

The Damned

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Chapter One

After a long and frustrating week at the end of what may well have been the shittiest day of his life, Scott Freeman found himself tagging along behind a light blue Honda Accord while the auburn-haired moron driving it pattered along slow as hell in the fast lane. The guy, side-by-side with two other pricks, was keeping Scott and a long procession of others from reaching a wide-open expanse of freeway wavering like a mirage beneath the searing hot August sun.

Skynyrd's *Gimme Back My Bullets* blared from the radio, a sharp contrast to the tortoise-like pace of the traffic.

A shitty day at the end of a shitty week, and here he was traveling down a three-lane Interstate at fifty miles an hour, clear sailing ahead and the fuckers didn't even have the common decency to move over and let the rest of them by.

And *this* son of a bitch in his Honda.

Probably with a cell phone glued to his ear.

The guy turned a degree or two to the left, and damned if Scott didn't see a telephone pressed to the side of his head; the prick smiling and laughing and shaking his head while Scott shouted and shook his fist.

The bane of his existence: cell-phone-using sons of bitches refusing to yield the right-of-way. If they weren't clogging up the highways they were running over or through some poor unsuspecting soul misfortunate enough to have crossed their paths. How many times Scott had barely missed being sideswiped, or run off the road by one of

these idiots; picked up the newspaper to read about some kid who had stepped off the school bus only to fall victim to Ms. Molly-has-to-have-a-telephone-glued-to-her-ear-every-waking-moment-of-her-life.

More times than could be counted.

More than should ever be tolerated.

And now here he was, one more time, sniffing some inconsiderate bastard's tailpipe.

Jesus, what his was wife going to say when he finally did get home—like it was his fault what happened at work today. He wasn't a magician, for chrissakes.

'Where are my printing press gears?'

Scott hadn't any idea where the woman's shipment was. All he had was a computer screen and a tracking number showing the freight hitting Atlanta two days ago, and no movement since. He couldn't reach into the monitor and pull the damn thing out. And he tried explaining that to her; all the while the office telephones continued their incessant chirping, and Sharon's voice: *'Line two, Scott! Line two!'*, while the woman he was talking to spoke to him like he was some kind of retarded plantation slave, until his frustration slipped out in a few choice words he could never take back, words he never should have spoken.

The sound of the telephone slamming in his ear sent him freefalling into a dark, never-ending tunnel of despair, because he knew it was just a matter of time, and thirty minutes later his time at All American Freight Forwarders was over. Just like that, five years of faithful service gone, and not a damn thing to show for it. Out the door and into the parking lot, onto the Interstate—behind *this* slow-moving son of a bitch.

Scott glanced in his rearview mirror at the huge tractor-trailer creeping ever so close to his rear bumper; so close that Scott could count the bugs splattered across its white license plate, all thirteen of them. He shook his head and looked back at the car ahead of him, narrowed his eyes and pressed the gas pedal, and the car shot forward.

The son of a bitch in front of him tapped his brakes and Scott hit his. A thousand screeching demons howled in his ear as the eighteen-wheeler locked brakes. Tires smoking and screaming against the pavement, the gigantic rig jackknifed into the congested lanes. Metal grated, and buckled, glass shattered; explosions and horrified shrieks filled the air as the Honda shot off like a rocket, down the highway and away from Scott, who had distanced himself from the carnage and was now moving slowly down the road, watching the entire scene unfold in his rearview mirror.

He put pedal to metal and roared off down the highway, veering in and out of traffic, catching up to and cutting off cars as the Honda flew down an exit ramp. Moments later he was through the ramp, screeching to a stop behind a line of cars sitting at a traffic light. The radio cut out, halting Skynyrd in mid-tune as a crackling and popping hiss emanated from the speakers. Buried within the static, a lunatic voice proclaimed,

“The time is here, the time is now. Today, you who have turned your backs to Him will pay for what you’ve done. What you haven’t done will leave you on your knees, weeping for sweet forgiveness.

Black clouds will gather. The sun will leave the sky!”

Scott left the car running and the door ajar, and jumped onto the asphalt. The rambling monologue spilled from several open windows as he ran to the Honda. He

grabbed the door handle but the door wouldn't open, swung his fist and the window exploded.

"...fire will pour from the Heavens—" blared through the ragged opening as Scott reached in and yanked a fistful of the man's jacket—

"—and the Damned shall walk the earth!"

