

CANNIBAL FATALES

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This is ___ of 15.

The girls are by the pool. Jo runs a hand through her black hair. She gently thumbs the joint from Mandy's hand.

Time burns slow.

Inhale smoke. This ritzy night party melts to a silent pulse.

Jo thumb-passes the joint back to Mandy and Jo's eyes ease shut. The pot spreads deep down her lungs. She wants to keep it there forever.

And a rumble swells. Her eyelids twitch—drift green.

Her brow furrows, ears buzz.

It's that same scene, Jo's mind twisting into:

The gaping mouth and lapping tongue of a dirty mustache and rough hands, the grinding bodies of men, their faces blurred and dark, nails raking skin. They are all over her. Bloody hands peel back hair and white tongues are smeared green.

Something tickles. Bugs trickle, drip down Jo's arm.

She keeps her eyes closed, tips her head up and lets the pot seep deeper.

Hot fingers wrench Jo up by her hair, rip a clump. She tries to scream. A tongue drives down her throat. Skinless hands pull, wrench her jawbone off—*snap*.

Jo eases open her eyes and exhales, follows the smoke spectrum. It trails up and out of her mouth in soft curls like curving streets. She laughs, can't stop laughing. Not because she wants to but because she *has* to.

Party noise swells.

"Good shit," someone says, from the pool. "Columbian?"

"Californian," Jo whispers, coming to.

"Girl's a chimney," Mandy says. "Keep us warm, you do, Jo."

"On fire." It's another actress, the sexy Kimberly. She's crept up, drapes both arms around Jo, hugs her tight. Jo sinks back into her arms, giggling joy.

"Never too soon for Christmas," Jo says. "And I'm a sucker for candy canes."

“Or candy girls,” Kimberly says. “You’re stoned.”

They giggle.

“Well, if it ain’t fashionable to be so late—” Mandy says. Her gaze shifts over Jo’s head, past the pool. She licks her lips. “Something savage this way stalks.”

Jo turns, sees Sonja, Ginger, and Peggy sliding open the patio door. They wave over the heads of the other party goers: actors, musicians, producers and hot bodies, all herb-puffing and bellbottom-shuffling to music. Everyone is beautiful.

Jo blinks it away.

Across the pool, a heavysset guy raises his glass to toast—he’s the director—slips. His glass smashes on the lip of the pool and he tumbles sloppily into the water.

“Too much shit-juice for Stanton,” Kimberly says.

“Too damn left-footed to keep himself from falling,” Mandy says.

“Lest we bite the hand,” Jo says, wagging her finger followed by the happy squeal of their fellow femme fatales swaying closer, eyes bloodshot and drunk. They sink down near Kimberly, Mandy and Jo, cross their legs just as the fat joint floats from Kimberly’s lips straight to Sonja’s already eagerly awaiting mouth.

Sonja sucks on it.

“When did you tramps get here?” Mandy says.

“Wouldn’t miss one of Stanton’s ‘meetings’ if it were the last thing in the world,” Peggy says.

“Just want to be seen,” Jo says. Her thighs are flashing hot and cold.

Ginger says, “You’ve had one puff too much,” and she brings a cold bottle of beer to Jo’s lips, tips it back just enough. The beer is cold, crisp and flat—Jo loves it.

“We know where this leads,” Jo says, licking her lips.

Stanton whales over. He pulls up in the pool right near the girls. “Always wear my suit to the soiree,” he says, shaking his wet hair. “Piss or shinola.”

“You old fool,” Kimberly says, laughing. “We saw you slip.”

“Dropped my cosmic charm,” he says. “Pass me that beer.”

And Jo grips the bottle from Ginger, hands it over to Stanton.

He holds himself up with one arm, guzzles with the other. “You girls prepped for tomorrow?” he says. “Ready to make cine-magic?”

“Got my lines down,” Jo says. “All ten of them.” Jo twirls a lock of her hair and adjusts her black rimmed glasses, snapping the world into clarity. It makes her blue eyes bluer.

Stanton coughs. “You die last, babe,” he says. “Just scream on cue, rail like your career depends on it and we can turn a buck to gold brick.”

He’s right and Jo knows it. She’s been there before. Low budget erotic horror. Two day shoot. A lot of skin. Buckets of blood. Cut to the good parts and it sells. At least Stanton isn’t a creep. Not yet.

Jo looks down at her spidery hands, flexes them and holds them up to the California stars.

“Anything interesting?” Mandy says. “Care to astrologize us?”

Jo shoots a pouty look, takes a breath and thumbs the joint again for another hit.

Sonja stands, slips off her shirt and tugs down her skirt for all to see. Her pink panties ride low and the whole party could see through them if they wanted to. What does she care? She’s a rising star.

They all are.

“What time do we leave L.A.?” Sonja says. “I’m a damsel in distress for these horror shoots,” and she cannonballs into the pool. Her splash is the start of a jazz tune from the hi-fi—maniacal, unstoppable.

“First thing in the morning,” Stanton says to the others, hauling back, tossing the bottle past a Tiki torch. “We’re

hitting desert roads,” he says. “Gonna boil in the heat and film, my fine fatales, shall be shot and sold to the highest bidder.” He burps. “I can’t wait.” He pushes away, kicks his fat legs like a drunken sea horse.

Jo snaps her fingers, keeps bobbing her head to the music. The other girls are already undressing, tossing off tops and skirts, heels and bras, leaving all their sartorial sexiness in a lump by the pool. They are jumping into the water. The music grows louder.

Jo stares at the empty clothes of the other girls, runs a finger down her red blouse, fingering open buttons, popping cleavage. She’s ready, was always ready and something tells her this will be the performance of her career. Suddenly, raging with desire, Jo stuffs her hands into the pile of clothes and throws them into the air, watches them scatter, feeling beautiful.

The visions can wait. Stay put. “You’re not real,” she says to herself. A pressure throbs inside her. “It’s time to rock ‘n’ roll.”

She rips off her shirt.

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Cue Title Card: CANNIBAL FATALES

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A sun rises over a distant desert mountain.

Stanton’s orange Volkswagen van speeds across the desert road, rattling and clunking. It’s way too early for these six girls to be awake. Most of them aren’t.

Jo stares out the window. Stanton cranks the radio to rock static. Jo taps her foot along with the beat, nods her head. Stanton hacks up something green, spits it out the window.

A rusty van passes them.

Stanton curses: “I told that flop to be careful. Will you get a load of this—?” He’s talking to Ginger. She’s passed out, long legs up on the dash, snoring. He punches the gas. “Give those wannabe actors a pinch of responsibility and they think

they're ponyboys." He wipes his sweaty head, licks his moustache.

Beside Jo, Mandy stirs. Her head floats down, rests on Jo's shoulder and Jo pets her to sleep. "Soon," Jo says. She smells Mandy's musky hair. "Plenty of time to dream."

Mandy's wearing a skirt. Jo's hand dances across Mandy's bare thigh, flirting with the idea of creeping higher. Instead, she strokes leg-skin in tiny circles until the rhythm of her stroke lulls Mandy to nuzzle closer.

Jo imagines fingers, the ones from her visions, tastes them ripping skin to neon blood and rivers of bliss beneath. She takes a deep breath, swallows a mouthful of stone cockroaches. She looks back at Kimberly, but Kimberly is passed out.

The visions, Jo thinks. From the moment she met Stanton as if something inside him had been smeared all over her mind. Can't be.

Let it sink.

And Stanton catches up with the van, shoots his middle finger out the window. Simultaneously, on each side of the van, arms stick out and the actors inside mock like their arms are bird wings. They flap them in unison.

Jo giggles.

"Those goofs," Stanton says. "Gonna make duck soup out them."

Those goofs are Gus and Zane, the only two male actors on this flick, one of them being the slasher and the other the obligatory boyfriend. Jo's worked with them before on *Assault of the Hellcats* and as an extra in *Nymph Warriors*. Suddenly, Stanton says, "Grab your ankles," and slams on the brakes. "Chow time."

The van veers right. The grinding brakes wake all the girls to curse. He downshifts. Jo's head hits the seatback in front of her.

Jo grabs her head and winces, feels the van wheeze and clunk to a stop. Dust floats around them. We read the sign:

“BIG GREASY PIG: CALIFORNIA’S CHEAPEST CHOW” along with a few pick-up trucks and stoned hippies meandering about shirtless, heads panning to stare at the two vans.

The girls groan and stir. “The shit you stop so fast?” Peggy says, groggy, massaging her temples. “I was baking on the moon.”

“Crash landing,” Stanton says. “Welcome to craft services. Don’t say I didn’t skim a little off the top.” And he’s out. He stretches his large body, rushes over to slap Gus and Zane upside the head. They laugh it off, dodge his blows. It’s all in good fun.

Jo admires their playfulness.

“What’s the matter, old man?” Gus says, “Thing ain’t got no juice?”

“Burned you,” Zane says, flicking back his blonde hair.

“I’ll burn your damn paycheck,” Stanton says. “Gear better be tip-top.”

“Time to pucker my tummy,” Kimberly says, adjusting her bra. She slides open the van door.

In the background: “Chop, chop,” Stanton says. “You okay, Jo?”

“I’m fine,” Jo says, looking away. Jo feels a chill against her bare legs. She steps down to the mellow crunch of dirt below her feet. The other girls yawn their way toward the diner.

Jo looks at the back seat, sees the desert sky through the van’s side window and follows it down to her small black handbag, the one with her buck knife inside.

“Eat or die,” Sonja says to Jo from the diner door. “Let’s fill up.”

Jo slams the van door shut.

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The waitress tips more coffee into Peggy’s cup. “And I was all sock you in the pecker if you try that again,” Peggy says. “Producer had to drag her from the set—topless.”

“What about you, Jo?” Kimberly asks. She forks another mess of runny omelet into her mouth.

“Haven’t had a brawl on set.” She takes a bite of blueberry pie, eyes upward in thought, swallows. “But this one, *Vamplust a Go-Go*, is one big—”

“Trashy pile of—” Zane says, butting into frame.

“Stupid dudes,” Ginger says, “especially if you’re in it, Zane.”

“Yeah,” Kimberly says, “Boyfriend meet pitchfork.”

“Boyfriend? We going steady now or what?” Zane says. He steals Peggy’s coffee and takes a giant slurp, hissing out a satisfying stream of coffee breath. “Leave your bedroom window open, watch for the rope ladder.”

“Watch you fall,” Kimberly says, chuckling. “Mr. Sandman.”

And Jo digs her fork into her half-eaten piece of pie, looks around the diner. Her gaze settles naturally at the counter.

She zones in on a man in a black cowboy hat pulled low. He’s sitting at a stool, sipping coffee. He has a thick black mustache. He’s gaunt, olive skinned. His eyes are shadowed. As soon as Jo realizes she’s eyeballing him, that cowboy hat of his tips up and he’s staring back at her.

The world shakes.

He raises his hand for another sip. She notices pink splotched skin on his right hand, can see it so clearly. It’s terrifying. He nods at Jo, flashes yellow teeth.

She drops her fork.

Her mind races. Brutal men, fingers dipped in human blood.

She stares at her pie and it flickers into a chunk of orange ooze.

Before she can scream:

“Ding-a-ling,” Mandy says. “Look who’s floating away again?”

Jo fake smiles, snaps back to reality.

“You girls clam baking with Stanton in his ride or what?” Zane says. “Gimme some a-lovin.” Sonja elbows him and he stupidly guffaws his way back to the guy table where Stanton is going on about how he was once almost bitten by a black mamba on the set of *Junkie Brats Go Native*.

“You alright?” Ginger says to Jo, touching her hand.

Jo stammers, “I, um, it’s nothing, really. I’m good.” She flicks a chunk of blueberry off the table, pulls her hand away. “Can I have a sip of your water?”

And she drinks. When she looks up—this time with caution, hesitation—the man with the black cowboy hat is nowhere to be seen. A hand lands on her shoulder, startling her.

It’s the waitress.

A record crackles in the jukebox: “These Arms of Mine” by Otis Redding. The record is warbly, out of tune.

“Strangest thing, honey,” the waitress says, bending close to Jo’s ear.

The girls lean in. They study the woman’s caked-on face, the sudden shift in mood. The waitress speaks directly to Jo, her voice low and shaky. “Got a message for you.”

“For me?” Jo says. Ice sweats over her body. “Shoot, I guess.”

The waitress’s hands fidget in front of her. “A guy gave me this, said to pass it directly to you.” And she hands Jo a folded up scrap of paper. “Said it was... vital.”

“Well,” Jo says, “who was this guy?”

The waitress almost speaks, stops. She bends to Jo’s ear. “I never seen him before.”

The girls laugh, roll their eyes.

“Woo-hoo,” Kimberly says, “Jo’s got herself an admirer in the diner. I’m jealous.”

“With a breakfast stud,” Mandy says. “Open it, babe.”

But Jo’s shaking, fingers fumbling to slowly open the paper.

She looks at the girls and takes a deep breath.

The waitress turns to a voice beckoning from the kitchen saying, “Eggs are burnt.”

Jo hears the sound of her own body, its hum between her ears booming in waves.

Something buzzes around Jo’s head.

Written on the paper in a childish scrawl are the words, “Turn Back.”

“What’s it say?” Mandy asks.

“Read it,” Kimberly says.

Jo frowns—says nothing.

“Spill the beans,” Ginger says. “Don’t be shy, sweetie pie.”

Jo scans the diner. Old faces. Cowboys. A family. Hippies.

“Says, ‘Call me,’” Jo crumples the paper and plops it into Peggy’s coffee. “Probably a creep.”

“Not even night yet,” Ginger says to the other girls. “That’s when they come.”

But Jo takes her fork and holds it tight, wanting, needing to get out the diner—fast. She stabs the fork into the table, heads for the bathroom.

What the girls don’t see is a low-browed black cowboy hat watching them through a dust-battered windshield outside. We study the girls’ lips move and a low laugh from our point-of-viewed stranger surrounds us.

The engine revs.

Spotchy knuckles tighten on the wheel.

Dissolve to:

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Downtown is a one street affair, dusty and seedy, just a speck of old buildings in the middle of the desert. Mountains line the edge of the town and the local juke joint’s parking lot is dotted with tumbleweed. A strip club sits a mile away by an abandoned gas station and don’t even ask about the hospital. It’s a burned out dental clinic.

