

# Fifteen Minutes

William Ollie

*In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.*

Andy Warhol (1928 - 1987)

## Chapter One

The drive from Klamath Falls to Seattle almost broke him. Twelve hours stuffed into a Greyhound bus laden with every kind of deadbeat imaginable: winos and meth-heads, down on their luck losers and yak-yak-yakking grandmothers returning home from long-overstayed welcomes—and Simon, who had sat cramped and stiff legged watching broken white lines race by his window while the sun went down and the darkness came, and the bus stopped at damn near every broken-down, one-whistle stop along the byway. When they finally pulled into Seattle, he almost cried with relief, a stark contrast to the tears he had shed upon climbing aboard back in The Falls.

Klamath Falls, snow-capped mountains to the east and deserts to the west, clear blue skies and lots and lots of beautiful green trees. All capped off by the spectacular, crystal clear sapphire hue of Crater Lake, truly a crown jewel of the Oregon trail, if not the entire world. A crown jewel Simon experienced only once before Mom met Rick and Rick met Simon, and took an instant disliking to him. Not that Rick was any picnic for Simon, either, with his military haircut and my-way-or-the-highway attitude. Who was he to tell Simon to do *anything*? Apparently, *somebody*, because after two weeks of summer, two weeks of all out fun, ‘Mr. Wonderful’ stepped in, and all of a sudden Mom’s packing her only son off to Grandma’s house. And dumpy, frumpy, old boring Grandma, who hadn’t laid eyes on Simon in more than five years, wasn’t all that thrilled about taking

him in. That much he picked up from Mom's end of their conversation: 'Oh, he won't be any trouble'... 'Why not?'... 'After all this time, I ask you for one favor, and *this* is what I get?'... And, finally: 'Thanks, thanks, Sadie. I'll call you with the details.'

*Doesn't even call her own mom, Mom? Maybe I should start calling her Sherry.*

Two days later, Simon Druford was on the bus, and now here he was, stretching his legs beneath a drizzling mist in front of the grimmest excuse for a bus depot he had ever seen, while Rick's banging Sherry and Granny's doing what? Opening up her house to a kid rejected by his own mother? Two weeks in paradise, and then shipped off to purgatory, barely enough time to make a friend or two before being jettisoned out of The Falls on the flat of his ass. They should've stayed in Idaho, but no, Mom's dear old best friend, 'Aunt Midge', had to move away and get both of them jobs in Klamath Falls, Oregon.

*Oregon... really?*

*The Falls... you're kiddin', right?*

Oh, well. It wouldn't be that bad. A few weeks in rainy old Seattle wouldn't kill him. A few weeks and then back to The Falls for the school year.

He hoped.

He had stepped off the bus, followed by Syl, a young girl just crossing the threshold of womanhood. Her eyes were brown, her hair, which hung like soft strands of silk down the middle of her back, was brown, too. There were flecks of gold in those eyes. Simon noticed it right away when she smiled and sat next to him in an aisle seat near the middle of the bus. Every degenerate eye was on her from the moment she walked through that hydraulic-powered door. Every move she made, scrutinized by the

cowboys and Mexicans, the winos and losers, not to mention the jealous looks cast her way by just about every female on the bus. And why not? Slim and trim, without an ounce of fat on her. Her breasts standing like soldiers at attention. And *she* sat down next to Simon. Of course she did; she would, wouldn't she?

Simon knew the drill. Had she taken a seat in an empty aisle, they'd have been on her like a pack of jackals. She sat beside him because he was safe, and why not? With his thin lips and the thick wire-rimmed glasses that turned his pale blue eyes into a couple of oversized marbles, and that lanky skin-and-bone frame of his, he looked like the proverbial nerd. And he was that, all right; no doubt about it. A nerd, everybody's favorite joke, a friend only if you were goofier than him—and who was? Damn near nobody, that's who. His sandy-brown hair curled around his head like Caesar's, and that was what they called him; the jocks and the cool kids, heck, even kids who weren't cool—'cause everyone was cooler than Simon. Caesar! With a hail! and a half-assed hand slapped to a breast in mock imperial salute, all designed to make his shoulders slump, his face flush and his eyes stare down at his shuffling feet. If it wasn't Hail Caesar, it was one of a variation of Simple Simon the pieman's son jokes. Of course, Simple Simon wasn't the pieman's son, but try telling that to a gaggle of geeked-up rednecks and see what it gets you. A blank stare, then a kick in the ass or a stomp on the foot, a punch in the gut or a pinch of the nerve running across your shoulder. Nothing good, that's for sure.

So when she said, "Hi, my name's Syl."

Simple Simon Druford said, "Drew. How's it goin'?"

*Drew, how cool is that?*

She got on the bus a couple hours outside Seattle.

Her name was Syl, and she was spending the week with her cousin. They were going to a concert Saturday night and they were going to have a blast. Speedball Stevie Walker and his band were performing at Key Arena, and she was going to be front and center, close enough to the stage to reach up and touch him. HBO was filming it, and Syl could hardly wait to see Speedball Stevie go to town on that rocking Les Paul of his. She loved music and movies, MTV and rock 'n roll. She hated teachers, (except for Mrs. Burkes) cheerleaders and cliques, and liars, which she said the world was full of.

His name was Drew, and he was going up to Seattle for the summer to care for his grandmother, who wasn't getting along too well these days. He was seventeen years old (actually, he'd just turned sixteen, but why tell her? He'd be seventeen soon enough) and he captained the debate team back at good old Falcon Heights Academy, and managed the football team. (Of course, he didn't manage the football team or anything else back at good old F.H.A.—he didn't even go there. He didn't go anywhere, right now.) But today he could be anyone or anything he wanted; within reason, of course. He couldn't be an astronaut or a cop, or anything cool, like an actor or a detective, or Tony Soprano or Speedball whatever-his-name-was. He'd just have to settle for being a really cool kid from the right side of Klamath Fall's tracks, even though he wasn't really from The Falls at all. Heck, he wasn't from anywhere, just a dorky-looking kid bouncing from town to town, hoping to end up back where he'd started, with a mom who didn't seem to care if he came back or not. But there was no reason to tell Syl that, not if he ever wanted to see her again, which he did.

They were standing in the drizzle, Simon waiting for the baggage compartment to open so he could claim his tattered suitcase; Syl, waiting on what, Simon didn't know. Maybe she liked him! After all, she could have already left, could've stepped out of the rain and waited for her cousin in the dry confines of the bus station. But she didn't—she was standing beside him as if it was expected of her.

