

— A Novel —

The
KING'S DISEASE

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Jeffrey S. Crawford



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PART 1

THE LONG NIGHT

The king is sick.

Today marks the fifth month according to the calendar of my forefathers. When the illness began, it was thought to be a common drought of mind and body, typically lasting no more than seven to ten days. After the first, month the court began to express concern. The king's temperament seemed most affected. Fits of rage and ravings that make no sense to one of sound thought. He resisted any attempt by the royal physicians to provide care and he turned violent, ordering them out of his presence, throwing his golden chamber pot and its contents at them as they fled.

Those he trusts most, his inner circle of advisors, can no longer approach him. He only grunts and raves continually, always growing agitated the longer social contact persists. Even Heabani, the one closest to the king and the most trusted of all, has been cast out. In seeking to faithfully and accurately record the account of the king's illness I have pressed Heabani for details on its origins. He is quite certain it began in the month of Tašritu when the moon shone at its fullest. It was on that night that the king returned from his walk along the flat roof of the royal palace, a most favorite location of the king to gaze upon the vastness of his kingdom, especially on this one night with the lights of the heavens showing at their brightest. "A curse! A CURSE...!" the king yelled as he stormed into his

bedchamber. “The gods have unmade me...I am finished!” He’s not come out since.

Haebani insists it’s a sickness of the moon. I personally believe in no such thing but his moods and temperament do seem to swing like the hammer of a great pendulum as the moon itself wanes and waxes. The height of his ravings always peaking as the moon itself peaks each month. But he always spirals down, never ultimately getting better.

So now, after five long months, it is clear – the king is sick. He is sick in mind, for sure. But he is also sick in body. Five months in his bedchamber, not once coming out to bathe or to freshen his clothing. His hair and beard grow long and matted. He is soiled as is his bedding. The whole room reeks of human waste and rotten food. Some days he eats but many he does not. The chambermaids refuse to attend to him out of fear. Royal guards do what they can to swipe old food and to clean up after the king, but such attempts are always cut short by the king’s violence toward all who come near. He is still the king after all.

Everyone in this country worships their own gods and I have mine. Tonight, the priests are coming to burn incense and to offer sacrifices for the king and his healing. They will be praying to their gods for the king’s relief and I will be praying to mine.

From the Journal of Meshach,
Royal court recorder for the king

Fifth day of the month of Addāru,
The nineteenth year of the king’s reign (586 BC)

CHAPTER 1

The North Coast of Ireland, October

The lone figure stumbled out of the woods onto the crumbled asphalt road. A wind whipped up and he felt cold, wet with sweat... and blood. *His* blood, or maybe it was Jorge's, or maybe it belonged to that...*thing*.

Oh, Jorge...poor, poor, Jorge.

He shuddered as he limped down the primitive road toward the glow of lights. Something was wrong with his right leg. Bad wrong. His jeans were torn and soaked with the sticky goo of his own blood. His left thigh didn't feel quite right when he probed it with his hands. Like a piece was missing. And the pain...the searing pain.

He had to make it to the small town. They could help him. Somebody would know what to do. It was late but someone would still be awake, right? He would pound on

the door of each house until someone opened and helped him, and then...Jorge, they'd go find Jorge.

We have to find Jorge. We can't just leave him out there. And the thing, whatever it is...there will be safety in numbers. And we will take guns.

The moon had been high and full, but now clouds rolled in and the low hum of thunder could be heard in the distance. Rain was coming. He had to get to the village. They could help him. He stopped for just a moment and looked back to the woods. His bad leg gave out and he collapsed onto the road, hard, the pebbles of asphalt cutting into his elbows.

More blood.

And tired.

So tired.

He looked up into the sky, a prayer escaping from his dry lips - "Oh God, help me..."

A shake of his head. Once. Then a second time. Trying to clear the fog. He'd passed out when his head hit the tree. He'd been flung at least six feet into it, right? The last thing he heard was Jorge's scream and then everything faded away.

