

# **CADAVER**

*A Christian Suspense Novel*  
*by*

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## CHAPTER 1

*They should have never done that!*

His left cheek rose lifting the corner of his mouth. The slight opening, coupled with his habitual sniff, united to make a soft whistling sound—a tic. He'd had it for as long as he could remember, but usually, he wasn't aware of it. Only when he would catch someone gawk at him or smirk did he think about it, and then, he would get mad. He would seethe within—like now. Only now, it was different. Now, it was because of them.

That thought clawed its way through his mind as he peered into the plain, mottled mirror in the tiny bathroom. It hung slightly askew above a rust-stained sink, suspended from one nail by a doubled wire. Beneath it and to the right, alongside a gray paneled wall, was an overflowing wicker hamper. Weakened by age, it inclined ever so slightly to one side. Oblivious to the smell of mildew that issued from it, he stretched his five-foot-eight frame to get a better view of his reflection.

Pale gray-blue eyes glared back, eyes that were haunting and hypnotic. A pocked face, long ago ravaged by acne, surrounded his finely shaped, narrow nose. His dark brown, curly hair covered his ears and dangled in multitudes of ringlets over his shirt collar. Its length reminded him of his father.

"Hey, you big sissy," his dad had slurred hatefully early one Sunday morning, awakening him from a deep sleep. He squinted into the glare of the hallway light. It silhouetted his father who staggered in the doorway. It was 2:30 in the morning. "You get that hair cut," his dad mumbled thickly, accenting his warning with a shaking fist that sloshed a *Bud*. "You look like a girl."

*How do you like this, Dad?* He made a disrespectful gesture in the mirror. It would have sent his dad into a rage were he around to see it, which he wasn't. Sclerosis of the liver had taken care of that. *Anyway, I like it*, he thought to himself, as he prolonged his gaze into the mirror. It was a gaze that gave an instant replay of an "it-won't-be-long-till-I get-even" smirk. And satisfied with himself and his plan, he set his 148 pounds back on his heels, spun around and hurried nervously into the bedroom.

There, wedged into a nine-by-ten room, sat an aged, multi-humped double bed. An aisle, little more than a foot in width, separated it from three grimy, beige walls and

a flimsy, walnut-veneered chest of drawers. He stood before it and rooted through the clutter atop the chest in search of his penlight. He found it, slipped it into the frayed, partially hanging rear pocket of his faded jeans and cast a restless glance at the black face of his plastic clock.

It was 2:00 A.M. It would be late enough now. Oh, some students would be awake. But you expect that on any campus, and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville was no exception. With nearly thirty thousand students from some forty-nine states and sixty foreign countries, somebody was always awake, any hour, day or night. So, he would have to be careful, and with a bucket in each hand, both full to the brim, he left his three-room apartment. Soon, he was slinking among the shadows cast by the huge oaks that lined both sides of the street. He became one of them. That way, he would make it to his destination unnoticed. Then, he would teach them a lesson.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the world, in Sydney, Australia, it was Saturday. 9:00 A.M. Brooks was standing in front of the kitchen window. She peered out as the postman pulled in front of their modest, split-level brick home. Suddenly, like the flashing of gunpowder, her spirits ignited as she watched him shove a pudgy hand into the mailbox.

*Maybe today?*

That hope lingered as a glint of radiant light peeked between the leaves of the snow gum that shaded the front yard. It flashed through the window into her eyes. She screened them with a cupped hand and squinted as she watched Noel hesitantly saunter toward the mailbox. It was almost as if he were afraid of what he might find. Or, not find.

*Dear God, let it be a letter from the university. And let it be good news.* As if to hedge her prayer, she crossed the index and middle finger of her right hand. That, Noel had once said with a disapproving smile, was undoubtedly a carry-over from her non-Christian days. Back then, like so many others, she thought "Lady Luck" was the author of good fortune, a cousin of "Mother Nature," no doubt.

On a more conscious level, she found herself wondering, hoping, that this cloudless October morning, with its splendidly crisp blue sky, might be a sign from the Lord. Maybe today, Noel would receive his answer from the University of Tennessee.

Maybe.

Then again, maybe not.

Either way, she would soon know, for Noel was now reaching into the mailbox.