*Wonder if she expects me to kiss her goodbye!* thought Simon, then, *yeah, right.*

But she could! She could throw her arms around him and plant one right on his lips, slip in her tongue and...

Maybe she wanted him to ask for her telephone number, and here he was staring at the bus like some kind of deaf mute. Standing there in her skintight jeans, the halter-top cut off at midriff that seemed to be painted on those perfect breasts of hers. The curve of her shoulders, of her spine, the way that chestnut brown hair lay against her back. He was just about to ask for the number when:

*“Simon? Is that you?”*

Simon turned to see a woman coming through one of several glass doors lining the side of the bus station—old as the hills of West Virginia. She must have been his grandmother because she was calling out his name, and kept calling it all the way across the wide concrete platform. She might have been his grandmother, but he sure didn't remember her looking anything like *this*: the wide streak of magenta hair lying flat against each side of her head, surrounded by a field of silver—not silver as in old-lady-grey silver, but silver as in a fashionable, modernistic bob, as if the hair had been a swatch of futuristic filaments lifted straight from the pages of *Wired* magazine and fitted to her head. Had to be a wig; had to be. And makeup—Christ, there was enough on her

face to paint a barn with. Skintight jeans and a cutoff halter-top to rival Syl's, and shiny black stiletto heels? And the breasts in that painted-on halter-top, how far would they drop if she took it off... all the way to the ground? At least she wasn't fat. On the contrary; she was slim and trim.

When she reached his side, she said, "Simon, that *is* you. You look just like your mother described you."

*Oh, great!*

"Like a nerd."

*Of course.*

"Oh, c'mon. I'm just fuckin' with ya. *Carol! Stop that!*"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Give your granny a hug."

And he did. He spread his arms, stepped forward and snuggled into his grandmother while Syl stood wide-eyed behind them with her mouth hanging open. And now it was quite evident that she couldn't have left if she'd wanted to—wild horses couldn't have dragged her away, not with rock n' roll granny bouncing around in front of her, which was exactly what she was doing, bouncing on the balls of her feet and patting Simon's back. Finally, she released him, and said, "C'mon, get your luggage and let's get going. We're gonna have a good time together."

"Yes," Syl told him. "Get your luggage, *Simon*." She took a step forward, leaned close to his ear and whispered, "You know, you didn't have to lie to me. Simon's a fine name, and you're a good guy, even if you aren't the captain of whatever back in Klamath Falls." She pressed her soft lips against his cheek, and then turned and walked away,

calling out “See ya, Simon” as she hurried down the sidewalk to where another pretty girl stood waving to her.

## Chapter Two

Simon grabbed his worn-out suitcase and followed Granny to her, what... *BMW*? That couldn't be hers, could it? But, yes, there it was, all right, and there she was popping the jet black 650i Beamer's trunk with her key fob. The car, gleaming under a sheen of beaded moisture, looked like it was brand spanking new. Probably cost more than the house he and his mother had moved into back at The Falls.

No probably to it!

He dropped his baggage into the trunk and Granny slammed the lid closed. Then the two of them climbed into the car. Moments later, the engine purred to life and the BMW shot away from the curb, and down the road they went, the old woman weaving in and out of traffic as if they were flying down a race track; Simon shrugging his shoulders, settling back into his seat and admiring the car's interior, which was spotless. Seats so plush you could drown in them, the black leather, cool and soothing to the touch, the stereo jamming out some old Pearl Jam tune. Seattle Grunge music. Grunge Granny, with the Neo-do and enough makeup to spackle a bullet-ridden wall with. She was grungy, all right. Simon smiled and looked over at his grandmother, watching her head bob up and down to the music a couple of times before turning back to the passenger window.

The car slowed as she turned right onto a two-lane highway, picking up speed again as a row of warehouses passed by them on the right.

Granny said something, but he barely heard her. He was too busy thinking about Syl, the way she smelled when she leaned into him—like apple blossoms—the soft,

warm touch of her lips when they brushed against his cheek. The quickening of his pulse when she kissed him. She actually kissed him. Sixteen years old and he'd never kissed a girl before. Of course not; look at him.

But *she* kissed him.

On the cheek.

*Better than nothing!*

He wondered what might have happened had they been alone somewhere. Alone in a house with the lights down low, soft music flowing in the background. The touch of her hand on his—

“Are you hungry, or aren't you?”

“Huh?”

“What's wrong with you? All the way down to the bus station to pick you up, and you sitting here like some kinda retard. You didn't hear a word I said, did you?”

“I'm sorry, Granny, I was... preoccupied.”

“Thinking about that little girl, weren't you?”

“Wha... no!”

“Yeah, right.”

“I wasn't!”

“That bulge in your jeans begs to differ.”

“*Bulge?*” Simon quickly looked down. There was no bulge.

“Like you'd even know what to do with it.”

“*What?*”

“*I* sure as hell know what to do with it!”

Simon's mouth dropped open, and Sadie's eyes darted to the rearview mirror.

"Mitzi!" she said. "*My God.*"

*Mitzi?* thought Simon.

"There's no *bulge*," he said.

"Not now, 'cause you're talking to me."

"Granny."

"And don't call me Granny."

"What am I supposed to—"

"Sadie. Call me Sadie."

"Sure, all right... Sadie."

"Sexy Sadie."

*Oh. My. God.*

Simon looked out the window. The drizzling rain had stopped; the grey clouds had cleared, giving way to a broad horizon of gorgeous blue skies. The BMW's digital display read 11:00. He wondered what his mom was doing, her and Rick. Probably curled up together in the sheets, happy as a couple of Jaybirds to have Simon out of the picture.

"Are. You. Hungry?"

"Huh? Oh, oh yeah, I could eat something."

Simon *was* hungry. His mother had given him some money, sure. But not much, and he hadn't wanted to squander it on greasy, overpriced bus station grub, so he'd saved himself a bundle by fishing stuff out of the snack machines. He would've blown the whole twenty bucks had he known Granny was going to pull up in a brand new Beamer. But who could've known that? His mom sure didn't know, couldn't have known, else

they'd be staying at Granny's instead of that shack back at The Falls, milking her the same way Mom was milking Rick. (Well, maybe not quite like *that*.)

"You like pizza?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, me too. We'll order one up when we get to the house."

"Uh, okay."

Sadie drew a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her purse, shook one loose and clamped it between her lips. It was thin, with paper the color of charcoal. When she flicked the lighter and touched the flame to the cigarette's end, Simon noticed a wide band of dark metal wrapping her ring finger. The setting it housed resembled a cats-eye marble, except this stone looked like an actual eye; a narrow black slit centered against a polished emerald background. A cat's eye, a tiger, something amphibian, maybe, a lizard. Who could know? Whatever it was, once seen, Simon couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Like that, huh?"

