

KillerCon

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Chapter One

Mary Roberts twisted a knob on her dimly-lit dashboard, spurring her wipers into action as sheets of torrential rain washed over the windshield. She stared across the parking lot at the woods in back of Pete's Bar, at some tree branches swaying under the heavy winds, pushed along by the driving thunderstorm. Pale, gaunt faces appeared at the edge of her vision; black, staring eyes, mouths slowly gaping open and shut. Tired, a little buzzed from the Rum and Cokes, and from the joint she'd just finished off while waiting for the car to warm up, she shook her head. Lightning flashed and Mary gasped at a fleeting glimpse of a woman's naked body, nailed to a tree trunk by three railroad spikes—one through each breast and one through her forehead, blood gushing from a gaping hole in her neck. She closed her eyes and a booming round of thunder jolted them open. In the distance, the faces disappeared like misty ghosts rising off the forest's floor. Another flash of lightning showed her it was just a tree, no blood, no rusty spikes or naked corpse. Just a tree bending in the driving winds.

Mary shuddered, and thought that maybe she should quit going to those creepy old movies, like the old sixties flick she had seen earlier at The Palace Theater; kind of goofy, but creepy just the same.

Mary loved her horror movies and novels, the gorier the better—adored Richard Laymon and wished he was still around. But as much as she enjoyed the cinematic thrills and spills and the twisted and somewhat sadistic tales she read, they unnerved the young accountant. Particularly this movie, with its type B actors (*the villain was a young man*

with spray-painted gray hair, and a totally fake sounding Egyptian accent, for God's sake) and cheesy script. Even with all of that, it had still been packed full of enough gut wrenching scenes of explicit torture to turn Mary's stomach. Enough to send her running straight to Pete's for a healthy dose of booze to wrap around her frayed nerves. No wonder some towns had not allowed that movie into their communities forty years ago. Mary almost wished it hadn't been allowed into hers. It was bad enough when the leering madman stalked across the bathroom floor and plunged a huge butcher knife into the beautiful young woman in the bubble bath, but when he pulled it back and Mary saw bits of skewered meat quivering on the blade... and later, when another woman lay sideways across her bed, blood gushing from her mouth while the cheesiest on-screen-killer ever to have graced a strip of celluloid held a ripped-out tongue in front of the camera...

Maybe I should quit going to these movies.

"Hey!"

Mary looked up to see a figure lumbering through the dark, a jacket held over his head to fend off the raindrops. Mary couldn't see his face, couldn't tell who was coming across the lot. And she sure as hell wasn't about to wait around to find out. She put her car into gear, stepped on the gas and pulled away. Pale tunnels of light pushed their way through the sparkling drops of water when she turned on the headlights.

"Hey!"

Tires whispering against the asphalt, she left whoever was jogging through the rain-slicked parking lot jumping up and down and waving his arms like some kind of a lunatic.

She made her way onto the highway, happy to be leaving the forest behind. Damn sure glad to have left that shouting maniac in her rearview mirror. At least he'd gotten her mind off the movie and the apparitions it had conjured up.

Best not think about that!

It had been a long and boring day at work, an insufferable grind made worse by Charley calling off their movie date at the last minute. Screw him, she'd thought, and had gone into the darkened theater by herself, only to have the ever-living shit scared out of her; barely able to keep her seat until the final credits started to roll.

And now, driving through the night with rain pelting her windshield, she wished she'd had sense enough to stay home.

Mary slowed to turn a corner, negotiated the curve and pressed on the gas pedal, picked up speed and a black cat darted in front of her.

She touched the brake and the car slid sideways. Then she stomped on it. Hands locked tightly onto the steering wheel, she turned it one way and then the other, while the car went in whatever direction it wanted—which turned out to be a sweeping three hundred and sixty degree tailspin and further, Mary's long brown hair lifting and swaying sideways, her blue eyes wide open; screaming and holding on for dear life like she had as a child riding the spinning tea cups at the county fair—tugging and turning with absolutely no input as to where she might end up, while the lucky feline dashed safely onto the opposite sidewalk.