He'd been out, who knows how long. But when he came to, he was alone. All alone. Jorge was gone and he was a mess. He reached up to feel the back of his head where it had slammed into the trunk of the big oak. It was a matted mess, his hand coming away with a chunk of loose hair as he clenched his fist and then released it. His fingers were tacky from dried blood, so the hair just sort of stuck to his palm. That *was* his hair, right? Some of it looked darker and coarser than his own. He found himself staring out of

The King's Disease

curiosity. And then he shook his head yet again, trying to come back to the moment.

He had to keep moving.

He had to get up and he had to get moving again. He had to make it to the light.

To the town.

To help.

It suddenly struck him. *That* thing could still be out here. In fact, it likely *was* still out here...with him. Stalking him. Like before. That's what had happened to him and Jorge. They'd been stalked and caught, totally unawares.

What if it was playing with him? Like a cat with a mouse. Toying and playing. Pouncing and then letting go. But not really letting go. Just a game. To see the mouse limp and make its way toward its little hole in the ground. Its nest of safety. Watching from a distance with glee as the poor mouse made its way forward with the false hope of survival. What if he was the mouse and what if that thing out there was the cat? Playing with him.

His heart was suddenly racing, his breaths coming in quick, short gasps.

I've got to get up, I've got to move! Maybe there is no hope, but moving is my only chance at hope.

Balancing on the palms of both hands, he made to push himself up. Pain shot through his leg once again like a hot fire. And then forward.

Step. Drag. Step. Drag.

A roll of thunder, closer this time, the first rain drops beginning to fall.

This is good, he thought. Harder to track me in the rain. Water washes the scent away, right? I've seen something about that on

Discovery Channel. And the clouds block the light of the moon. Make it darker. Harder to see me.

A glimmer of hope was rising inside of him and he quickened his pace.

But animals can see in the dark.

He stopped and frantically looked back again. Was that a shape moving across the road? So hard to see now because it was getting darker. The clouds thickened and the rain was falling harder.

That's right, animals have night vision.

He had to move.

A first flash of lightning illuminated the outline of a small house just ahead. Hope swelled. If he could just make it to the house.

I must look a mess, he thought in panic. Who would let someone covered in blood into their home in the middle of the night?

He used his hand to wipe his face and smooth his hair. *Ouch!* New pain shot through the back of his head as he brushed over it. But the pain brought clarity. What exactly had happened? It was coming back to him now.

He and Jorge had spent the last couple of days in this same town. It *was* this town, right? Hard to tell right now - it was so dark and he was confused - but he thought so, nonetheless. The people had been friendly enough and there was much to see from this village along the Irish coast.

The first day of hiking was stunning, the weather perfect. He'd grown up seeing pictures of the majestic bluffs of Ireland as they dropped off into the Atlantic Ocean, but standing on the edge of one, over three hundred feet in the air, truly did take your breath away.

The King's Disease

Heading back to their bed and breakfast, they had taken a shortcut across a field and stumbled upon four mutilated cows. The scene was grotesque. The bloated animals had been exposed for some time, covered in flies and maggots. They reported the find to the owners of the B&B, a nice couple – Vaughn and Patricia O’Leary – but they didn’t seem too alarmed.

“Aye,” Vaughn had said, “wild animals or wolves or some such. It happens from time to time.”

“But the cows had not been eaten,” Jorge mentioned to him later. “Don’t wolves kill to eat? Those cows had just been...torn apart.”

The pair pressed the owner to report it to the local authorities and Vaughn said he’d take care of it, but they questioned whether or not he really would.

And then tonight.

He and Jorge had headed out on a late afternoon hike to watch the sunset from the top of Masterson Peak. With the moon full, they’d planned to stay and take in a late-night view from the high point of the region, hiking back to town before midnight. And oh, how stunning it all was. The sunset was the best the two friends had seen on their backpacking trip across England, Scotland, and now Ireland.

They’d built a small fire and roasted hot dogs for dinner. Jorge pulled out his mini-Martin and began to strum tunes from his native Venezuela. The moon crested bright and full, revealing a unique beauty of the countryside all around. It had been a perfect day and with plenty of light in the night sky, the two had decided to head back to town shortly after 10:00 pm.

As they picked their way through the dense woods,

they'd gotten lost a couple of times but managed to find the trail after some backtracking.

"Rain's coming later tonight, Jorge, we can't afford to get lost too many more times," he'd chided his friend, all in good fun.

