

THE
RELUCTANT
GUEST

THE RELUCTANT GUEST

A Novel By
Bud Simpson

BUD SIMPSON

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As always, this is for my wife; Margo

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Chapter One

AN UNLIKELY TRIP

THE CROWS ARE ENGAGED in raucous conversation from the tops of the tall pines down by the lake. Several humming birds are trying to intimidate each other at the feeders hanging like red jewels from the eaves of Rex Stephenson's porch. The musty smell of golden rod and new mown hay waft softly to his wife's nostrils on the summer breezes that drift up from the lake.

Cheryl; Rex's wife, is sitting alone on the screened in porch, sipping iced tea from a tall glass in one hand while reading a galley proof of Rex Stephenson's latest novel with the other. Rex is not at home right now. It's not that he doesn't want to be. He *wants* to be there with an overpowering desperation he has never felt before. He *wants* to see the reaction of her face as she reads ... *wants* to hear her intimate little giggle as she reads a particularly juicy line ... *wants* to see those blue eyes of hers squint slightly from the smile he knows is on her face. He wants it more than life itself.

Rex Stephenson can't be there, however, because he is floating; but *not* on the waters of the lake by his home. Instead, he is hovering high above the verdant Maine countryside far below him. He is trying to control his flight by putting both of his hands outward from his sides; maybe they can act as his wings? He looks to his left and then to his right and to his horrified amazement, sees no hands! In fact, he perceives no

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body! It's as if he is re-living a dream he once experienced as a very young boy. He had awakened from *that* one; scared, but in the safety of his nice warm bed at home. But this *can't* be a dream, he tells himself! *This* is *far* too real.

As he looks down, he recognizes the landscape spread out below him. On the wall of his summer home on Millboro Lake; far below him now, is an aerial view of his property and, as he gazes below, there it is ... just as in that photograph! It stretches out below him, glowing with a luxuriant, surreal vibrancy! He can even smell the same musty scent of goldenrod and new mown hay that Cheryl is enjoying on the porch as a playful updraft carries the scents to him from far below.

His recently restored nineteenth century farmhouse is perched on the top of a rise. It is facing the lake, the shoreline of which is only a hundred yards from its front door. The hollow indentation in the ground where the old barn used to stand before a sudden gale blew it down the year before seems to be much deeper than it actually is. The newly constructed shop and three car garage seems oddly out of place with the main house as he gazes down upon them.

In a few years, as soon as that cedar siding weathers a little, it'll blend in better.

This thought surprises him. *Why am I thinking about things like that? How in hell do I get out of this situation? How in hell did I get into this situation?*

The boathouse and dock on the edge of the lake are projecting a particularly beautiful image to him. The deep, azure waters of the lake sparkle as they are tickled by playful summer breezes dashing about and brushing against its surface. Each errant wavelet sends a diamond-like flash up to him through the clear afternoon air. The flashes are like tiny sparks in all the colors of the spectrum.

The tall maple trees growing along the curving drive leading from the house are reaching upwards, also, like soft, green hands; as if they want to pull him back home, but their

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leafy fingers can't reach him here. Their earthly anchors are holding them firmly to the ground.

Then a sobering, soul shaking thought occurs to him! *I must be dead! Certainly; that has to be it! I must be dead! That would explain it all. Why else would I be up here, floating around with no body and no visible means of support?*

Below him, on the road leading past his farmhouse, he sees a solitary van. It seems to be drifting silently along on the hot, blacktopped country road. It is dark blue in color with many rust colored spots along its lower sides; typical of many of the older vehicles in the area that have survived a decade of Maine winters and salted roads. As his gaze fastens upon it, he senses there is a connection between him and this van, but what can it be?

How did I die? Was it an accident?

Yes; it *had* to have been an accident! It couldn't have been an illness; Rex has no recollection of being sick enough to die ... only a vague, dream-like memory of walking along that winding road, even farther below him now, and then ... and then ... what?