\* \* \*

It was a relatively quiet night. There was the occasional passing of a semi on Alcoa Highway, with its whirl of rubber on concrete; rising, cresting, then slowly waning. Off in the distance came the faint sound of a siren. Nearby, he could hear the rustle of leaves flapping in a gentle, warm early-fall breeze, a breeze on which wafted soft, sensual peals of laughter from Clifton Hall.

He hated that dorm. They didn't have any restrictions. Guys could go up into a girl's room any time, day or night. Just the thought of it made him want to puke, and gladly, resolutely, he brushed it aside, crossed Eleventh Street and headed east.

Five minutes later, the wire handles of the buckets began pinching off his circulation, numbing his fingers. To relieve them, he crept into the shadows of the Harris Home Economics Building. He set the containers down, and while his eyes combed his surroundings, he rubbed color and feeling back into his creased palms.

Soon, his fingers tingled back to life, and once again, he picked up the pails. Only this time, determined not to carry them any farther than necessary, he took a short cut through a dark, unlit alley paved decades ago with crushed rock. Due to years of use and now neglect, it was in a sad state of repair. Deep gullies grooved out by automobile tires were the only telltale signs that this alley had ever been used.

Suddenly.

Out of nowhere.

An overstuffed garbage can thudded to the ground, spilling its rancid contents. He jerked to a halt. The sudden stop caused some of the liquid he was carrying to slosh onto his jeans, and unconsciously, a whispered curse hissed through his clenched teeth.

*Get a hold of yourself!*

He gradually regained his composure, and like an actor playing a death scene—his breath baited—he set the buckets down. Afraid that someone or something lurking in the shadows might, at that very minute, be watching him, he stood rigid while his eyes scanned his surroundings.

How could he explain what he was up to?

Or, why he was carrying two buckets of—

So, he waited, and waited—like a mannequin.

Once again, the stillness was shattered by another noise, one more recognizable: a mew. The sound he had heard moments before had been nothing more than some bone-thin alley cat, scrounging for an early morning snack.

Relieved, and feeling a little ridiculous, he picked up the buckets once again and began stalking through the alleyway. Still wary, he fired a glance to one side and then the other. But, he saw nothing, only unkempt vines, rickety back yard fences and more garbage cans.

Soon, he came to Laurel Avenue and turned right. Not wanting to make even the slightest noise, he crept on the grass that lined the sidewalk until, midway down the block, he slipped behind a tree. He set the buckets down and glanced to the left, then to the right, and finally, across the street. What he saw delighted him, for there, on the other side of the road, loomed the dilapidated house where she and the other three lived.

## CHAPTER 2

All of a sudden, Brook's mind shifted from the urgent to the mundane. It was a re-routing motivated by escape and triggered by Noel's attire. He was clad in a blue and white polo shirt with matching shorts. Upon his sock-less feet, he wore slip-on tennis shoes. It was what you'd expect someone to wear in the spring, which was what it was south of the equator.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," she had told Noel just the day before.  
"Spring. In October."

She had lived in Sydney for over nineteen years, and she still couldn't get used to the reversal of the seasons. *It should be fall.* That's what it was back home, in St. Louis, where it all had begun some thirty-six years ago, and where Pastor Schultz of Concordia Lutheran Church had baptized her—

"Receive the sign of the cross, both upon the forehead and upon the breast, as a token that thou hast been redeemed by Christ the crucified," he intoned in preparation for her baptism. His liver-spotted hand simultaneously marked an unsteady cross upon her forehead, and then the breast of Janice Elaina Brooks. That was her name, then.

Now it was Mason. Janice Mason. But since the day they had first met, for some inexplicable reason, Noel had insisted on calling her by her maiden name, Brooks. Of course, he would have never even known her had her anthropologist father not coaxed her to Sydney when he became the administrator of the Taronga Park Zoo. She was seventeen at the time. Five years later, she was a senior at the University of Sydney, where she met her husband-to-be, Professor Noel Mason.

"He's a little old for you, isn't he?" her father had asked when finally she floated in off the front porch, some forty-five minutes after she and Noel had arrived.

"No, Daddy. He's only twenty-seven. He just recently got his doctorate." Brooks changed the subject. "What do you think of him? Really." Her face glowed with expectation as she hoped for her father's approval.

As it turned out, she had nothing to worry about. Her father was impressed with Noel from the very start. First of all, there were his manners. He actually had some.

"I really appreciate your allowing me to date your daughter, sir," he had said when Brooks had first introduced them. That, understandably, predisposed James Felding Brooks in favor of young Professor Mason. There were, of course, more important considerations.