"Man, it's neat."

"Yeah, well, it's mine."

Simon didn't know what to say. All he was doing was *looking* at it. Wasn't like he'd asked her to *give* it to him. But he sure did like the way it looked.

Sadie held up the pack of smokes, nodded at Simon and said, "Want one?"

"No."

"Smart kid," she said.

She returned the pack to the purse and took a right, a couple of blocks later, a left. Another right put her on a narrow street lined with old run-down row-houses, each one a

carbon copy of the other, right down to the screened in porch and the cracked cement driveway. Those Jersey Shore guys could've been living in those houses.

*Not exactly the kind of place you'd expect a new brand spanking new Beamer to be hanging out, though.*

Halfway down the block, Sadie pulled into a driveway on the right side of the road, up the driveway and past the house. Once upon a time, the two-story wooden structure might have been yellow. But now the paint had faded away, leaving behind nothing but weathered pieces of the siding it had once covered. A flat-topped, rectangular garage stood at the rear of the property, but Sadie made no move to park inside it. She edged up to the door, threw the car into Park and cut the engine, looked at her grandson and said, "C'mon, Champ, let's get that pizza."

## Chapter Three

The pizza was great (a supreme, slathered with extra everything). Paying for it was even better. When the doorbell rang, Sadie gave him two twenties, but the tally was only seventeen bucks, so Simon kept twenty dollars for himself. Nobody gets a twenty-three dollar tip for delivering a pizza, not if Simon was the one handing out the money. By the time it arrived he was famished, so the pizza was buzzed through pretty fast. Sadie tossed the empty container in the trash and Simon went off to the bedroom he had been shown to a little earlier in the day. Minutes later he was standing beneath the spray of a hot shower, wondering what might come next.

He had stepped off the bus into a surreal world of stylish grandmothers in designer jeans—*designed* for women a tenth her age. Well, maybe not a tenth, but a whole heck of a lot younger than *her*. Who could've dreamed that Simple Simon Druford, the geeked-up nerd-boy from way back when would have a crazy grandmother with a kickass car that cost more than her house? And money—Simon saw the roll she pulled those twenties from. The thing was big enough to plug a toilet. And that hair, what was up with that? The Beamer and the purse full of cash, hundred dollar jeans and three-hundred dollar shoes. And the house: worn and weathered on the outside, but everything inside it brand new. Everything. From the La-Z-Boy chair she reclined in to the Ethan Allen furniture filling each and every room, all the way down to the stainless steel refrigerator and the gold-plated fixtures in the bathroom and kitchen sinks. Even the polished hardwood flooring looked new. The house, dead on the outside but bursting at

the seams with the trappings of wealth inside. Like she was loaded but didn't want anyone to know it. Simon wondered how much she had. If she had a pocketbook full of cash sitting by the coffee table, she had to have a lot more somewhere else, didn't she? Where did she get it, and why didn't Simon's mom know anything about it? Although, that part was easy to figure: if Sherry Druford had even an inkling of the wealth and affluence her mother had acquired, she'd be up I-5 faster than you could say 'give *me* some'. This, of course, was what Simon wanted to say. But he wouldn't. Nobody gave a kid anything if he begged for it. Even Simon knew that—not that anyone had ever given him anything, one way or the other. His mom sure hadn't, nor had his dad, who nowadays was nothing but a vague memory.

Simon grabbed the faucet, turned it and the water stopped flowing. He pulled back the sliding glass door and picked up the towel he'd left lying across the toilet seat, stepped into a blur of swirling steam and began toweling himself off. Moments later, the towel was on the door rack, and Simon's glasses were back on his face. Swiping a hand across the mirror gave him a brief glimpse of his face, which was smiling because he felt so darn good, clean, refreshed and ready to go. Where? He didn't know. Maybe Granny would take him somewhere. Granny... Sadie...

He slid into a fresh pair of underwear and pants, threw the door open and the steam began to dissipate. After stroking on some deodorant, he brushed his teeth and finished dressing, left his dirty clothes in a pile on the floor and went off to find his grandmother, who was in the living room, slouched into her plush leather couch, feet on the coffee table as she watched MTV on a 52" plasma television. Simon knew it was a fifty-two incher because the only friend he'd made back in Klamath Falls had one in his

house. Two days ago, he and Jimmy Farber were watching Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* on the big screen, and now here he was watching *MTV* with his Ancient Mariner of a grandmother.

Simon sat in the recliner, and Sadie said, "Well, you look a little better, nice and refreshed, hair combed."

Simon, who still hadn't gotten used to seeing his grandmother in her skintight outfit, the multicolored hairdo or the flippant attitude that went with it, didn't quite know how to respond. So he gave his shoulders a shrug and turned his attention to the television, and the video clip displayed upon it, which, much to his surprise, turned out to be Speedball Stevie Walker back in his Metal Whore days. Simon didn't know much about Speedball Stevie Walker, but man could he play that guitar. The clip being shown was of a live performance, and Stevie was wailing, as was the crowd, especially the women, half of whom seemed to be chunking articles of clothing at the stage. Man, what it must be like to be Speedball Stevie Walker, traveling around the world doing something he obviously loved. Not to mention the women; probably gets to pick out whichever one he wants.

*One? Two or three, more than likely... or more!*

Simon wondered if the guy would be picking Syl out of the crowd come Saturday night. *He* sure would. He'd snatch her up and backstage they'd go.

Sadie, feet on the hardwood floor now, leaned forward and scooped something off a silver tray resting on the coffee table. Simon hadn't noticed it before, but he sure saw it now, the plump plastic bag of marijuana in her hand, a smaller bag of white powder on

the tray, slim rails of the powder beside the bag, rolling papers and a pipe small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, a razor blade and a cutoff piece of straw.

*What's next, Snoop Granny and a hypodermic needle?*

Sadie said, "You know how to twist up a joint?"

"No," Simon told her, a word and inflection that was starting to become a very familiar interchange between the two of them:

'Got a hard-on?' ... 'No' ... 'Wanta smoke?' ... 'No' ... Roll us a spliff?' ... 'No!'

Sadie rolled a couple of joints and tossed them onto the tray, picked up the pipe and filled its bowl, watching Simon out of the corner of her eye as she scooped up the lighter and clamped her lips around the pipe's stem. She fired up the pot and took a deep drag. Smoke flowing from her nostrils, she said, "Wanta hit?"