—grabbed another fistful and yanked the guy screaming through the busted window; jagged shards ripping the man's face and arms, shredding bits of clothing as he cleared the window, and Scott stood him upright against the side of his car. He punched him in the gut and the guy doubled over, slammed him against the car and screamed, "You son of a bitch! Do you know how many people you just killed back there?"

"What?"

The monotonous drone of the radio faded into a static-laden blur as Scott grabbed him by the neck, punched him in the face and the side of his head. A knee to the groin sent him crumpling to the pavement and Scott followed him to the ground, flattening the guy's busted and broken nose beneath a steady barrage of punches—he crossed his arms over his face and Scott beat on them, too. "You cell phone using cocksucker!" he yelled. "I'll shove that son of a bitch up your ass!"

"You fucking maniac! I don't own a goddamn cell!"

Scott stopped, one hand around the man's throat, a clenched fist suspended above his crossed arms. "Fucking liar," he said, but something deep within told him the guy wasn't lying, and then he saw it: blonde hair instead of brown. The prick in the Honda had brown hair, a tad longer, too.

“Oh, God,” he said, as he looked down at the bruised and battered face, the pulped nose, the cut and swollen eyes and the blood-spattered white shirt. “Jesus, mister, I’m... so sorry.” He got off the man’s chest, tried to help him up but his hands were slapped away.

It was an honest mistake. The prick on the Interstate had been driving the same light blue Accord. He’d hauled ass down the exit ramp moments before Scott, and here was this guy in the same light blue... An honest mistake. He thought about explaining but knew it would do no good, so he got to his feet and hurried back to his car. Once inside, he threw the car into gear and drove away. The lunatic voice was still rambling along, so he turned the radio off. Scott rubbed a hand across his sweaty cheek, looked in the mirror and shook his head. Sweat streaked his face; his grey Polo shirt was soaked with it. He turned up the air conditioning and frigid air blew across his forearms. Scott leaned into the breeze and sighed. What he’d done to that poor bastard sickened him. And now the person he had chased off the expressway, the person responsible for all that destruction, and God only knew how many deaths, was gone.

Probably laughing his ass off.

With a cell phone pressed to his ear.

Scott pulled up to a stop light, looked to his left and saw a woman gesturing for him to roll his window down. He cracked it a bit and she said, “You hear that?”

“What?”

“On the radio.”

“Oh,” he said, “that.” He shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to the red light, and somebody tapped on his window.

“Hey, asshole!”

Scott turned to see a blood-smeared arm; at the end of the arm, a thin hand wrapping a gleaming pearl pistol grip.

Swirling clouds as black as night raced across the horizon as the pistol jumped and fire exploded from the barrel; glass shattered and Scott’s head jerked sideways. Booming thunder pounded the skyline. Lightning as white and bright as fire streaked the dark sky as Scott’s eyelids fluttered and closed, and Scott chased the lightning into a dark and nightmarish landscape, a forever-world devoid of light, but not of sound, where raw and rasping screams bubbled up from the darkness, and whispered moans floated endlessly along thick breezes as sultry as a demon’s breath; hideous screeching, the skittering and clattering of talons, and claws as sharp as nails. The smell of raw sewage, blood and spoiled meat fouled the air. Scott tried to run away, but he couldn’t even open his eyes...

And then he did.

His eyes sprung open and he squinted against a hazy light streaking in through an open window. The room he occupied was musty, the air thick. His temple throbbed and a fire raged within his arm. Plastic tubing taped to the top of his right wrist ran from an IV pole standing by the head of the bed. A grimy-looking bag attached to the pole was empty. A set of monitors lay dormant by his headboard. His skin was pale, the hole in his wrist crusted over with dried pus, something yellow and not so dry bubbling up around the needle occupying the hole. Scott touched a thick wad of gauze wrapping his head—the fabric was brittle and stiff—touched it again and a white flash exploded behind his eyes, producing an excruciating jolt of pain. And that smell, like the spoiled rotten meat

of a dead dog sprawled too long beneath the mid-afternoon sun, in a battlefield infested with worm-eaten corpses.