"Do you trust in Jesus, Dr. Mason?"

Brooks flushed. Of course, she agreed, that was the most important thing to determine when a Christian dates another. But there was a time for everything. Even Solomon had said that, and to Brooks, the first date was certainly not the time.

"Daddy...!"

"That all right," Noel said, glancing first at Brooks and then her father. "You bet I trust in Jesus, Mr. Brooks. He's been my Savior for as long as I can remember."

A tentative smile broke ground beneath her father's inquiring eyes. It dimmed slightly as James Brooks thought of one more concern: what kind of Christian was this young man? Was he one who believed the Bible to be as it claims—inspired and inerrant—or one who approves of the Bible denying, higher-critical approach to Scripture.

"What denomination do you belong to, Doctor?"

"I'm Lutheran."

"What Synod?"

"The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod."

Noel couldn't have given a better answer. Brooks father had been a lifelong Lutheran. He had come from a different Synod—the Wisconsin Synod, but he respected Missouri, Wisconsin and the Evangelical Synod. Each was strongly Bible believing. So, to Brooks great relief, her father thoroughly approved of young Dr. Mason.

So did she, of course, but not for the same reasons. Like most young women, she had first been attracted by his looks; he was, in her words, "soap opera" handsome. But there was more, much more in Brooks estimation. Noel had depth. He was intelligent, had a tremendous sense of humor, and a generous smile to match, one that was both quick and captivating.

As for his view of her, she was a "TEN." "I bet if you were a little taller, you could model," he had said on their first date. At 5 feet 5 and 118 pounds, Brooks was, as models go, small. Even so, as Noel was to later learn, she had done some part-time modeling as a teen. And though her modeling days were over, she was the same size some seven years later when her aunt Bea slipped a white-satin gown over her head,

one delicately accented about the neck with Belgium lace dotted with seed pearls. But, that was back then, when everything seemed so promising.

Now, fifteen years later, their future was uncertain. One letter could make it or break it, and Noel now held that letter in his hand.

\* \* \*

The house in which they dwelt was better than his, though, not by much. The once proud building was now pocked with chipped and flaking white paint. Even that which had escaped such weathering was filthy with years of neglect.

Matching, circular turrets protruded at each corner. Like huge, wizened gargoyles, they seemed to guard the decaying building. No doubt their weapons were the two lightning rods which, like fencing foils, jutted from the two inverted-cone roofs. Far below each, at ground level, both in front and on one side, was a sagging porch with warped planking; its railing displayed fewer teeth than a centenarian.

But despite its age and state of repair, no one had ever suggested that it be condemned. The reason, quite simply, was that old dilapidated houses, such as this one (and his) had proven to be excellent rental properties for opportunistic landlords, not to mention a source of cheap lodging for frugal students. So, Drear House, as it was unaffectionately called, subsisted for utilities sake alone.

That, of course, was of no concern to him. He wasn't interested in the house, just the occupants. As the moon tugs the tide, they had drawn him here, and hoping to catch a glimpse of one of them, he gazed at the oval attic window, and the minimal light that eked through the dusty glass. But, he saw no one.

*No matter.* Now was the time to become like—a rat in a cellar. The cellar: that's where it was, and where he would soon be. He crossed the street and within seconds, was prowling alongside the house among velvet shadows. When he reached the cellar window, he squatted beside it, and a minute later, was inside, pulling the penlight from his back pocket.

*Now, where is the water heater?*

### CHAPTER 3

Brooks' heart sank as she saw Noel droop his head and slowly shuffle back toward the front door, the opened letter hanging loosely by his side.

"Better sit down, Brooks," he said as he entered the front door, his countenance like that of a boy who had just seen his dog squashed under the wheels of a passing automobile.

"Why? What's wrong, Noel? Is it bad?"

"Please," Noel pleaded. "This is hard for me."

Not wanting to add to his obvious pain, Brooks quickly sat on the edge of the dinette chair, her hands clenched tightly in her lap.

"Whatever it is, we'll live through it," she said. "We've been through tough times before."

Noel averted his eyes as if to conceal his hurt. He stepped up to the sink, gazed blankly out the kitchen window, but said nothing. It was as if he were trying to think how to break the news to her in the least painful way.