And Simon's newfound mantra continued: "No."

"What, sixteen years old and you don't smoke pot? You really are a nerd."

"What *ever*."

Sadie took another hit, and Simon said, "What, you're offering me drugs? My own grandmother?"

"Better me than a stranger."

"Like that's gonna happen."

"Like that... *hasn't* happened?"

So far, in Simon's sixteen years, it hadn't. Simon remained drug free not because of some lame 'Don't Do Drugs' propaganda, but because no one had ever offered him any. Most of the kids at his school smoked pot—all you had to do was open your eyes

and look around to see *that*. But Simon wasn't friends with most kids, certainly not with anyone cool enough to be running around with weed in their pockets.

"Let me guess. You don't have many friends—no one from that crowd, anyway. And the one or two friends you do have are even nerdier than you."

*Bingo!*

"You're no angel; you just haven't been exposed to a good time yet." She held the pipe out to him. "C'mon," she said, smiling. "Can't stay a dork forever."

"What *are* you?"

"Liberated."

"Seriously. Mom has pictures of you, and none of them look anything like *this*. Granny hair, Granny glasses, nice frumpy dresses, old beat-up Caddy with two nice looking old people standing in front of it. What happened?"

"What happened to your nice little granny? She finally got rid of that lying-ass, deadbeat grandfather of yours, got rid of his ass and the beautiful butterfly you see before you emerged. What happened? The same thing that's about to happen to you, if you got sense enough to take advantage of it."

She winked at him, cocked her head, and said, "Come here."

Simon bounced out of the recliner and shuffled over to the couch, sat down and watched her tap spent debris into the ashtray, reload the pipe and hold it out to him. He was right beside her now, and he couldn't imagine taking that pipe, couldn't comprehend something like this could even be happening. But it was happening, all right. He took the pipe and clamped his mouth around it. Granny... Sadie, said, "Take a deep pull and hold

it in ‘til I tell you to let it go.” Then she flicked the lighter and touched its flame to the bowl, smiling as the pot crackled and Simon instantly began to sputter and cough.

“One more,” she said, chuckling and relighting the bowl while Simon drew in another round of smoke.

The first time seemed to blow his lungs apart. The second wasn’t quite as bad. He held it for a moment, a moment more. Granny said, “Let it out” and he did. Face flushed, he began to feel warm, his head thick, his thoughts muddled. He sank back into the couch and started to chuckle, thought about Rick and his mom going at it back at The Falls and started to laugh, glanced at his grandmother and howled laughter.

Sadie said, “What’s so funny?”, and Simon, who really couldn’t see himself saying, ‘Your ridiculous get-up’, said, “I don’t know.”

“Now you’re getting it, Sport,” she said, and Simon laughed some more.

She picked up the length of straw, leaned over the table and huffed up the two rails of powder, pinched her nose and sniffed.

“Cocaine?”

“What else?” Sadie said, and Simon, grinning from ear to ear, gave his shoulders a shrug.

They sat for a while, Sadie bobbing in time with the music, Simon actually *feeling* the music, which by now was an old ZZ Top tune. The thump of the bass, the driving beat of the drum, the down and dirty crunch of the lead guitar and the smoky sound of the singer; all combined to put Simon right in the middle of it. And then he actually was *in* the middle of it. He closed his eyes and the music carried him away. He imagined himself onstage, a cool-looking electric guitar slung around his neck; him and ZZ Top and a

stadium full of people. Front and center, smiling up at him, was Syl. He smiled back and she shrugged out of her halter-top and beaned him with it.

He opened his eyes. His heart was pounding, he was sweating, the music was too loud. He was slouched into the couch beside Granny, who sat beside him with her eyes closed, rocking in time with that driving beat, oblivious to whatever may have been going on around her. She opened her eyes, looked at Simon and picked up the remote, turned the volume down and said, “Kinda loud, huh?”

“I’ll say.”

“Tell me a little bit about yourself.”

“Like what?”

“Like, whatever. I haven’t seen you in what, six years?”

“Something like that... Well, I dunno. I go to school and come home, that’s pretty much it. Watch TV and surf the Net. Do you have a computer here?”

“I’ve got *everything* here: computer, Wii, XBOX, big screen HD satellite TV, and now I’ve got my little grandson here to enjoy it with me.”

Smiling, Simon said, “Sounds good to me.”

Sadie said, “What else?”

“What’ dya mean?”

“Girlfriends?”

Simon, blushing now, said “Awww.”

“What? You seemed to be doing pretty good back at the bus station.”

“Yeah, right.”

“She liked you.”

“What, now *you’re* gonna tease me? I might as well be back in gym class.”

Sadie put a hand on Simon’s leg, which kind of freaked him out.

“They tease you, huh, kids in your school?”

Simon nodded. “Pretty much,” he said.

“Call you names, nerd, gei-boy, Simple Simon, and for what? ‘Cause you can’t toss a football, can’t sink a jump shot?”

Simon said nothing. He’d heard those names, and a lot worse. He sat on the couch, staring at the television while Granny continued: “All you wanta do is fit in, and if you can’t fit in, to just be left alone. Because, really, you’re sick and tired of the whole situation and you’d just as soon hide out in your room, the woods, a park—anywhere to get away from those pricks. But you can’t hide out forever and they can’t leave you alone, because then they’d have to take a look at *themselves*, at their *own* shortcomings, and believe you me, they’ve got plenty of ‘em. But as long as they’ve got you, they’re safe; they don’t have to deal with their own weaknesses and imperfections.”

Simon looked at Sadie. She had just described his life’s experience for the past few years as if she had lived them herself. The words had not mirrored just random experiences, but his very existence. The hand on his leg that had seemed so wrong, more like a claw than a hand, now felt like nothing more than a grandmother’s loving touch. The gentle touch of her hand, the look in her eyes; she knew him, she understood him. How she could have, this old woman with her garish makeup and tray full of drugs, was beyond him, but she did—he could feel it, could feel the kinship, as if they both inhabited some mystical inner circle known only to the downtrodden, the tormented and put-upon.

“You know, Simon; you’re going to grow up to be a handsome man. I can see it in your face. Whatever you want to do, whatever you want to be; it’s all out there waiting for you to grab it. Astronaut, actor, sheriff or scientist.”

“Man, I’d love to be that guy.”

A clip from a Foo Fighters concert was playing on the big screen. Several young girls were rushing the stage, heading straight for the guitar-playing lead singer.

“Be neat, huh, to be somebody else for a while? Pick out, say... that guy, become him for a day or two, a few hours even.”