We’re nearby, deep in the afternoon at a rundown motel.

A scorpion skitters past.

Inside, Kimberly hits the shower's hot water nozzle, twists it to full blast. She slides off her black T-shirt and jeans, stands surveying herself in the mirror. She's early twenties, gorgeous curves. She unhooks her bra and steps out of her blue striped panties.

Feet on wet tile.

She rubs soap into her hands, angles herself under the water spray, letting the flow loosen her shoulders and neck. She coats her body in water. From outside the bathroom, she hears the rest of the girls talking, laughing.

Kimberly soaps her long legs.

A girl screams. It's practice for tomorrow's shoot.

Kimberly lets the water flow down her face.

As we pull back and drift into the motel room, we do, in fact, see the girls lost in the depths of their own forthcoming film: arms flail, lines botched and broken, Sonja takes a shot of vodka, slams the glass down on the bedside table.

Action—

Jo: "If you love me, you'd show it."

Mandy: "I do love you. Why can't you see?"

Jo: "See? You want to suck my neck—see."

Sonja: "There's an eight-foot tall iguana out there." Her voice breaks. "And if we don't do something about it we're, we're—"

Jo: "Say it, Jane. We're what?"

Sonja (sobbingly): "Dead girl meat."

Ginger: "We're getting out of this alive. You hear me? Alive."

Meanwhile, just steps away, Kimberly sits in the shower, cross-legged, chanting a mantra over and over.

Outside, the afternoon suddenly swirls orange and pink.

Someone's walking, coming closer...

A knock at the door.

The knob turning, but it's locked.

Someone knocks harder.

The girls freeze in place. Eyes dart to weed roaches in an ashtray, to the doorknob.

Jo throws her script on the bed in a huff, untwists the lock and creaks open the door.

It's Gus, twiddling his thumbs.

"Knock knock?" he says.

Jo rolls her eyes. "Who's there?"

"Who? Who Wants to Screw? You're looking frisky."

"Knock it off, Gus," Mandy says, flopping on the bed, not even looking, firing up a joint. "Your stand-up bites."

"Now there's an idea," he says. "Hitting the strip club. Who's game for a little skinema action?"

"You want us to join you at the strip club?" Jo says.

Ginger takes the joint, inhales: "I'm in—skin rocks."

"Hot in the city," Gus says. "Stanton says drinks on him."

"Luscious," Sonja says. "Guzzle time, girls."

"Language of a liquored tongue," Peggy says. "Let's do it."

And the room swings into a flurry of girls getting ready to go out and ravage the local perverts, blow off some steam and drink.

Jo pouts, taps her foot, arms crossed and annoyed.

Kimberly steps from the bathroom, a white towel pulled tight across her body.

"What'd I miss?" she says, her hair dripping wet.

"Everyone's buck wild—strip club bonanza," Jo says. "Count me out."

"We could just stay here and, you know, rehearse," Kimberly says. She winks at Jo.

The idea puts a smile on her face. Reefer hovers in front of Jo's nose, beckoning a toke. It's Ginger. Jo grabs the joint, takes a hit of bud. "I could use a little practice," she says. "Wanna be a method actor?"

"I'm a pro when it comes to method," Kimberly says, running her hands across her breasts.

Drums fade into the scene. Ginger snakes her way across the room in some kind of tribal shuffle of undulating hips. Hot lips kiss into:

A low laugh—cut to:

The magic hour fading to night in the desert. The two vans are loaded with cast and director. Stanton rolls down the window. Jo steps up.

“Sure you don’t want to come?”

“I’m mellow,” she says, stoned and a bit bashful. “Kim and I’ll stay here, watch out for the bogeyman.”

“They got lizards the size of El Paso out here.”

“Kim *still* toweling herself off for the rubdown?” Sonja yells from the backseat.

Jo flips her off, smiles.

“Seriously, don’t wander off into the sunset,” Stanton says, tense. “We need you for the shoot.” He looks up at the stars. “You’re gonna be big.” He touches something under his shirt, a necklace. He grips it tight and grins. “Adieu.”

“Adios,” Jo says, sticking her hands in her pocket.

“Come on, Stanton, pump this sucker,” Zane says, from the passenger seat. He drops a tab of white paper on his tongue. “Party maniacs and jiggling galore, here we come, dot, dot, dot.”

“Catch you later,” Stanton says. “Pole speed ahead.”

And Jo watches the tail lights drift out to the main road into the dark. Behind her, the motel doors are perfectly framed. A buzzing, glitching light bulb hovers above each door.

Bugs swarm in the sky. They’re just stars, Jo thinks. Shut them out.

“Just you and me, Kim,” Jo says.

A radio simmers in the distance, high static and garbled voices.

With Kimberly in the room and the rest of the crew gone for the night, Jo can finally relax. She’s dreamt of letting loose

for a long time. Her stomach stirs with anticipation of their first kiss, how slow they can take it with no one else around.

She strolls back to the room, hands still deep in her jean pockets, humming over the distant static. She pauses at the motel room door.

A flash of light blips her sight.

The door is ajar. The doorknob shines silver from the light's glow like it's still twisting without a hand to turn it. She watches it spin.

A pulse in the distance.

She recalls the note, runs her hand over her face.

Turn Back.

It's hotter outside.

Too much grass. I'm seeing things.

And what she sees in the doorknob is the reflection of a slobbering mouth-hole lined with grisly yellow teeth, cracked lips watering blood. Someone standing behind her. No one. A breath. Saliva dripping bile. Red jelly oozes from the sides of a girl's mouth and Jo slaps her ears shut. A fly flutters. Jo bats her hands around her body to brush off the spiders. She smells centipedes, maggots, black tongues lapping skin, thick blood-drops carving routes over her arms. She stumbles back, catches herself. The scene is calm.

Nothing has changed. It's the same motel. Same night. She hesitates.

Open the door.

Do it slow.

Jo steps in and unbuttons her jeans. Her hand drops to her tight stomach. We move around her in a circle. She fingers the rim of her bellybutton, surveys the messy room: clothing, bags, bras and panties, backpacks and empty liquor bottles. She remembers the buck knife. Be steady.

The lamp glitches. It's old.

Her black handbag sits open on the floor.

She click-shuts the door, leans up against it, letting her hand move into her jeans and pushing them down enough to

see skin. She wants it now worse than ever, tastes Kim's tongue on her lips, on her neck. Her cheeks are hot. Her hands are wet. More pot? She can't wait. Not now.

But Kimberly's taking too long in the bathroom. Must have wanted to freshen up.

"Kim," she says, "I'm coming in—time to play."

And Jo tugs off her jeans, wads up her panties and tosses them on the bed alongside her shirt. For a second, she stands naked in the room, takes a deep breath. Her body tingles.

Her arm pushes open the bathroom door. A cloud of shower-vapor hits her face. It feels good like a bath of quilts.

The door swings wide, the steam simmers and the roar of running water is static.

Except, things are not right.

Turn Back.

No, God, no, Jo says to herself.

There is blood smeared everywhere.

Jo's head pounds.

Kimberly's decapitated head floats in the toilet—dead eyeballs drenched in puked-up goop, tongue sliced off, torn lips, and both cheeks flayed with jagged gashes. The forehead is caved in, ripped open.

The rest of her body is splayed wide in the shower in a pool of skin chunks, gut-ropes and blood-splattered hand prints. A lifeless body limp and flimsy. Streaks and swirls. The walls are like the inside of a stomach.

Kimberly has been slaughtered.

Blink.

Don't blink.

Jo screams, the scream blurs.

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The doctor is not a medical doctor. He's a dentist—grey beard, frazzled mophead—and he's shooting another dose of muscle relaxant into Jo's bare thigh. We rise up through her mouth. She screams, can't stop: Kimberly's mutilated mouth flashes green, split-tongue lapping up imaginary gore.

“She’s in shock,” he says. “This will give her pleasant dreams.”

A river of blood between her eyes explodes.

Arms pin her to the kitchen table. It’s all vamplust in plain clothes: Mandy, Peggy, Sonja, Ginger, Gus, Zane, and Stanton.

But Kimberly’s dead and Jo’s drenched in static again.

Those bite marks around the edges of Kim’s lips linger in Jo’s mind. She blinks blood, naked—twitching on the table at the dentist’s—static reforming to skin. And the drugs push up into her gut, to her limbs and her mind lulls to a numb sleep.

“It’s nothing to be afraid of,” a voice says—too far away. “She’s dead.”

Time burns slow.

Jo gasps.

Snap awake and hands caress her hair.

She flexes her toes, feels them flutter.

“Just breathe,” Stanton says, handing Jo a cup of coffee. “Everything is okay.”

“Tell it to the centipedes on your tongue,” she says, delirious, entranced by the light above her. It’s a light bulb. Flights of horse flies dance around it.

They swirl us into:

Later that day.

The dentist is flanked by the sheriff and two deputies. After their questions about time, place, purpose and so on and so forth, they pull Stanton aside, let Jo tremble among her friends and calm down. They hug, comfort her and try to quench the tearless sobs in memory of their slaughtered friend.

Her black-rimmed glasses rest beside her. She can hardly see. Just blurs and streaks and bloodshot eyes.

“Where are we?” Jo says.

“The sheriff’s here,” Mandy says. “Don’t worry, doll. It’s over.”

But she cringes at the blurred men—the bugs in their blood.

The sheriff and Stanton walk from the dentist's house, out the front door, to the driver's side of the cruiser. The sheriff speaks, leaning up against the car: "Not the first time—damn psychos—this town is a mess. Two of my guys caught a sleazebucket waitress just hours after this happened, was crawling down the middle of the road, out there on ninety-two with a broken coffeepot, hopped up on party fuel—face smeared with it."

"So you got her?" Stanton says, winking. "Took her in?"

"We don't take kindly to these kinds of incidents," the sheriff says. "Boys took the old hag out of town, the old-fashioned way and—" The other two officers nod.

"Thank you, sheriff," Stanton says, clearing his throat, touching his chest. "I've already made arrangements for the body."

"County will handle the details," the sheriff says, tipping his hat.

"Blood spills," Stanton says, "and we got a goddamned film to make."

"You carry on is what you do," the sheriff says. "We'll be in touch, but you already knew that."

The other two officers pile into their own cruisers. One more tip of the hat, and Stanton's alone just like Jo was last night. Carry on. It's what we do. "Funny," Stanton says to himself, already feeling the sun burn through his Hawaiian shirt. "Never seen a sheriff with a black cowboy hat." He pulls the necklace out of his shirt and tugs on it gently. It's a green stone. It glows. "And... Cut."

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A vulture swoops. The shooting location is nestled at the foot of a small mountain, perched on a hill. It's a farm house. No barn. No silo. A few dead trees trickle into a mangled clump of forest, leading up a mountain.

Inside, a wobbly microphone hangs from the ceiling and Stanton holds the camera mashed to his face, tripod and all. He's moving close to Jo, Mandy, and Sonja, pushing in for a

slow pan across their breasts. They're huddled on a cot, trembling bosoms in bikinis ready to burst.

"Is he... is he gone?" Jo says. "Please tell me he's gone."

And Mandy hugs herself. "Shut up. Don't make a peep."

The front door explodes in a flurry of wood chunks. It's Gus wearing overalls and a flannel shirt. Gigantic work boots clomp to a stop, rage in place like a jacked-up bull. He's covered in blood and wearing an oversized lizard mask, streaked jet black. His eyeholes are just slits, but he doesn't need sight. He's holding a pitchfork and thrashing his head back and forth like a dragon.

But we're drawn to Sonja who starts convulsing on the bed. Mandy and Jo scramble to the corner and Jo screams. Stanton captures her dramatic gutwrench for the camera. All of a sudden, Sonja's mouth opens revealing the real vampplust a-go-go logline of the flick—she's sprouting fangs.

Our killer grunts—head cocks to the side.

Sonja bares teeth, squeals demonic in Latin. Stanton can't conceal his glee.

If we crane our necks hard enough, we catch Zane peek in through a window, wanting to get a first hand view of the scene, his nose mashed against the glass.

"Jenny," Jo yells, calling out to Sonja. "Don't-!"

It's too late. She's fuming.

Gus the Lizard wields the pitchfork, jabs the air with it, feet away from Sonja.

Sonja: "You're nothing," she says. "Warm your scales in the hot flames of oblivion."

Outside, pressed against the window, Zane laughs too loud.

It travels from the stupid depths of his throat right into Stanton's earshot, ruining the shot.

"Cut!" Stanton yells as Zane ducks. "You turd—can hear you from here to El Paso."

Gus drops the pitchfork and Sonja plops on the bed, blowing out a yawn.

Jo freezes, not sure if the scene will resume or not.

For now, it doesn't.

"Night's coming soon," she says. "Too soon."

"Fantastic, Zane," Stanton says, sarcastically. "Outta tan your hide."

Sideswipe to:

Suddenly, it's dusk. A few more shots are filmed, but the movie is not yet in the can.

"I need to pee," Mandy says, grabbing her crotch, hobbling away.

"Can someone scratch my—?" Gus says. "Right here," trying to rip the mask off, but it's glued onto his neck.

"Fangs are making my gums numb," Sonja says.

"Twenty minutes," Stanton says. "And you," pointing at Zane again like he's managed to spoil almost every scene of the film. "Got words for you—sure ain't sugar."

Zane yells through the window, "Hey, I didn't write this flick. Don't give me no sugar shit."

"Make yourself useful," Stanton says to no one in particular. "Shit!"

And Jo steps outside on the porch, snapping her sweaty bikini into place. She grabs a soda from a cooler propped open in the back of the van—the cans are swimming in melted ice. She cracks open the can and guzzles.

She still can't believe Kimberly is gone, can't get rid of the awful taste of the note or the diner man's hands like the hands of her visions: pink splotches, leathery bubbles of milk and alcohol. And the can is slippery in her hand, too much fish skin aluminum. She drops it in the dirt watching the cola splat the Earth dark.

"What are you doing?" Stanton asks, reaching around for a cold one himself.

She didn't hear him approach. "How did it happen?" She's serious. "Kim..."

"What do you mean? It was—I guess, Jo—Just let it go."

"Can I have—I want one of your cigarettes."

Stanton pulls a pack from his pocket, shakes one out for her and lights it. Jo puffs, coughs, takes it deep inside her.