Scott snatched the needle from his arm and dropped it to the floor. “Hey,” he muttered, his throat dry, his voice raw and rasping, cracking when he called out, “*Hello?*”

He struggled to sit up, but he could barely move. Arms locked beneath him, he finally pushed himself into a sitting position: butt on the mattress, shoulders against the headboard. He wondered where he was and how he had come to be here. The last thing he remembered was that silly bitch slamming the phone in his ear, the smirk on his boss’ face as Scott headed out the door that final time, into his car and onto the... *Jesus, that guy...* Scott touched the stiff bandage that felt more like a grimy rag wrapping his head.

And it all came flooding back: the ass-wipe in the Honda, the blare of the eighteen-wheeler’s air horn, screams and shouts and screeching tires ... the guy tapping on his window... *he shot me!*

Scott’s stomach lurched. His breath hitched in his chest. Blood pounded through his temples as he turned sideways. Gripping the mattress with shaking hands, he swung his legs off it and gasped. A man lay in a bed on the other side of the small room, separated from Scott by a table and a lamp. His lifeless eyes stared up from their hollow sockets. Mouth hung open in a death’s head grin, his peeled-back blackened gums exposed a crooked set of disproportionately large teeth. One stiff arm hung draped over the mattress edge, the other lay across the thin white sheet covering his chest. Scott’s feet hit the floor and a small wisp of dust puffed up from it. Arms held out for balance, he wobbled forward, and then pitched sideways and knocked the lamp off the table—the ceramic base shattered against the tiled floor as Scott regained his balance, and then

edged closer to the bed. The sheet covering his neighbor was damp. He looked closer and saw that it was *moving*.

“Christ, where the hell am I? What *happened* here?”

He didn't want to see what lay beneath the sheet, did not want to lift it, but he couldn't stop himself. His trembling hand grabbed the edge and the sheet slid off, exposing a pile of squirming maggots that lay in a bloated field of yellow-crusting wounds covering the dead man's chest; writhing clumps of them slid off the sheet, hitting the floor with a wet *splat*. The horrifying stench intensified as Scott grabbed his gut; he doubled over, retching, but nothing came up. He wondered how long it had been since he'd eaten, and how in the hell he could think of food at a time like this. His bare feet tracked the dusty floor as he staggered away from the bed, over to the open window. The air flowing into the room was hot, but anything was better than this, so he stuck his head through the opening, breathed in a heaving lungful and started to cough. Smoke and ash swirling through the air spiraled down like grey snowflakes. He couldn't tell if it was day or night, because everything was grey: the sky, the ground, even the air that seemed heavy wafting through the curtains. The buildings across the way were vague shapes. Scott couldn't even tell what color they were. He fell to his knees and rested his head on the windowsill.

He was dead. Dead and gone to Hell. That son of a bitch had blown his brains out and sent him here. He wondered if he shut his eyes would he find himself in that same nightmare world, with the screaming and screeching and that awful smell, wake up and find the sheet across that poor bastard's chest, stagger across the room and close his eyes and start all over again.

Hell.

Somewhere in the distance, someone yelled. Scott squinted at a dim yellow glow that lay far beyond the fields of grey. He struggled to his feet, across the room, out the door and into a hallway. No light found its way here. He stood for a moment, too frightened to move, until his eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Open doors lined both sides of the silent corridor, dark gaping mouths he dared not enter. He walked forward until he came to another hallway branching off to his left, and then continued on. Slowly, cautiously, he made his way down the hall, until it emptied out into a much larger room. A small partition sectioned off a corner of that room. Glass ran along the partition and Scott thought that maybe he wasn't dead after all, that he was in some kind of a convalescent home, a rehabilitation center. He looked down at his white T-shirt and grey sweatpants. Of course, probably taken here after they cut the bullet out of his head.

The bullet... out of his head.

But what in the hell is going—

His foot wedged against something soft, and he looked down at another dead body. Whoever it was wore a dark policeman's uniform; a thick leather belt looped its waist and an empty holster hung on the belt. Scott knelt down for a closer look, and found a mass of writhing white maggots swimming in a ragged pit that had been chewed out of the guy's neck. A pump-action shotgun lay across his knees. Scott wondered what had happened to him, how long he'd been here. He didn't dare touch him to find out. He picked up the gun and got the hell out of there, across the room and through a set of double doors. A sign in the front yard read: Park West Rehabilitation Center.

Scott started down the steps and a garbled voice startled him.

“Hey, buddy,” it said. “C’mere.”

