

Chapter 3

Maslo, Nevada—August 10

Judy looked up from finishing the dishes as the glare of headlights flashed across the diner's window. It was late, far too late for customers. Sometimes people stopped at the diner for directions or to look for a place to spend the night—sometimes, but seldom this late.

Removing her apron, Judy walked carefully to the screen door. The dust settled in the gravel parking lot, and she could see the car now. It was a big Ford, a salesman's car. Why stop here? The lights were out, the "closed" sign prominent in the front window. Now the driver's side door opened and a man emerged, stretching and yawning. Looking in Judy's direction, he saw the dim light from within the diner and started trudging toward her. His slow footsteps in the gravel made angry, crunching sounds. She watched as he drew nearer, taking shape in the dim light.

He was of medium height, fortyish, with a neat moustache and pleasant, even features. His suit was baggy and wrinkled from hours of driving, and he looked very tired. "Hi," he said with a small wave of his hand as he saw her behind the screen. "Excuse me. I saw the sign—"

She cut him off. "We're closed, mister. It's late."

He nodded. "I know. I'm sorry if I startled you." His voice was low and fluidly easy. "I saw the sign, the apartment for rent. I know it's late, but ..."

Judy's thoughts soared. Maybe there was a God in heaven after all! A real renter! She had all but given up. In fact, she had planned to take the sign down tomorrow. A renter would mean she could finance Nori, her daughter, through one more semester at UNLV. Could it happen? She forced herself back to calm and caution.

"There is an apartment for rent all right, mister."

The man smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. "Talley. Kenneth Talley. I'm a regional rep for an industrial bearings firm. Just got the job. I have four states to cover, and I've spent the last two weeks mostly lost." Grinning, he shook his head. "Your town, eh—what's its name again?"

"Maslo. You passed the reason for the name, coming into town. You must have seen the ruins. There used to be a big hospital here, a funny farm for rich people from LA. It sat here about thirty years. Most of the town grew up around it.

About ten years ago there was some kind of scandal and then a fire. Still, the name stuck. Some of the people did too.”

“Yeah. Maslo. Anyhow, Maslo is just about centered on most of my accounts. So I thought, *Why not rent something here?* and then I saw your sign. I know it’s late, and I’ll come back tomorrow if you’d rather, but I’d really like to see the place.”

“Gee, I don’t know, Mr. Talley. Look at the time.”

“Look, Mrs.—what did you say your name was?” The smile was broader now.

She hadn’t said, but that was all right. “Judy Carnover,” she answered simply.

“Well, Mrs. Carnover, if I like the place, I’ll take it tonight. Believe me, I need somewhere to rest in a hurry. I can pay you right now.”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t let you in until the check cleared.”

He held up his hand in peace. “I know that, Mrs. Carnover, but surely you’d take cash.” Pulling a wallet from his jacket, he revealed a neat stack of twenty- and fifty-dollar bills. “There should be plenty here for the first and last month’s deposit. What do you say?”

What could she say, indeed! Judy’s mind raced. The place would go for \$275. With an extra \$550 in cash, she could wire Nori enough money to cover registration tomorrow, just in time.

Nodding her head, she carefully unlatched the diner’s screen door. “Okay, Mr. Talley.”

“Call me Ken.”

“Okay then, Ken. The place is here, in the back. Not much of a view, but then there’s not much to see, except the desert.” She led him behind the diner to what appeared to be a large barn or garage.

“I like the desert. Always have,” the man said. Now they were climbing a wide wooden stairway built into the barn’s wall. She looked back. “Not afraid of heights are you, Ken?”

“No, ma’am.” He chuckled. “Just big holes.”

She laughed back. “Well, here we are. Before we go in, here’s the rules. Payment first of the month, no excuses. The place is furnished, but if you put your own stuff in we’ll help you move ours out. You can use the garage downstairs. I’ll give you a key for that too. Rent includes water; you pay your own electric. I’ll call

in the morning and set it up. I keep a key. If I come in and find the place trashed, you're out. No arguments. You can eat at the diner at a discount. Any questions?"

"No, ma'am. It all sounds fair to me."

She smiled again as she worked the lock to open the door. Maybe this would work. As the door swung open, she ushered him in and turned on the light. The subdued glow from a table lamp revealed a large room, simply furnished with a couch and two easy chairs. The wood floor was partially hidden by a worn area rug. A small breakfast table and three chairs fronted what was obviously the kitchen, near a window that looked out over the mesa behind. A dark hallway led to the bath and bedrooms.