"Don't worry about me, amigo! Worry about yourself. Venezuelans always find their way home."

The smell was the first thing they noticed. Like a thick wave of musk.

The pair looked at each other, Jorge commenting that his skin felt prickly. And just like that, like some primal instinct, they knew they were being hunted.

Now, hours later - there really was no way to know what time it was. His watch had been torn from his wrist and in his confusion after coming to, he'd simply left his backpack behind. But he was almost to the dark house on the road. *Gotta get help*, was all he could think.

Then he realized it wasn't a house at all, but an old dilapidated shed for holding sheep or some other kind of animal.

Dread. And then fear.

And then he was walking faster down the road, past the shed. Other houses, real houses, came into view.

Step. Drag. Step. Drag.

The rain falling harder now.

The town center was still two or three blocks away and that's where the B&B was, but he needed help *now*. No time to wait. He chanced a look back over his shoulder once again and froze.

Was that? Yes!

In the distance, too hard to judge how far, but it was

The King's Disease

there. Something in the road. The shape undefined, but...two eyes. Two *yellow* eyes... piercing the darkness and the rain. Fear shot through his body, draining him of what strength he had left. He whipped around and ran, dragging his way past one house.

Then two houses.

The third house shone a light in the front window. That was his target. His best chance of help. His best chance of survival. Bounding up the two wooden steps onto the porch, he reached the front door and banged hard with his bloody fist. Red smeared the white paint. He could hear footsteps moving beyond the threshold.

“Please God, let them hurry,” he shouted through clenched teeth.

He was out of breath, his heart pounding.

In the light of the porch he looked down and saw more blood from his leg pooling on the wood planks. That’s when he realized he’d been losing blood along the way.

Like a trail for the hungry wild to follow.

Like a cat being led to the mouse.

He felt light-headed.

The latch to the door disengaged and the handle turned.

As the door opened slowly, the warm glow of light and heat from the hearth poured out. A middle-aged man stood in the opening and stared at the late-night visitor standing on his porch.

Behind him a woman screamed and the visitor collapsed.

CHAPTER 2

Phineas T. Crook sat on the balcony of his hotel room in his boxers and t-shirt. He was drenched in sweat.

Looking out across the Thames River, his gaze was fixed on the lights of the London Eye in the distance. He was shivering. His shoulders carried an uncontrollable quiver as his knees jiggled up and down.

“What is wrong with me?” he whispered, working the palms of his moist hands together. It was well after midnight; he hadn’t bothered to check the time when he woke up. It was another panic attack, like so many he had suffered from the last three months. He inhaled deeply. Hold and count – one, two, three. Then exhale. Repeat.

A warm presence eased up behind him and he regretted disturbing her sleep.

“It’s a beautiful night.” A melodic voice instantly soothed him as a comforting hand rested on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," was all Phin could manage to say. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Nonsense," the voice replied quickly. "I've slept enough for a lifetime. Life is short. If you're awake, I want to be awake." She pulled a matching wrought iron chair over next to Phin's and settled in, her head leaning over onto his shoulder.

The two sat in silence as the moments ticked by, the beat of Phin's heart calming, his t-shirt drying in the slight evening breeze. She always had this effect on him. When Autumn was awake and with him, he was all good. His dearly beloved wife. His most precious earthly treasure. Who once was lost but now was found. A miracle of God that he did not deserve. And yet, they were together again.

"You had another episode, didn't you?" Autumn didn't really know what to call it. But her husband was suffering, and she struggled to understand the what and the why of it all. "We can talk about it if you want. Or not. Or we can just go back to bed, Phineas. I'm here, though. You don't have to worry anymore." She squeezed his arm tight.

And that was the heart of the problem for Phineas Crook - he worried constantly that he would lose his wife again. It had become a daily torment over the course of the last three months since she had been back with him.

"I know, I know," he replied, pulling away so that he could look at her. He never got tired of looking at her. Her silky brown hair, her milky smooth skin, but mostly her eyes - especially her eyes - their hazel tint. Now open to a world they had been closed to for the last three-and-a-half years. "In my mind, I know that all is well. That you are back and healthy and healed, but in my heart..." he stammered to

continue. “In my heart, I’m scared, Autumn. I am scared to death that something is going to happen. That I’m going to lose you all over again.”