He desperately wants to drift back down to his home on the lake; that wonderful home he and Cheryl worked so hard to acquire. He wills it with all the power his mind can muster. *Damn it all*, even if he is dead, he wants to see Cheryl's face one last time. That's not asking too much, is it? Just a single look; that's all he wants ... just a glance! To look into his wife's eyes one last time before ... before, *what?*

Instead, even though he fights powerfully against it, he is pulled along; away from all that is familiar and comfortable by the power of that van; that God damned van! Where is it taking him? *Why* is it taking him? The farmhouse and lake begin to disappear into the distance behind him as the van speeds west chasing the heat of the afternoon sun.

The farther Rex travels from his familiar landscape, the more the beautiful colors surrounding him fade. More and more ... and then he realizes that he is now hurtling downward

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... downward; towards that speeding van. Faster and faster he spirals in an uncontrollable freefall, as if the van is a powerful magnet and he; or his spirit, is anamorphous, ferrous thing! It's obvious to him that he is going to slam into its rusting sides. Wide-eyed, he braces himself for the impact. Instead ... blackness; and a dead, overwhelming silence enfolds him and all awareness of the outside world ceases to exist.

Chapter Two

THE AWAKENING

REX LIES THERE; EYES closed; not moving. Any movement at all causes him to have unpleasant spinning sensations. He had tried opening his eyes once before but shut them almost immediately. The sudden assault of light on his senses had been overwhelming to a mind that now seems overly sensitive to light and sound. In that fraction of time before his eyes involuntarily slammed shut, his mind absorbed enough to make him realize that he was *no* flying in the safety and comfort of his bed at his home on the lake.

If I'm not home, then where'n hell am I?

He moans and puts his hands over his eyes. A swimming head and nausea seems to have him nailed to the bed. A dry, coppery taste is in his mouth. He forces himself to salivate and then swallow. This brings him memories of trying to awaken from a drunken binge, but he knows that can't be true. Hadn't he given up his drunken ways years ago? Boozing and drugging are things of his past. They had nearly ended his writing career before it had begun. Booze and drugs don't have a place in his life anymore; only an occasional beer. That's not to say that there haven't been many times when he felt those inner demons coaxing, prodding, pushing and pulling him in a direction he had to force himself not to go.

Le' me try this again, he thinks.

Even the workings of his mind seem to be as slurred as his speech. He is having a hard time pulling a complete,

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comprehensive thought from it. He eases his right eye open to a tiny, fuzzy slit.

Tha's not too bad ... now f' the other one.

He lets his resisting brain get used to the pain caused by the intensity of the light seeping in through his nearly closed eyelids. What he is seeing causes him to panic and the blood to run cold in his veins.

I'm in a jail cell! A God damned jail cell!

"How in th' name o' God did I en' up in jail?" he moans. His lips are still dry and parched and they want to stick together. It's as if he has been asleep on his back with his mouth open for a long time. He licks his lips and swallows again.

Rex grasps the edges of the bunk he is lying on and attempts to pull himself erect. The effort sends his mind into a dark spin and he feels himself whirling; spinning off the bunk and toward the floor. A last second, desperate grab for the bunk rails is the only thing that prevents a crash onto the cold, concrete. Tightly squeezed eyelids make the whirling sensations worse, so Rex relaxes them and mentally forces his mind to slow down ...to become calm; and then with great trepidation, he tries opening his eyes again.

He squints and blinks as he turns his head and looks about. Every motion of his head threatens to spin him off the bunk. Indeed, the surroundings *do* have the appearance of a jail cell. Rex has firsthand knowledge of the inside of a jail cell. Several times, in drinking days past, he had awakened in the local drunk tank to see bars in front of his eyes, but this cell is not like any he has ever seen before ... and yet; somehow, it *is*!

This cell seems much too large for an ordinary jail cell and the ceiling is not like those in the cells of the county jail. This cell has an oddly familiar feel to it; not only because the ceiling is like the one in the basement of his home on the lake; there's something else ... but what? Wooden, two by ten inch joists spaced sixteen inches apart with plywood flooring above them

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make up the ceiling of this cell. Shaking his head, he thinks, *No real jail cell would be built like this.*

The walls are constructed of eight by sixteen inch concrete blocks and are painted white. The room that imprisons him is about twelve feet long and eight feet wide and another eight feet from the concrete floor to the bottom edge of the joists above him. Rex lowers his head and closes his eyes. He breathes deeply and exhales in a loud sigh.