"It's not the Ritz by any means, but it's clean. Bedrooms are down the hall. Take a look for yourself. The bedding's been changed weekly, so it's not dusty. If you put it out, I'll run it with my wash. Bathroom's on the right."

Judy watched and then listened as the salesman disappeared from sight, the sound of his footsteps tracing his progress down the hall. For ageless seconds there was no sound at all, and then she heard the hurry of his returning to the living room. He emerged from the hall with a broad smile on his face.

"It's just what I need," he announced. "I'll take it. If you'll get a receipt, I'll pay you right now."

Judy nodded dumbly, overcome with relief she tried unsuccessfully to mask. "I'll bring it by with the lease tomorrow, ah, Ken. I know you'll like it here."

He shook her hand firmly as he handed her the cash. "I know I will, Mrs. Carnover. This place is exactly what I wanted."

For several minutes after his new landlady left, Karl Thibault stood motionless in the center of his newly rented living room. He was tired, having put more than six hundred hard miles on his car since morning, but his elation overcame all fatigue.

Ken Talley. Not much of a name, but close enough to his own that he would quickly learn to react to it—another detail he had given much thought. Details could sometimes make the difference between a failed plan and one that worked. He surveyed his new home with grim satisfaction. Now he had a base of operations. Now the most important part of his plan could begin.

He sprang down the steps, sprinted to his car, and then drove it to the base of the garage apartment's stairway. Moving more slowly, he carried his suitcase and shaving kit up the steps and into his rooms. Suddenly weary again, he quickly

stripped to his underwear, brushed his teeth, and settled into the stiff white sheets of one of the single beds in the room across the hall from the small bathroom. A shower could wait until morning, he decided. Almost as soon as his head hit the slightly gritty feather pillow, he slept.

Sometime during the night, he dreamed. In many ways, Karl's dreams had redefined his life. For these were not the random images of a brain reordering its memories, preparing for a new day. Instead, Karl's dreams were visions of the grotesque sickness he harbored.

He had first become aware of the dreams seven years ago, two years before he committed the crime that sent him to Benniston (although Marianne later testified that his sleep had been disturbed for as long as she had known him). At first there was only one, which repeated itself several times a week. After a while there were more, and they crowded into his mind every night.

Finally, even consciousness could not keep them at bay. The sight of a certain type of tree, military trucks going the other way, sunlight through a cloud, or any of a thousand things could send him spinning from concrete reality into a world of violence, fear, and confusion. He tried his best to keep track of the real world through this mist of chaos. At business meetings, he would give presentations while, in his mind, he cowered in what had to be a landing zone, waiting for the chopper that would never come, while unseen enemies prepared to rush him from the edges of a place he could never quite see. Reality was still there, but it was distant, as though he was viewing it through the wrong end of a telescope. His words rang hollow and senseless in his own ears. Only a tremendous force of will prevented him from crying out and running away forever.

A few times, some trigger careened him into this awful place while he was driving. Once, he had to endure the ignominy of an afternoon of blood, urine, and other tests, conducted by a highway patrol officer who was sure he was either drunk or on drugs. Badly frightened, he sought help from the Veterans Administration.

The VA shrugged collectively, offering therapy he didn't understand and drugs that he took mechanically. Almost every time he visited the local VA clinic to renew a prescription, the doctor he saw had changed, requiring Karl to recite his case history over and over until it became divorced from him, like a half-remembered religious litany mumbled in church. Tegretol, then Desipramine, then other medications whose names he couldn't remember—all prescribed by squads

of physicians who barely glanced at the notes of their predecessors. Eventually, the worst of his daytime horrors, his “intrusive thoughts” or flashbacks, were controlled by the drugs. The dreams were never curbed. Every night they eroded his will to fight them and every night his strength to resist was less until he finally gave in to the black release of madness that encompassed him still.

The dreams came in no particular order, and he didn’t always have each one. Since his incarceration, he had almost begun to look forward to them. After all, they were the only part of his life that had not changed. Here was the first one, coalescing from the gray behind his eyes. Men from his unit in Vietnam—Easton, Henley, little Ky, and the others—sat before a pier. They were about to board a boat and cross the lake behind them, he was always sure, although no boat could be seen. The sky was a sullen expanse of gray: monsoon season. The men didn’t move, didn’t speak. Their ghastly wounds, still present from the last time he’d actually seen them, didn’t bleed. They merely looked at him, timelessly. He often thought he could sense small movements, as if they beckoned him nearer. On other occasions, he was sure they were angry or happy.

Sometimes, he was able to move close enough to examine their faces intimately, but tonight he could not. He wished they would move or speak, even to curse or accuse him. In his soul, he knew they never would, not until death put him with them on that pier. Then they would all cross the awful lake together.