A tear formed in the corner of Autumn’s eye as she turned her head slightly toward the river. She could only imagine what the last three years had been like for her husband. For her it was but a moment.

The last thing she remembered was being shot in the stomach in downtown Oklahoma City. It was their sixth wedding anniversary and they had celebrated with a lovely dinner and a show. After that came the most amazing dream that seemed, to her, but a moment in time. But to Phin, it had been three years. A long, lonely, and tortuous three years. Three years of monthly visits to Second Life, Inc. in Plano, Texas, to visit Autumn. His precious E, as he loved to call her - the E standing for her middle name of Eden. Like the Garden of Eden, he’d always thought. Well, that now took on a whole new meaning after the events of the last year which had led to...now. She was back. It really was a miracle. Even the media called it that.

No patient of Second Life, Inc. had ever awakened. Oh, that was the whole point of the service, to provide a “suspended animation” type of care that could theoretically last until some point in the future when medicine could advance to the point that whatever led to a patient’s near demise could be cured. But the technology and service provided by Second Life, Inc. was still very new and no patient had ever been revived.

Until Autumn.

And now she was back, her wounds healing on their own with remarkable speed. She was up and about within

forty-eight hours and discharged from medical care within a week. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. The Crooks were inundated with media requests from the local news affiliates. CNN and Fox News picked up the story, as did the AP, which pushed it to all the national papers. 48 Hours wanted to do a special on the couple and their story. It was overwhelming to say the least. All Phineas and Autumn wanted to do was get away. And that's exactly what they did.

Phin's employer, Oklahoma Baptist University, had extended his sabbatical through the fall semester so the couple could reconnect. It may have only been a moment in time in Autumn's internal clock, but three years *had* passed. A lot had changed in the world. A lot had changed in *her* world. When she went to sleep, she had been a pastor's wife living in Oklahoma City. When she woke up, she was a college professor's wife living in a quaint little home on Broadway Avenue in Shawnee, Oklahoma.

The first time Phin drove her "home" it had felt so unreal. Walking up to a house that wasn't hers, yet it was. All the furniture, the pictures, and knick-knacks...their bed. It was all the same, but in a new place. Those first days were dizzying as she took it all in. Phin had taken Autumn on a tour of the OBU campus, introducing her to all of his colleagues and friends. It was as if his life had gone on while hers had frozen in time.

For Phin's part, it hardly seemed like life had gone on. Oh, time had continued to tick by, the days of the calendar flipping from one day to the next. But the life that Phin had grown to love and cherish, the life with his darling E, had come to a crashing halt - the only remaining remnant being

his trips to see his sleeping beauty at Second Life, Inc. Her comatose, near lifeless body behind a shield of Plexiglass. But now she was back, just like before.

But not.

Life was now so very different and crazy. Everybody, it seemed, wanted a piece of them. To know the story. A story that in a very real and serious sense Phin was prohibited from telling.

The events surrounding the search for the Garden of Eden and real story behind Autumn's recovery were off limits, both legally and practically. What Phin and Autumn needed more than anything else was to be left alone. They needed time and they needed time away. So they'd simply left.

He didn't need to be back until the start of J-Term in January, and so the Crooks did what the Crooks loved doing most. They traveled. Boarding a plane with one-way tickets to Europe, they simply fell off the radar and had remained off the radar for the last couple of months. Their most recent journey had led them to a favorite city of theirs, London.

"You're not going to lose me again, Phin." Autumn had turned back to face Phin. Her tears gone, nothing but determination in her face. She was a fighter. Another characteristic Phin loved about his wife.

"You can't know that, sweetheart."

"Of course I can't *know* that, Phin. Nobody knows the future. But listen, I'm not going anywhere. What happened to me – to us – was a fluke thing. We could live to be one hundred and not be assaulted and me shot again. And the doctors all say that I am one hundred percent healed. They

even said my body looks better than new in some respects. So, listen to me, Phin.” She grabbed both of his hands and looked hard into his brown eyes, his floppy brown wave of hair mussed to one side. “We are going to grow old...together. Do you hear me? This. Will. Happen.”