The rear tires skidded into a driveway and the car's fender slammed into a matched set of aluminum trashcans. Refuse flew across a yard as the garbage cans clanked noisily along the sidewalk. A door banged open and the car lurched to a stop,

rain pattering against the hood as the motor died out, the rear wheels upon the grass between sidewalk and curb, the front of the car still in the road, headlights illuminating an unlighted house directly across the street.

“Hey, goddamn it!” a barrel-chested old man yelled from his screened-in porch. Framed in the light of the open door, he wore a blue bathrobe open at the waist. Mary could see the white elastic band of his blue-and-white boxer shorts.

“Look at this shit!”

Mary grabbed the key, turned the ignition.

“Hey!”

The motor turned over but didn’t start.

“Hey! The fuck’re you doing?”

She pumped the gas—

“Hey, goddamn it!” The screen door flew open and the old man bounded down the steps, onto his garbage-strewn yard, rain pelting him as he ran toward the stalled vehicle.

—turned the ignition and the engine roared to life.

He slammed his hands down on the trunk. “Hey! Look at what the fuck you did!”

Mary stomped on the gas, her spinning tires flinging mud and chunks of grass onto the man’s chest and face, gritty-black-soup into the mouth he’d opened to scream his outrage.

Lightning flashed and the man flinched, as if afraid the next bolt might strike him.

The rear tires jumped the curb and the car careened sideways. Then it righted itself and hurried away, leaving the sopping wet man shaking his fist, spitting mud as he stood beneath the thundering sky, railing against the heavens.

“Oops,” Mary said, laughing into the rearview mirror, her shaking hands gripping the steering wheel as she moved further away from him.

She really hadn't meant for it to happen, but it didn't change the fact that it was funny as hell—now that she was safely on her way. Heck, it was probably his cat that started the whole mess in the first place. At least *he* came through it without a scratch. Probably holed up in a dry spot underneath a porch on the other side of the street, laughing his furry little butt off at his owner. And that made Mary wonder how many scratches were now on the side of her Mustang. There was sure to be a big dent.

Almost worth it to see the look on his face!

Mary laughed out loud at the image: the snickering cat and its cussing owner; all thoughts of murder and mayhem, forest ghosts and lurking and lurching strangers left behind as she finally found her way onto her own residential street, cruising along until her porch light finally appeared in the distance, a safe port in the roiling storm.

Then she was pulling into the driveway as close to the front door as she could get, killing the ignition as a flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed seconds later by a booming crash of thunder.

She hesitated a moment before drawing her jacket overhead, and then held it there with her left hand, her purse and keys in her right as she prepared to leave the car and hurry up to the porch. Then she was out of the car, slamming the door and running across

the red-brick driveway, onto the yard where her left foot sank into the muddy turf. She strained for a moment, pulling and tugging until a bare foot squelched out of the muck.

“Dammit!” She bent down and grabbed her black leather pump. Wrestling free the soaking wet shoe, she said, “Oh, this is great... just great!”

She tucked the shoe beneath her arm and hurried to the door, fit the key into the lock and swung the door open. Lightning crackled and the porch light flickered, thunder rolled across the sky and Mary almost jumped out of her other shoe. She hopped inside, dropping her purse and shoe to the floor. Then she kicked off the other shoe, shrugged out from under the wet jacket, and let it fall as well.

Outside, torrents of water pounded the roof as white hot branches of lightning arced across the sky, followed by a thunderous *crack* that seemed to shake the house.

“Whew,” Mary said. “What a night.”

She jiggled the key loose from the door, and then pushed the door closed with a satisfying click of the lock. Flipping a switch by the front door flooded the hallway with light, and she walked down the hall to an archway that led into the living room. Light spilling through the opening projected a faint illumination that filtered through a narrow strip of the living room and into the kitchen, leaving the rest of the room bathed in darkness. The end table lamp cast a shadow across the wall. Mary recognized the dark, hulking beast clawing at the fireplace as her treadmill’s shadowy familiar.