At least, I know I'm alive! That's good ... I think!

Leaden knees threaten to pull him to the floor as he rises from the bunk. Momentary dizziness almost forces him to sit again, but he persists. Leaning up against the table at the end of the bunk, he gives the cell closer scrutiny. A six foot opening in the center of the wall in front of him is the scariest part of all. Steel bars from the floor to the ceiling obstruct the opening. They are made from one inch galvanized steel pipes and set about six inches apart; definitely *not* State of Maine specifications for jail construction. Each bar is set into a hole drilled into the concrete floor and disappears behind one of the joists in the ceiling. He has no doubts about them being secured strongly at the top, also.

Half way up the pipes, a flat, two inch wide steel bar is welded across, binding all the bars solidly together. There is no door to the cell. There seems to be no way in and no way out. The only lighting in the cell comes from a single bare, sixty watt bulb centered on the ceiling. A twisted string dangles down from the fixture to turn it on or off.

Through the bars, Rex can see another room slightly larger than the one he is in. In the center of the far wall is a single door with another bare light bulb centered over it. There are no furnishings in that room except a wooden table to the left of the door with one green, plastic lawn chair pushed up against it. Setting on top of the table is a worn cardboard box about the size that typing paper comes in and what looks to be a pair of long, leather gloves that would come almost up to the

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elbows. The box is open and nearly full, but he can't see what is written on the top page.

Rex nearly falls as he sits down on the bunk and looks around the cell. He is sitting on a metal bunk on which there is with a thin, foam mattress covered by a single sheet. A pillow is on one end of the mattress and a folded blanket on the other. To his right is a stainless steel flush toilet. A matching stainless steel sink is attached to the wall beside it ... *very* institutional! To his left, at the foot of the bunk, is the small wooden table he had leaned on. Whoever has constructed this little prison has done it well.

Who on earth would go through all the trouble of building a cell like this?

"Hah! Not exactly all the comforts of home!" he mutters out loud. The effort makes him cough loudly.

The sudden sound of his voice bouncing off the stark walls of his prison startles him. Its dry, raspy tone makes it sound as though it belongs to someone else. It isn't until that moment that he realizes how very quiet this place is. Not a sound creeps in from the outside world. Not a vibration can be felt. It doesn't seem to him that this place is in a city. Rex's mind is beginning to settle down to its normal pace now, but the only sound he can hear is a solitary, distant ringing in his ears and the slight hoarseness of his breathing. It's then that a cold, biting fear begins to creep in and replace the frustration he is feeling.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He yells loudly, venting that frustration. Running through his mind; questions, questions, questions! *How* did he get here? *Why* was he here? Above all, *who* brought him here! He lies back down on the bunk and with eyes shut tightly, begins to search his increasingly frightened mind for answers. The last thing he can remember with any clarity is telling his wife that he is going for his usual afternoon walk. He can visualize himself kissing her goodbye.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," he is telling her.

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He leaves his summer home on the lake and walks the two hundred yards down the curving, maple lined driveway. He likes that driveway. Its green beauty prevents gawking Stephenson fans from seeing the house from the road. It gives him and Cheryl a measure of privacy. He turns left when he reaches the main road going by the property. A review copy of a book by one of his favorite authors is in his hand. He intends to sit under a large maple tree a half-mile or so up the road and read some of the book in the peace and tranquility of the warm summer afternoon.

Let me see; I walked about a quarter of a mile up the road, reading that book, and then ... then ... then what? What happened after that?

Try as he can, he can force nothing from within a resisting mind that gives him an answer to that question. He tries to relax and let the memories come, but it seems futile. Nothing helpful can be pulled up from that recalcitrant mind. He puts both hands over his tiring eyes and vents another hoarse scream of frustration.

“What in hell is going on here? Why is this happening to me? Who would do something like this? What could they want?”