Scott looked down at a three-foot-long torso dragging two legs fused into one raw, gelatinous stump behind it. Half its face looked like dripping candle wax, the other half a crusty piece of burnt leather, its mouth a glistening red slit encasing rotten stubs of broken teeth. A webbed hand reached out for him and Scott took off running, up the street through the swirling ash, toward the distant glow. Anywhere but here.

He ran but he didn’t run far. His breath gave out and he used the shotgun as a crutch, leaning on it while he took a few deep breaths. What was that thing back there? he wondered. What in the hell happened here? Where is everybody?

Scott took one last breath, and then headed up the sidewalk. He rounded a burned-out shell of an apartment building and stopped dead in his tracks. Ten yards ahead, three huge men stood with their backs to him, behind a fourth who was turning a naked woman round and round on a spit over a roaring fire. She was tied, arms and legs to a wooden pole held off the ground by two sets of iron bars crossed in an X a couple of yards apart, fastened together with strands of twisted wire. Her skin was cracked and charred, her scorched breasts dangling just out of the fire’s reach, belly split open like an over-cooked sausage, hair singed down to her smoldering scalp. The juices running along her sides sizzled when they dropped into the flames. All four behemoths stood grunting like cavemen who had just discovered the miracle of fire... and cooked meat. Scott pumped a shell into the chamber and one of them turned, squeezed the trigger and the top of his head dissipated into a fine red mist; blood sloshing from the cratered shell that remained as his body flopped to the ground. Scott ratcheted another round and the spent plastic cartridge fell smoking to the dirt. All three turned and he fired again. Blood and bone

splattered the ground; chunks of raw-red meat sailed through the flames as another body convulsed onto the dirt and the remaining two ran for cover. Scott pumped and fired, pumped and fired again. The first blast ripped a gory crater through the man's back. The second blew a mammoth knee apart and the last creature fell shrieking to the ground. Scott stepped forward jacking a shell into place, and a smoking cartridge flipped end-over-end through the air. He walked up to the huge man, who was crawling across the dirt with nothing but a grimy pair of cut-off jeans covering his filthy body. A pistol was wedged into the waistline of his pants, but he didn't go for it. He crawled forward, grunting and dragging the bloody stump of his leg behind him, leaving a slimy red trail as he went.

Scott touched the barrel to the back of his neck.

The guy turned and smiled.

And a roaring blast blew his head clean off.

A voice called out, "Hey, mister!"

Scott whirled, and found the shotgun barrel dead-center in the small face of a dwarf. He wore a soiled white tank top with **Come Join Us!** stenciled across the front, dirty black pants and faded grey sneakers. An inch-high growth of dirty blonde hair surrounded the back and sides of his head. The silver-handled walking stick gripped in his hand like a shepherd's staff was bigger than he was. He threw a hand in the air and said, "Easy, pal."

"The fuck are you?" Scott said, his wide eyes scanning the dreary landscape to either side of him.

"You gotta get outa here. *We* gotta get outa here."

“Jesus Christ, what’s happening to me?”

“C’mon, buddy. They’ll be back, and a hell of a lot more of ‘em.”

“Who? Who’ll be back?”

“Whoever heard that goddamn thunder-stick of yours.”

Flames crackled and popped, sizzling in the background as they licked their way up the naked woman’s torso and face. Scott nodded at the fire. “What about her? We can’t just leave her like that.”

“What’re you, kidding me?”

The distant clattering of trashcans crashing to the sidewalk swiveled Scott’s head toward the noise.

“Run!” the midget called out, and Scott chased him across the street, into an alley that lay between two houses. In the darkness at the corner of a house, the midget on one knee, Scott crouching behind him, they watched five men emerge from the side of a building a ways up the street. Two carried baseball bats with long nails hammered through their thick ends; another carried a machete. Like their fallen counterparts, the two carrying bats were huge, well over six feet tall. Scott stroked his shotgun for a little high-powered reassurance as three of them broke off from the others and made their way down to the fire, whose light revealed pistols jammed into the back of two of their waistbands, just like the one he’d just killed. The two left behind carried shotguns.

