bullshit!” Samantha yelled.

“What do you mean you didn’t kill anyone?” Norm asked. “What happened to those girls? Someone ripped ‘em apart. If not you, then who?”

“It’s a long story,” Dale said. “All that matters is that it’s all over now. I’m destroying everything. I’ll be leaving Eighth Block afterwards. You’ll never hear from me again.”

“If it was that easy, we’d all eighty-six this place. You know *the tower* will never let you leave,” Samantha said.

“Then I’ll kill myself,” Dale said. “There’s nothing for me here. If I can’t leave, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“I’ll help you out with that,” Samantha said, smiling.

“Cool it, Sam,” Norm said. He looked at Dale, still in disbelief this was actually happening. *Was his best friend really a serial killer?* He needed to know for sure. He had to look into his eyes.

“Take off the mask, Dale,” Norm said. Dale started to respond, but before a word could escape his lips, Norm became enraged. “God damn it! Take off the mask!”

Dale nodded and raised his hands to pull off the gas mask. It fell to the floor.

Norm tried to make eye contact with him, but Dale hung his head in shame, sobbing violently.

“Don’t believe this bullshit, Norm,” Samantha said. “Sociopaths don’t feel anything. He fucking murdered four women, and attempted two more tonight. This is all a show to get you to feel pity.”

“I told you I didn’t murder anybody, you cunt!” Dale screamed. Tears leaked down each side of his face.

“Maybe not you specifically, but those clones you’ve got roaming around here,” Samantha said. “What are they anyway?”

“Burn in hell, bitch,” Dale said, spitting at Samantha. It didn’t come close to hitting her.

“Norm, I’m gonna give you about thirty seconds to say goodbye to your friend before I shatter that fucking skull of his,” Samantha said.

Norm thought of the clones that attacked Samantha not even an hour earlier. They were modeled in his image. He wasn’t sure if she was right about Dale, but he had to admit the evidence certainly supported her theory.

“Those clones, Dale, what are they?” Norm asked.

Dale looked up at him, making eye contact for the first time since taking off the gas mask. Every time he attempted to speak, sobs overwhelmed him.

“I can’t help you if you don’t let me know what’s going on,” Norm said, hoping this warm approach would be enough for Dale to finally come clean.

“It’s *the tower*, Norm,” Dale said, choking back tears. “I would never do anything like this. You have to believe me.”

“Did you build those things to kill the women of Eighth Block?” Norm asked.

“I guess so,” Dale said. “I mean, it didn’t start out that way.”

“What do you mean?” Norm asked.

“That wasn’t the original purpose of the clones,” he said.

Norm was still confused.

“He *fucked them*, Norm,” Samantha said. “He couldn’t have you, so building his own fuck toys was the next best thing.”

“Fucking hell, Samantha,” Norm said.

“What?” she asked. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Norm looked at Dale, but he didn't respond. Instead, he just hung his head, embarrassed.

"This is too much," Norm said. He took a deep breath. "How did you even know how to build those things? You'd have to be a fucking genius to create something like that. They have blood and everything."

"I told you, it's this fucking *tower*," Dale said. "It wanted me to do this. At first I was okay with it, but when it had me send them off to kill, I felt sick."

"Did *the tower* send them off to kill, or you?" Norm asked.

"I mean, technically it was me, I guess," Dale said. "But I would never do something like that. It had to be this fucking *tower*. I could never kill another person. Never. Norm, you have to believe me. If I get out of this *tower*, the problem will be solved. I'll destroy everything I've created and free myself of this fucking disease."

"Your thirty seconds are up, Norm. Say goodbye," Samantha said.

"Wait! Can't we just call the police?" Norm asked. "Let the law decide what they want to do with him."

"I keep telling you the cops won't come here, Norm," Samantha said. "I don't know what world you've been living in all this time, but everyone here knows the residents of Eighth Block are on their own when it comes to the law."

"He needs to be institutionalized, Sam," Norm said. "He's not a bad person. He's just confused and clearly psychotic. He needs help."

Samantha shook her gun.

"I'm helping him," she said. "It's a cure all."

“She’s right, Norm. The cops won’t come here,” Dale said, somehow blubbing even harder now. “And truth be told, she’s also right about the tower. *Who am I kidding?* If leaving was really an option, I would have done it long ago. The tower has its claws in me. The only way out is death.”

Dale reached into his pocket and removed a cell phone.

Samantha lost her patience and finally pulled the trigger, but Norm pushed her hand away just before she did. The bullet chipped away a spot in the cement floor of the basement.

“You’re really pissing me off,” she said.

“What are you doing, Dale?” Norm said, ignoring Samantha. Dale tapped away at his cell phone.

“There’s a box over there in the corner. See it?” Dale asked.

Norm spotted the cardboard box sitting in the corner of the room and nodded.

“If you fill it with meat and leave it right here in the middle of the basement, it will vanish within hours. The tower. It will take care of it. Always does. Sorry for leaving such a mess,” Dale said.

“What the fuck does that even mean, Dale?” Norm asked.

“I love you, Norm,” he said. Wiping the tears from his face. He dropped his cell phone to the floor. “I always have.”

“What the fuck, Dale?” Norm asked, terrified of what was about to happen.

Samantha screamed, looking in the direction of the smoke-filled room. Norm turned and spotted one of the clones charging forward. A barrage of bullets

went hurdling through the air around him as Samantha pumped her finger down on the trigger, emptying every last bullet into the invalid. Norm dropped to the floor and covered his ears.