“I’ll say!”

“A rock star, a world leader... Stephen King.”

“Stephen *King*? Why, so I can sit in a room all day, typing on a computer?”

“Well, *you* know; he’s loaded.”

“Heh, I’ll take Bill Gates’ stash.”

Sadie laughed, tousled his hair and said, “You’ve got his eyes, you know.”

“Who? Bill Gates?”

“No... Albert. My Albert, your grandfather. You look just like him.”

“What... happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Granny, we haven’t seen each other for over five years. But, back then, you know, Grandpa was here. You didn’t have all this stuff. You had granny hair and frumpy old granny clothes. You didn’t look like... this.”

“What, you don’t like the way I look?”

“No. I mean, *yes*. I mean, you used to wear glasses, thick, like mine. You’re not wearing them now.”

“Great, isn’t it?”

“What, you got contacts?”

“Something like that.”

“Your car, and all this great stuff inside the house, but the outside’s rotting away. Like you got a bunch of money but you wanta keep it a secret... and all these... drugs.”

Sadie smiled and put her hands together. Absentmindedly fingering her cat’s-eye ring, she said, “First off, what I have or don’t have is nobody’s business but mine. And if I want to puff a little pot or snort a line or two of coke; that’s my business, too.”

Once again, Simon didn’t know what to say. He simply couldn’t believe something like this could be spilling from his grandmother’s mouth. But it was.

“Your grandfather was a liar and a cheat, and the best thing I ever did was wake up three months ago and get rid of his sorry ass. And believe me; we’re all the better for it.”

“How long were you married?”

“Fifty-two long, hard years.”

“And it took that long for you to figure out he was a bad guy?”

“Like I said, he was a liar and a cheat. And he was good at it.”

“Must’ve been *real* good, ‘cause I always thought he was a great guy.”

“Like I said.”

“How come you didn’t tell Mom about it?”

“What, I should call her up with my problems when I never get a call from *her*? Oh, around Christmas time I always hear from her. God forbid a year goes by and she doesn’t get her little bundle of Holiday cash. Thirty-six years old and still dropping the hints at Christmas time—*Hints*? Nuclear bombs, more like it.”

On the big screen, ZZ Top gave way to My Chemical Romance’s *Black Parade*, a song Simon knew well. He sat up, watching the video. After a while, he said, “Where does Grandpa live now?”

“Close enough for me to keep an eye on him, far enough away not to get in my hair.”

“Will I get to see him?”

“What do you wanta see *him* for?”

“He’s my *grandfather*.”

“Damn deadbeat is what he is. Your great-*great* grandfather; now *there* was a *character*. A real rounder, that one. Merchant Seaman most of his life, a real adventurer. Spent a great deal of time in the South Pacific, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, up and down the coast and in and out of those Brazilian jungles. London, Australia. A real explorer, that one. Of course, he was probably a lying piece of shit, too.”

“Gee, Granny.”

“Don’t you gee Granny, *me*. You don’t know the shit I put up with from that cocksucker.”

*Cocksucker*? Simon’s jaw dropped; his eyes grew wide. He looked at Sadie and she said, “*Angie!*”

*She's crazy, thought Simon. Crazy as a loon and I'm stuck here with her for the whole summer. Grandpa probably left her. Got as far away from the crazy old woman as he could. Got away and she hit the Lotto and she's hiding it so she won't have to share it with him.*

“What'd you do, hit the Lotto or something?”

Chuckling, Sadie said, “You can say that again.”

She reached into the baggy, pulled out some pot and dropped it onto the tray, picked up the small bag of coke and dropped it into the baggy, sealed up the drugs and stowed them in her tan leather purse. Purse in hand, she stood up. “Well,” she said, “I'm gonna go lie down for a while. See ya later.”

Then she walked away, leaving Simon staring bleary-eyed at the television.

## Chapter Four

He stretched out on the couch, relaxed and drifted off to sleep. When he woke up she was gone. He got up and walked into the kitchen, out the back door to check on the car. It wasn't in the driveway, and Simon wondered briefly where she had gotten off to. But he didn't *really* care; even though she was his grandmother, she kind of creeped him out. He went back inside, through the living room, down the hallway to a den at the rear of the house. It was his grandfather's room; he knew it was because of the condition of the place. No fancy new furniture here, just a threadbare couch and a scuffed leather chair, a couple of wooden-backed chairs and a tarnished old desk with a stack of drink coasters under one of its legs to keep it from tipping forward. Musty curtains, drawn tight, cast the room in shadow. A couple of lamps and their stained shades sat about the place. There were pictures on the desk: Granny in her glasses, standing in the kitchen with an apron around her waist; an old one of Simon and his mom. The place smelled of tobacco and booze, beer maybe. Simon wondered if she was preserving the place in case he came back. He didn't really think she'd kicked him out. But maybe she had, maybe like Simon's own mother; she'd sent the man of the house packing.

It was his grandfather's room, but nothing in the place caught his interest, so he moved forward, through the house, downstairs, upstairs. He didn't know what he was searching for, didn't know what he expected, or hoped he might find. As it turned out, there wasn't much of anything *to* find. He thought about going through Granny's drawers—after all, she had a pocketbook full of money, maybe there was a secret stash

somewhere in her room. But he didn't have the nerve to chance it. What if she came home to find him rifling through her stuff, walked in and caught him elbow-deep in *her* drawers, meaning her underwear. That was the thought that brought the whole proceedings to a halt. He was in the middle of her bedroom, staring at himself in a mirror running across the backside of a chest of drawers when a car pattered by. It was her, he just knew it was. He ran out of the room, into the hallway, beating it down the stairs as fast as he could. By the time he got to the living room he had figured out it wasn't her. It couldn't have been. She was driving a Beamer, for crying out loud. *Beamers* don't putter.

He spent the rest of the afternoon going from couch to kitchen, to the fridge and back to the couch. Shadows began creeping up to the windows. Soon they were in the house. The next time he looked up it was dark outside.

And where was Granny?

He couldn't concentrate on the movie he was watching because being alone in a strange house in a strange city felt weird. And he was tired. Twelve hours crammed into a crowded bus had left him weary. Stopping at every little town they came upon had worn him out—not to mention being hauled down to the bus station in the middle of the night. The nap he had so recently enjoyed should have left him feeling rested, but it didn't. He was exhausted, and, finally, Granny or no Granny, alone in the house or not, he pried himself off the couch and hauled his weary bones to his upstairs bedroom.