*How like Noel*, she thought as she waited for him to say something. Anything. Her heart sank even further as she watched him whisk a handkerchief from his hip pocket and raise it to his eyes.

"Noel...please. Let me help."

Unable to stand it any longer, Brooks rose and slipped up behind Noel. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him gently. As she stood there, he slowly twisted around. He cupped her shoulders with his hands and looked into her eyes.

"Brooks, I don't know of any other way to tell you this, but..."

That's when she saw it. The corners of his mouth began puckering upward and his eyes sparkled. And, unable to restrain himself any longer, he grinned broadly, and shouted, "WE'VE GOT IT!"

Caught off guard, Brooks just stood there. Stunned. When what he had said finally soaked in, she didn't know whether to whoop for joy or wallop him for teasing her.

"NOEL," she shouted, as she opted for the second choice and punched him in the stomach.

Noel buckled over in mock pain, and then began backing away from her. One arm shielded his abdomen while the other, extended like the stiff-arm of a tail back, warded off her advances.

"Brooks! Get a hold of yourself. You're going to hurt somebody. ME!"

Brooks couldn't help it. She laughed. Noel did the same and soon, they embraced, and after giving her a short but welcome kiss, he said, "Come on. Sit down, Hon. Ok?"

"We've been through that routine before."

Once again, Noel laughed. "Listen," he said, waving the letter in front of her as if it were a white flag. "I'm serious. Sit down and listen to this."

Like one peering over topless bifocals, Brooks cast a suspicious glance at Noel, and sitting, she regarded him curiously as he joined her, unfolded the letter, and began to read...

Dear Dr. Mason,

On behalf of the University of  
Tennessee, it's my privilege to offer  
you the position of Visiting Professor  
for the summer quarter commencing on  
Thursday, June 18th—

Brooks smiled softly and eased back into the chair. Like a death-row convict who had just received a stay of execution, she let out an inaudible sigh of relief and bowed her head in prayer. She had much reason to be thankful. Noel had been through so much, and this letter...? Well, it was, in a sense, a vindication. The University of Sydney had, after all, treated him shamefully. It had all begun about a year ago when Dr. Tilton, the Dean of the College of Archeology, called Noel into his office.

"Have a seat Dr. Mason," Tilton said, his vocal chords tensed for confrontation. He skipped the amenities and added, "I understand you are a Christian. Is that right, Dr. Mason?"

"Yes...I am," Noel said, making no attempt to disguise his concern over the nature and tone of Dr. Tilton's inquiry. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's come to my attention that you've been teaching religion in your classes, and..."

"I've been what?" Noel interrupted.

"Oh come now, Dr. Mason. Let's not be melodramatic. Everyone on the faculty knows you don't believe in evolution. But, as far as I'm concerned, you can believe whatever you like. You cannot, on the other hand, *teach* whatever you like."

Noel had never been too fond of Dr. Tilton. In his estimation, Tilton was a little too pompous and officious for one housed in a five-foot-five inch, featherweight frame. That Noel had even harbored such feelings for the man had, on more than one occasion, spurred him to his knees in search of a more forgiving attitude; and, it seemed to have worked. That is, until today.

"Dr. Tilton, I don't know where you get your information, but I assure you, I haven't been teaching religion. I admit, I have on occasion shared a few arguments from the creation-science point of view, but..."

"Ah-HAH," Tilton blurted out, believing he had just proven his point. "That's what I mean."

"Dr. Tilton, creationism is hardly religion. When I shared with my students that coal was not formed well over 200-million years before the appearance of man—as evolution insists—I was not teaching religion."

"Oh. Is that so?" Tilton snapped back, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"You *do know* that a fossilized human skull composed of brown coal has been confirmed, don't you? By Professor Otto Stutzer? A leading authority on coal geology?"

Dr. Tilton hesitated. "Of...course I do, but that doesn't prove anything."

"Maybe not, but it sure suggests something, doesn't it?"

**"Dr. Mason, I don't plan to sit here and listen to your religious prattle disguised as science."**

Noel knew if he stayed in Dr. Tilton's office any longer, he might do something he'd be sorry for, so he quickly rose to leave, so quickly in fact, Tilton flinched. Noel, however, didn't even notice. He marched briskly toward the door, his back to Tilton. Once there he stopped, wheeled about, and measuring his words carefully said, **"Dr. Tilton, shouldn't we scientists be open-minded? Shouldn't we, of all people, be allowed the freedom to search for the truth, to challenge a theory which is, by its very nature, unprovable?"**

Dr. Tilton's countenance slowly underwent a metamorphosis. Deep creases etched themselves between his brows. His lips compressed into a thin, taut line and he glared at Noel.