“Fuck, it’s not stopping, Norm!” she screamed. “Move!”

Norm pushed himself to his feet, but as he looked back at the clone, he realized it wasn’t coming after him, or even Samantha. The thing was headed straight for Dale. Just when Norm realized what it was that was happening, the clone pulled out a Bowie knife and proceeded to chop up his best friend, pulling every limb clean from his body, right in front of him. All in just a few seconds, life had been stripped from his body, and his existence became nothing but a pile of mutilated meat.

The clone stood motionless now. Blood leaked from its many bullet wounds. Norm and Samantha kept distance between it and them until enough time had passed that they were certain the thing was finished. Norm moved closer to it, gun in hand, ready to shoot at the slightest sign of movement. It didn’t move. It didn’t even blink. With Dale gone, life would never return to the invalid. Any of them.

Samantha let out a deep sigh, as if she’d been holding her breath the entire time. Norm took it as a sigh of relief. Not wasting a moment, she slipped the gas mask over her head and walked to the doorway of the smoking room.

“I’ll clean up what’s left in there if you take care of the mess in here,” Samantha said, sounding tired and ready to get this part of the night over with. Norm nodded. She disappeared behind a wall of smoke.

Norm felt elated. They were alive. The shock of losing his best friend hadn't really sunk in yet, or maybe it had. He wasn't sure what he was feeling in those moments other than pure joy that he and Samantha were still alive. It certainly felt like a victory, albeit a small one. Even though they were able to stop at least some of the weirdness happening in Eighth Block, the two of them still lived inside *the tower*, and that meant the battle was far from over.

Norm removed the Bowie knife from the invalid's hand and proceeded to hack away at it, tossing the surprisingly realistic meat onto the pile of Dale's remains. As weird as it was to dismember a body that looked damn near identical to his own, he tried not to think about it much. After a night like the one they'd just experienced, all he could really think about was the comfort of his bed. That, and a hot shower. The way he saw it, butchering the clone was the last obstacle standing between him and those comforts.

When he was finished, he transferred the meat from the pile into the cardboard box Dale had pointed out, and slid it over to the center of the room. The walls of the box swelled as the cardboard became engorged with blood, now resembling the hanging end of a morbidly obese torso, more so than an actual box.

Walking towards the smoking room, Norm thought there was no way the box was sturdy enough to hold the meat any longer than just a few minutes. He scanned around the room, looking for a more suitable container, but could find nothing.

That's when he saw it.

The cardboard box, and the hundreds of pounds of meat contained inside, had inexplicably vanished.

How curious is this home, our tower?

Under Green Brain

Crater sat on the steps leading down into the basement, staring blankly into the darkness before him. He'd been waiting there patiently for the better part of the morning, on a delivery of fresh meat so he and the rest of the kitchen staff could finally get to work preparing the day's meal. There were dozens of hungry mouths to be fed, and within the next hour they'd be lining up to grab a plate just as they had every morning before.

Crater drummed his fingers against his knee, a nervous tick caused by the steadily increasing levels of anxiety he was currently experiencing. There was a slight ache inside his ears due to falling asleep with his earbuds in, something he'd noticed had been

happening more often than usual in the last few weeks. He knew this too was something attributed to his creeping anxiety. With most people, anxiety and depression had no clear solution, in his case however, he knew exactly how to get rid of it: *the building would have to be destroyed*. The Eighth Block Tower was the source of every problem he'd ever had, and to eliminate the building would be to eliminate even his most extreme fears and paranoia. Destroying the building was no easy feat, however. Not only had it contained the kitchen he worked in, his only source of income, but also his home. Eighth Block was the only home he ever knew, and the people there, though he couldn't stand the majority of them, were more like family than neighbors. The fact that the building was still standing was a testament to his self-control. He was clear-minded, for the most part, and able to analyze an idea thoroughly before making a conscious decision to stick the oars in the water and follow through. This was one of his best qualities, he thought. However, in the last few weeks he'd noticed a definite slip in this ability. The pressures of living within the tower felt inexplicitly higher now than ever before, and the effect it had on his mind was undeniably negative in a variety of ways. This is why he had been falling asleep with his earbuds in night after night, listening to self-help tapes on an old Walkman he'd found in one of the storage closets. The tapes seemed to help slightly, *but not as much as...*

He flipped the light switch on without bothering to stand from his position on the stairs. The unfinished concrete basement lit up and for a second burned out his eyes. Once he could see clearly, he examined the cardboard box resting in the middle of

the floor, saw that it was still empty, and flipped off the switch again. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he fought the urge to calm his nerves the best way he knew how: *the hum*. He felt it necessary to try and deal with his anxiety through any other means because he knew the other residents of the building found the same solace in the hum, and he was *not* like them. He refused to believe the madness that infected the others infected him as well. To give in to the hum was to give up hope, he thought, after all, once he allowed himself to become a hum junkie, his dreams of one day destroying the building and being rid of his problems would be just that, a dream, something that would never become tangible, an unfulfilled wish, a lone stationary coin in a long forgotten well. Once he allowed the building inside his mind, destroying it would mean destroying himself, and he would never allow that. He had to walk away unscathed, and also reborn. He could not complete his metamorphosis while hanging on an addiction for the very thing he wished to destroy: *the radiation, this building*. It wouldn't happen. If it were easy to overcome, then the other residents would have done it years ago. However, even knowing the consequences, it still seemed like a small sacrifice during moments when his anxiety levels were extremely high. During those moments, his brain sought immediate relief, and in the last few weeks he was embarrassed to admit, but he had given in to temptation quite a few times. Even now, as he sat on the basement steps, bathed in darkness, he thought about how easy it would be to lean over and push his ear to the wall, just for a few seconds of that sweet hum caused by the radiation of toxic chemicals flowing on the inside. He took several