The man bearing the machete looked at what was left of his headless compatriot, walked over and put a foot in the back of another, nudged him and said, “Goddamnit.” He had on a pair of black leather pants. A sleeveless black leather motorcycle jacket draped his thin shoulders. His long black hair lay flat against his head. He turned and

Scott saw *The Devil's Own* emblem adorning his back, the pistol grip protruding from his waistband. His eyes swept from house to house, settling on the slice of darkness hiding Scott for a brief moment before kneeling to relieve the headless corpse of its sidearm, scooping it up and jamming it side by side with his own weapon.

“Man, look at this shit, Dub,” the larger of the two said. “Somebody sure fucked them up.”

The other huffed out a laugh. “Blew ‘em the fuck apart is what they did.”

Dub, the apparent leader, nodded at the woman. “Look at that. Goddamnit. Turn her ass over.”

The other two lay down their bats. Manning opposite ends of the spit, they tugged and twisted and a fresh wave of juices sizzled, popping as they sluiced over the fire. Dub grabbed a handful of blackened breast, sliced off a nipple and tossed it into his mouth. “Mmm,” he said, crunching it between his teeth as he sawed the entire breast away. The steaming hunk of meat looked like a piece of barbequed pork as he tossed it to his counterpart, who snatched it out of the air like a rabid dog, crammed it in his mouth and said, “Tasty!”

“I want her lips!”

“Fuck you,” Dub said. “Grab her goddamn feet.”

“Am I dead?” Scott whispered. “Are we in Hell?”

“Well on our way if you don’t shut up,” the midget whispered back.

Dub walked down a few feet, swung his machete until blade met wire and her feet came free. He did the same at the opposite end and the two behemoths shuffled sideways with the burned and blackened corpse.

“We should do something.”

“Like what, shoot ‘em? That’s what they want. They want you to give your position away so they can come get your ass. No telling how many of those cocksuckers are fanned out along these houses.”

“Who are they?”

The midget shushed him.

“Who are *you*?”

Shushed him again.

Dub turned and led the grisly procession back up the street. Moments later they joined their companions, and all five disappeared into the murky grey landscape from whence they had come.

“Whew!” The midget sat back against the side of the house, sighed and smiled.

“The fuck is wrong with your teeth?” Scott asked him—they were filed down to fine sharp points, like something out of a cheesy horror flick, or a nightmare, one Scott was not entirely sure he wasn’t having. “Am I even awake here?”

The midget laughed. “I’m Warren the Rat Boy. I come from a long line of sideshow performers—notice I didn’t say freaks. I’ve worked the Carny circuit most of my life, finally made my way up to the Big Top a couple of years before the shit hit the fan.”

“What do you mean, the shit hit the—”

“What happened to your *head*?”

“Somebody shot me.”

Warren snickered. “*What? When?*”

“I’m... not sure.”

“Because I’m sensing you really don’t understand what’s going on here.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that, because I keep asking you WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?”

“Keep your voice down, dumbass. Those big bastards could be anywhere.”

Warren paused for a moment, then, “Look, what’s the last thing you remember?”

Scott sat down, relaxed and crossed his legs. He laid the shotgun beside him, took a deep breath and let it out. “Just... pulling up to a red light. Somebody tapped on my window... a gun was there and it went off. I woke up a little while ago down the street in that rehabilitation center.”

“That means you’ve been out seven weeks.”

“What?”

“About the same time that crazy fucker came on the *TeeVee*—radio too, I’ve been told.”

Crazy fucker.

“What do you mean?”

“Seven weeks ago some crazy bastard broke through the airwaves: television, radio, even the movie theatre screens winked out into a staticky buncha noise, and a voice came outa that jumbled mess proclaiming the end of the world. Black clouds will gather, he said.”

Scott gasped.

Black clouds will gather.

“The sun will leave the sky!”

The sun will leave the sky.

“He was right about that shit; fucking sun ain’t shone around here for seven goddamn weeks. Look at that smoky grey shit up there.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, it’s the middle of the friggin’ day. Bet you thought it was night, didn’t you? I would too if I didn’t know better.” Warren laughed. “Fire will pour from the Heavens and—”

“The damned shall walk the earth. I remember now. I was chasing some prick down the expressway and the radio cut off, and some... I thought I’d jumped stations and some crazy preacher was spouting off a bunch of bullshit. Next thing I know the gun’s in my face and... a swirling mass of black clouds raced across the sky and the gun went off.”