It doesn't help.

"Stanton," she says, "your last shoot—didn't..?"

"—Zane," Stanton says, buzzing his lips into a fart noise. "What a flathead. He's gonna cost us this damn picture."

And Jo shrugs her shoulders. She ignores him, walks toward the clump of trees near the house, turning back to take in the view, the frolicking actors, all carrying on as if nothing had happened. But she was the one who saw blood. Stanton spits, walks away.

It makes her tingle.

Stanton yells at Peggy about tanlines, not enough skin.

Jo takes another hit, blows smoke straight up. "Where are you hiding, Kim?" she says under her breath.

Then it hits.

Dum-dum-da-da-dum-dum-da-da. From somewhere in the distance, from the other side of the mountain, we hear tribal drums pound. She takes another puff and cranes her head. The drums thud in a straight beat. She hears the clacking of what sounds like wood on bone.

But, surely no one's...

A rough hand squeezes her ass. She jumps, spins around.

It's Gus, still wearing the black lizard mask.

"Howdy, little lady," he says and Jo knees him in the sack. He doubles over. "What'd you do that for? You'll turn me into a—"

"Don't ever touch me again," she says. "I was listening."

"Sunshine, it's dusk," he grunts. "Listen, I wanted to say how sorry I am. What you saw. We all feel like shit. Kimberly was a great girl, you know." But the lizard mask conceals his face, makes it sloppy, and Jo can't help but think of his mask in the dark, scraping across her tummy at night.

She shivers.

"Kimberly was my friend," she says. "Let me see your hands."

And Gus holds them out to her. They're stained red with corn syrup and dirt. Gus cocks his head like before. "Why?"

She fingers his palm, traces his lifeline to his wrist.

"Nothing," she says, spitting the cigarette from her mouth. "Thanks, Gus." She looks up into the fathoms of those eye slits. "I appreciate you saying so—about Kim."

"Let me know if you want to smoke down later, okay?"

"For Kim..." she says.

"Sonja's got tabs of orange haze, too," he says, snapping his fingers. "Only the lonely if you know what I mean." And he walks away.

She doesn't realize she's turned back to the drums as if they're beckoning her, begging her to float over to the other side of whatever secrets they conceal. Jo wants, more than anything else, to let go of her own mind.

Her hand curls into a fist. She imagines holding her buck knife and what it would feel like to slide it in and let blood spray memories to death—but she has a film to make—what it felt like for Kimberly when someone stuck her gut, bit her open and threw her insides in a shitty pile.

What did you taste like? Jo thinks. So much soft skin...

And it's Kimberly's face she sees in her mind's eye, pain-clenched, writhing to the drums and fingernails and a voice she's heard before, but can't place.

"Jo," Stanton yells. "You're up—shower scene."

"Yeah," Jo mutters. "Steamy."

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Night at the motel.

Jo strokes Ginger's hair and Ginger leans back into Jo as Jo spreads her legs, wraps them around Ginger's waist.

"You've gone cold," Ginger says. "Long legs and all."

"Thinking," Jo says. "I see too much—can't shut it out."

"Still dreaming of Mr. Diner?" Peggy says, hanging up the telephone. "My Mr. Diner won't return my calls—out porking the town white."

"It's the note."

The door bursts open. Mandy and Sonja stumble into the room, a bottle of Jack Daniels sloshing. Mandy's holding it by the neck, barely. They're drunk.

In a cowboy drawl, Ginger says, mockingly to Jo, "Call me for some hot breakfast twenty four seven," and rubs her tummy, but Jo's pissed, was trying to be serious, and pushes her off full-force. Ginger snaps back, "What the hell, Jo? I'm kidding. It was just a stupid note."

"Girls, don't kill my buzz," Sonja says. "Take a hit of Jack."

"The note," Jo repeats, standing slowly on the bed, towering over the other girls. She's wearing a white T-shirt, faded jeans, black boots. "It didn't say 'Call me.'"

This gets the girls' attention.

"The truth revealed, my dear Watson," Mandy says and grabs the bottle. "In the blink of an eye." She takes a swig.

"Don't you get it?" Jo says. "Kimberly was murdered last night—the note..." but her voice trails.

Everyone stares at her.

Jo stands on the bed hugging herself. She can't get the words out. She steps down and shakes her head, mouths, "No, no, no, no," to the curtained window and she slugs the wall, denting plaster to crack. "It said, 'Turn back' and I didn't listen—was a goddamned warning."

"An epiphany," Peggy says, rolling her eyes. "Guy probably wanted you to give him a handjob, hold the bacon."

"Or a eulogy," Sonja says. "So you lied. So what. So some sleaze from the diner wanted to sizzle your fries. I don't see the connection."

Pause.

"I do," a voice from the doorway says.

And the girls belt out a startled scream.

Jo's heart leaps into her throat.

The door is wide open. It's the man from the diner: black cowboy hat, splotchy hands, and his mustache is thick, waxed

and nasty. His hands rest on a gigantic skull belt buckle. He's dressed all in black.

"Who the—" Jo says and: "It's you."

"It's the sheriff," Mandy says, falling drunk over the motel room's only chair. "Busted."

"Drama queen," Sonja says, off the cuff.

Jo's already diving for her black handbag. She pulls it open and has her buck knife in her hands.

"Holy shit," Ginger says. "Put that thing away."

"It's him," Jo says, in a tight whisper. "The stalker from the diner."

"What are you talking about?" Peggy says.

"I do apologize for the intrusion," the sheriff says. "Door was open and I happened to be in the area. Thought I'd check in on you girls—make sure you're snug like bugs in a rug."

And the clomp of footsteps outside.

The sheriff turns. We see Gus, Zane, and Stanton lugging it into frame. Gus grips a stupid lamp and Zane has a Gideon Bible.

"Something the matter, sheriff?" Stanton says as the sheriff steps aside, lets him through.

Zane: "We heard screams."

"Oh, actresses preparing for a cinematic explosion," he says. "Ain't that right, girls?"

"Get out," Jo says, face tense.

Stanton squeezes into the room to have a look. His bathrobe drapes open over his round gut and judging from the view, the girls get more than they bargained for in the below-the-belt horror department.

"It's a slug."

"A snail."

"A flop."

"Zip it," he says. Stanton shuts his robe and snarls. But, too late. Jo's already seen the necklace—a chunk of green rock screaming in her ears to drill the sheriff right in the eyes. Stanton, the hero, lunges at the bathroom door, kicking it

open, but he slips on a wet pair of panties, head over heels, smacks his head on the sheriff's boot. A pink-splotchy hand reaches down and helps him to his feet.

"Mind the water," the sheriff says. "And quite a buck knife," he says to Jo. "A prop for one of your murder scenes? Looks darn real."

She is still gripping the blade, has it outstretched in her right hand, trembling, ready to strike. "Feels real, too," she says. "Want a taste?"

"Jo!" Stanton says, abruptly. "Stop it."

"This was the guy who wrote me that note... I know it was him—murderer."

"Impossible," Zane says from outside the room. "He couldn't—wait, what?"

"You're suffering," the sheriff says to Jo. He's stepping into the room, black boots squish on carpet. "Truth is," he says, "the locals wanted to welcome you all to town. It's not too often we get such prestigious visitors from Sunset Boulevard. And considering last night's tragedy, thought you might want to unwind, see how we do things out here in this desert community." No one moves. "There's a small get together tonight at my house. I can show you the way. Don't worry—we're cool—cold shower cool. Bet on it."

"Wait," Peggy says. "You're not arresting us?"

"Hauling us in?" Sonja says.

"To the slammer," Ginger says. "The clink."

"Now, why would I do that?" the sheriff says, taking another fatal step closer. "Unless, you want me to restrain this pretty lady who insists on pointing her knife at my throat?" He gives Jo a toothy grin—yellow jagged teeth—and curls his upper lip, tips up his chin. "Nah, she won't bite. Will you, darling?"

"You need to leave—" Jo says.

"—leave us the directions to this shindig," Gus says, butting in. "A jam's a jam and I don't turn down jams."

“Gnarly, sheriff,” Mandy says, woozy, “and, yeah, when in Borneo... or whatever the hell this town is.”

And Stanton rubs his temples, grinding his teeth. “I don’t know, sheriff. It’s been a long day. I’m sure we’re all—”

“Well, you obviously haven’t met the town strippers,” he says. “Don’t get cold feet—they’re dying to meet you.”

Zane: “Did somebody say...”

“Bingo, boy,” the sheriff says. “Strippers. They remember you from last night and they’re bringing friends. Them strippers would love to be in the pictures.”

“We could just—” Stanton says. “A few minutes wouldn’t—one drink. One drink.”

And Jo lowers the knife, because as Stanton continues by trying to smooth talk the room into going, the sheriff keeps his eyes focused directly on Jo. “You should stop by,” the sheriff says. “It would be good fun and we’d love to welcome you—a drink for the road would do you good.”

“Line ‘em up, Jo,” Gus sings, trying to lighten the mood, but he’s no Sinatra, not even close.

In Jo’s mind, from the intensity of the sheriff’s eyes, she hears the swirl of skin-drums pounding heat to blood-bits and flesh upon flesh severing, splitting into tiny spasms of gore. Everything pops, burns behind Jo’s eyes. The gore seeps down tiles, scattering green in the dirt. She’s shivering, weak and the buck knife falls from her hand and thuds on the carpet.

“So, what do you say?” the sheriff says. “Friends, yeah?”

And something inside Jo pushes her forward and she knows this is it.

“No turning back,” Jo says, keeping it cool. “Maybe,” she says, “I’ve got you confused with someone else—my apologies.”

“Hospitality is always appreciated,” Stanton says. “Charmed, sheriff.”

Static seeps into the background, fills the scene.

Jo’s blue eyes hover and spin. She’s thinking, turn back, turn back.

Mandy pouts.

Ginger licks her lips.

The sheriff runs his hand across his cheek. And we move closer to his grinning face, those teeth and his dark tongue writhing around his mouth, chewing the aftermath of a bad diner dinner.

Go inside his mouth. Deeper and the blackness swelling into:

Two sets of headlights coming right at us, until we're drenched in pure white light and the roar of Yma Sumac.

Snap to:

A hand switches off the ignition. The music dies.

Stanton drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

"You sure you want to do this?" he says to Jo, who sits in the passenger seat smoking his cigarettes.

"Been seeing things," she says. "Awful things. And I think—how can I put this—I have to be here."

"*Have to* my ass," he says. "Look, I can take you back—" but he's sweating and shaking.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Jo says, giving him a "don't push it" face. She pats his leg. "Sheriff's orders, right?" she says. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Yeah," Stanton says, trying not to touch his necklace, trying not to look worried. "For the world."

///

And a warm beer floats into Jo's hand from a bearded biker. She doesn't know him, but it's her sixth drink of the night since arriving at the party. It's all a bit strange, but she's been wrong before. Take a dive, she thinks. The bugs, the hands, none of this is real.

The sheriff's place is a small bungalow near the farmhouse. A bonfire near the back door lights the evening bright red. The rest of the girls linger the grounds in varying states of high. In a drunken haze, Jo slams, tosses the empty beer can and squats down examining the dirt. She caresses the buck knife she has strapped to her leg.

She's waiting for the sheriff to show, but so far, she hasn't seen him. She wants to speak with him, thinks she should. Maybe he can help her—maybe a joint would be better.

Or, maybe I'm wrong, she thinks. Gone too far—too much worry, pain, regret. A line from *The Hawk Street Hitsquad* pops into her mind, "Sometimes, you plunge—become the plunger, just make sure to hit." That works.

A slick dude in jeans and a button-down cowboy shirt ambles over, squats beside her.

"Good dirt, yeah?" he says. "A taste of honey might make it all better."

"They don't make dirt like this in L.A.," she says, lying. His rough hands rubbing the dirt remind her of the sheriff's hands—hands from the other side of the tracks, a side she'd rather not see at night, hands she can't help but see. She pulls a centipede from her hair, squashes it.

"Plenty of films shot in town," he says. "*Mutagon II*, *Yakuza Witch Cult*—bet you didn't know that."

"Got wind of it," she says. "This place is a regular horrorshow."

"Heard about your friend—pity, really."

"Not worth talking about," she says, trying to brush off the imaginary insects that swarm around the holes in her gums. She swallows.

Jo's shaking, trying to keep it together, but those holes are leaking pus trails out into the night.

Sonja jiggles around the bonfire, hips swaying to someone's jambox blaring Tibetan chants.

"Where's Mandy?" Jo asks the man—a rush of confusion spills down her skull.

"Who?"

"Nevermind." She suddenly doesn't know why she's talking to him. "I need to find somebody."

"The spirit animals around these parts tend to bite," the slick dude says, grinning. She does a double take. He looks too much like the sheriff.

And she's storming away, leaving the man irritated. He watches her walk toward the fire and he looks out into the darkness. A light flickers in the distance and it's the flicker he was waiting for. "Delicious," he mutters. "Always is."

Inside the house, Jo brushes past drinkers and pot smokers, meth heads, and coke clouds, young women and young men all on the verge of complete depravity. A mutt yips in the corner, won't shut up. The music is too loud, just a wall of chants and bells and throats. Who are these people? she thinks. Where did they come from? More people are piling into the house. Someone's hand tickles across her ass. A man strokes her hair, she brushes him off. A biker burps. It's crowded.

Outside, a van full of out-of-towners pull up behind Stanton's orange clunker, block it in. Who invited the cheerleader nurses? They're cheering. And Stanton, he swings the bathroom door open, his face pale, eyes puffy. He grips his chest. He's grinding his teeth, looks deranged.

Across the room, Jo catches the front door swinging open. It's the sheriff. His eyes already on her. Her breath stops.

A chill pulses through her chest and a leather jacketed swinger beside her snorts a line of coke, says, "Fuzz heaven, baby... Don't worry. Sheriff don't bite."

Jo's shivering. "Bite?" she says to the man. "Don't say that word to me."

"Nasty grooves, right?" Gus says, suddenly dancing up, reeking of weed and sweat. His face is beet red.

"We have to leave," Jo says. "Now, dammit—back off, Gus."

A Rita Hayworth tramp grabs Gus, pulls him close and starts kissing him madly. Jo pushes them both away and weaves past a gang of fat bikers through the kitchen and out the back door.