deep breaths, regained composure, and proudly managed to resist. He slid his hand up the wall and flipped the switch. Again the concrete room lit up and burned out his eyes, but this time the cardboard box was no longer empty. Great hunks of red raw meat glistened now inside the box and a small pool of blood was forming underneath. Crater stood, relieved to be getting on with his day, which he hoped would be filled with enough distractions to keep him from thinking too much about anything. The further he was from his thoughts, the better. He grabbed the box from the bottom, his fingers pressing deep into the squishy blood-soaked cardboard, nearly piercing completely through, and carried it up the dark stairway.

“It’s about fucking time, Crate,” a voice said as Crater walked into the kitchen. “It’s almost ten. You get lost down there, boy?”

He dropped the soggy box onto the countertop and wiped his hands clean across the front of his white apron.

“Chuck, it’s hardly my fault,” he said. “You know delivery has nothing to do with me. If anything, maybe you should put the box down there a little earlier.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted it. There was nothing left to do but take the storm head on, and to say as little as possible in the meantime.

“So what are you saying, Crate? You saying this is my fault then? You wanna be the guy that comes down here at six every morning to get the kitchen ready?”

“No.”

“Sounds like that’s what you’re saying.”

“No, not at all.”

Chuck took a moment to respond, instead he stared at Crater, sizing him up, long enough to create tension and for a little adrenaline to flow through their veins.

“You know, you wouldn’t do it even if I assigned the job to you. Hell, I can barely get any work out of you assholes now. You’re down doing god-knows-what in the basement and Sansa comes in later and later every day. She was supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“Have you heard from her?”

Chuck laughed.

“Do I ever? She’ll walk right through those doors, pull on an apron, and not say a single thing to me. Won’t even look at me. You watch and see if I ain’t right.”

Crater began cutting away at the hunks of meat, tossing slivers of fat into the wastebin.

“Have you ever considered that you may come off as a little intimidating?” Crater asked.

“Ah, Crater, come on now. You and I both know what’s going on with that girl. Her fella has got her on quite a short leash—”

Crater interrupted, “Stop.”

A surprised look came over Chuck’s face.

“Am I wrong?”

“It’s not fair to talk about that. It’s her business.”

“Shit, Crater, it’s just us here. What’s the big deal? You sweet on that girl or something?”

Crater silently chopped away.

“Oh, I see,” the two of them were silent for a few moments, Crater focusing on the task at hand and Chuck reflecting on the information he just uncovered. “You know, what you do outside the job is y’all’s own fucking business, but if you two bring any of that bullshit love drama here into work, I won’t hesitate to get rid of the both of you. Can’t have that. We clear?”

“It’s not like that. We’re only friends, Chuck.”

“Yeah, well, just keep that in mind for future reference.”

Crater couldn’t help but to crack a smile.

“You think she likes me?”

“Boy, you better hope not. No offense, I know you like the girl and all, but she’s a mess. It doesn’t take a whole lotta digging to see her life ain’t all shooting stars and rainbows.”

“Yeah, but who’s is?”

“Well, no one’s, I guess, but Crater...”

He paused.

“Just be careful,” he continued. “You’re a good kid. I know I bust your chops now and then, hey, that’s the job, but I’d hate for you to get mixed up in her mess of a life. You know how she is...walks around here, barely saying a word, but humming like a hive of honeybees. She’s a hum junkie, man. Bet her brain is so full of radiation it glows bright green. You can probably see it through her skull at night.”

“Chuck! Fucking stop already!”

Crater slung another hunk of fat into the wastebin.

“None of us are perfect,” Crater continued. “We’re all slaves to the radiation. Don’t pretend it’s

not affecting you too. We've all walked in on you licking rat bellies at one time or another."

"I wasn't licking their bellies."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. We've all seen you do it. Just about everyone in the entire building knows. We all do weird shit like this. It's all the goddamn radiation in the walls."

"I chew on their feet."

"What?"

"I chew on their tiny rat feet. I don't lick them."

"That's still not normal."

"Didn't say it was."

"Right, well, my point is that we are all fighting a battle here. It's true that most of us here in the tower will be nothing more than a slave to the radiation, but not me. I refuse. I'm going to beat this."

"Not with that girl, you're not. And that was *my* point," Chuck said.

"What girl?" Sansa said, as she walked in through the kitchen door.

"Speak of the devil," Chuck said.

"Chuck!" Crater yelled, completely embarrassed and shocked that Chuck managed to keep his secret for only a minute or two.

"Me?" Sansa's face became flushed. "What about me?"

"Ah, it's nothin'," Chuck said. "You're late again, I see. This is becoming quite a habit. What's the story here?"

Sansa pulled her long blonde hair over her face, hiding, just as a child would while being scolded.

Chuck spat a fake laugh.

"Told you, Crate," he said. "Not a word."