She stepped into the room and saw a wooden chair sitting out of place in the middle of the floor. She knew the dining room chair shouldn’t be there and she stopped. A flash of lightning revealed a dark form near the wall, silhouetted in front of the living room curtains like a malignant spot on an x-ray.

Something clicked and the overhead light came on, leaving Mary squinting against its glare.

The man in front of her wore black trousers, a blue pullover shirt, and a navy-blue jacket zipped open to his waist. A pair of black Nike running shoes covered his feet. One hand held a pillow over the other. A video camera sat atop a tripod that had been centered in the room, between coffee table and couch. He was clean-shaven, his brown hair neatly-trimmed, his light brown eyes staring at her as if she was a prize he had brought home from the fair. He was young and athletic looking, handsome in a disarming kind of way. If she had run across him in the checkout line of a grocery store, or at the mall, she would not have rebuffed an attempted conversation by him.

But she was not in the grocery store, and they were not at the mall.

Mary frowned and took a backward step.

He lifted the pillow, smiling as if they were old friends bumping into each other after a much too long absence. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said.

Rain battered the roof. Outside, a flash of lightning lit up Mary's front yard. Seconds later, thunder rattled the windowpanes. The stranger leveled a silver plated revolver at her, and then motioned her into the room.

"C'mon and stay a while," he told her.

"Please," she said, because it was the only thing she could think to say.

"It's okay," he said, still smiling, but his eyes were all wrong; wild, excited, darting around the room, taking in every inch of it. He nodded at the wooden-backed chair. "Sit over there."

He set pillow and gun on the coffee table. Then he walked over and grabbed her shaking arm, and led her to the chair.

“Who... are you?”

“Who? Me? I’m Sexy Rexy, come to give you the business.”

“*Wh...what?*”

“I’m gonna give you the business!”

Mary frowned, because she recognized the line from a Laymon novel.

“Every friggin’ inch of it.”

And that’s how she felt: like a character straight out of one of those sick, perverted Richard Laymon stories that she loved so much, where the killer gleefully rips his victim to shreds and moves on to the next one.

Sexy Rexy eased her into the chair. He looked over his shoulder at the camera and tripod, then back at her, as if trying to line up a camera angle.

Tears welled in Mary’s eyes, rolling down her cheeks as he smiled.

“Don’t move now,” he said, and then took a couple of steps backward, the tips of his thumbs pressed together, index fingers pointing straight up, staring through them like a half-assed director looking through his imaginary camera lens, until his legs touched the coffee table and he stopped.

Rain drummed against the windows as Sexy Rexy sidestepped his way around the table, behind the tripod, bent down and peered through the viewfinder, touched the camera and a red dot of light appeared in its upper right hand corner.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, baby!”

“Smiile!” he said, cheerfully stretching the word into two syllables as he scooped up the gun and pillow, folded the pillow around the gun and made his way to the middle of the room, out of the camera’s line of sight.

“Please,” she said.

“Please what?”

“I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Will you blow me?”

“Yes... please.”

Sexy Remy smiled, pointed the revolver at her and squeezed the pillow tightly. A horrendously loud crack of lightning lit up the sky and he flinched. Something splintered, and then creaked, leaving the house in darkness when something crashed into the roof, shaking the walls and floor beneath it.

“God *damn* it!” he yelled. “God fucking damn it!”

The gun thudded to the floor and Mary jumped out of the chair.

Then she was *in* a Laymon novel: racing across the dark room, the body that slammed into her sending her crashing to the floor, the hand gripping her throat banging her head against it. A red dot blinked in the darkness as Sexy Remy laughed and raised a hand high above his head, lightning glinting off the blade of the huge butcher knife it held. Thunder crashed and the knife punched her breast; she screamed and the blade ripped down. Blood spewed from her mouth, onto the white silk blouse she wore. Then her stomach was pierced and all of her air rushed out.

Another bolt of lightning illuminated the knife hovering over her face, bits of meat skewered on its blade as it rose high over his shoulder.

The blade swept down and her hand grew limp.

Then she saw nothing, felt nothing.

And darkness swallowed her.