Jo's mind swirls with faces collapsing, melting and blurring.

Turn back.

Jo feels everyone stare at her.

The sheriff is scanning the house, looking for Jo. He grabs a girl by the hair, studies her face and shoves her aside. “Watch out,” he says. “Out of my way—where’s the girl?”

“Stop looking,” Jo says to herself, shoving aside a football player. His beer spills on his shirt and he yells, “Touchdown!”

Outside, Mandy’s top is off, her pink nipples drenched booze-flavored. She rubs them.

Peggy, Sonja, and Ginger are making out hard. A group of frat guys watch them, hi-fiving their palms raw. They are grinning, egging them on.

And Jo is visibly panicked.

More women stream into the party, coming around the house to dance by the fire—strippers with high heels and big hair.

Jo stumbles through the swelling crowd that has gathered outside—faster, to a jog—but her head is still flicking back, watching the sheriff, making sure he doesn’t get the drop on her. It was him, Jo thinks. All along. I know it.

She can hear him laugh.

“Hey, Jo,” Stanton says, but she doesn’t hear him—won’t listen even if she did. “Where you going? You’re gonna be a star—I ever tell you that?” He tries to grab her, but she pries his fingers off her body.

She runs right into the slick dude’s chest, almost falling over. He grins down at her. Behind them, Stanton stumbles past, clutching his head and howling like a beast.

“You asshole,” she says to the slick dude, picking herself up, brushing herself off.

“Where are *you* off to?” he asks. His hands are bigger than she recalled.

“Stay away,” she says, but his face is melting black tar and his teeth are streaked red and mooshy.

“Why don’t you go back inside—enjoy the party?” he says, slurping goop. “I want to introduce you to some people—film types who love pretty girls.” Jo slams her foot down on his shoe and slugs him in the gut, knocking the wind out of him.

She follows it up with a slap to his face. When he raises his head back into the firelight, his face is normal, nothing strange, nothing wrong. He's smiling.

"This can't be happening," she says, stunned. "You're all mad."

"Don't stay away too long," he croons. "Might catch desert fever."

And, she thinks, something's wrong: the party, the strange people, her inability to connect, the sheriff, Kimberly, everything.

The music blasts louder, the chants mutate: horn, drums, strings, fingers on metal. She can't take it anymore. It's too much. His teeth. The sheriff. A hot steam blows on her neck. The sky is a vortex of centipedes. Jo does the only thing she can.

She pushes and runs.

"Where are you going?" the slick dude calls after her. Too late to look back. She's off into the dark. Branches whip her face. She stumbles, keeps going.

Snap to a pink-splotchy hand on the slick dude's shoulder.

"Let her go," the sheriff says. "She'll be back—let the festivities begin."

The forest is a rush of black tangles and branches.

Reach down. The buck knife is still there.

A cracking behind her. Someone's wheezing—following. The sheriff, she thinks, running harder until the party noise is nothing but a hum, the sound of her own breath swelling against her muscles.

And she finds herself in a clump of dead trees. She clutches her side, presses. There is a circle of branches on the ground. A snake slithers past. The sky flashes orange and white.

Something wet drips on her head.

Catch your breath—breathe!

Drums like a storm of woodblocks. They are close, just over the hill. The moonlight reveals, through the dirt and the

branches, what appears to be the traces of a snaking path. Yes, she thinks, moving further into her mind. And, as she stares off into the darkness, it's Kimberly she envisions stepping through the moonlight.

Naked and stunning.

Beyond Kimberly is the mountain—stone splitting. Jo sees the mouth of a cavernous entrance.

But it's not her. It's someone else. It looks like her, but this woman is hovering in a haze of green mist, too blurry and jittery for Jo to make out. Jo rubs her glasses and tenses. "Kim..." she says. "Is that you?"

The woman who looks like Kim hovers, her stomach bursts open with a flash: spiders and scorpions, gore-smeared guts and screaming maggots slither up and down her body, immediately coating her body in dark scales. The woman's throat is a graveled moan.

Jo clenches her temples, squeezes. "Stop," she cries. "Leave me alone."

Another drop from the sky splats her face.

She wipes it away, holds her spidery fingers in front of her, the moonlight and green mist illuminates the darkness.

Boots crunch behind her.

Blood.

It's blood.

Jo looks up and there, suspended by a clump of tree branches above her is the mangled corpse of Zane. It looks like his face has been ripped open by a pitchfork, but there are others up there, too. They are crawling in the dark, steadying themselves on branches. Shirtless others. Distant smiles of hate. One of them jabs an arm into Zane's stomach and yanks out innards. His blonde hair feathers to the ground. Bare feet grip tree limbs. Grunting. Three of them? Four. One of them feeds on skin while shoveling more Zane bits and chewing bits to drip fresh blood on Jo.

A rib-chunk of Zane drops from the tree-clump, splattering all over Jo's white shirt.

She jumps back. But someone's coming. Just feet away.

Jo can't hold it in. She slips the buck knife from her leg sheath and Kimberly is still there, still enmeshed in the green mist as if to light the way to where Jo knows she needs to go.

A cavern. Is this what you're showing me?

"Show me..." she says. "Kim, please don't go." She wants this to be Kim. It has to be. "Kim?"

But Jo was right. It is not Kimberly. The figure's face is Jo's face, only shrinking smaller and fading fast.

A branch breaks right behind her.

Crunch.

Snap. Another.

The figure of Kim evaporates instantly, green shimmering to black. Voices chant. Foreign tongues. An ancient tone vibrates the dirt, turns it to mud and Jo is stuck inside herself.

She lifts her foot. It's only dirt.

Static. The tone of death is a buzz in her ears. This is it—my time. And she accepts that, but:

No time. The things in the trees have scurried further up. Zane's viscera hangs from the limbs like a sappy chandelier, barely recognizable and still dripping.

Kill the fucker, Jo thinks.

Spin and stab.

Thrust the blade, Jo.

Jo's knife plunges. She throws her weight into the blow and sticks the buck knife right through the meaty palm of Stanton's left hand. He has thrown it up to cover his face.

His eyes bulge and she rips back, tearing the knife out of the newly carved hand-slit.

Blood gushes, sprays everywhere, coating his chest and necklace, making his face even uglier than it is.

Stanton howls, grabs his hand in bewilderment, but the intensity of his grip makes him yelp louder like a dolphin cracking: *iiiiiiiiiiiiiceessshbbb*. Jo backs up, keeps taking steps back, the knife ready to slice again and her shivering mind is

blown open, didn't expect to see Stanton following her out into the night. She stands guarded, back against a tree.

"Why?" she asks. "No one knew... I was just—"

"You," he says in shock, "stabbed, stabbed my ha-ha-hand—"

Above, branches creak, break. More liquid. And the blood of Zane, bits of Zane's headcheese, splat all over Stanton's face.

The trees reek of limburger.

But before Jo or Stanton can react, the branches above are crunching with bodies moving stealthily from tree to tree. Or, Jo thinks, readying themselves to pounce.

They're still up there.

Zane's torn-up corpse—what's left of it—slips from its branch bed and slops to the ground between her and Stanton in a pile of broken branches and rot.

"Zane—Holy *blech*," Stanton says, doubling over, hurling up thick orange juice and hissing spit out his mouth.

"You knew," Jo says. "You knew, Stanton. You came here, because you knew."

"I knew you're out of your mind," he barks. "The way you took off from the party, all with Kimberly's death, all with the fatalistic voodoo you've been giving off. Somebody has to keep an—AHHHHHH, my hand, you psycho—what is this mess?" His hand hangs limp, a reddened mess. "Look what you did to me, Jo."

Even in the darkness, Jo watches his face turn pale.

"Kimberly was just..." she says, gives up.

But Stanton's necklace pierces her vision. "Why is your necklace glowing?" Jo says. "Take it off—now." She jabs the knife in his direction and he winces, stumbles.

"It's nothing—souvenir from a—get your head together."

Jo's entranced by its glow, same color as the mist. "No," Jo says. "Tell me or I'll slice your goddamned throat."

"Calm down," Stanton says, wincing his shoulders back, cradling his hand. "It was given to me—"

“By who?” Jo says, a fire in her eyes.

“I don’t know—it was—a package...before the shoot.” He grabs it and holds it up to his face. “Good luck, I guess,” he says, laughing and it’s the same laugh of the sheriff, but slower, a laugh to push maggots out of Jo’s arm-skin. She shakes them to the ground.

“Destroy it,” she says. “Now, fucking now.”

“I can’t, Jo. I was told—”

The forest jolts.

A scream and like a tidal wave crashing land, sweeping death, the sudden screams and shrieks and terrifying roars of the partygoers. Something has happened at the sheriff’s house. It makes the Tibetan throat-cacophony sound like a music box.

Jo gives Zane’s body one last look. “Sorry,” she says.

I must, Jo thinks, get back to the house—Mandy, Gus, Sonja, Peggy, Ginger.

“Come on,” she says. “I’ll deal with you later.” Jo grabs Stanton by the arm, pulls him with her through the trees and the darkness, his blood splattering her skin and shirt, but she yanks his arm harder trying to shut out the voice of his necklace, what it could mean: the bugs, livid hands, teeth, and static. “And what’s back at the party, Stanton?” she says. “My inevitable death—another one of your twisted movies?” She’s pissed, anger rising.

“What are you talking about?” he says. “You’re pulling too hard—it hurts.”

He’s huffing, out of breath, but when they emerge from the darkness to meet the glaring flames of the bonfire, they get a double dose of more than they ever could have bargained for.

Carnage.

Stanton collapses in the dirt, crawls sloppily to his knees.

The screams have stopped. The music has stopped.

An eerie pulse hovers over the grounds.

It's a bloodbath slaughterhouse: the ripped apart corpses of old men, young women, football players, strippers, local hooligans; the entire area is dyed red. Over there. The fire. The flames make blood shift blue, bluer than Jo's eyes and we hang tight on those eyes, about to burst from her skull, scanning the scene. She drops to her knees, still clutching the knife, but she can't. "Mandy? Peggy? Ginger?" she says, suddenly back up on her feet, huffing it to the house. She shouts: "It's the sheriff and Stanton—some occult shit." Too late. She forces the front door open, plowing over the corpses: hacked up body parts, strewn gore and guts and bones and death extraordinaire. It smells of shit and rust and vinegar. "Gus? Sonja?" she says, stomping over mutilated strangers; she's frantic, out of control, can't make sense of what happened. "Say something."

A body shoots up from the pile—a skinned vagrant, drooling blood—she stabs him in the face, screams, kicks the body away, and watches him gurgle to death. His body melts to mush in her mind.

"It was..." he says, "for you..."

"I can't hear you," she says, shutting her eyes, snapping them open.

The rumble fades in, shifts to a hiss.

There are bugs festering across the floor. Ants and spiders seep from the insides of bodies, and centipedes and scorpions gnaw bone, slither up and down naked skin. There is a buzz in the room. It hits her eardrums, a buzz like saw blades skinning.

Stanton watches Jo from outside the window. He's perfectly framed and shivering pale and as Jo catches him staring, she sees him smile. "I'll kill you, Stanton" she says. "Whatever you're hiding."

And Jo jumps over gut-piles and limbs and rushes out through the kitchen, outside to near where the bonfire burns. Someone has thrown bodies onto the fire, turning skin to goop. It looks like a spaghetti-tower of arms.

It's Ginger and Sonja, Gus and Mandy.

“Where’s Peggy?” Jo says, rushing over to them.

They are huddled at the tree line, shivering and white with dread. Their collective hug is a slobbering, shivering mass of jitters.

“Where’s Peggy?” Jo repeats. “Where is she?”

“Dead,” Gus says calmly. “Watching us from the fire.”

Sure enough. Jo turns, sees the charred outline of Peggy’s corpse, her face melted into raw skin and muscle-goop. Her arms have been torn off, left to burn.

Stanton stumbles by in the background gripping his hand. He rips off someone’s shirt and is wrapping it to stop the blood, lost in the suffering of his own world, mumbling, “And so it goes—at the end of this film a go-go-go.” He’s out of his mind.

This is when, not only Jo, but the remaining group of shivering actors, all hear the rumble of drums and a choir of ugly voices rising again in the distance.

A violin cuts through the air.

“What happened here?” Jo says. “The sheriff? I have to know—I’ll kill him.”

“Those drums,” Ginger says. “Make them stop...”

And Ginger rakes at her eyes, leaps up, grabs Jo by the arms. “You brought this upon us, didn’t you?” she says, fighting back tears. “You and your visions.”

“How did you—?” Jo says, holding back Ginger’s slaps, but they sink to a weak hug. Ginger sobs.

“We know about your episodes,” Sonja says. “The way you trance out—shit! Stanton told us...”

“Stanton told us everything,” Mandy says. “You shouldn’t be here—you’re cursed.”

“Who did this?” Jo says. “He’s lying. Don’t trust him.”

“They ate people—cannibals,” Gus says, Jo turning to meet his monotone gaze. “They ate people and used their hands to tear people apart.”

“Where the hell is the sheriff?” Jo says. “It’s him—him and Stanton. They’re behind this.”

“Why do *you* want to know?” Ginger says, “We can’t trust you—look at the blood—it’s over.”

“You can’t trust Stanton,” Jo says. “We have to get the hell out of here.”

“You ain’t going anywhere,” Stanton says, limping closer and holding his messy arm in place. “Not before we hear what happened from the source.” He stops near the fire, his eyes entranced by the flames. We track across the faces of the cast. “Gus,” Stanton says. “Speak up,” he says, gripping his necklace so tight, his palm is running red with blood. “Tell us the truth of how this went down. We’ll see who’s lying.”

As if in a trance, Gus snaps to it, calm and flat: “I don’t know—I mean—it was hot, right? I remember slamming a shot of Jager, was licking dust off this cheerleader’s buttery tits, and...”