**"...Believe me a fool if you like," Noel continued, "but grant me the courtesy of being a scientist, one just as objective as you, or any other evolutionist..."**

Maybe Noel should have stopped there, but he didn't.

**"...Why is it you, and other evolutionists like you, ignore all the evidence contrary to your pet theory, or in your inability to refute it, brand it religion?"**

Dr. Tilton sprang to his feet and pointed a tremulous finger at Noel. **"Dr. Mason, you're fired!"**

Noel just stood there for a moment, staring at Dr. Tilton. He started to speak, and would have, had he not been suddenly struck with the thought that maybe—just maybe—his dismissal had been planned from the very start, and not by Tilton either.

Tilton might be nothing more than a pawn in the whole affair; and the more Noel thought about it, the more he was convinced that God was involved. He had to be, for Noel no more believed in accidents than he did luck. All things are caused, or at the very least, allowed by God. But then, Noel also knew that God doesn't always approve of what He allows. Even so, Noel drew comfort from his conviction that God was in some way involved in what had happened, and slowly, calmly, he turned toward the door, opened it and quietly left without so much as a backward glance in Tilton's direction.

A week later, Noel was an unemployed professor of archeology. Worse, he was an unemployable professor of archeology. His chances of teaching again were, at best, slim. Certainly there would be no raving letters of recommendation from his alma mater, not if Dr. Tilton had anything to say about it, and he did.

In the months that followed, Noel collected his thoughts and put them into a book. Much to his surprise, it turned out to be more than a therapeutic exercise. Entitled *Scopes Revisited*, it was a smashing success. It went into many reprints, and soared to number eleven on the *Publisher's Weekly* list of best selling nonfiction. Moreover, it didn't coast off the chart until twenty-four weeks later. Offers to speak poured in.

To top it off, there was a hint of an offer from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville for Noel to join the staff as a visiting professor for the ensuing summer. If approved, it included an offer to debate one of America's leading evolutionists, UTK's Dean of Biological Sciences, Dr. T.M. Sheldon.

To sweeten the pot, which to Noel, was already so saccharin it could choke a fly, the debate was to be televised on cable TV. There was only one problem. The board had some reservations about adding someone as controversial as Noel to their staff, even if only for the summer, and Noel understandably feared the worst. But the letter he had just received affirmed that his fears had been unfounded.

...In addition to the aforementioned remuneration,  
both housing and transportation will be provided.  
In closing, I look forward to an educationally  
profitable summer, and thank you in advance for  
your contribution to that high goal.

Noel spun the letter around so Brooks could see it. It was signed—Dr. Winston Powers, Chancellor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

As Brooks gazed upon the baroque signature, her mind faltered as if to allow it all to soak in. After all, going to States had only been a hope. A dream. Something she

had desired for Noel. Now that it was a reality, Brooks realized she had given no thought to leaving her home, even if only for the summer.

"Noel," she said, her eyes still on the letter, her index finger fidgeting with one corner. "Doesn't it worry you a little?"

"What?"

"The fact we're just going to pull up roots and leave home for the entire summer. I mean, we don't have any idea what to expect."

"No. We don't, unless..."

Noel searched Brooks' eyes for a moment, as if trying to read her mind. Without saying a word, he rose and walked into the living room. When he returned, he was holding a Bible. He sat down and placed it in front of him. "Let's see what God has to say...Ok?"

Brooks realized that Noel wanted to ask God to direct them to a specific passage of Scripture, one that would speak to their present situation. Ordinarily, she preferred to discover God's will by reading His Word, and by prayer and meditation. Only when critical decisions had to be made, did she feel it appropriate to ask for guidance in such a direct fashion. From the answer she now gave Noel, this was such an occasion.

"Ok," she said, and smiling, she reached for Noel's hand.

He grasped it, and together, they bowed their heads in prayer. "Lord," Noel began, "...if it's in keeping with your will, and if it might be beneficial for us to hear directly from You, we ask that You would please give us a word about Tennessee, about...what we might expect. To that end, if it please You, guide my hand as I open the Bible, and lead me to a verse and speak to us, for we ask it in Jesus blessed name. Amen."