“You don’t know the half of it, pal. I was onstage, dead in the middle of a performance, and half the audience vanished, just up and disappeared like some kinda crazy *Twilight Zone* episode. The rest of ‘em started going at each other like a pack of jackals, beatin’ and tearin’ and rippin’ the shit outa each other. The roof of the tent caught fire and I got the hell outa there. The sky was fallin’, just like the man said. Great balls of fire falling outa the sky as far as the eye could see, cities burning, forests set ablaze until not a tree was left un-scorched. The Rapture came on a Friday afternoon but the Bible was wrong, wasn’t no seven years of prosperity following it, just Hell on earth, seven weeks and counting, until all that’s left are bands of brutes and nightmarish creatures slithering about the landscape.”

Warren snapped his fingers. “Just like that, the lights winked out and the sun went away, and damn near half the world went with it. All the decent folks, anyway. I ain’t run across a straight-shootin’ son of a bitch since it happened. Just a buncha evil doing bastards. Like that preachin’ cocksucker said: the damned are walkin’ the earth and it’s dog eat dog, and you’d better watch your nuts or one of those big behemoth motherfuckers’ll be gnawin’ on ‘em. God knows they ate everything else they could get their mitts on.”

“God Almighty,” Scott said. “This can’t be happening.”

Warren laughed. “Pinch yourself... what’d you say your name was?”

“Scott.”

“Pinch yourself, Scott, and pray to God you can’t feel it.”

And Scott did. He pinched his forearm hard, but it wasn’t pain that brought the tears streaming from his eyes. “Jesus, where’s my wife?”

Warren shrugged. “Gone to Heaven if she was righteous, I’d guess. On a spit if she wasn’t, or being fucked to death by *those* pricks—if she looked halfway decent. They ain’t got the highest of standards, you know.” He got to his feet, and Scott, placing a hand on his stomach, said, “Jesus, I’m hungry.”

“Got some rusty old cans of Spam at my place. Better than dirt, I guess.”

“*Spam?*”

“Ain’t no meat. When the sky fell, the power winked out. The meat went fast—those big bastards seen to that. Next thing you know they’re runnin’ around barbequing *people*; men, women, don’t make no difference to them. They’ll eat anything.”

“What about cows, chickens... farm animals, for chrissakes?”

Warren laughed and shook his head. “You just don’t get it, do you, Scotty? When the Rapture, or whatever the hell it was, hit, everything good in the world went away: plants, animals, dogs and cats and all the nice neighbors you used to have—hell, there aren’t even leaves on the trees anymore, just one big nightmare of a world with a passel of scary sons of bitches dying to get their hands on each other.”

Scott wiped a band of sweat from his grimy forehead. His stomach rumbled and Warren chuckled. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s see if one of those pricks you gunned down has the same size feet you do. Then we’ll go eat some frigging Spam. My shit’s stashed a couple of blocks from here.”

Scott uncrossed his legs, and leaned forward on hands and knees. He pushed up and the walking stick pounded his temple, sending a blinding flash of pain hammering through his skull as he toppled face forward onto the dirt.

He struggled to a knee and Warren laughed.

The cane bounced off Scott’s shoulder and he screamed. He scrambled to his feet and lurched away, his head cradled in his hands. The shotgun lay on the ground but Scott didn’t try for it; all he could think about was getting away from that paralyzing jolt crashing between his ears. The cane whooshed through the heavy grey air and the silver handle found Scott’s kneecap; he hit the dirt and Warren mounted him like a child-sized jockey. A fistful of hair in one hand, feet gouging the prone man’s sides, he ripped the bandage from Scott’s head. Eyes wide and wild and pointed teeth as sharp as razors, he called out, “Dog eat dog, baby!”

Chapter Two

It was damned embarrassing, being man-handled by a pintsized circus performer, but Scott, weak from hunger, and from the blinding pain inflicted by Warren's walking stick, could do nothing to stop the little creep from riding his back like some kind of demonic cherub come from the depths of Hell to claim him. He tried to push up when the guy cried out and grabbed his wound, but the pain forced him flat onto his belly. He closed his eyes against what surely would come next, but nothing happened, other than a startled, "What the hell?" from Warren and a simultaneous *whupping* sound, much like the sound of his grandmother's broom bouncing off the old threadbare throw rugs she used to hang over the clothesline in her backyard. Whatever had made the noise sent the midget sliding off his back and onto the ground.

Scott turned to see