And we’re there: Gus and his wicked tongue swirling cleavage circles, fire-lit and wasted. The party is raging. Behind him we catch a glimpse of the sheriff, he has his hands on his hips and we clearly watch him raise his arm and drop it. We notice this. We remember this. As soon as the arm hits his hip, a sudden shift happens. Unknown bastards, crawling on their hands and knees like wild animals—leopards, pigs, maneaters—some jumping down from the sky, others bursting up from the dirt, all of them wild and wicked, are tearing at anyone and everyone. It’s a bloody gropefest in the blink of an eye. They are walking, running, crawling, humping. “My crawlers!” the sheriff yells, “Dinner is served,” but he fades in the crowd as if enveloped in a puff of smoke and violent noise. A mouth clamps onto some girl’s neck, rips out skin and pulls back, watching her bleed out on the sand. Inside, it’s carnage as bodies are thrown against walls, ripped limb from limb and in the corner, three of the crawlers are burying their heads in some guy’s stomach, noodling guts and lungs with their teeth and thrashing their bodies to the chaos. Hair flies everywhere. They are sucking skin and muscle—tongues, eyeballs, toenails. Someone crashes through the window,

covered in maggots. Teeth chomp. Lips suck. A nose is ripped from a guy's face. More teeth mash teeth and crunch bone. Under the sounds of this flesh feast, we drift over the face of the sheriff—he's watching it all go down, hands on his hips, laughing. He tips his hat. His lips are moving—an incantation or invocation—and he's scanning the chaos for someone special it seems, maybe Jo, maybe not. The drums blast our ears. More crawlers appear. They are barefoot and shirtless. All shapes and sizes. All covered in dirt. All fast and bloodthirsty: bearded, shaven, skinless, dirty, brutal shrieks of fury. Mouth sucks fingers. A foot flies through the air, lands in someone's mouth. Screaming bodies are thrown onto the fire and held there with sticks and rough hands. A woman is held high, stripped and suddenly ripped apart by savage naked men. A man is covered in snakes and rats, doused in oil. He explodes. A knife—some guy is stabbing at these things, trying to get a foothold (he's missing a foot), but one of them swoops in and bites his stub. He topples and crawlers use a log to beat him to death and eat him. The chants mutate to moans and the simmer of flesh rises. It's a feast. Someone is cooking up a chunk of human brains in a pot of spaghetti sauce. It boils over. Drink it. An elbow smashes teeth, but it's too late for gum soup. They've moved on to tongues and spears with hooks to catch cheeks. The crawlers are cannibals and the cannibals are ready for more skin, more juice. One of them throws a spear, impales a football player in the leg, crunches into kneecap with a mouth possessing the power of a chainsaw. Three jump in and bite the quarterback to death, or until his face is skinless and screaming even after he dies. Touchdown. The carnage rises and the fumes of the dead are too rotten to bear. We see Gus scramble into a corner, watching it all happen. His eyes roll up into his head. We hear the cock of a gun.

Someone is aiming a barrel at his head.

“Open your eyes.” It's the sheriff. “It's been a strange day, hasn't it pretty boy.”

Gus stares at his mouth.

“I want you to remember this moment.” The sheriff pushes the barrel deep into Gus’ throat and Gus gags. “When Jo finds you—and she will—tell her I’m just steps away. Tell her I told her, but she failed to see.” And the sheriff’s fist slams Gus in the cheek, knocking him out.

The girls are silent.

Gus hangs his head, returning to the reality of the fire and the carnage.

Jo is silent and Stanton’s face glows orange from the flames. He’s shaking his head, still gripping the necklace.

“Bullshit,” he says. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“Like what?” Jo says. “The message? You...”

“I have a film to make—how am I supposed to...”

“Had,” Ginger says. “Peggy did too...”

“Where’s Zane?” Gus says.

All eyes fall on Jo. “Zane’s dead,” Jo says. “Eaten.”

“So, Jo,” Gus says in a slow drawl. “Why is this sheriff looking for you? What are you hiding from us?”

And Jo’s mouth opens, her gaze drawn to the necklace, but before she can speak, we dissolve to:

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One week earlier:

“Yadda-yadda,” Stanton says, “you read the script?”

“I did,” Jo says. “*Vamplust a-Go-Go*. I’m in.”

“Consider yourself hired. We’re shooting it quick, so get ready. Speak of which, I’m having a shindig at my bachelor pad. Drop by, get comfortable.”

Jo adjusts her skirt. She’s sitting in a leather chair in his tiny Farmington office. “Is there anything I should know going into this?”

“Going in? Like what?” Stanton says, lighting a cigar and leaning back. “It’s a quick shoot. Your part’s not too demanding—bit of skin, nothing you haven’t exposed before.”

Jo clears her throat. “What about the cast of your last picture...”

“*Mondo?*” He straightens up, leans in, suddenly serious. “What did you hear?”

“I heard you had problems with the natives—or vixens.”

“Nothing to worry your head over—a Virgin mishap, capital V. What you heard is bullshit—had a misunderstanding with the townsfolk, nothing major, you know these actor-types—no offense—a few of the girls got rowdy, left set, wandered off into the jungle, next thing I know the cops are saying I’ve got a pile of bodies to deal with—messy. Imagine the look on my face. Anyway, long story short, investigation, blah-blah-blah, and everything’s fine. Yeah, too bad for them, but you play with shit and you get shit-stained.”

“Let’s hope things go better this time around, Mr. Stanton,” Jo says, watching the bugs crawl out of his eyeholes.

“This is a special one, dear,” he says. “It’s going to be exquisite”

“I’m your femme fatale.”

And so she is: polite nod, fling back hair, smile.

The door slams shut and Stanton picks up the necklace. A torn open envelope sits on his desk. We drift over his shoulder. He’s petting the necklace, rubbing its soft stone. A note lies crumpled before us in the same crawl we’ve seen before at the diner. It reads, “She’s the One.”

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“Can’t trust Stanton” Jo says. “Ask him why we came here to shoot. Ask him about the neck—”

But Stanton is no longer standing where he was. In fact, he’s disappeared.

“How the—?” Sonja says.

“What does he know?” Mandy asks.

“This film is over,” Jo says. “I’m pulling the plug on his ass.”

“Not while I got final cut,” Stanton says from up by the house. He’s lost his shirt, huge gut hanging out, and the necklace is pulsating a deep green, causing his entire body to

glow. He's framed in the open door, the house of blood behind him.

"He's got a gun," Jo says, diving away from the group and taking off for the tree line. And so he does—a big one.

A shot cracks out.

Stanton is armed with a SPAS shotgun, holding it trembling in his good hand, trying to angle it on the group. He's unsteady, but still, this gets the gang up on their feet.

"Don't even think about moving!" he shouts. "I'll shoot."

"It truly has been a strange day," Gus says, shutting his eyes, resolved.

Stanton pulls the trigger, splattering Gus right in the chest. Gus is thrown back and the hole in his chest is smoking death-fumes. We hear the shotgun pump another round into the chamber.

Stanton: "Whoever wants to die, keep moving like lizard boy did—this is my shit film."

From where Jo is—just in the shadows behind a slim tree—she watches Mandy, Ginger and Sonja raise their arms and slowly make their way toward him. "Hurry it up," he yells.

"Why, Stanton?" Sonja says. The girls stand just feet away from him, heads down, frightened.

"Shut your mouth," he says to Ginger, kicking her in the thigh. "You wouldn't understand art if it bit you in the tits. We're making a new movie called Trust Nobody, so get on—where the hell is Jo?"

The girls are quiet. Ginger is weeping quietly, but Sonja and Mandy are alert, looking at each other, knowing this is it. Their shirts are torn and ragged, stained with blood, but they are alive, hanging on.

"Jo," Stanton says. "I'm giving you till the count of five to come out or she get it right in the kisser."

No one moves. "One."

We see Jo's hand squeeze her buck knife tight in her grip.

"Two."

And her eyes are darting. Nowhere to run.

“Three.”

“Don’t do it,” Ginger yells. “Save yourself, Jo. He’s crazy.”

“Four.”

And we are Jo’s heartbeat thudding rapid.

Stanton raises the gun to Mandy’s head, struggling with all his might to keep it steady.

“I had big plans for you, Jo,” Stanton says to the dark. “You think those visions came out the fucking ether, well, you’re wrong. You were meant to be here. This,” he laughs, “is your destiny. Might wanna shut your eyes, girls, and dream big.”

We hear the word “Five” fizz on his lips, his mustache more gruesome and bushier now than ever before.

Stanton’s finger closes in on the trigger and squeezes.

But Mandy lunges, throws her fist into Stanton’s crotch, grabbing hold of his man-meat and shoving it up into his gut.

His eyes cross.

A buck knife hurtles from the dark, end over end, and sticks into the house, inches from Stanton’s head.

The shotgun roars, but goes wild, splattering a stripper corpse. Ginger and Sonja are rushing at Stanton’s body and Jo’s darting across the dirt to help.

He slips, falls. They’ve toppled him and Sonja yanks the buck knife from where it stuck.

Stanton thuds to the ground and Mandy raises her leg high—“Here’s your final cut”—stomps on his wounded hand, grinding it to mush, splattering blood on her face. “Cut him, Sonja—kill him.”

“Don’t—it’s the necklace,” Jo says, but too late. Panic. Fear. Adrenaline. The knife slides across his throat making a jagged red line. It’s Sonja, shaking and screaming. She did it good. She drops the knife.

Stanton flops there gurgling, but he gives the girls one last pathetic smile. “Make... deal with... other side, end up fucking yourself, yeah,” he says. “We,” he says, but the blood

is oozing out of his mouth like sludge, draining him white, “sure gave them good shit to watch.”

Mandy spits on his face, kicks away the shotgun. Her fingers fidget.

Jo leans in and the girls wrap their arms around her, hugging her and crying. Jo looks down at the necklace and its green pulse has faded to nothing. It’s just stone. She feels the millipedes in her guts turn to butterflies and kittens. “Thank you,” she says, overcome with relief.

“Is it over?” Mandy asks, sniffing.

“Hardly,” the sheriff says, wrapping his hand around Sonja’s face. No one saw him appear, but if we rewind and go back to Stanton standing there with that shotgun leveled at the girls, we do see a sickly figure drenched in gore, rise from the heap pile behind us—from inside the house—and stalk his way forward. He’s slipping in out of our vision as if he’s somehow not fully present in the scene. And he pulls Sonja into his body, his front pressing into her back, rubbing himself into her. The pistol is jammed into her side. “Seems the tables have turned in my favor,” he says, looking down at dead Stanton. “Now would be a good time to take your buck knife and hold it out, killer, just hold it out gently, because you’re going to be using it.” He whispers in Sonja’s ear: “Give Jo the damn knife or I’ll splatter your guts.”

Sonja tosses the knife to Jo and Jo catches it one-handed, quick.

The sheriff’s mustache is stained bright red as is the area around his lips. He licks those lips and presses the gun tighter into Sonja’s side. “Now, here’s how it’s going to go down,” he says. “In the name of sportsmanship, I’m giving you girls the chance to save yourself, before Hell breaks loose with your sweet little no-talent names written all over it.” He flicks his tongue. “Follow your buck knife bitch-friend.” He gives a twisted flick of his eyebrows. “She’ll know where to lead you.”

Sonja’s face tenses. The gun drives deeper into her side.

Ginger and Mandy look at Jo, but Jo is staring at the sheriff, at what evil incarnate looks like.

“Why me?” Jo says, her legs buckling. She keeps them steady.

“Because, babe,” he says. “You’re a star—let’s make an even newer motion picture. It’s called Run or Die.” And the sheriff shoves Sonja into the girls and abruptly turns his back to them, lowering his gun, scanning the house of death. He walks into the house, stepping over corpses. His hand shoots into the air and we hear:

The rumble swells.

His arm drops.

What the girls thought were corpses are not corpses. The piles jiggle, coming to life and it’s just how Gus explained—the onslaught of this terrible carnage—the crawlers stirring to hunger. It’s the men Jo has seen in her visions—dirty men, brutal men of filth, their hands and it’s the black shapes in the tree, the ones who feasted on Zane’s dead body.

“This is not real,” Jo says. “Kimberly, not this, please not this.”

“Who are you talking to?” Mandy says, grabbing her by the arm and they are all huddling close together, walking slowly backward, unsure about what is about to happen.

“He said to follow you,” Sonja says. She picks up the shotgun. “We have to move.”

“Yeah,” Jo says. “Belly of the beast.”

Her eyes are flames of pure fear and hate.

And the crawlers cometh.

The pile of bodies are groaning, crunching up to stand all around and flex their jaws. They are not zombies, they are alive and ready for skin—hungry for the taste of supple bodies. The clicking sound of jaws snapping air—teeth grinding—sends chills down the girls’ spines. “We’re next,” Sonja says. “Jo, quick—go, go, go.”

“So it begins,” Jo says. “Watch out for bugs. They’re all over you.”

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And the girls are off, mad-dashing through the woods, Jo leading them back down the same path she's already been on before. Her buck knife is held out in front of her like a divining rod. She can't see straight.

The world is a swirl of night noises. It's all branches and drums, deep voices building in the furthest reaches of the dark.

Behind her, Mandy wields the shotgun, while Ginger and Sonja clutch at each other and run together. Jo feels the ground shake. They are all dashing loudly. The cracking of bones and the rising of voices swell and churn to mush. It's all coming from the sheriff's house.

Jo sees her meeting with Stanton, his cursed film history, and what must have happened to the other girls he worked with—all those missing bodies never found. This must be coming from him, she thinks. A curse? It can't be. All these visions: the bugs, the rot, the death. And Kimberly? What about Kimberly, she thinks. If only she would have been able to read the signs. But the sheriff? He's a mystery to her. Bad luck? The worst. Wrong place? Not a doubt. Wrong time? It doesn't matter—there is no time.

BOOM! The house erupts in flames and smoke. Someone has blown it up sending the stench of bodies to fill the air like vats of boiling vinegar and waste. Jo looks back and the cloud of smoke and flames spiral high in the shape of a giant face—the sheriff's face dissolving black.

"What was that?" Sonja says, screaming.

"Keep going," Jo says. "Faster! Faster!"

And Jo shuts her eyes, runs harder. She lets the buck knife guide her forward. She is not religious, but she's mumbling help, calling out in her mind to anyone to give her the guidance she needs to get her friends out of this mud.

"Let's just get to the van," Mandy says, out of breath, "and drive the hell out of here."

“Can’t,” Jo says. “You heard the explosion.” She dodges a tree, another and they keep running deeper. “By now they’ve torched it. We’re too dead to go back.”

Splat! Jo slips on Zane’s goopy mess of a body, skids to a stop. Her eyes are open, darting to make sense of the dark. The other girls slip fast, run into her and they are back to their group huddle, panting and weak.