Sansa pulled on an apron and quickly went to work, stirring the beans, doing anything to avoid being caught in Chuck's crosshairs.

"What's that you got there?" Chuck asked.

Sansa turned away.

"I'm here, okay? Can I just work now?" she asked.

"Let me see your face," Chuck said. "Look at me."

Sansa continued to look in the opposite direction. From this angle, Crater could see what Chuck was going on about. The left side of her face had a crescent-shaped bruise that was a darker shade of pink than the rest of her skin. This wasn't the first time she'd walked into the kitchen with visible injuries. Her last had healed only days before.

"That man of yours still giving you trouble, honey?" Chuck said.

"Jesus, shut up already!" Crater yelled.

Sansa briefly looked up at Crater, her eyes like big blue jewels, then quickly returned her gaze at the floor.

"What? I'm just asking her a simple question."

"You're being an asshole," Crater said.

Chuck laughed.

"If you love this girl so much, why don't you save her?"

Sansa looked up at Crater again just in time to see his face flare in anger. He pulled the bloody apron off his body, balled it up, and threw it at Chuck's face. Chuck let it hit him and fall to the ground.

"You're a lonely old bastard who criticizes others because you're too goddamned scared to

analyze your own shitty, pathetic life,” Crater said. “I’m outta here.”

He grabbed his Walkman from the countertop and stormed out the kitchen door.

“He’ll be back,” Chuck said, and then walked over to the counter to finish chopping the meat.

Sansa remained hidden behind her hair, stirring the vat of beans. She couldn’t help but to smile.

Crater sat on the ledge of the roof, looking out at the dirty Chicago streets, the crumbling buildings that surrounded Eighth Block, and lit a pale cigarette. He inhaled. The smoke couldn’t have been any worse than the pollution he was taking in, he surmised, then took another hit. He dug his hand into his pocket and removed a spaghetti mess of tangled wires, his earbuds. After fidgeting with them for a moment, he managed to straighten out the mess and plug them into his Walkman. He took a long draw from his cigarette, laid his body out flat on the concrete ledge of the building, and pushed play.

“Your mind is consciousness, it is you, and it is in control of your own reality, the way you perceive the world. You are the mind and you are in control. You make everything happen,” said a tinny, somewhat distant voice on the cassette tape. *“When feelings of anxiety penetrate your mind, it is only because you are allowing it. Do not accept this as part of your reality. Anxiety is not natural. There is a parasite living inside you. Take a moment to breathe. Close your eyes and concentrate on a way to expel this parasite from your body.”*

A few minutes later, the steel door leading to the roof opened and two figures stepped out, dragging behind them a black shop vac on wheels and several feet of bright orange extension cord. Crater remained in position and took another pull from his cigarette. He recognized the two men immediately and wasn't surprised in the slightest to see them, or their shop vac. Their names were Buzz and Magus. They came up to the roof several times throughout the day, vacuuming the sky, for god knows what reason. Crater was one of the only people in the entire building who actually recognized their vacuuming as a deeply odd ritual, however, he'd grown accustomed to seeing such bizarreness over the years that he really didn't think too much about it anymore. It was a mental illness, something they shared with all the other residents in the tower. He was thankful the illness hadn't spread to him. He wouldn't allow himself to become so sick. *His mind was consciousness, it was he, and he was in control of his own reality, the way he perceives the world. He was the mind and he was in control.*

They dragged the vac out to the center of the roof and Buzz leaned down and flipped on the switch. The hum of the vac immediately sent a chill shuddering down Crater's spine. He tried turning the volume up on his Walkman, in hopes of obscuring the constant drone, but it was already on its highest setting. *He would not allow this parasite into his mind, no matter how lulling... or relaxing... he found it... to be.* However, he did not move or try to block it out in any way. In fact, he found himself doing the exact opposite. He stopped the tape, sat up on the ledge, and pulled the buds from his ears. His

breathing slowed as his body synched with the buzzing. He was at peace.

This was quickly interrupted by the sound of gunshots.

Buzz held a stiff straight arm up in the air and fired a pistol into the clouds at random. Startled pigeons took to the sky, twenty or thirty of them in total. Crater's heart jumped with every pull of the trigger, causing his anxiety to come rushing back all in an instant. *The parasites are here, and they are swarming now. Expel! Rid them from your body! This is not natural. What you are feeling is not a natural human experience. You are plagued!* The call of radiation was singing sweetly to him now from within the building, urging him to come back inside, promising to take care of him and calm his precious heart.

He stood and cupped his hands over his mouth.

"Hey, assholes!" he shouted at Buzz and Magus. "What's with the gun? What the fuck are you even shooting at anyway?"

They looked up at the sky with a confused look on their faces.

"God?" Buzz asked. "Z'at you?"

"God?" Crater repeated. "No. Hey, over here, fellas! It's me, Crat—"

He was interrupted by the sound of the gun going off again, but this time a bullet whizzed straight past him. It missed by several feet, but it was close enough for him to realize that he was now the target. He dropped flat against the roof and rolled his body to the nearest cover, a rusty old air-conditioning unit. The gun continued to fire in his direction for a few seconds more, stopping the moment a bloody pigeon

fell into his lap. The bird had been shot straight through the neck, its head no longer attached, likely blown into a million little pieces and carried off with the breeze. This, of course, startled him and caused him to leap to his feet, awkwardly juggling the dead bird in his arms.