A sudden overwhelming weariness comes over him and he feels himself drifting off into a dreamy but frustrated state of mind. His mind keeps seeing blinding flashes of blue-white light and can hear a popping, sputtering sound. He resists as best he can, but feels sleep overtaking him. As he drifts off, he has a momentary vision of a rusting, blue colored van drifting by him on a warm summer day. A voice from behind him floats to his ears on the balmy afternoon air. “Mr. Stephenson! Are you Rex Stephenson?”

Rex Stephenson moans, gives in to his weariness, and sleeps.

Chapter Three

HIS BIGGEST FAN

MEET CHARLES QUEEG ... CHARLES *Morrison* Queeg. He is called Charlie by his friends. (Of which, he has *very* few) He has driven by this particular house several times today. He is on a pilgrimage of a sort. This is a famous house in the world of literature, that is, if you considered works of horror fiction to be literature. This is the home of writer renown, Rex Stephenson, of *that* Queeg is now certain. He has seen pictures of this house many times over the past years. Its owner, Rex Stephenson, has become the most famous of all the authors practicing in the horror genre. The works of all other modern writers of horror fiction and ghost stories are measured against Stephenson's body of work.

It is a house wondrously befitting a writer of horror fiction. A one hundred year old two and a half story Victorian painted a dark, rich red; (The picture of dried blood enters Charles Queeg's strange little mind) a tall, octagonal turret with a pointed roof on it; slate shingles and lots of ginger bread decorating the edges of the eaves all combine to make it seem as though it belongs to another era or even another country ... Transylvania possibly?

Queeg slows his vehicle as he drives by the house this final time. "Yes! This has to be the place!" To be dead certain, an article written about Stephenson and containing a photograph of the house is on the seat beside him. He glances down at it

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one last time to reassure himself. “For sure, for sure! This is it; and that’s for *certain!* No mistaking *that* fence!”

Queeg feels a surge of adrenaline enter his blood stream. The surge is so strong it brings a brief but strong twinge of pain to his lower back. The pain is soon dulled as a warm sense of euphoria fills his mind. At last, after all these years, he is about to meet his literary hero, Rex Stephenson! He has bought and read every single book Stephenson has ever written. He has devoured each and every delicious word. Every phrase and every metaphor in Stephenson’s books strikes him as pure, unadulterated genius! In Queeg’s mind, and in the minds of literally millions of other fans, Rex Stephenson has earned the right to be called the King of Horror. Stephenson is perceived to be the best ... the *crème de la crème* of horror writers ... and *he*, Charles Morrison Queeg, is about to meet him! It doesn’t get any better than this for a diehard Stephenson fan.

Queeg slows the car almost to a stop and makes a U turn near the end of the wide street. He drives slowly back down the street and brings the vehicle to a stop at the curb opposite Stephenson’s house. He takes a deep breath and tries to slow his racing heart. After turning the ignition off, Queeg leans back against the seat and puts the keys into a pants pocket. Reaching down, he pulls the lever that opens the car’s trunk.

He opens the driver side door and gets out. After a quick, reaffirming glance at the house across the street, he walks to the back of his car and lifts the trunk cover. Inside the trunk is a blue, plastic Walmart shopping bag. “Another rollback to save you more,” proclaims a yellow smiley face on the side of the bag. In the bag are three books. One is Rex Stephenson’s first novel, *The Story of Rachel*. It isn’t a first edition; they are costly and hard to find, but it is still a *very* nice copy; hardly any wear on the dust jacket at all; *and* the price is not clipped from the jacket. This pleases Queeg. The other two books are first editions of Stephenson’s, *The Moving Finger Writes...*; a book about the writing process, and *Waltzing with the Devil*; a history

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of modern horror writing. These two are the only works of non-fiction Stephenson has written up until now.

Of all the Stephenson books, Queeg values these three the most. The thought of Stephenson inscribing these books to him fills him with a momentary giddiness. His heart is pounding in his chest; so *heavily*! It's causing his ears to ring. He smiles to himself and shakes his head. Queeg starts to close the trunk but then stops. *Whoa!* He thinks. *I almost forgot my manuscript!*

Reaching farther into the trunk, he withdraws a cardboard box containing over three hundred and fifty double spaced, typed pages. This is Charlie Queeg's first attempt at a novel. He is *very* anxious to see what Rex Stephenson will think of the manuscript.