He was lying in bed when a door slammed shut, still halfway immersed in the dream he'd been having. Laughter drifted up the stairwell, and he propped himself on an

elbow. Slats of light filtering through the window blinds painted the walls of the dark room. The digital clock on the bedside table read 3:00.

Three o'clock in the morning and Granny was just now getting in?

*Unbelievable...*

More laughter now, but not Granny's—girlish giggles, a man's drunken voice. The footsteps he heard pounding the hardwood floor reminded him of the first time Mom had brought Rick staggering into their house in the middle of the night, the annoyed look on the guy's face when Simon walked in to find them writhing on the couch together like worms on a hook. The next afternoon she started talking about Seattle. A week later he was on the bus.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, waiting for Granny's voice to join in. But it didn't come. Just snickers and sniggers, chortled laughter and drunken, indecipherable babbling. He knew he should go back to sleep and wake up in the morning to whatever wild explanation Granny would come up with, but he wanted to see who was down there, what they were doing—they sure sounded like they were having a good time. Besides, the way Granny... Sadie, was acting this afternoon; Simon doubted if she would mind him showing up.

*Hey guys, this is Simon. He's cool, aren't you, Simon? C'mon in and burn one with us.*

That or she'd go all bug-fuck-Rick on him and run his ass back to bed. Either way, he'd get to see what they were up to.

He got out of bed. His clothes were still on, so were his glasses—he'd laid down earlier and drifted off to sleep in them.

More laughter as the TV snapped on; seconds later music joined with the swirling laughter floating up from the first floor landing. Simon crossed the room and walked barefoot into the hallway... down the corridor until he was standing at the top of the dark stairwell. He took off down the stairs, into the hallway on his way to the living room. When he reached the arched entranceway, he stopped dead in his tracks. He'd expected to find Granny and a couple of drunks crowded around her tray full of dope, maybe a roomful of people she'd hauled back from whatever sleazebo bar she'd spent the evening in. He sure as heck didn't expect to see a man and a woman groping each other on the couch. But there they were, all right, bathed in the soft glow of blue light radiating from Granny's big-screen television. The man, with his back to Simon, was naked, trim and muscular with long, dark hair lying across his wide shoulders. His clothes lay in a pile beside the couch, next to a dark skirt and a pair of black high heeled shoes. The woman, bare from the waist down, wore a silky blue blouse, so thin Simon could see right through it. Not that he needed to—the garment unbuttoned, the fabric pulled back, gave Simon a straight-on shot of her breasts, firm and large, the nipples erect as pencil erasers. He could've seen her snatch (which would've been his first *real* snatch sighting) if the guy hadn't been blocking his view. Straight, jet-black hair, dark eyes and long red nails. Even in the dim glow of light, Simon could see that she was a knock out. Not pretty like the girl he'd met on the bus this morning, but drop-dead gorgeous... movie-star-material. Her slender legs wrapped his waist, one hand on his chest, the other doing God knows what to his lap while the guy buried his face in the crook of her neck.

She pushed him away, smiling as she disentangled herself. Simon stepped back into the shadows and she swung those exotic-looking legs over the edge of the couch, and

for the briefest moment he saw it, the pink split in her skin, the triangular patch of hair surrounding it. She leaned forward and started diddling with something on the tray, picked up that cut off length of straw and light glinted off the ring decorating her finger. A cat's eye ring, just like the one Granny had worn this afternoon. Simon wondered if they were in a club together, or a cult. But he didn't really care if they were in a club or a cult or anything else. All he cared about was watching from the shadows, those breasts, the curve of them, her nipples, the way her long, graceful fingers wrapped the stem of Granny's pipe. Simon imagined them wrapping around something of his, and felt that something grow hard. He touched himself, stroked himself. He'd never beat-off before, had never even considered it, but he sure was considering it now. Who wouldn't, with Granny's naked little friend over there.

And where was Granny, anyway, and who were these people? Maybe she'd let them borrow the couch or something. Maybe she was already in bed, or in another part of the house with some old geezer, naked, legs wrapping his waist, one hand on his chest, the other stroking his... thank God Simon hadn't walked in on that!

She leaned over and snorted up a long line of coke, snorted another and handed the straw to her lover, who followed her lead and snorted a couple of lines of his own. She dipped her fingers into the tray, brought them up and smeared coke across her breast, smiling as he licked it clean. Coated her fingers again and stuck them into her mouth. Then she was back over the tray, the straw back in her grasp, dipping and snorting and huffing, laughing and tossing the straw to the table as she leaned into the couch, folded her legs around him and lay back on the cushions.

Then he was on her, *in* her.

Her back arched, her hips jutted forward; her lips pursed and her eyes glazed over. Then they closed. She smiled as his hips thrust. The smile turned into a look of anguish as his hands found her breasts and her arms wrapped his neck, pulling him closer, until her breasts flattened against his chest. And now they were really going at it, humping and pumping and grinding their hips, Simon watching from the shadows, butterflies fluttering in his shorts as her hands pounded his back and the pale blue light washed over them, while on the big screen television, Duran Duran belted out *Hungry Like The Wolf*.

“Oh God!” she cried out. “*Goddamit!*” Her arms shot straight up, fingers splayed outward while her upraised hands quivered and her lover thrust. She grabbed her breast and screamed, screamed again and beat at his chest, slid off the couch and the guy came out of her. He stood up, his huge erection pointing at the ceiling. Simon had never seen anything like it, and hoped he never saw anything like it again—unless it was hanging off *Simon!*

“The fuck,” the guy said.

Her eyes were bulging, she was gasping for breath.

“You all right?”

But she wasn’t all right. Even from his place in the shadows, Simon could see *that*. He stepped forward, into the living room. “What’d you do to her?” he cried out.

The guy turned. “The fuck’re *you?*”

“Granny!”

“*Easy, kid!*”

“GRANNY, CALL THE COPS!”

The guy looked up at the ceiling, grabbed his clothes off the floor.

“GRANNY!”

Frantic now, he picked up his shoes—

“CALL THE COPS!”

—raced past Simon and ran naked down the hallway.

The front door banged open and moonlight spilled through it. Simon hurried to the porch, stunned as the guy raced down the middle of the street, shoes in one hand, the rest of his clothes in the other.

Simon stepped into the hallway, and closed the door behind him, locked it and went back to the living room. The woman, who moments ago had seemed so strikingly beautiful, now lay sprawled on her back between coffee table and couch, moaning, gasping for breath, one hand clutching her breast; the other, lifeless on her flat stomach. Her face, her body, every square inch of her covered with sweat, as her chest heaved and her mouth gaped open. Something was wrong here, *very* wrong. He knelt beside her and she grabbed his wrist, looked up at him and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Simon,” she whispered.