Crater let out a horrified scream.

“Dear Jesus, what have you done?” Magus yelled at Buzz. Buzz shrugged his shoulders and looked into the sky. “You killed God, man. Buzz... holy shit, Buzz, you killed God!”

Buzz didn't seem too affected by the thought. As Magus stood there, hands cupped over his mouth and staring at nothing with the greatest intensity, Buzz calmly leaned over and turned off the vac. Crater watched as they seemingly struggled to make sense of what had just happened, trying to find the common thread that linked all these peculiarities together, something that told a story, even if it was the *wrong* story, something that made sense...*to them*. He also acknowledged that neither one seemed to realize that he was out on the roof with them too, despite the fact that he had actually spoken to them.

He grew annoyed watching them and threw the blood-soaked pigeon carcass at Buzz. Though the bird did not drop down on him from above, when it struck him, Buzz looked again to the sky.

“Birds! They rain from above!” Magus shouted. “God's final plague! This is some Old Testament shit! Take cover!”

They huddled together, crouched on the rooftop, hiding from a rain of birds that simply just wasn't there. Crater looked down at his hands and

traced his fingers along the trails of dried blood caked in the creases in his palms.

“Christ,” he muttered. “I... I can’t... I can’t do this anymore.”

He ran to the steel door and pushed it open with such force that he put a hole in the sheetrock wall that lined the inside of the stairwell. He pushed the door shut and sat on the stairs, burying his face into his hands. Tears started to form in the corners of his eyes.

“I am not in control. I am not in control. I am not in control,” he repeated to himself.

He wrapped his fingers in his hair and pulled taut, away from his scalp. It was a way of distracting himself, or perhaps it was punishment for allowing himself to become so weak, and all within an instant too. He was shocked to see how quickly he had fallen, how weeks of listening to his tapes and remaining almost completely abstinent of the hum had built nothing sturdier than a house of straw. He was weaker than he thought, and tired, so very tired of fighting...

Never hesitating to reach out and grab him at his lowest, weakest points, the hum from within the walls sounded out clear and true, as if calling out to him, urging him in that moment to put his head upon its breast so it could sing his restless, worrying mind to sleep. Crater looked up at the hole in the wall and for the first time he could actually see the flowing river of chemicals that lay beyond the sheetrock. It was a liquid substance that had the color and consistency like that of antifreeze, just a little thicker than water. Crater pressed his face against the hole and took a deep whiff, expecting to get some sort of contact high off the fumes of whatever type of

chemical this was, but instead he smelled nothing but dirt and caught a lungful of black mold. He started to reach up to touch the strange flowing substance, but was distracted by a body scurrying up the stairwell.

It was Sansa.

In addition to her bruised face, she now had a bloody lip and her neck and arms were red with hand-shaped splotches. She was sobbing hysterically.

“Sansa? What happened to you?”

She did not respond. Instead, she collapsed into his lap and continued to cry out uncontrollably, her face buried in the lower half of his torso. Hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around her. It was the first time he had ever actually touched her. Though he had often fantasized about it many times before, he never once thought it would happen under these particular circumstances.

She lifted her head and looked at him with big, wet eyes, saying nothing at first. Pain radiated from her gaze, her nearly soulless face, as she carried the look of someone severing nerves and ties to an unhealthy, abusive past. Crater found that in an odd way her lack of explanation spoke more about what she was feeling now than words ever could.

Finally, her swollen, bloody lips parted and she said softly, “I need a place to stay tonight.”

Sitting on the couch inside his apartment, Crater wrapped his left arm around Sansa, his hand resting on her upper arm. She was much thinner than he had previously realized, he noticed this as soon as she fell into his lap on the stairwell. Down in the kitchen, she always wore clothes that hid her frame, t-shirts two

sizes too big and baggy jeans, covered by an even larger apron. He'd always assumed she wore them big because she had to, seeing as how clothes in Eighth Block Tower are almost always hand-me-downs from some other resident within the building. Now, however, he suspected there was a bit more to it than just that, that perhaps she was hiding something, some kind of sickness. She was much too thin to be healthy.

They stared almost blankly at a flickering television screen as it displayed an old black and white film called *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*. Neither were paying much attention to it though. Sansa was looking at the screen, but her mind was elsewhere, lost in the events of the day and fretting of the days to come. Crater's thoughts were lighter, as he found himself just really enjoying her company, even though they hadn't really done or said much of anything at all. She was there and she was safe, so he was happy.

"How great would it be if some kind of giant monster came and destroyed this place right now?" Crater asked, desperately trying to get a conversation started.

"What?" she asked, snapping out of her trance.

"Something like that," he said, pointing at the monster on the television screen. "What if something like that came up out of Lake Michigan and just leveled this place? Wouldn't it be great to have to leave? To find some other place to live?"

She looked confused.

"You don't like it here?"

"You *do*?"

"I guess. I've never thought about leaving before."

“Never?”

“Never.”

“I think about it all the time. Don’t get me wrong, I like the people here just fine, it’s just I... I don’t know,” Crater cut himself short.

“What?”

“I just see myself doing something else, something that doesn’t keep me here. Something that *means something*.”

“Like what?”

Crater thought about it for a moment and realized he didn’t have an answer. He had never thought that far ahead. Did he ever really dream of doing something with himself or was the dream all just a fantasy to rid himself of this place and nothing more?