“Is this Zane?” Ginger says. “Holy Santa Mira.”

“What’s left of him,” Jo says. “Listen, I know this sounds crazy, but I saw Kimberly—know I did. She was here and it was her and we can live, we can get out of here. She’ll help us find our way back home.”

“You’re crazy,” Mandy says. “No, Jo, this is the end.”

From the path where they have come from, we hear the sounds of screaming voices warbly and reverberated, twisted cannibals raking themselves through the trees, lusting for the skin of the girls. They are coming closer like a wall of bloody mouths.

“But, look,” Mandy says, her mouth agape.

“Doom mountain,” Jo says.

The girls stand at the foot of the mountain. An opening lies before us, the cavern revealed by the sudden light of the moon and the flickering flames of the sheriff’s burning house in the distance.

“Listen,” Sonja says. Their heads crane into the mouth of the mountain. Sure enough, the sound of woodblocks and creaking bones, but there is another sound and it is a rumble like the rumble Jo has heard reverberating through her mind for days.

Ginger turns back, sees the beady eyes of the cannibal crawlers creeping their way through the woods. There must be a hundred eyes shining in the darkness.

Suddenly, a squeal like a field of dying pigs wells up and blasts the girls backward into the mouth of the cavern. A bone spear thuds into the side of the opening.

They're up and stumbling. A howl. Branches snapping, tearing closer. "No time to wait," Jo says, dashing into the darkness, grabbing Mandy's hand and the girls form a chain and grope their way forward.

The strangest thing happens. As soon as the girls enter the darkness, everything stops: the noises, the crawlers, the rumble.

Gone.

"Are they following us?" Ginger asks.

"I don't hear them," Sonja says. "It's like they've disappeared."

"Maybe they have," Jo says. "Up here..."

Jo stalks forward step by step, the path curving and cramped.

Mandy flicks a lighter.

The walls are coated in black goop. "It's like the inside of a stomach," Mandy says.

"Smells unholy," Ginger says, trying to hold her breath.

Jo inches forward another step. She has everything to lose. She slashes the buck knife forward into the blackness and the lighter flickers with each step.

They walk in the midst of a deep silence.

"Why aren't they following us?" Ginger whispers. "Is this some kind of a trap?"

"Quiet," Jo says. "I hear water."

And it's that rumble. It appears to be raging in the distance, but for all Jo knows, this goopy cavern goes on and on to no end or to the end of the world itself with the things that lurk in the dark. Ginger and Mandy and Sonja grip Jo by the back of her shirt, shaking and breathing heavy and pulling tighter, stretching it to break. The lighter dies in a sudden spurt.

Too late.

Jo slips and the girls tumble down with her, the path suddenly slanted and slick like an icy slope.

It's covered in fresh blood.

///

Plummeting fast, Jo melts into her mind and it's there she confronts Kimberly, studies Kimberly from a distance, melting into the green zone of her own perverse thoughts, emerging to the light through Kimberly's eyes as she soaps her legs and hears the girls rehearse in the motel room.

The voices dissolve in a buzz.

A rush of shower water nails Kimberly's face.

She hears the bathroom door creak open and bare feet on tile, but the water rumbles too loud and Jo's vision is taken by the thought of herself, and Jo feels afraid, vulnerable. She's stuck flickering in and out of Kimberly's mindscape nightmare.

The shower curtain is thrown open.

Stanton holds a dull butter knife. The green necklace pulses around his fat neck. He sticks the knife in Kimberly's gut and she blinks blood. Jo's mind explodes in a flurry of gore and splattering stars. How could he?

Jo's body tumbles end over end, further down the blood-tunnel followed by Mandy, Sonja, and Ginger.

Yet, inside her mind, the knife stabs and hacks at Kimberly's bare chest. Stanton's face fills her mind. And Stanton smiles, his mustache, just a blur of horse hair on his face, but his face is twisting into the gaunt olive-skinned face of the sheriff: cheeks sink, jaw elongated, skin tone darkening. Yes, their bodies are melding and folding in on one another, the two becoming one, obscured in static and the buzz of Jo's mind.

The knife rips up from Kimberly's gut to her throat and Jo's vision floats to the ceiling like a weak prayer, looking down on how the mutated mass of Stanton or the sheriff, the two of them caught in a bout of shifting figures, is cutting and slicing into Kimberly's body, stabbing and ripping off her head and stuffing it in the toilet.

The Stanton-sheriff apparition steps back, grabs his own head and screams a warbly fever-pitch, fingers piercing into his

goopy face, jabbing his own eyes out in a fit of psychotic rage. The bathroom lights flicker. It's the sheriff. It's Stanton. But, his hair is growing, his face a swell of eyeballs and flame and woman. He's shifting further, but Jo doesn't understand why or how or what this means. He's stumbling to the sink, tracing words on the shower glass, some kind of message and if only, Jo thinks, I could read the traces of his fingers. The word-shapes are not of a language she understands, just a jagged line fading fast. Can I see? Please, she thinks, let me see and understand this pain, let me know why, just let me know why.

Blip.

The scene starts over: Kimberly soaps her legs, massages her breasts. Jo feels tingles up and down her stomach.

And the bathroom door opens again and it's her own body she sees in the bathroom. Kimberly strokes her lower back, hands moving around her body, spreading suds over her supple breasts. She moans in ecstasy.

A wordless mantra echoes. It's the water. But the Jo in Jo's vision is adjusting her glasses, standing stark naked in the bathroom. She is standing in front of the shower. Kimberly doesn't know she's there—yet.

The frame shakes, glitches static, bad tracking.

Jo is holding the buck knife. A glowing green stone hangs from around her neck. She's never seen it before in her life. But Jo is shrieking demonic now, screaming for Kimberly to open the curtain and run, that she couldn't possibly have done this, not her, not to Kimberly. It just isn't possible.

"I am not a murderer," she says. "It can't be me..."

Jo plunges the buck knife through the shower curtain, stabbing Kimberly dead-on in the throat. The blow throws Kimberly's body off balance and she slips gurgling on her own juice, suddenly wheezing red arcs like a fountain of living death.

"Tell me I didn't..."

Through Jo's eyes. Her skin is made of latex scales.

The way Jo scoops into Kimberly's guts and spreads them around the bathroom, howling maniacal, thirsty for more, needful and desperate. She rips Kimberly's head from her body, yanking away the spinal cord and stuffs the head in the toilet, adjusts the head and takes her time, just being there in the bathroom, her eyes shut as if she's communicating with someone or something not in the room.

Water streams.

The room drips green.

Jo looks up at the ceiling. She's watching herself and smiles as if to say, "See me now and forever after."

And, with her eyes focused on the hovering view, Jo reaches down and scoops up some of Kimberly's innards. She takes a sloppy bite of her heart.

Crash!

The girls tumble head over heels, skid to a roll and land limbs akimbo. Breathe. They are no longer enveloped in utter darkness.

"Where are we?" Ginger says.

They are in a small stone room. Four walls with one torch propped into one of the walls. The shotgun slides down and bumps Mandy in the leg. She stands, grabs it.

Ginger limps to her feet.

Sonja flicks back her hair, vomits.

Jo is on all fours, shaking her head in disbelief. It is as if she is possessed. Her eyes are far away and intense. Her glasses have cracked, her black hair hangs down like a Japanese ghost about to crawl out of your television.

"Are you okay?" Ginger says.

"We arrived," Jo says, looking up the tunnel. "I'm, I'm okay," but she's not and she knows it.

"I'm sopping wet," Mandy says.

"Straight out of a horror flick," Sonja says.

"No one's following us," Ginger says, looking up the tunnel from which they have fallen. She scrapes her hand against the goopy surface, shakes off blood.

“The belly,” Jo says.

“Of what?” Ginger says, sniffing her fingers, spitting.

“Or why?” Mandy says.

Jo rises to her feet. We move up her body, blood-soaked and wicked. She has a gash across her face, but is also more gorgeous than ever. “No turning back—not anymore.” And we’re tight on her face, moving in slowly and deliberately. “The show has begun.”

“I don’t know what kind of shit you’re talking, dear,” Sonja says, “but this whole mess has me freaked out.”

“Get ready to fight,” Jo says. “There’s no way out.”

///

A pink-splotchy hand rips Stanton’s green necklace from his slit throat. The sheriff holds the necklace up in the air, against the stars. Around him, a raging fire burns, the house destroyed. A horde of cannibal crawlers pillage the remaining bodies, eating and feasting. More creep out from the forest.

The slick dude who talked to Jo earlier walks up to the sheriff, his hands in his pockets. “You were right,” he says. “Dead on, boss.”

The sheriff chuckles. “I always am.”

“What about him?” the slick dude says, gesturing to Stanton.

The sheriff whistles a call. Three crawlers limp over and snarl. The sheriff nods and they pounce on Stanton’s dead body, ripping it to shredded chunks. The two men just watch.

“Is everything in place?” the slick dude says.

“Indeed it is,” the sheriff says.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Something,” the sheriff says, clearing his throat. “is not right. She—she saw me.”

“What do you mean?” the slick dude says. “She couldn’t have.”

“Make sure they reach the chamber.”

“The table’s been set,” the slick dude says. “We have prepared.”

And the sheriff looks down at the gross remains of Stanton, he opens his palm and strokes the necklace. “This pathetic man. Maybe in the next life.”

“But, boss, he—”

“He had to go,” the sheriff says. “Too sloppy for his own good.” He passes the slick dude the necklace. “Now, make sure everything goes as planned—it’s time to play.”

///

Ginger grabs wall torch and the wall *pops, clicks*, immediately slides up into the ceiling, revealing another path in the dark. It’s quiet.

Jo flips the knife in the air, catches it. “That’s our cue,” she says.

Mandy holds the shotgun like she knows how to use it.

Ginger brings the torch close to her face, wraps both hands around its base.

Sonja flexes her fists, studying them in the firelight. She nods.

“Four against the world,” Jo says. “Let’s be careful.”

“Wait,” Mandy says. They turn, look at her. “If this is it—let’s show these bastards how we do things in Hollywood.”

And the four of them creep through the dark tunnel. The sound of water has vanished. A heavy silence rings in their ears.

But the silence is broken by the sound of lips smacking. They freeze. A gangly crawler lurches from the shadows and sucks at Ginger’s arm. She squeals and tears away. The crawler shrieks and gets a face full of flame and a swift blow from the barrel of the shotgun courtesy of Mandy. The thing stumbles, lunges again, this time at Jo. It smells of death and decay. It runs right into her buck knife.

“Take one for the team,” Jo says, grinding the knife deep into its guts and twists.

The thing whimpers and falls to its knees.

“Finish it,” Sonja says. “You okay, Ginger?”

“Fine,” Ginger says, driving her boot into its face until all that’s left of its head is a mushy pile of ground bones and torn skin.

“Open sesame,” Jo says, nodding toward the opening in the tunnel wall from which the crawler emerged. “Thing must have known we’d be here, but how? It’s a secret door.”

“What is this place,” Ginger says. “Some kind of dungeon?”

“Trick wall,” Mandy says. “Remember that film *Thunder Embrace Me*? Same thing. Let’s get the jump on these goons, follow this slit to where the rainbow ends.”

They look at Jo and she takes a lip-snarling step. It’s time to move.

Jo goes first. Something strange is in the air. A dark green presence hits her mind, but the other girls cannot feel it. She follows its pull forward as the slit widens to another tunnel. She runs her hand across the stone wall. Behind her, the firelight of the torch casts shadows like cockroaches skittering. A tickle across her forehead. Is it wind? She glances back, but the other girls are stone-faced staring ahead.

The tunnel curves to the left and they keep following. Jo pushes away the voices and they come upon a flight of stairs twisting down. The darkness is paste-thick, the silence rising and falling and Jo imagines she’s walking through a field of corpses. She sees Kimberly, Zane and Gus, and a gigantic camera floats down from the sky swirling and expanding until it covers the sizzling desert sun to black.

“Look,” Mandy says, “a light.”

Sure enough. Straight ahead, at the end of the tunnel the girls see the outline of a door.

“Quiet,” Jo says. “We don’t know how many of them are out there.”

“Our ticket home,” Ginger says.

“I doubt it,” Jo says, clenching the knife, steadying herself for whatever evil lurks on the other side of the door.

For a moment, the girls stand there, huddled around it, trying to hear what might lurk on the other side.

Everything is quiet.

Jo twists the knob and the door creaks open. The creak is loud, louder in the huge chamber they enter into.

And what the girls see makes them shiver.

Before them is an enormous metal chamber like the inside of a modern warehouse. Aside from a desk in the corner, a few chairs and file cabinets, industrial fluorescent lights, the room is empty. And we see what stands at the far end of the chamber.

Perched on top of a stone-staired stage is an enormous obelisk—a greenish grey chunk of stone. There are occult designs of pentagrams and snake shapes hanging behind it giving the entire room a sinister edge. The stage is flanked by candelabras and a faint green smoke wafts from the stone. Although they don't even realize it, they are moving closer to the stone, drawn to whatever power it possesses. Jo, in particular, with each step, feels the bugs that crawled inside her all this time, stir to dust. She tastes Kimberly's face in the stone, sees herself in Stanton's office, feels Gus and Zane and the images dance inside her, but she doesn't say a word about this to the other girls.

"A stone?" Mandy asks. "I think I see something." Her eyes are glazed. "Mom? Is that you, mom?"

"Don't trust it," Jo says. "Let it go."

"Am I high?" Sonja says. "I need weed."

On both sides of the obelisk stand the stone statues of women—six on the left, six on the right.

"Who are they?" Ginger says, walking away from the girls and moving toward the statues.

"Actresses," Jo says. "I bet they're Stanton's actresses."

"You mean—?" Mandy says.

And Ginger runs her hand over the face of one of the statues. It is the visage of a young woman, beautiful, face frozen in anger.

“Someone brought them here—or carved this out in precise detail,” Jo says.

“Maybe we’re next,” Sonja says, but the giant stone shakes and the girls startle, grip their weapons. Ginger moves from the statues to get a closer look at the giant stone.

“Ginger, don’t,” Jo says. “You have to stay close.”

“How did they build this place?” Mandy says, still in shock. “It’s like a warehouse or a factory.”

“Or a church,” Jo says.