He carefully places the boxed manuscript on top of the three books in the bag, then pulls the bag out and slams the trunk shut. Turning from the car, he faces the imposing house and again draws in a deep breath. Heart still pounding, he exhales slowly as he walks across the street to the black, imposing gate in the fanciful medieval style wrought-iron fence surrounding Stephenson's property. A smile is on his face and he feels as if his feet are not touching the ground.

Queeg pauses before the gate and then reaches for the latch. The iron latch feels heavy and cold to his nervous fingers. He lifts; a dull clank reached his ears, but the latch barely moves. Queeg frowns and looks down. He jiggles the latch several more times. "It's locked! He's locked the gate," he mutters to himself; painful disbelief permeating his voice.

He turns and takes a single, hesitant step towards his car, but then stops in mid stride; his body stiffening. "No, damn it! I'm not leaving! I didn't drive all this distance to *not* see Rex!"

He turns now, a determined frown is on his face, and walks down the sidewalk along the fenced in front yard. When he reaches the end of the fence, he takes a careful look about. Where the iron fence ends, there is a narrow opening between it and another fence, a wooden one, separating Stephenson's

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property from his next door neighbor's. Queeg looks up and down the street. No one else is in sight.

He steps to the opening and finds there is enough room for him to squeeze his body through with a little effort. Once inside the fence, he walks quickly to the back of the house. His heart is pounding rapidly; more rapidly than before. He feels the throbbing pressure of it in his neck and head. He moves closer to the house and eases himself around the corner of the building. A flagstone patio beneath tall shade trees covers most of the small backyard area. A double set of French doors looks out over the patio.

Queeg walks with almost exaggerated caution over to the doors and peers through. The room behind the doors appears to be a study or possibly a library. Book cases; their shelves heavily laden with many books, line the dark wood paneled walls. In one corner is a small desk and to the right of it, a word processor. He smiles.

This must be where he works, he thinks.

Getting braver, he steps directly in front of the door. He lays his bag of books and manuscript down on the patio; shades his eyes; leans against the door and peers through the glass. The room appears to be empty. He can see into a room beyond the study but no sign of life shows itself to his prying eyes. He taps lightly on the glass door with the tips of his fingers.

Queeg half shouts, "Hello, inside! Is anyone in there?"

He is greeted with silence. There is no answer and no movement from within. A wave of disappointment sweeps over him. His disappointment is then is swallowed up by a larger, almost overwhelming, wave of anger. "That bastard must be in there somewhere," he mutters under his breath. He tries the door handle but it is locked, also.

He kicks at the bottom of the door with the toe of his shoe. The door shakes and rattles on its hinges. "I'll go around front and ring the bell! He's *got* to be here."

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Queeg picks up the blue plastic bag containing his books and manuscript. He walks around the other side of the house and heads for the front door. His stride is one of fierce determination; his feet stomp the ground at each step.

If Rex Stephenson is in there, I'll get him to respond one way or another!

He steps up to the front door, pauses in front of it, and then pushes a shaking forefinger firmly against the door bell. He can hear the distant, hollow sound of the doorbell chimes through the door. They echo softly throughout the house. He pushes the button several more times, but still receives no answer. His whole body is shaking now as the anger within him grows in intensity. He steps up closer to the door and pounds on it with a tightly clenched fist.

"I know you're in there, Stephenson! You damn well better answer the door *now* because I'm *not* going away!"

He pounds harder yet. Still no answer to his furious knocks. Setting the plastic Wal-Mart bag on the ground at his feet, Queeg begins to pound on the door with both clenched fists.

"Open up, you dirty son of a bitch! I know you're in there. Open up *now* or you'll be *real* sorry, because I'm not about to go away!"

"Put those hands in the air and don't you move a damned inch! This is the *police*, fella!" The voice with the strong Maine accent attached, thunders through the fierce intensity of Queeg's fury and slowly sinks into his mind, and his body freezes; clenched fists seemingly stuck against the door. To his horror, his mind pictures an image of the barrel of a police pistol pointed at his back. His anger drains from him and is replaced by a cold feeling of utter disbelief.