He picked up the TV’s remote, muting the sound and tossing the remote on the couch.

“It’s me.”

“*Me? Me who?*”

“*Who? Who do you think?*”

“*What?*”

“The mattress.”

“Huh?”

“The ring.”

“What’re you talking a—”

“Under the mattress.” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. The side of his face touched her breast as she gasped out, “The mattress, you fucking nerd.”

She let go and her hand hit the floor, and she started to wheeze, a grating sound more like the rusted scraping of a swinging gate than actual breathing. Simon had never seen anyone die before, but *she* was dying; Simon knew it. And before he knew it she *was* dead. The noise abated and her hand stopped moving. Her ashen face slumped sideways. Her lips were blue, her eyes wide open and her mouth agape. He felt for a pulse and felt nothing—her skin seemed to be already cooling.

Simon had seen stuff like this in the movies: a heart attack and they start babbling nonsense, incoherent stuff that means nothing to no one but themselves. He never thought he’d end up seeing anything like it in real life though.

*Jesus, the guy fucked her to death.*

He stood up, looked around the room and thought, *where the hell is Granny?*

And where does she fit into all of this?

They’d made enough noise to wake the dead, Simon shouting at the top of his lungs, the other guy stomping down the hardwood floor on his way to the front door.

*So where’s Granny?*

He went upstairs, calling out her name, downstairs, all through the house. But she wasn’t in the house. He looked outside, down the driveway, and there was the Beamer sitting right in front of the garage. The car was here but she wasn’t?

Simon went back to the living room, picked up the telephone and started to dial 911, but stopped himself before pressing the final digit. What was he going to do, bring the police down on his own grandmother? There was a tray full of drugs sitting on the coffee table. What if the woman OD'd? Granny might end up in jail—after all, they were her drugs.

Better to wait for her to show up.

And where the hell was she, anyway?

*'It's me.'*

*'Me? Me who?'*

*'Who? Who do you think?'*

What did she mean?

*The mattress...The ring...Under the mattress...The mattress, you fucking nerd.*

Simon dropped the telephone into its cradle, looked down at the body and said, "No way."

*The ring... It's me... Who do you think?*

The car's here but Granny isn't?

*Under the mattress.*

"What the..."

*The mattress, you fucking nerd!*

"No fucking way."

Simon took off down the hallway, up the stairs, not stopping until he found himself in his grandmother's room. He got down on his knees beside the bed, threw back the cover and lifted the mattress, and saw a thin black leather book lying on the

bedsprings. He grabbed it and slid it out, released the mattress and sat on the bed, and then flipped the book open, and found a word printed in the center of the unlined page:

*Awakening.*

## Chapter Five

*Awakening*

Feb 07

*I'll not state my name. Whoever finds this book will know it, and if not, well, they won't need to, and this will probably be written off as the ramblings of a crazy old lady. I'll say only that I've found something truly amazing, something so wondrous as to defy belief. It all started with the scrapbook, Albert's scrapbook. Who's Albert? My husband. The book, filled with photographs and newspaper clippings, was hidden in one of four bookcases lining the walls of his study. Tossed in like any old book, no one should ever have noticed it, and no one would have, certainly not I if I hadn't slipped and fallen against the bookcase. The book jarred loose, and there it was sitting on the floor. Imagine my surprise at flipping it open and seeing those pictures, photographs of famous people posing with my Albert. Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, a young Frank Sinatra, although how he could've gotten to him is beyond me... here a politician, there a sports figure or two, an Academy award winning actor—decades worth. And in every picture, Albert handcuffed, or tied up. To bedposts, to chairs, even one time to a tree in the middle of the woods. Why, I wondered. Why would these people chain my husband to a chair and take pictures with him. The answer to that question lay on the pages of the journal, and I read on.*

And so did Simon.

The woman, his grandmother Sadie, recounted what she had read in her husband's journal. Simon's great-great grandfather, the Merchant Seaman adventurer, had found an artifact deep in the jungles of Ecuador, a ring said to have been forged from the soul of a great mystical beast, and then handed down to a village Shaman, affording him a power greater than all. The power to become another, to ward off an enemy by *becoming* that enemy. He would use the power to become a rival chieftain who had vowed to annihilate the Shaman's people, become his enemy and lead his warriors into a bloody ambush. But

under the searing heat of an Ecuadorian sun, something went horribly wrong. The Shaman, who indeed became his rival, used those warriors to wipe his own people off the face of the planet. Hours after the battle was over, heartbroken by what he had done, the magic man took his ring and wandered off into the woods, never to be seen again.

Apparently, he *was* seen again, though, because the seaman came home with the cat's eye ring and a heck of a story for his grandson.

The same cat's eye ring that now resided on a woman who lay cooling on the living room's hardwood floor.

Simon's grandmother, who had a story of her own to tell:

### *The Ring*

*Albert's journal did not say how he had reactivated the ring, only that he had. And I knew that he had. How else could those photographs be explained, and the bankbook recording an excess of a million dollars within it. Yes, that lying, deceitful son of a bitch had squirreled away over a million dollars, and here we were living on the wrong side of Seattle, Washington in a house badly in need of repair. We could have lived anywhere, had anything, and here we were. Well, here I was. Albert, with his 'quote, unquote' sales job, was hardly ever around. Here I was while he was traveling the world like some kind of desert royalty. Albert Speegle, the Sultan of Seattle. Money, women, jewelry, the best of everything, forty years running. Until he ran out of luck, that is. Until he ran into me.*

*I don't know exactly how Albert incapacitated his subjects, but I know how I got the upper hand on that silly bastard. Why he bothered coming back here at all, I'll never know. I don't think I would have. Maybe he needed some place to call home, someone to come home to when he needed a rest. Whatever it was, he was here two weeks ago, downstairs eating a bowl of oatmeal laden with enough of that powdered tranquilizer to put an elephant to sleep. And just as soon as he went down, that eye moved. I swear to God it did, swiveled around in that setting and looked dead at me. I believe if it had had a*

*mouth it would've smiled. Albert went down but the ring wouldn't come off, no matter what I tried, it just would not budge. Well, I got it off. It wasn't easy dragging him down to the basement, but I did. Didn't think I'd have the stomach to saw his finger off, either, but I did that too. Sawed it away and the ring slid right off, put it on my finger and it's been there ever since. And it won't come off now, won't allow itself to be removed. I've had me a fine old time with that ring, and why not? It was easy. Albert spelled it right out for me in his journal. Incapacitate them and the ring takes over, lay them out and touch their face and the face slides right off them and onto you. Not only their faces... everything about them, their memories, their personalities, everything they've done, everything they've become. Just like the old story the seaman passed down to Albert. You become your enemy until the power wears down. Twelve hours of being whoever or whatever your heart desires. All you need is the right subject, the nerve to corner them and the will to get it done. I put enough tranquilizer in that oatmeal to put an elephant to sleep, but Albert wasn't an elephant. Albert went down but he didn't come back up. Probably for the better, what with his finger and all. I'm just glad I got it off him before he died. No telling if the ring would've retained its power or not, had I waited. After all, he never said how he was able to reactivate it.*

“Damn!” Simon said.