Behind them, like the tapping of woodblocks, we hear the loud *click* of guns being readied to fire.

Turn around.

Machine guns are pointed at the girls by an array of odd-looking characters: farmers with mullets, a man in a pinstripe suit, a Japanese gangster. The men are quiet, too quiet. They fan out and flank the girls in perfect formation. The sheriff and the slick dude stroll calmly up the middle, huge grins on their faces. The sheriff is clapping his hands.

“Welcome, ladies,” the sheriff says. “I see you’ve found my home away from home—and you’ve been introduced to my actresses. Beautiful, aren’t they? Quiet, but we make do.”

The sheriff snaps his fingers.

A vicious band of crawlers storm through the tunnel door. They are hideously deformed and dirty, muscle-lean and mean with slobbering mouths and crooked noses like long-haired elves of death. And their hands. Jo spits—the feeling of having her hair ripped out, her mouth yanked open.

Suddenly, Jo grabs the shotgun from Mandy and aims it at the sheriff’s face. “Don’t come any closer,” she says. “I’ll blow your brains out.”

“And what?” the sheriff says, laughing. “You’ll float up out of here? You’d never make it more than two steps.”

“Put the gun down,” Sonja says. “Jo, please...”

“They’ll kill us, can’t you see?”

The sheriff clicks his teeth. “We’ve been watching you, Jo. What you did to your friend at the motel was impressive,

almost as impressive as your films. I adored you in *Beachhouse Slaughter*, knew I had to have you. You and your girls will make a nice addition to my collection. Pity you didn't trust your instincts." The sheriff pauses, chuckles to himself and looks up at the stone. "Those visions you have, well get ready for the mother lode. One snap of my fingers, I can see to it your sweet lips are forever being pried open, even in the depths of whatever bimbo purgatory you end up in."

Jo doesn't budge, keeps the gun aimed at the sheriff's head. "Now what?" she says, spiders crawling from the barrel.

"Now toss your weapons," he says, "and come quietly with us."

"Over my dead body," Ginger says, and hurls the torch at the Japanese gangster. It nails him in the face. His slick hair bursts into flames. The sheriff nods his head and quickly, three crawlers are on Ginger. They hoist her over their heads and toss her to the ground. The other soldiers step around the girls and keep their machine guns on them. Jo lowers the shotgun, hangs her head. And the buck knife? She's shoved it down the back of her jeans.

"Ginger shouldn't have done that," the sheriff says. "Her loss." The crawlers spread Ginger out on the floor and drive wooden spikes into her. One into each hand and one into each foot. Her screams are blistering. "Watch and learn," the sheriff says. And the crawlers rip off her clothes, scatter them into the air. And the crawlers finger-dig, yank open Ginger with their fingers. They are digging into her bare stomach. Her face clenches in pain, but one crawler swoops in and takes a chunk out of her cheek. While this is happening, the sheriff boldly walks up to Jo, stands right in front of her. She can't move. He snaps his fingers and she feels her body filled with tarantulas. The stone pulses. "I have plans for you, Jo—big plans. We're going to give the world what they want. You, my dear, are going to be my scream queen beauty." He strokes her cheek. "I'll make it so you never grow old. You'll be mine—forever."

Jo spits phlegm in his face.

The crawlers have strewn Ginger all over the place. Their mouths drip blood and skin. They beat her bones against the ground and howl.

The sheriff licks his lips. "Take these girls away."

The men rush in and grab Jo, Mandy, and Sonja. The men grip them hard, drag them across the warehouse, guns to the girls' heads. The whole time Sonja and Mandy are screaming, but Jo is quiet, deep inside herself even with the barrel of an AK-47 jammed against her temple. She feels herself murder Kimberly over and over—a perpetual shower scene massacre.

But no one knows.

A door is kicked open. They are dragged through another hallway, turn and up ahead, Jo sees the jail cell. The rough men force the girls inside. "Stay put for Billy," one of them says and the men storm away, back the same way they came.

"We're doomed," Mandy says.

"I have a plan," Jo says.

Footsteps.

It's the slick dude—Billy. He's wearing the necklace. "Come with me," he says to Jo. She looks back at the weary-eyed faces of Mandy and Sonja and the man grabs her by the arm. Their eyes seem to say, "don't leave me," but inside her, she feels miles away.

Billy shoves her into an empty room. Above, the fluorescents blare harsh light. "Get undressed," he says, unbuckling his belt. Jo smiles at him like she means it.

"So you *do* want me?" she says. "I knew it—out there in the dirt."

"You walked away," he says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, lighting one up. "Boss has some mighty important folks for you to meet. They've heard all about you."

"Do I know them?"

"Not yet," he says, exhaling, "but that's how this goes, right? Don't worry your sweet little head. I know just what you need. Now, take off your clothes."

Jo stands up and unbuttons her jeans.

Static.

She's back at the motel. It's the night of Kimberly's death.

Billy comes close to her, wraps his arms around her. "Take it slow, babe," he says, but in her mind, he's a pile of oozing filth. She looks down at his necklace. "What is this thing, anyway?" she says, smiling a flirty grin. She knows it's Stanton's, can feel it call out to her.

"From stone to stone," he says, holding it up to her face so she can see it. "Ain't it pretty?" And inside of it, she watches herself murder Kimberly, stuff her head in the toilet. "Ancient power." The man laughs, blows smoke into the air and smells Jo's neck. She moans and he licks his pig-tongue to her right ear, kissing her softly. She feels him stiffen down below and she rubs herself into him. "Feels good, yeah?" he says. "You taste great," he says. "Vanilla cream."

"And I screw better," Jo says, licking his neck, running her tongue across it. She grabs his face, tilts it upward, grinding herself harder into him. He moans. She pulls back her face and his eyes are closed. She gives his neck another lick and bites his Adam's apple. Jo tears it out of his throat with her teeth.

Billy tries to pull away, chokes on his cigarette. He can't cough—blood seeps from his gory neck-hole. She won't let him go. Jo rams her face back into his neck, going in for a second bite and this time it's his entire throat she sucks into her mouth. Billy's hands wrap around her neck and squeeze. Jo's too powerful. Her head shakes back and forth like a pit bull. She's tearing into his neck, spraying gore and blood all over the room. Jo likes it. And with a strong pull, she cracks his head off his body, feeling his arms around her neck weaken. His dead corpse pisses to the floor, twitching and farting.

She holds his dead head. She spits blood in his face, splatters the head against the wall.

A knock at the door. "Bill," a voice says. "you okay in there?" Another knock.

“Mmmhmmmm,” Jo says in a deep voice, cursing under her breath.

“We got the other two ready to go, waiting on this honey—boss needs her fresh.”

Jo grabs the necklace off the ground, puts it around her neck. She buttons her jeans and stands to the side of the door.

“We’re good to go,” she says. “Come on in.”

She watches the doorknob turn and those yellow fangs from the motel room door reflect in the fluorescent light of the room.

It’s just me. Just us.

She pulls the buck knife from the back of her pants, holds it above her head, the blade bearing down, ready to strike.

The door opens and the guard walks in. “What the shit—Bill?”

Jo slams the knife down into the back of the man’s skull, pulls shut the door behind him. His face goes funny, scrunches. He crumples into the room, splats hard on Billy’s body.

The necklace grows warm against her chest. She touches it, feels her body tingle with electricity. A night sky roars over her mind. Her head grows light. She snaps open her eyes. Stay with it.

Footsteps down the hall. The sound of boots clacking concrete. She doesn’t move and the footsteps pound louder. “Is what he said—a Goblin shark?” one of the guys says, chuckling and they keep walking past the door, giving Jo enough time to ease it open, buck knife in hand and sneak down the empty hallway to the main chamber—but her friends—Mandy and Sonja. She checks the cell. They are not there. A small pool of blood shines on the ground and the necklace pulses against her chest harder, buzzing heat.

Back in the hallway. She’s ninja-sneaking toward the main chamber. When she arrives at the main door, she finds it cracked open. On the far side of the room near the obelisk is a crowd of writhing crawlers. Everyone is facing the stage,

facing the giant stone. The stench of death fills the air. The lights have been shut off and the entire chamber is candlelit, allowing Jo to snake her away around the back of the room and make her way closer. Covered in blood as she is, she almost blends in. She sees him—the sheriff. He’s there, standing at the obelisk, mumbling a prayer. His cowboy hat is enormous and he raises his arms. The crawlers cheer and howl. Jo comes up to the row of six femme fatale statues, the ones to the left of the obelisk. She ducks behind one of them.

Three guards rush into the chamber. They come from where Jo and the girls were, where Jo murdered Billy and his goon. The men look panicked. One of them motions to the corners, is flailing his arms, heated. The sheriff, consumed as he is with his own words, doesn’t even notice them. Jo cranes her head. There is a hole in the forehead of each of the fatale statues. The hole is the size of her necklace. Her legs turn to jelly and she feels herself floating again, but she is not floating. She touches her back. There are no wings, no tail sprouting from her spine. Stay focused and breathe, stay focused and breathe. The centipedes and scorpions are not real.

A voice tickles her ear. Jo cannot understand what it says. She is drawn to the hole in the forehead of the statue.

The crawlers howl, this time in unison like a pack of ugly wolves crooning a drunken ballad. “Behold,” the sheriff says, turning to face them, “the first of three additions to our beautiful family.” The crawlers cackle. “We offer this act of beauty in the name of those who have come before us, in the name of those whose skin we consume to live and never die.” He makes a fist. “Forever and ever.” He smoothes down his mustache and licks his lips. “Bring the first one to me,” he says.

And Jo is stunned. It’s Mandy. It can’t be, but it is. She is dressed in a beautiful white gown and her mouth is gagged. She is bound by rope and being led up the stairs to meet the sheriff where he stands.

The sheriff picks up a pitchfork. It is the same pitchfork used in Stanton's film. Jo gasps, tries not to run. Her legs are screaming to let loose. She jams the buck knife down the back of her jeans and stands frozen with the statues.

He gives Mandy a toothy grin. "You will live and feast in the glory of the skin until the end of time." The crawlers scream again, this time louder as if possessed by pure evil. Mandy is struggling, those tears falling from her eyes. Men push her. She falls at the feet of the sheriff. "Bring me the dagger."

And from the back of the room, three crawlers in black robes, muttering and moaning, walk in a straight line toward the stage. The crawler in the middle is holding a long silver dagger with a skull embedded at the base of the hilt.

Jo doesn't even realize it, but she is taking off the necklace. Her hand is shaking. She feels her arms go numb. Something is guiding her hand to the fatale statue, to the hole in the forehead. "Complete me," it seems to say. "Release me."

The men are climbing the stairs and the sheriff's face is glowing. He is jubilant. His pink-splotchy hands await the dagger.

And Jo feels the necklace ice over in her hand. She inserts it into the fatale statue's forehead.

It fits perfectly.

And the strangest thing happens.

Jo ducks behind the statue, creeps behind the second one. A long-haired crawler has taken notice of the statue. He is muttering to himself. Jo watches him from behind the second statue and his head cocks to the side. What he sees is the statue begin to shake and tremble.

It's coming alive.

Mandy's eyes follow the dagger just as it is raised in the air. Crawlers scream with delight.

Jo quickly inserts the necklace into the hole of the second statue. She yanks it out, feels the second one shake, too. And down the line, into the forehead of each statue as quickly as

she can without being noticed. The crawler who appears distracted by the statue's movement has nudged other crawlers, too, and they are grunting and squealing. He pulls out his hair. The screams roar louder. Now, it is too late.

The sheriff's head turns to the statues. In the candlelight he cannot see them clearly. "And now," he says, focusing his attention on the helpless Mandy, "we complete the ritual stripping of our feast." The crowd erupts.

Suddenly, the first statue bursts.

Jo covers her head, rolls, crawls to the corner.

Yes, the statue has burst open and within it stands a beautiful actress, very much alive. She flexes her hands, stands ready like she's been waiting in there the entire time, trapped and mentally preparing for her moment to take revenge.

This gets the sheriff's attention. His brow furrows and he motions to his men. "Unbelievable," he says. The crawlers scream, this time with fright.

The second statue explodes and the third and the fourth. All of them burst in an explosion of stone, freed from their snares and angrier than a swarm of Satanic hounds. Each is beautiful with a look of pure violence in their eyes. Jo can't believe this, but her eyes are drawn to the obelisk itself. It is glowing a deep green, rich and fathomless, more mesmerizing than anything she's seen in her life. It is beautiful. She puts the necklace on, grabs her buck knife.

Chaos erupts.

The sheriff: "It can't be! This is impossible—where is Jo?!" He looks at the obelisk behind him. "This must end now." And he plunges the dagger into Mandy. She dodges to the side and it slams into her arm, shooting a stream of blood onto his face.

The crawlers don't know what to do. They find out soon enough. The fatales are possessed with superhuman strength and one of them grabs a crawler, rips his head clean off his body and kicks his corpse into the crowd. Suddenly, the room is lit up with gunplay. The sheriff's men open fire, nailing

crawlers and fatales. Bullets spray, but they do not affect the women.

Mandy grabs her arm, spin kicks the sheriff in the stomach and he falls back. Jo leaps onto the stage and tackles the sheriff, throws him into the crowd of crazy fatales. The candles go out and the room is smeared in a dark green haze from the pulsating stone. Jo's buck knife slashes through Mandy's ropes. "Where is Sonja?" she says.

"I don't know," Mandy says. "They took her."

The sheriff leaps back into action. He slugs Jo in the head, dropping her to her knees. Mandy's arm hurts. She punches him in the mouth and he tastes blood. He drops the dagger. Jo is up and throws an elbow into his face. He knees her in the gut, doubling her over. Mandy grips her arms, clenches her teeth. The entire room is a splattering of limbs and blood and guns and green.

Fatales are going wild. Blood sprays as bullets fly and crawlers leap, roll, collide and go crazy. One crawler accidentally attacks another and suddenly the whole lot of them are neck deep in their own blood. They are eating at each other. One fatale rips out a tongue and uses it to choke a deranged crawler. She bites his ear off, spits it into the mouth of another crawler. Another fatale pulls off a crawler's manhood and squeezes it to explode in her hands. She laughs at the flaccid bits of goop. These women are vicious. The room is filled with the sound of static.

The sheriff kicks Jo in the mouth with his boot. She falls and tumbles off the stage, rolls against the other six statues. He grabs the dagger and slices at Mandy, stabbing her in the stomach.