Noel opened his eyes, and for a brief moment, contemplated the book before him. Like one handling the world's last copy of God's Word, his fingers flipped through the pages, until suddenly, they came to an abrupt halt. As if sliced by a celestial cleaver, the Bible parted to Acts, chapter nine, and his hand sprang to life. With seemingly a mind of its own, his finger leaped to verse sixteen, and he read it. Silently.

"What is it?" Brooks asked as she saw his brow furrow, and it remained so as he shared the verse with her. It read: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

## CHAPTER 4

The thin circle of light panned the cellar like a minuscule theater spotlight revealing dusty boxes, a washer and dryer, and an unused shower stall. Complete with cheap plastic curtain, the shower stood forlornly, cobwebbed into a dank corner of the cellar. The sight of it caused him to think of them, and remembering what he was there to do, he slipped up beside the water heater and got to work.

After draining most of the water, he began re-filling it with his first bucket. It was a slow process, and as he waited, his mind, once again, began to drift back in time until it focused on her and on what she—what *they*, had done. It had happened on a Saturday. She had been lying on the grass of Circle Park, reading, and they were with her, all three of them.

*Great!* As if it weren't rough enough as it was. He had never before asked anyone for a date. But, he had gotten this far. He wasn't going to back out now. He took a deep breath and stepped up beside her.

"Uhh...Kathy?" he asked. His eyes dropped to his shoes as hers rose. "I...uhh...I just thought maybe you'd like to see a movie with me?" Then, with much difficulty, he raised his eyes to meet hers.

This time, it was Kathy who looked away. Neither wanting to go nor to hurt his feelings, she glanced at Susan for help. That, as it turned out, was a mistake, for Susan was smiling. It was a smug, contagious smile, one that threatened to leap from Susan's face to Kathy's. In an effort to avoid that, Kathy quickly averted her eyes, but apparently, not quickly enough. Try as she did, she simply couldn't contain it. A giggle burst forth.

In an effort to compose herself, she bit her lower lip. "I...I have plans for tonight," she said. Then—she lost it. She began to titter, and the others quickly joined in.

Humiliated, his spine stiffened, and with ever widening eyes, he glowered at them with an intensity that throttled their laughter. He spun around and tramped toward McClung Tower. It blurred before him as tears filled his eyes.

He had felt that way before, long ago, the shame and the anger. But, never again, and newly enraged by the thought of what they had done to him, he poured the last bucket into the water heater, reassembled it, and left.

If only he could be there in the morning. Then he would laugh. Oh, you bet he would. He'd laugh, just like they had laughed at him.

\* \* \*

***BUZZZZZZzzzzzzZZZZZZzzzzzz***

Kathy jerked awake and sat up with a start. She stared straight ahead. Still half asleep, she rubbed her stinging eyes, road mapped and gritty from too little sleep. As if attempting to chase away the confusion that invariably links the conscious mind with the subconscious, she shook her head.

***BUZZZZZZzzzzzzZZZZZZzzzzzz***

Gradually, like the tubes of an old Crosley radio, her mind warmed up. It was Saturday morning. According to her alarm, it was time to get up. She didn't want to, but she had no choice. Reluctantly, she cast off the sheet and blanket and plopped her feet on the wooden floor of their attic apartment.

***BUZZZZZZzzzzzzZZZZZZzzzzzz***

"All right. All right," she said to no one. "I hear you already."

As always, Kathy had set her alarm on the desk, well out of reach of the bed. She knew all too well that were it close, she would shut it off in her sleep. Now awake, or nearly so, she shuffled in the direction of the irritating noise and dropped a heavy hand on the gratingly, persistent clock. She fumbled for the switch and shut it off.

Silence.

At last.

That is, except for Susan. She was, as usual, snoring. Kathy ignored it and glanced in Robin's direction. Robin's pillow cushioned her face, a sure sign that she had heard the alarm and had discovered another way of dealing with its rudeness.

But then, who could blame her? No one should have to get out of bed at 6:00 A.M. on Saturday morning. But she did. For that matter, they all did. Well, all except Barb. She had no class on Saturday. Nor did she have a job to go to. Barb's folks picked up the whole tab for her.

That thought ignited jealousy within Kathy. Like a pyrotechnic dud, it sizzled, became a wiggly whiff of smoke and then, disappeared.