"Put both of your hands on the back of your neck and stand very still. Someone as angry as you are could make my trigger finger *very* shaky," the voice of Officer Johnny Reagan commands.

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That bastard must have called the cops! Well, he'll pay for that ... that's for sure! That's for damn sure!

Queeg feels the touch of cold metal for the second time today, but it's not the latch of a wrought iron gate. It is the firm embrace of handcuffs clamped tightly around his wrists.

Chapter

Four

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

A MUFFLED THUMP ON the ceiling above his head awakens Rex Stephenson. He is wide awake in an instant and sits up; intensely alert. No signs of the nausea and dizziness that plagued him on his first awakening are present now. He glances down at his wrist, wondering what time it is. For the first time he realizes that his watch is not there.

They must have taken it, he thinks.

He listens intently. Was it his imagination? Had there really been a sound? Yes! There it is again, the soft sounds of a single set of footsteps! They seem to be drifting across the floor above him! It's the sound of footsteps on a carpeted floor; as if the person making the steps doesn't want them to be heard. The floorboards make a sudden snapping squeak. Yes! Someone is up there!

Rex has an urge to yell for help, but thinks better of it. Whoever has kidnapped him certainly wouldn't be having company in a room directly over their prisoner's cell. He is certain the footsteps are those of his kidnappers. How soon will it be before they come down and make their wishes known?

The muffled steps disappear across the floor and fade to nothingness. Cold, dead silence envelopes him again. Rex has no idea how long he has been here in this stark cell. It has to be more than a day. He has slept and awakened several more

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times since his first awakening. From the feel of the stubble on his face, he is certain it must be more than two days since he arrived.

Thoughts of a cold drink of ice water keep creeping into his mind. The tap water from the sink is enough to prevent dehydration, but he finds himself with an intense longing for a tall, cold drink of water with ice cubes floating in it. The more he thinks of it, the drier his mouth becomes and the thirstier he gets. He shakes his head and attempts to drive that bothersome thought from his mind.

The only reason he can come up with as to why anyone would kidnap him would be for the money. He is a rich man; several times over. All of his books have become best sellers and many have been made into movies. It seems at times that all he would have to do would be to throw some words onto those scary, blank sheets of white paper and someone will be willing to pay him money for them. He knows this really isn't true. He won't let it be true. He has a deep passion for writing. Some of the things he has written have never seen the light of day. Not because he couldn't have gotten them published, but because he himself does not think of them as being up to his own hard standards for publication.

His agent has said to him many times, "I can sell that for you, Rex."

"Nope! Not this piece of crap," he always replies. "I'll just stick it away until I can think of a way to make it fly."

He has several "pieces of crap" lying around and, indeed, on a few occasions; a *very* few occasions, he *has* made some them better and, indeed, a few of them sprouted wings and had flown. More often than not, another more worthy piece would materialize from the fruitful recesses of his mind and the pieces of crap find a permanent home in writer's limbo. They hover there like little bats at the mouth of a cave, reminding him that no matter how good he is, or how good he *thinks* he is, those little bat-like pieces of crap prove to him that every story he writes has *not* been a masterpiece.

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In spite of the dread he is feeling, he is getting most anxious to meet his captors. They *do* have to show up sometime, don't they? Not knowing anything, not hearing anything, and not having something as simple as ice ...it seems to him that *anything* would be better than this nerve wracking nothingness. A growling rumble from the pit of his stomach reminds him that it has also been a long time since he has eaten.

Rex gets to his feet and walks over to the bars of the cell. He looks across the next room to the table by the door. His eyes find the box of typing paper and the odd looking gloves again. Strain as he can, he cannot make out what is written on the top piece of paper. The layout of words on the top sheet seems to have a familiar order to them. Then it strikes him! *That looks like it might be a manuscript! What would a manuscript be doing in this place?*

He also cannot figure out why his surroundings have that vague familiarity to him. He knows for certain that he has never seen this place before. He would *certainly* remember a place like this, wouldn't he? It's not the sort of place that one would forget. Rex walks back to the bunk and sits down. He closes his eyes and almost instantly, a vision of his wife's face comes into his head. *What is she thinking right now? What is she doing? Are the police involved yet? Have his kidnappers notified her? How much ransom do they want?* More questions without answers.