Meanwhile, Jo slams the necklace into the forehead of the first of six more fatales. The dagger yanks out from Mandy's gut and she looks at the wound. The sheriff jams his hand in her stomach and roots around in there, flicking his wicked tongue at her. He pulls out his maggot-drenched hand. Mandy screams and millipedes drip from her mouth.

The other six fatale statues explode. The room is drenched in stone. Six more killer actresses leap into the action. A crawler rams into the sheriff, knocking him off balance. He gouges the crawler's eyes out. One of them takes a bite of his arm. Jo sees a group of crawlers munching on someone's brain. Another takes a brain, splats it against the obelisk, shouting some kind of curse in a foreign tongue. Jo bats away scores of flies and bees, the buzzing is too much for her to take. She stabs her buck knife into anyone and everyone around her. The sound of her knife poking and ripping skin intensifies. Her limbs are a blur of stabbing action. She wants more. She wants blood. She wants for her friends to be alive, for these visions to finally stop. A fatale grabs Mandy and gently lowers her to the ground as the sheriff looms, bloodthirsty and ready to kill.

"Get outta my way," he says to the fatale. "I own you, tramp."

"It's you," the woman says. "We've been waiting for this moment." She's pure mayhem, a vixen Wonder Woman if there ever was one. But a shotgun blast blares through the crowd and rips the woman's head off. It was a wild shot. Her body sinks to the ground, fist curling to death. "Off air," the sheriff says, laughing maniacally.

The sheriff slugs Mandy in the face and she blacks out. Another man leaps on Jo and head butts her. More hands grope her body, until her entire body is a swarm of fists and fingers. It's the sheriff's armed men. They are pummeling her and she is far away, but the pain is intense and something breaks. Bones crack, sizzle. Her stomach is a mess of slime.

She shuts her eyes.

She waits to die.

But death does not come.

Someone is peeling open her eyelids, propping her up. It's the dentist. She is not dead. She is at the foot of the obelisk. The sheriff's face hovers over her. "Welcome to Stonehenge," he says. "Trust me, the other side is worse." And he laughs

maniacally. His eyes glow green, his pink-splotchy hand, a fist. “If only the cameras were still rolling.” The dentist laughs too loud. The sheriff flicks his eyes to one of his armed men and the man shoots the dentist in the brain.

Jo is thrust to her feet.

More crawlers have arrived and it appears they have cornered all twelve of the fatales near the back of the chamber. The room is drenched in green. Sonja is on stage, tied and gagged just as Mandy was. Mandy is being held up by two men in black suits, her guts trailing out of her body, blood leaking from her mouth. The sheriff holds the dagger. “Turn back,” he says, “and behold our power, Jo. It’s beyond you. It’s beyond all of us and it’s my pleasure to introduce you to it. Bring her to the front.”

And two more men, cowboys, grab Jo, muscle her to the front of the stage. She’s weak and gore-drenched. It doesn’t matter. She’s livid. They must pay—will pay.

Mandy gives Jo one final weary-eyed look, smiles, and says, “It’s okay, kiddo, now it’s your turn.” And her head death-flops down. Sonja screams and wails. The butt of an AK-47 shuts her up to a babbling mutter.

“Sonja,” Jo yells, “Don’t you die on me.”

The sheriff raises the dagger in the air. He mumbles something in a tongue Jo has heard before, a tongue she neither understands nor speaks.

Sonja’s head snaps up, rage in her eyes. Jo’s hands, bound behind her back as they are, fidget and she is able to reach down the back of her jeans. The buck knife. It’s still there.

The remaining crawlers prod and scream, frenzied and delirious. Their attention is pulled to the giant stone, but they must keep the fatales from breaking free. The entire room is a cacophony of noise. One fatale kicks a crawler, gets her eyes raked. The sheriff’s voice grows louder and he’s babbling, his whole body shaking and quivering as if possessed by devils.

Jo spins the knife in her hands, eyes on the guards, on the sheriff, on Sonja. She locks eyes with Sonja and saws upward with her blade, trying desperately to hack through the ropes.

Suddenly, the sheriff spits out a string of garbled words and the armed men grab Sonja, drag her to a standing position right next to the sheriff. They slash her rope. Her arms dangle limp. He raises the dagger and places it to her throat. The two men kneel. They hold a silver bowl to catch the blood.

“Come on,” Jo mutters. The rope loosens, still tight, but looser. Jo inches her hand upward and saws, sweat dripping off her face, off her hands, her entire body growing weaker.

“Accept this embrace of blood,” the sheriff says, angling the blade steady across her throat. “Please, Jo, watch and learn.” He smiles.

The rope snaps.

Sonja’s eyes are pleading. Her nostrils flare and she nods at Jo.

The necklace burns hot around Jo’s neck—sears into her skin. She screams and casts the ropes from her body with lightning speed. The sheriff’s eyes widen. “To the stone,” Jo says to Sonja, suddenly throws the knife not at the sheriff, but at Sonja. And the knife sails through the air. The sheriff sees it coming.

He’s fast.

In a blur of speed, the sheriff’s dagger slides across Sonja’s throat, tearing open the slice of her impending death.

At that exact moment, she raises her arm, catches the knife, spins, and propels the knife onward, sending the knife sailing directly into the obelisk.

The sheriff: “No—you can’t!” He’s furious, his arm shaking. “Kill her!”

Jo is up, sends a roundhouse kick to the guards surrounding her, knocking them back.

And the knife hits the stone, sticks right in it.

For a second, the room is dead silent.

All eyes are on the stone. Rays of green light begin to swirl around the stone. “You’ve unleashed it,” the sheriff said. “You good for nothing—it’s over!”

Sonja smiles at Jo, touches her throat, sees her hands and drops to her knees. You did it, Jo thinks, knowing Sonja’s spirit can hear her, knowing she gave herself to save Jo’s life.

And the sheriff kicks Sonja’s dead body away, takes a step to Jo.

The rest of the room is watching. Even the fatales are mesmerized, because on stage, the giant green stone is ready to burst.

And it does.

A swirl of green rays shoots out and blasts a group of crawlers, exploding their bodies to gross piles of guts and bone.

Another ray shoots out and nails the sheriff’s guards, splattering them up to the ceiling.

“We gave you blood,” the sheriff says. “We gave you our everything,” but the next ray hits his body right in the heart. He does not explode. He does not die.

Right there on stage. Just feet away from Jo, she watches the sheriff’s face mutate into what appears to be a terrifying black lizard. This can’t be real. It looks exactly like the mask Gus was wearing, but gross and wet. He roars and laughs. “Finally,” he says. “I am reborn in blood.”

“Not for long,” Jo says. “You’ve been added to my kill list and it’s time to clean house.”

“We’re with you on this one,” a voice says behind her. It’s the fatales, all of them. They are covered in crawler blood. A ray cracks at their feet, sending them scattering.

Another ray blasts the back wall of the chamber shattering it to broken rock. The rays spread, shoot randomly around the room. Crawlers scatter and scream and chomp their teeth and slip on the piles of gushing blood-ooze.

“The stone has heard my cries,” the sheriff says, “and there’s not a damn thing you broads can do about it.”

Jo: "Fuck you and your stones."

And the lizard sheriff twists his head. The rays of green light are blasting out in every direction. One of the rays hits near Jo and explodes a fatale in a mess of blood and blonde hair. "Run," one fatale says. "This stone is out of control."

Jo dives, grabs an Ak-47. She aims it at the sheriff and fires every round into his body. His giant lizard head writhes and pops. He is smiling. His body is rocketed by bullets. And the necklace stings worse than ever. She throws the gun at his feet and he looks down at the holes in his chest. "Is this all you can do?" he says. "You punk bitch."

"Run," a fatale says, "This way!"

"Don't move," Jo says to the sheriff. "Learn to crawl."

The giant stone begins shaking and cracking, emitting a sound like a hundred woodblocks raining down. The sheriff touches his bloody chest, not even phased by the bullets, and stares up at the giant stone. "You wish to take me," he roars. "Fill me with your power."

The rumbling crack intensifies. The stone splits down the middle, sucking Jo's knife into its depths. But those rays are still shooting out all over the room like death-lasers.

Jo looks up at the ceiling. It's moving. Dust drops on her head. The entire chamber is shaking. Rocks fall on crawlers and bury them. It's an earthquake. It's a bloodbath disaster.

"Take me!" the sheriff yells, again. "I am the one." And the rock explodes, the largest chunk barreling from its uppermost tip, falling right on the sheriff. It crushes him. Jo and the fatales do a double take. One of his arms sticks out from the rock-chunk. Jo's knife is buried in his dirty palm. His fingers twitch and stiffen.

"Nice party, you delusional bastard," Jo says, watching the blood seep from his crushed corpse.

No time. The fatales are pulling at Jo to run. And the ceiling is caving in. A huge chunk nails Jo on the shoulder. She keeps running. "This way," one of them says, and they are going through a door, are in a goopy tunnel. It is pitch dark.

The world is a rumble. Behind them, rocks are falling and dust hovers everywhere. Jo listens to the sound of splattering crawlers, hears their primal yelps and shrieks, listens to them die.

The world goes blurry and nothing is in focus, the entire frame shaking every way. “Faster, you can do it,” and Jo is yanked sideways down another tunnel and she is climbing stairs. The rocks hurt. They pummel her body. They are falling all around her. “Duck,” a fatale says, and “This way, we’re almost there.” The sound is massive. Jo hears the death-squeal of more crawlers, hears the rays shooting rock, bursting rock to dust. At the same time, the sound has become muffled, more distant.

Jo sees a light.

“Don’t stop now!”

And a strong fatale hand grips her wrist and tugs her out of the way of a falling boulder. “Go, Jo, go,” they say and Jo runs, she shuts her eyes and runs faster than she’s ever ran in her life, just pure speed. The wind is hot. She’s a beast, not a human, she’s not who she always thought she wasn’t. She is pure animal and stone and life and breath and love and death and her arms beat wind, become wind, her legs numb. The necklace is pulling her as if an invisible string has been implanted in her chest, carrying her onward closer and closer to the light.

Jo opens her eyes. She is still running.

She is alone and in the dead forest. She can’t stop. Keep going.

And the next thing she knows, she is stumbling up to the sheriff’s burning house. It is a gigantic pile of bodies and melted ooze.

The orange van, untouched.

Her head is swimming and she looks back at the woods and the mountain, sees the smoke in the air, hears a gigantic crunch echo across the face of the world. And the mountain

blows up, rocking and shaking the ground. The blast blows her back.

She props herself up, climbs to her feet.

“Fatales...” she says, just can’t bring herself to say how or why they saved her. She’ll never know.

Jo drops to her knees and throws up. Mashed in the dirt is a joint and a lighter. Jo grabs the joint, brings it to her lips. She lights it and sucks green.

Time burns slow.

She tastes Kimberly in the joint.

Jo lets the smoke trail out of her mouth. She stands up.

It’s almost day.

A new day.

“Freeze,” someone says. “Make one move and we shoot—put your hands where we can see them.”

It’s the cops.

“Put your hands where we can see them,” the cop says. “Do it!”

Jo takes another hit of the joint, turns around slowly. Sure enough, five officers with shotguns and chopper glasses stand by the house. The world is a blur of cop lights. They were waiting. Jo’s heart sinks. She touches the necklace. It is no longer burning her. It feels different now and so does Jo.

“First day of the rest of my life,” she says, smiling. She looks up. “Officers, I’m all yours.”

“Cuff this bitch,” one of them says and they move in, grabbing her. They force her to the ground, snap cuffs tight. She’s lowered into a cruiser.

What happens next is a bit blurry. Jo dreams of Kimberly and the girls. She tries to replay the whole experience in her mind, from Stanton’s party to the stone and the bugs, the motel, the sheriff, but she can’t. Her mind sparks new images: bleak futuristic landscapes, cow skulls on fire, a high rise, and drills whirring into bone. She doesn’t understand these new forms. A horse. A lizard. A needle. A slice of film.

The film, Jo thinks, was called *Vamplust a-Go-Go*.

Dream big.

The jail cell slams shut and the cop tosses the keys on his desk. He leans back in his chair and slugs a shot of whiskey. Jo sees a pitchfork propped in the corner. She can't tear her eyes off it.

"You're quite the looker," the cop says. "Can't wait for shower time." He laughs.

A bundle of centipedes flash through her thighs. They tingle.

She drums her fingers across the cell bars and smiles.

A black lizard mask sits on top of the jail bed's pillow.

The sheriff takes another shot of whiskey, opens up a girlie mag and laughs loudly at some dumb joke.

Jo starts laughing. She can't stop.

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The cop slides open the jail cell. It's not everyday a prisoner as beautiful as this one shows up in his lonely slammer. A deranged serial killer, nonetheless. He can't see her. She was here a minute ago. Gone. He burps whiskey. "Like the goddamn wind," he says, stepping in, looking under the bed. He scratches his head in disbelief.

Something scrapes.

"Leonard?" he says. "Leonard, you see that girl?" And everything changes. "What the shit?"

Someone is standing in his jailhouse.

It's a woman in a blood-stained black lizard mask and she's holding a pitchfork. Her white T-shirt is ragged, drenched in blood. Her jeans are ripped and battered. The mask is a size too big for her, just hangs over her head, droopy and absurd, but perfect for the sequel.

"What in the world?" the cop says. "How did you—?"

Jo does it lightning quick. She lunges, stabs the pitchfork into his throat and makes sure it tears all the way through. She twists it out, watches blood ooze out on the floor. A hand mashes into the dead officer's face and slams it to the latex lizard mouth. Jo smears it on the lips, until it sticks.

She takes his car keys, slams the station door behind her.
And we move in tight on the goopy remains of the cop.
Outside, an engine revs.
A lizard hisses.
Static.
Roll credits.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Grefe is the author of this book you are holding and **THE MONDO VIXEN MASSACRE** (Eraserhead Press) as well as other forthcoming works. His short fiction appears in such places as *Birkensnake*, *elimae*, *The Bacon Review*, and *New Dead Families*. He is originally from Michigan, but has lived and worked in South Korea, Japan, and China. Grefe currently spends his days in the mountains of northern New Mexico. For updates and further information, please visit: <http://shreddedmaps.tumblr.com>