*Ought to wake her up just for the heck of it*, Kathy thought. But, she didn't. Instead, yawning, she walked over beside the bed where Susan lay. She laid a hand on her shoulder and gently shook her.

"Rise and shine," she said in mock cheerfulness. "It's time to get up."

"Uhhhhh...you've got to be kidding," Susan said in a gravelly voice. "It's six already?" Not receiving, or expecting an answer, Susan sat up. She braced herself on her elbows.

In exactly one hour she would be at the Pancake Palace taking orders from puffy-eyed patrons. At least she didn't have to be there at five to get the place ready for them.

"Oh, Rooobin," Kathy said as she stepped alongside Robin's bed, eyeing the pillow-covered bulge that was Robin's face. "I know you're under there. Don't try to fool Mother Nature. Up and at 'em."

A muffled groan issued from the heart of the pillow, proof that Robin was alive and awake, sort of. Robin had an eight o'clock class in accounting. She had given herself two hours to shower, brush her teeth, finish her assignment and hopefully, make it to class on time.

As for Kathy, she had an eight o'clock too. English Literature. And, she didn't want to be late. That's why she was the first to enter the community bathroom that served their two-room apartment.

Actually, if you didn't count the bathroom, it was a one-room apartment, and that one room, being an attic, had an arched ceiling. A lumpy single bed rested at each

end of the four corners. In the center, two cheap doors lay horizontally, end-to-end. They had been transformed into tabletop desks by the proprietor who was, without a doubt, an amateur carpenter (with emphasis on the word, amateur). Two huge, matching table lamps, each worth up to two dollars at a rummage sale, squatted at each end of the long, makeshift desk.

The remainder of the attic had been converted into a bathroom. It had two private commodes, two plastic-curtained shower stalls, two antiquated sinks, and one five-by-three foot rectangular mirror positioned above them.

On either side of the bathroom was a door. One led to the living quarters, the other, to a neglected iron fire escape mottled with flaking black paint, generously dusted with rusty reds and browns.

\* \* \*

**6:10 A.M.**

All three were in the bathroom. Robin and Susan were showering and Kathy was at the sink, brushing her teeth. It was Robin who first realized that something was not quite right.

"Hey, you notice anything strange?"

"Strange?" What do you mean...strange?" Kathy asked, her mouth full of toothpaste.

"The water," Robin said as she watched it spew onto her chest and split into tiny rivulets. They snaked down her body until finally, each pooled and gurgled down the hair-clogged drain.

"WHAT? shouted Susan from the other shower stall, her face fully lathered with soap. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU."

"The WATER...the WATER," Robin yelled back.

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WATER?"

"IT'S...KIND OF PINKISH."

Her mouth still full of toothpaste, Kathy gazed down at the faucet and noted the pale, crimson liquid that gushed from the combined hot-and-cold spout. She twisted the cold water handle to the off position, and suddenly, the stream bloomed a vivid red.

Sensing what it might be, yet unwilling to accept that possibility, Kathy spit out the toothpaste. She cocked her head sideways, bent over and sniffed the now steaming hot fluid.

*Could it be? No. That's impossible.* Still—what was it? Kathy held a clear plastic cup under the faucet and filled it.

She sniffed it again.

Stuck her tongue in it.

Still unsure, she took a mouth full and sloshed it around. It had a coppery taste to it—and then she knew.

Her eyes opened wide as confusion, disbelief and fear convulsed in her mind. "It's...BLOOD!"

Kathy spewed a mouthful onto the mirror and screamed.

Frightened by it, Susan frantically stuck her heavily lathered face under the spout. Fortunately, with her eyes tightly clenched, she couldn't see the jets of pale red as they washed over her face.

Susan screamed, as Kathy had done before her, and blindly, she fumbled for the knobs to shut off the flow of blood and water.

By now, Robin also knew. She gagged, bent over and vomited into the shower drain. The blood instantly changed directions and began coursing through her hair, into her eyes and nose and mouth.

Like Lady Macbeth, trying to cleanse herself of the imaginary blotches of Duncan's blood, Kathy tried to rid herself of the sticky liquid that now slimed the inside of her mouth and hid under her tongue. She spit, and spit.

Above her, gravity continued to tug the wiggling rivulets of pale red down, down the mirror to its bottom edge, where each stopped abruptly, gathered, and began to drip, drip, drip onto the white enameled sink.

And Kathy spit, and spit, and spit.

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