The aroma of bacon drifts into his nostrils and alerts all his senses. He opens his eyes and inhales deeply. Is it his imagination? No ... it's real! It's *not* his imagination. The odor must be coming to him through the heating and air return vents. Anger flares within him. "Those sons of bitches are having breakfast and I'm down here starving! Are they *ever* going to show their God damned faces?"

The answer to that most important question will remain unanswered for the moment. Rex shakes his head and leans back into the heavy, insipid boredom of his new, timeless

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world of silence and tap water. He inhales deeply, closes his eyes, and lets out a long sigh.

Chapter Five

THE DECEPTION

CHARLES MORRISON QUEEG HAD fooled them. He had fooled them all. The lawyer he hired had been a very good choice. He and the judge belong to the same lodge. His attorney had convinced the friendly court that Queeg was merely an overly enthusiastic Stephenson fan wanting to get some books autographed. Queeg had apologized to the court for his actions and had shown what seemed to be more than the proper amount of remorse.

In spite of arresting Officer Johnny Reagan's plea that Queeg should at least be ordered to undergo some sort of psychiatric treatment because of the extreme behavior Reagan had observed, the judge had only reprimanded Queeg, fined him, and ordered him not to go within one hundred yards of Stephenson's home on West Broad Street *ever* again.

Queeg had hung his head low in front of the magistrate and had said; with regret dripping from his remorseful countenance, that *indeed*, he would most respectfully obey the order of the court. The judge seemed most anxious to get rid of one more somewhat petty, annoying case when he had rendered his judgment.

Then, Queeg had then been released back into the world. He had smiled to himself as he walked down the granite steps of the court house. It was all he could do to hold himself back and not skip down those granite steps and dance his way to his

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car in the parking lot. *Sure*, he had thought, *I'll never go near that house again. But ... he never said I couldn't go near his home on the lake!*

Queeg's own home was in New Hampshire less than a convenient hour's drive from Stephenson's lake home in western Maine. He told himself on the drive back home that he should have realized Stephenson would probably be at his summer home at this time of the year. He reprimanded himself for his error in judgment.

After he had returned home, Queeg thought things through with a new thoroughness. He had felt certain that Rex Stephenson was a different kind of person than that other author, E. V. Houseman, the writer of science fiction and fantasy. *That* bastard had been a first class prick!

Queeg had waited in line at the book store for over an hour to get Houseman to sign all of his books. He had adored that man from afar. When it was his turn to get his books signed, that fat son of a bitch Houseman had told him he was only going to sign the latest one. He just didn't have time to sign all ten of his other novels.

After all, Houseman had said, have consideration for all those other fans standing in line. Then he had laughed at Queeg in front of all those people and kept shaking his head and smiling; that shiny, trademark gold tooth of his reflecting the lights of the book store like a tiny, convex mirror. He must have polished that damn thing every day! Houseman had signed *only* the latest book and had acted as if he were dealing with a first class fool!

Have consideration, *indeed!* Queeg had spent several hundred dollars buying that man's fucking books! He had spent countless hours reading the god damned things! He had waited in line with those heavy things pulling at his arms for what seemed like forever to get them signed! By the time he had arrived in front of that fat, supercilious pig, those damned things felt as if they weighed a hundred pounds!

Houseman should have had consideration for *him!* With only that one book signed, Queeg had left the bookstore with

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the other nine books sans Houseman's signature. Other people in line had stared at him and smiled knowingly at each other as if he were some kind of an idiot from another planet. He had been humiliated.

Queeg smiled to himself as he thought back on that experience. He had gotten back at that bastard, though. A few weeks later, Houseman *had* signed all those books for him; *and* with special inscriptions. But not at a book store ... he had signed them instead at Queeg's own *special place*.

His eyes narrowed in self satisfaction and he began to nod his head. *Yes! And that prick never had an opportunity to humiliate another fan again! Not Ever! I fixed him good!*