Phin felt embarrassed and his face flushed a bit. Why was it so easy for her to be the brave one?

“Oh, E, you are the best of me.” The tension eased a bit in his shoulders. “I will say this.” A bit of mischief appeared in his eyes and a sly smile returned to his face. “The doctors are right. Your body definitely looks better than new.” He winked.

“Stop it!” She slapped his chest playfully. Phin drew her into a long embrace and kissed her gently.

They made their way back to bed and then eventually back to sleep. At least Autumn fell back asleep. Sleep was something that eluded Phin these days. Oh, he’d nod off well enough, but he always woke up prematurely, fear taking its cold hold. The first thing he would do is check to make sure Autumn was breathing, that she was still there with him. And then the second wave of fear would hit him. *Will she wake up? When the sun rises, will she?* He fought the urge to nudge her, just to make sure she was really with him. The last three years had taken their toll on Phin, and it seemed he was still paying the price.

As Phin lay in bed, his wife asleep by his side, he wondered when it would all end and life would return to normal. Was normal even still possible for the Crooks?

CHAPTER 3

“Quit lagging behind!”

Malcolm Connor yelled over his shoulder. “The sooner we get there the sooner we can get out of this mess.” The rain was coming down in sheets as the two young men slogged their way down the muddy trail that led to the beach. They each carried a battery-powered torch to illuminate the path that had degenerated into a slippery mess. More than once they each had taken a spill.

Behind him, Jamison Murphy slipped yet again, a round of curses pouring from his mouth. “I’m not even supposed to be out here tonight. It wasn’t my turn.”

“Stop yer yappin’ already. Greg has the fever and so you’re next on the list. That’s how it works and you know it. It’s not like no one’s covered for you before,” Malcolm reminded his partner. That quieted Jamison for the moment as he troweled a layer of mud off his trousers with

The King's Disease

his hand. The two trudged on, careful with each step.

Malcolm was the older of the two but not by much, only a year. They'd gone to school together and had known each other their whole lives. He'd always known Jamison to complain about the smallest inconveniences. Tonight, the inconveniences had come in triplet form.

First, he'd called Jamison to fill in for Greg Collins last minute, only an hour-and-a-half ago now. In Malcom's defense, he himself had only found out about Greg's illness about fifteen minutes before that. When he saw Jamison's name on the list as the "next" he had rolled his eyes.

Second, a storm had blown in, and harder than had been expected. It was never an easy hike to the cave, but in the dead of night and in the rain, well....

Finally, their shift had fallen on the evening of a full moon. Everything was inflamed when the moon was full. The tide was stronger. Storms were fiercer. And then "they" were always more agitated. On edge. Which is why the two of them had to do a shift change in the middle of the night.

Normally, on all other nights, the shift change occurred at dawn. But when the moon was full it had been decided that relief should be extended every four hours instead of every eight. And if your name fell on the night of a full moon – well, that's what had happened to Malcom and Jamison and, yes, it was inconvenient.

But such was the duty of the citizens of the small Irish township of Tiamat. Theirs was a close-knit community with outsiders visiting only for tourism purposes, and not many at that. As in most small towns, everyone knew everyone else's business. Few ever left for the world at

large, and those who did always returned, usually choosing to work the family business, whatever that be, to get married, and then to die. And so it had been for many generations in Tiamat. The decision to have children, well that was a bit more complicated. While propagation was strongly encouraged, some couples didn't want to subject another generation to the peculiarities of life in their village. Others - most, actually - embraced the duty to procreate. The joy of children outweighing the trials, as they saw it.

All Malcolm and Jamison cared about at this moment, though, was getting their shift over with. But first they had to get to the cave.

"When are you and Marilyn getting married?" Jamison asked, trying to change his sour attitude by focusing on something different, happy.

"Next summer, but I'd be all for tying the knot sooner. I keep telling her that we just need to run away to Dublin and get hitched with the judge. But she'll have none of it." Malcolm laughed, recalling the numerous times he'd playfully giggled his fiancé with the notion.

"My mum says you two are a perfect match, Malcolm. I'm happy for you, truly I am."