“I don’t know, but...something,” he said, embarrassed of his answer, or lack thereof. He looked into her eyes and noticed her wincing in pain.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I just have a headache, that’s all,” she said. “You can keep talking, I’m listening, but do you care if I close my eyes for just a bit? I think it would help.”

“Sure thing,” he said. He remained silent and ran his fingers through her hair, still in disbelief that she was actually there in his apartment, on his couch, sitting right next to him. He smiled.

“Talk to me,” she said. Her eyes remained closed.

“Okay, hmmm.” He struggled for a topic, then quickly remembered the incident on the roof, the strange scene that had played out only hours before. “When I was up on the roof earlier, I had a strange encounter with Buzz and Magus. They had come out

to the roof to vacuum the sky again and they had somehow mistaken me for God or something, I don't know. Guess you never know with those two."

Sansa's chest began to heave noticeably and she was exhaling faster and more audibly now. Crater was sure she had fallen asleep, but decided to test it.

"So Buzz, that crazy bastard, he pulled out his junk, folded his dick and wrapped it inside the veiny skin flap of his scrotum. He kept yelling, '*Run away from the alien egg sack! Alien egg sack! Run away!*'"

She didn't flinch. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She was asleep at his side. He couldn't think of a better way to end the day.

He closed his eyes.

Crater was awakened shortly after by the sound of a strong electric current coming from out in the hallway. He slowly pulled himself up off the couch, careful not to wake Sansa. The room was dark, save for the light emanating from the small television screen. He reached out at a nook beside the front door, and out from behind a large potted cordyline he removed a crowbar, a tool he kept around not particularly because of its primary function, but because it was *thick* and *metal* and *could penetrate skulls easily*, if need be. He was fairly confident there was nothing to fear out in the hallway, however, looking at the couch he was quickly reminded that someone else's live-in girlfriend was presently sleeping inside his apartment. And knowing the violent tendencies of her boyfriend, the crowbar seemed like a proper precaution, even if ultimately it would not be needed.

In the hallway, he was quickly able to find the source of the strange electric sounds that awakened him. It was a faulty radiator on its last legs, and from the sound of it, it was close to exploding, or at the very least bursting into flame at any moment. Visions of the Eighth Block Tower engulfed in flames flashed suddenly in his head and he couldn't think of a sweeter sight. Well, except for maybe the kaiju scenario he had come up with earlier while watching television. *Now, that would be quite a sight*, he thought and just thinking about it caused him to be overwhelmed with elation.

He started to head back into his apartment, but stopped short, thinking heavily on the crowbar he held in his hand. He turned around and stared at the wall with such intensity that it seemed as if he was trying desperately to see through it, to see the sweet green chemical flow on the inside. Curiosity was besting him. He raised the crowbar above his head and came down with it hard into the wall, hook-end first, tearing into the soft sheetrock with ease. He dug his hand into the hole he'd made, and pulled chunks of the wall away until the hole was the size of a human head. His hand was now saturated in the strange liquid and he felt an odd tingle as it dried, absorbing into his skin.

The liquid rushed out of the hole in an instant, but curiously the flow did not slide from the hole, down the wall, and to the floor as he was expecting. Instead, it flowed out the left side of the hole, defying gravity, and kept surging in that direction for as far as he could see. He followed the thin rivers of radiation as it made it's way through the hallway and up the stairwell.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Crater asked the substance, not expecting to get a reply.

The flow was slowly getting weaker and had begun to taper off, now only three small streams remained, and dripped down the wall at the top of the stairs. It was headed out onto the roof. Crater was hesitant to open the steel door, feeling a strange sensation now rattling about within his nerves. *Something* was out there. This chemical was flowing *somewhere*. He thought for a moment of turning around and sliding back onto the couch next to Sansa, but he pushed it away.

He opened the door.

There were stars in the sky somewhere far beyond the polluted fog that hung overhead, but Crater could not see even one of them. It was dark out on the rooftop. The only light came from the sides of the tower, from the streetlamps a few floors below, and the dull white glow of the waning gibbous moon. It was dark enough that immediately after opening the door, Crater easily spotted where it was the chemical was flowing towards—out in the middle of the roof there was a bright green light emanating from below the graveled rooftop. He went to investigate. There was a large crack in the roof, and whatever was putting off the strange green glow was somewhere just below the surface. Crater held the crowbar high above his head and came down onto the rooftop with such force that a large chunk of concrete broke away, causing even more of the green light to spill out. He chipped away just enough to make a hole to slip himself inside. Without giving it a second thought, he tossed the crowbar out onto the roof, got down on all fours, and slid down inside the hole.

He noticed two things right away that struck him as odd. First, he fell flat on his back upon dropping down through the hole, however the surface he landed on did not take his breath. In fact, it was soft, spongy, and covered in a thin veil of mucus. The second thing was that the humming was louder here than he had heard it anywhere else inside the building. In fact, it was so intense that he was almost immediately paralyzed by it. He could feel the vibrations of the hum through the spongy surface beneath him and in a way it felt as if the hum was fusing to his body, or perhaps somehow swallowing him whole. Whatever it was he was experiencing, he didn't bother analyzing it. He felt a calm he had never felt before and wasn't about to spoil it with overthinking.