He slammed the book shut and jumped off the bed, and then out the door he ran, down the hallway and into the stairwell, taking two steps at a time as he traversed it. He was out of breath when he rounded the corner into the living room. Granny was still on the floor, but a little further away from the coffee table, and he wasn't imagining it, was he? She *was* a little further away. And *both* hands were on her stomach. He wasn't imagining it. That was Granny—he knew it. That naked body on the hardwood floor may have looked like a Penthouse Playmate, but that was Granny, all right. The car in the driveway, the ring on her finger. She was dying and she wanted to pass her secret on to him.

*'It's me... Under the mattress... The mattress, you fucking nerd.*

It was Granny, all right. He reached down and grabbed her ankles. She groaned, and he said, "Praise the lord."

He gave her legs a tug and a hand slid down to the floor. That was when it happened. The ring, which had been pointing toward the archway, swiveled on her finger, until the eye was staring directly at Simon. There was a second, a moment or two when he could have dropped her ankles and ran to the telephone, dialed up 911 to get them out there, just in case the woman could be saved. But the moment was fleeting and it quickly passed. He pulled and he tugged, and before he knew it he was dragging her across the kitchen floor, dropping her legs when he came to the entryway to the basement, because, well, he did have to get that ring off her finger. He opened a drawer, closed it and quickly opened another. Looked up and spied a set of carving knives protruding from a darkly-stained block of wood on the counter next to the fridge. Above that, hanging amongst an assortment of utensils on a rectangular piece of decorative pegboard, was a meat cleaver.

Simon grabbed the cleaver and hustled back to... well, he knew it was his grandmother stretched out on the floor before him, but with those breasts, the silky black hair and long, slender legs, it was hard to think of her as Granny. He opened the basement door to find two switches mounted in a beige-plastic square. Light flooded the narrow stairway when he flipped them up. He grabbed her ankles and began pulling her through the doorway. Her eyes were open, so was her mouth. He couldn't tell if she was breathing or not. Her gossamer blouse fanned out behind her as they started down the concrete stairs, and with each thump across those stairs, her breasts jiggled like crazy. Simon

could barely keep his eyes off them. And that slit between her legs... he saw it a couple of times, too.

Yeah, it sure was hard to think of her as Granny *now*.

In the basement he looked over his shoulder at a washer and dryer sitting at the far end of the squared room, next to an old rectangular wooden table with two beige plastic chairs in front of it. A white laundry basket sat on the table, a few feet away from the withered corpse of Albert Speegle, which occupied one of the chairs.

At the far end of the basement was his grandfather. He knew that, and now he knew everything he'd read in his grandmother's journal was true. He pulled her across the rough concrete floor, tugging harder now, because the going was tougher without the hardwood beneath her. Lifting her into the chair was tough sledding too, but not so hard that he couldn't do it. He laid the cleaver on the table, and locked his hands behind her back, buried his face between those massive breasts and hoisted her into the chair. He tried pulling the ring off her finger, but just like the diary said—it wouldn't budge.

Simon grabbed the cleaver, tried spreading her fingers across the table, but he couldn't isolate the one he needed. He should've brought a knife instead of the cleaver, but it was far too late to run back and get one now. He knew it. He could feel it, could feel the cat's eye upon him, urging him to *do it do it do it!* He raised the cleaver above his head, hesitating a split second before bringing it down. He wasn't sure if it was the cat's eye or the woman who said, "Don't", or if it was anyone at all. What he did know was, metal smacked bone and all the fingers jumped off the table, save for the one he was after.

He picked up the finger and the ring slid gently off it. It was much too large for Simon, but by the time it cleared his knuckle, it fit like a glove. As *soon* as it cleared his knuckle, pain shot up his arm and his heart began to pound; his eyes bulged out and sweat began trickling from his forehead. A searing pain swept over his right hand, and his breathing became shallow. Then he couldn't breathe at all. He fell to his knees, clutching his chest and crying out his anguish as he looked up at his grandmother, whose eyes were wide, her face a frozen mask of terror. Blood fell from her hand, which had slid off the table after being separated from its fingers; Simon could hear the *plop plop plop* of it spattering the concrete floor. She looked at him, opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. Her eyes, which had been wide with terror, began to narrow, and Simon saw within them a precognitive spark of recognition. It was a look he had seen before: the babysitter, waiting for her freshly baked cookies to be sampled; mom right before she hands over that birthday present, knowing you're going to love it. For a brief moment, she smiled. Then her eyes closed, her body slumped, and it was over. As quickly as it had started, it stopped; the spark went out, and Simon's pain evaporated. His breathing returned to normal and he flexed his hand, stood up and looked down at the table. Two fingers lay in a pool of blood, one, slender with a freshly lacquered nail, the other, withered as a dead twig. His glasses lay under the table.

*His glasses.*

They had jarred from his head when he fell to the floor. He shouldn't have been able to see anything other than vague shapes and washed out blurs. But he could see, all right.

Clear as a bell.

Better than ever.

He stooped down and picked up the glasses, put them on and the world went away, removed them and it all came back. He dropped them onto the table, and stroked a finger across the ring, which, to him, felt warm as flesh and smooth as polished bone. His grandmother lay dead before him. She had come through the door wearing another woman's body, and now there she was, dead with her fingers chopped off. Chopped off by Simon, so he could what, gain possession of a magic ring?

It was, of course, impossible; as was everything else he'd been through tonight. But there they were, grandpa, with his papier-mâché skin and four fingers on his right hand, a dried up shell of his former self. The drop-dead, knockout of a woman, who couldn't have been his grandmother, but was. Even in death, she was still beautiful. He should've been horrified at what he had done; shocked that he could have perpetrated such an act.

But he wasn't.

He had touched the ring and the ring had touched him, and all was right in the world.