This lifted Malcolm's spirits to hear such words coming from Jamison Murphy. It was no secret that he'd been sweet on Marilyn all the way back to grade school. Oh, they'd dated for a while, but she was forever turned away by his propensity for negativity. Malcolm was surprised that he was being so openly positive about his pending marriage to her. Maybe Jamison was finally growing up.

"Thanks much, Jami. I appreciate it, I do. I know you had hopes for you and Marilyn at one time."

The King's Disease

“True enough. Marilyn’s a real looker she is, but I’ve got an eye for Molly Walsh now. If you haven’t heard, we’ve been seeing each other the last month or so.”

“She’s gotta be five years younger than you, Jami! And still in school, she is. Are you sure her father’s gonna take a liken’ to you dating his daughter?” Malcolm was surprised that any girl would be interested in Jamison. He didn’t have the best reputation in town with young and old alike. For his part, he didn’t like the way he talked about Marilyn being a “looker” and all, so he supported anything or anyone else that might divert his attention away from her.

“Oh, don’t worry about ol’ Bob Walsh. I’ve got him in my hip pocket, I do.” Jamison chuckled. “Molly says that her and her da don’t get on very well and that he can’t wait for her to graduate, find a man, and move on. Well, I aim to be that man. Malcolm, she really does like me, I tell you. At least it seems like she does. And she’s as ready to get out of her father’s house as he is to get her out. Why, the first time I went over to meet her folks, it was Bob himself who opened the door and invited me right on in. Shook my hand real hard and was all smiles. Told me I was welcome anytime and that he was real excited Molly and me was a datin’.”

“Well, alright, I suppose.” Malcolm couldn’t help but join in Jamison’s newfound joy. He turned and shook his wet hand. “Best of luck to you both, Jami. Who knows, it might be a race to see which one of us gets married first.” The two laughed in spite of the rain and wind, both of which seemed to be dying down somewhat.

It was another ten minutes until the two men broke free from the forest trail that descended the bluff to near beach

level. The path was already becoming sandy although still mixed with dirt and mud. The storm was nearly gone and the clouds were thinning, the night sky beginning to lighten.

Malcolm's thoughts had turned inward again. The talk of girls and Marilyn and dating had him thinking again about his impending summer wedding. Marilyn wanted to leave Tiamat behind and move somewhere, preferably out of the country. She had a fascination with Scotland and was putting the pressure on him to at least consider it. But he just wasn't sure. His parents and the city elders really put the pressure on the next generation to stay and help the township stay alive and hopefully even grow. The reality of the situation was that it was just too hard and risky to leave. Oh, some did, but eventually all came back. Especially once they had children. And then there was the cave. The little secret of Tiamat. Actually, it would be a big secret if anyone on the outside were to ever find out. Which no one had...yet.

The two men followed their torch beams along the beach, staying close to the overhang of the bluff. The cave was just ahead, maybe another hundred meters, and they could make out a small fire just at the entrance. It was normal practice to keep one going for warmth on these cold fall nights.

"Who's on duty tonight?" Jamison asked, breaking the silence.

"Blake and Sheamus. The brothers."

"Well, they'll be glad to see us, I'm sure. One thing's for certain, their hike back will be a heckuva lot easier than our hike down."

"I don't know, it's still pretty muddy up there - "

The King's Disease

Malcolm's words cut off as he walked up the small rise to the campfire burning just inside the cave's entrance. Something wasn't right. He'd felt it a few meters back but had tried to dismiss it.

"Hey, where are they – "

"Ssshhhhh!" Malcolm cut his partner off. Setting down his pack, he eased his way toward the fire. No one was around and he strained to hear any sounds coming from deeper within the cave itself. He could make out scratches and what sounded like muffled grunts.

"Those guys better not be jackin' with us."

"I said be quiet, Jami!" Malcolm interjected again, this time holding up his hand toward Jamison while straining his eyes to see into the darkness. Seeing what he was trying to do, Jamison sidled up next to him, flipping on his torch.

The horror that lay before the young men paralyzed them both.

Jamison couldn't move.

It was as if his feet had been cemented to the ground. He was shivering, beads of sweat popping out on his forehead. He couldn't take his eyes off of the scene in front of him. Next came the sensation of warmth as his bladder lost control. The torch fell from Jamison's hand, landing with a loud crash on the rock floor. The light went out, plunging the pair back into an eerie darkness save the dying fire just meters behind them.