A second dream overlaid the first. He was above a clearing in a heavy forest, as though sitting on the branch of a tree. Below and in front of him, a friend stood smiling broadly, dressed in his best khakis—probably about to go on leave. The friend’s identity changed from night to night. Sometimes, it wasn’t a single person at all but a montage of people Karl had liked or respected. As he watched, tonight and every night, small bright yellow figures, no taller than dolls, crept from behind rocks and bushes to surround the man, who ignored them completely. Karl called out warnings that weren’t heard. He tried to move from his perch but found himself paralyzed. He continued to watch helplessly while the industrious little men constructed ingenious ladders and ropes from vines and sticks and began climbing the man’s legs. At last, Karl’s friend noticed the creatures, but as always it was much too late. They had engulfed him to his waist, and now they pulled him to the ground and swarmed over him as he screamed and swatted at them ineffectually. Finally, the little men left to creep back to their hiding places behind the rocks and the trees, leaving only gleaming bones where Karl’s friend had stood.

Suddenly he was in that same glade, completely alone. There was no noise at all. That was a bad sign since it meant something large had scared the geckos away. With his back to the tree, Karl scanned the brush and the forest he could see. Behind a large tree in front of him, the barely visible silhouette of a man became apparent. He was almost completely hidden, but the edges of his cheek and shoulder were clearly visible. He was smoking one of those awful locally made copies of Galois cigarettes. Karl thought sometimes he could smell the greasy, smoky odor. He knew the man was a North Vietnamese soldier. He would move from hiding any moment, Karl was sure, along with the other enemy troops hidden nearby. They would take Karl prisoner and torture him horribly before killing him. This second of silence was utterly terrifying.

As he turned to run, Karl found himself in a helicopter. To his front, several men dropped through a large hatch to rappel to the ground. All the men, including Karl, were heavily armed and carried bulky packs, indicating a long mission. The ground below wasn't visible, but the sky was a sullen gray with tendrils of orange red, as though a fire were nearby. In the corner of the chopper's bay, a large good-natured officer who looked to Karl a lot like John Goodman cheerfully urged the men on.

"Come on, men," the jolly major rumbled, "Got to move! Got to jump!" He turned to Karl with a wide smile on his friendly face and a gleam in his honest blue eyes. "Your turn, little buddy!" he said. "Come on now, got to jump!"

Karl was confused. "I don't know the mission, major," he said. "Where are we going?"

"On your mission, of course! The big one! The biggest mission you've ever had," the major replied with a deep chuckle. "Off you go, now! Everybody's out but you!"

To his own surprise, Karl started to cry. "Please don't make me go," he pleaded. "I'm so scared. I was always so scared, but I couldn't say it. I couldn't tell anybody ..."

The laughing major stopped smiling and grabbed Karl's shoulders with his great big hands. Karl suddenly felt very cold.

"You people never understand," he said calmly as he forced Karl to the hatch. "You think these wars just go on and on by themselves." By now, Karl was at the hatch, grabbing and adjusting his line. "Nobody realizes," the major continued. "These things gotta be fed!"

Karl looked down, as he always did, and his eyes followed the lines of the men who had left before him—down, down, but not to the ground. Instead, the end of each line dangled before the open jaws of a huge beast whose eyes reflected the mad red glare from the sky above. An enormous tongue lolled against fangs the size of boulders, and the monster’s fetid breath made Karl reel with nausea.

The smiling major was behind him now. “Goodbye, little buddy,” he whispered with a buff chuckle as he threw Karl into the waiting maw of the beast.

Karl awoke, as he always did, bathed in sweat. He felt fatigued, unrested, and giddy. It was almost as though he were still dreaming. In fact, since his escape, the boundaries between his dreams and reality had blurred considerably. Karl didn’t mind. In other dreams, he could act out his plans perfectly.

He rose from his bed and walked to the bathroom, where he drew a glass of water from the sink. His throat felt raw and sore. That was hardly surprising since he had been screaming in his sleep.

After shaving and dressing, Karl walked to the phone, a dusty cream unit sitting on a low end table in the apartment’s living room. Taking a card of thumbtacks from his briefcase, he quickly mounted detailed road maps of Nevada and Arizona to the nearest wall. He would bring up the equipment and his few belongings tomorrow, he decided. Then, as soon as the phone line was connected, he would begin. He would lure his prey to the killing ground of his choice. His military training on ambush technique had been specific: “Choose a kill zone where both retreat and relief are difficult.” His first victim would find both escape and rescue impossible.

Karl smiled.