However, the feeling was short-lived, because a few seconds later the slick mucus caused his body to slide off of the spongy surface and fall hard onto the solid wood floor below. This caused him to briskly awaken from his calming coma and for the first time he could actually see what it was he landed on: it was an enormous, neon green, pulsating brain. The brain was emitting the same bright green light that he had seen leaking through the crack in the roof earlier, and the room he was presently standing in was completely bathed in it. Also coming from the brain were rivers of green liquid, four of them in total, each running toward one of the four walls of the tower. This was the same radioactive liquid he had seen inside the walls. Standing there, looking at the pulsating folds and seeing the liquid oozing out from between every wrinkle, he couldn't help but to smile. Seeing the brain, to him, was enough proof that he and all the

other Eighth Block residents were not insane, well at least not permanently. They were all experiencing hallucinations and temporary madness because they were victims, slaves to this...this thing, this brain, whatever it was. *This is what is keeping us here*, he thought, *this is why we cannot leave. The building must be destroyed. It's our only chance of survival, at a normal life.*

Suddenly he felt a sickness in the pit of his stomach as he realized that maybe this wasn't the case at all. *Maybe none of this is real*, he thought. *What if I'm imagining things again? Either this giant pulsating brain is real...or I'm truly mad.*

He stood stunned at this realization, and panic quickly crept in.

When feelings of anxiety penetrate your mind, it is only because you are allowing it. Do not accept this as part of your reality. Anxiety is not natural. There is a parasite living inside you. The words from the cassette tape played in a continuous loop inside his mind. *I am not mad*, he thought, *I am in control, I am in control, I am in control.*

The building must be destroyed.

"Your wish has been granted," said a hissing, throaty voice. It sounded reptilian to him, what he imagined a snake or lizard would probably sound like if they could talk.

"My what?" he asked, not even knowing who was actually speaking. The brain seemed to expand and contract when he spoke, as if it was somehow sensitive to his speech.

"Did you just speak to me?" he asked the brain, immediately feeling completely insane.

“Your wish has been granted,” the voice repeated.

To say that Crater was confused at hearing this would be an understatement. As far as he could recollect, he had never been asked to make a wish, let alone did he ever actually wish for something.

“My wish? What wish?” he asked, looking around the room, still unsure of who or what was even speaking to him.

There was an awkward pause that lasted several moments. The sound of the hum was all that could be heard, until finally the voice spoke again.

“Your wish has been granted.”

“Jesus Christ,” Crater said, more annoyed now than worried. “I’ve got to get the fuck out of here.”

He looked around the room and quickly assessed that the only way out was the way he came in. He took a deep breath thinking it may help in preparing himself for the climb, but it wouldn’t. He pushed his fingers between the mucus-filled folds of the green brain and pulled his body up on top of it. By the time he climbed out of the hole, his clothes were completely saturated in brain goo. He hardly noticed, however, because as he pulled himself up onto the roof, he was greeted by a surprise. Nearly every tenant of the Eighth Block Tower was there on the roof with him, crowded together and shrieking wildly.

He spotted Chuck, surprised to see him without an apron on, as he wasn’t sure he had ever seen him without one in all the years he’d known him, and he moved his way through the crowd to get to him.

“Hey, Chuck, what the hell is all this about?” Crater asked.

Chuck spun around, startled to hear his voice. He held a live rat in his hand that was missing three of its feet. When he remembered he was holding the rat, he quickly held it behind his back hoping that Crater hadn't noticed. He'd noticed.

"Oh, this?" Chuck said, waving the rat around, motioning at the crowd. "Their just freaking out over the kaiju."

"The kaiju? What the fuck are you talking about, Chuck?"

"The kaiju. You know, that giant monster that just crawled out of Lake Michigan. It's over there somewhere."

Chuck pointed out somewhere in the dark distance.

"Like it'll even make its way down here," Chuck continued. "Why would it want to? All the good stuff is downtown. Am I right?"

Chuck smiled and nudged Crater in the arm with the rat. When he smiled, a tiny rat foot stuck out from between two of his teeth. Crater grimaced as he noticed this and decided to leave Chuck alone with his meal.

"Thanks, Chuck," he said, and pushed his way through the crowd.

"No problem, Crate. See you in the morning, right?" he yelled.

Crater pretended he couldn't hear him and kept pushing through people until he finally reached the ledge of the building. Out in the distance, he could see the silhouette of a large creature moving slowly between skyscrapers.

"It has wings," one of the residents shouted. "Do you see that? It has fucking wings!"

“Nah, that’s a pair of tentacles,” another resident said, cupping a fistful of popcorn and shoving it into his mouth. “If it were wings, that thing’d be airborne.”

“It’s wings. I’m wearing glasses. I’m seeing in HD,” the first resident said.

“You’re wearing glasses because you can’t see for shit,” the second resident said, squeezing another fistful of popcorn. “Besides, what’s a lake monster doing with a set of wings, anyway? You don’t know nothin’ about evolution. Do ya, four eyes?”

Crater tried to focus his eyes to get a better look at the hulking creature, but before he could make out any details, someone grabbed him by the back of the shirt and sent him hurdling through the crowd. It was Kevin, Sansa’s boyfriend. Crater landed hard against the graveled rooftop.

“Kevin, stop!” Sansa shouted, throwing wild-armed punches at his chest. “Leave him alone! He didn’t do anything wrong!”

He palmed her face and pushed away, sending her into the arms of the crowd. Crater tried pulling himself to his feet, but was immediately grounded as Kevin jammed his foot into his ribcage.

“You been fucking my girl, Crate? Huh?” Kevin yelled, stomping on his ribs a few more times.

Crater was winded and couldn’t answer him even if he wanted to.

“Answer me, you fuck,” Kevin screamed. He saw Crater gasping for air and just hearing him breathe pissed him off even more. Out about five feet away was the crowbar. It didn’t take long before Kevin spotted it.

“You’re fucking dead,” Kevin said, gripping the crowbar in his hand.

“No, Kevin! No!” Sansa screamed.

Crater looked up just in time to see the crowbar coming down at him. He was struck on the right arm, just above his elbow. The pain seethed with such intensity that he could actually hear the rush of blood as it boiled inside his body. It felt like his arm was broken in three different places, if not shattered completely. He probably would have been killed immediately after, but Kevin, along with the other residents on the roof, was suddenly distracted by a bigger threat.

The monster had arrived and it was feasting upon the residents.

Crater could hear a terrible wailing, but was unsure if it was the creature making the noise or if it was the final death howls of the residents as they were scooped up and taken into its maw. Magus stood over Crater and thrust the end of the shop vac into the air between him and the giant creature. Buzz, taking a more effective approach, took out his gun and fired a few rounds, but being the terrible shot he is, he ended up putting more holes in residents than he did the monster.

“This isn’t over, fucker,” Kevin shouted, pointing at Crater. “Once this thing leaves, you’re—”

He wasn’t able to finish the thought, because at that very moment, Kevin was picked up by one of the creature’s slimy tentacles and shoved inside its beak. His body was chewed up, right at eye level of all the onlookers, and no one, including Sansa herself, really seemed to mind watching him as he entered the first stage of digestion.

Crater staggered to his feet, minding the wounds of his ribcage and his possibly shattered right arm, and made his way through the steel door and down the stairwell. He had to get away from the crowd and all the action out on the rooftop. He had enough for one day, to say the least. It was a little difficult, due to the pain, but he made it back to his apartment in only a few minutes.

Upon opening the door, he wasn't at all disappointed to discover that an entire wall of his apartment was missing completely, ripped away by the kaiju, he presumed. Truth be told, he was ecstatic. This was exactly what he had wanted, for the building to be destroyed. *And good riddance.* He wouldn't miss it at all. At first, he thought he would miss his neighbors, the very people he had known all his life, but after that scene up on the roof, he thought *to hell with them all.* He knew this was his only chance to get away. It was now or never. He couldn't wait around on everyone else to get their shit together. The time was now. If it weren't for one vital element, he would have already made it down to the ground level and out onto the street. He couldn't leave his Walkman behind, though. *What if the world outside was just as mad? What would ever calm him if he had neither the Walkman or the hum?* The risk was too great to go without it. *Better safe than sorry,* he thought. Besides, it would only delay his exit by a minute or so...

Or so he thought.

One minute turned into two minutes, then three, four, five minutes. The Walkman was nowhere to be found. He threw the cushions off the couch, flipped the entire thing over, ripped up the rugs,

threw out the contents of every drawer, every cupboard, and even the refrigerator. As the seconds rolled by, he grew ever more impatient and angry. It wasn't long before he was throwing random items off his bookshelves in anger, breaking mirrors, picture frames, old records, anything and everything that would shatter when thrown against the wall. He began kicking furniture and screaming at the top of his lungs, for his frustration was boiling and flowing, and the pain in his arm was excruciating and growing, and the residents on the rooftop were bitching and moaning, and the creature above was howling and groaning! Crater's heart was beating so wildly that he thought he could actually feel it pushing through the gaps in his ribcage. In a blind fit of rage, he picked up the television, still playing the same old kaiju film from earlier, and threw it outside the massive claw-shaped hole in the wall.

The instant the television was unplugged from the wall, all fell silent.

The giant hole in the wall had suddenly disappeared, and the things he had just destroyed had all found its way back into their rightful place, all in an instant. The only light now came from the flickering television set: *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*. The pain in his arm and ribcage had somehow vanished, and when he looked down to investigate, he found he was sitting on the couch, next to his beautiful Sansa.

It happened again, he thought. The visions, when they came, seemed all too real in the moment. He sighed with relief.

Sansa awakened for only a short moment, long enough to pull him closer and wrap her arms around his torso. He heard her sniffing.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You smell weird,” she said.

He thought of what it could possibly be. He felt his shirt and it was damp. He wondered for a moment if any of the events from the last hour were actually real, because if so, then she could possibly be smelling the brain mucus soaked in his clothing.

“Is it a chemical smell?” he asked.

She sniffed again.

“No, it smells like sweat...and mold,” she said.

Crater wasn't sure what to say. He thought about getting up and changing his clothes, or maybe even taking a quick shower, but he really didn't want to lose his place next to her. He had been waiting for this moment for far too long. He wanted to enjoy her company while she was still there.

“I'm sorry,” he said, but she had already fallen asleep by the time the words left his mouth.

He reached over and grabbed the Walkman resting on the arm of the couch, pushed in his earbuds, and listened to his tape.

His ears would be sore in the morning.

The residents of Eighth Block will return in:

THE BEDLAM BIBLE

*“A Strange History of Madness
Inside the Eighth Block Tower”*

BOOK TWO: WHITE FUZZ

William Pauley III

DOOM FICTION

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