"Rrr...rrrr....RUN!"

CHAPTER 4

“Get some bandages while I hold this towel in place. We have to stop the bleeding.”

Ross McCloud pressed down hard on the thigh of the unconscious man. He’d been reading a book, trying to ward off his insomnia, when the bang on the front door had come. Startled, he had cautiously made his way to open the door, not certain at all what to expect. Mattie, his wife, had been rustled from her sleep due to the commotion and had come out from the back room to see what the need could possibly be at this hour.

“I’ll be right back. Just keep the pressure on that wound,” Mattie called back as she rushed to the closet and yanked down an old bedsheet. They would need more than the few bandages they had on hand.

The man was a mess, wet with dirt and mud and blood all over, but the leg was the worst. It looked like he’d been

attacked by some wild animal. He was probably lucky to be alive. His blood loss was severe. Mattie started ripping strips of cloth, dropping down next to Ross to begin first aid in earnest.

“Here,” she commanded. “Let me see what we’ve got.”

Ross let her move in and take control. Mattie was good in situations like this, having volunteered at the local physician’s office for the last decade. She was only a receptionist, but Dr. Kelly enlisted her help from time to time with various patients and she had picked up a lot of pointers on wound care along the way.

Mattie slowly removed the towel. The bleeding had slowed greatly from the pressure Ross had applied. This was good news. Cautiously, they cut away the man’s trousers, and then with great care Mattie cleaned the wound with clean towels and warm water. The thigh muscle was more intact than she’d first thought, but the wound was still severe.

“Looks like it was ripped open,” Ross commented with fascination. “Like he was just flayed. And look at all the bruises on his arms and torso.” Even with his shirt still on, the rips and tears in the fabric exposed his pale skin. “His head’s a mess too. Man, this guy really went through the ringer with something.”

“Or someone.” Mattie eyed him knowingly.

“Don’t talk like that, Mattie,” Ross replied with a stern tone. “We haven’t had problems like that in a long time now. We’ve taken precautions. You know the system works just fine.”

“Yes, you are right. It’s just...” Her voice trailed off. “I wonder who he is.” Mattie gently brushed his long black

hair off of his forehead, using a rag to clean the grime from his cheeks. Their unconscious visitor had a kind face, a naïve innocence in his appearance. “There,” she declared. “That’s better.”

She finished cleaning the wound, applying generous amounts of antiseptic the best she could before binding the leg with the strips of cloth from the bedsheet.

“Let’s get some fresh clothes on him and then put him in Tommy’s bed,” Ross suggested. At the mention of their only son’s name, Mattie stopped working and looked into Ross’s brown eyes. The same eyes as Tommy’s. “I know what you’re thinking, Mattie, but he can’t stay here on the floor. It’s either Tommy’s bed or ours.”

The mention of their son touched a tender spot with both of the McClouds, a deep heartache. They lived a simple life in the small hamlet of Tiamat with Ross functioning as the town’s gunsmith. He had a small shop on the square that had been passed to him from his father, who had received it from his father, and so it had gone, back for several generations. Between what the shop made and Mattie’s modest income from Dr. Kelly’s office, they did well for themselves. But their home was small - just a two-bedroom single story dwelling that had been passed to the couple from Mattie’s side of the family. Small, but enough room for the couple and their son, Tommy. But Tommy was gone now and had been for some time.

“I know, but...it’s just, it’s Tommy’s room and he’s coming home soon.” Mattie’s heart churned. She had kept his room exactly the same as the day he left, his return inevitable.

"Not till later next year, the spring at the earliest. This is just for tonight, until we figure out what to do."

"What to do? We have to get him to Dr. Kelly for starters. I've only stopped the bleeding and bound the wounds. This boy needs stitches and probably a blood transfusion. Maybe even surgery. And then we need to let the town council know."

"I think that's an overreaction, dear. I'm not sure this is a council matter."

"Not a council matter? Excuse me, but we have a stranger in our home. A stranger to this town who's been torn apart. This was no accident. Someone did this to him." Mattie barked back at her husband. She had a gift for cutting to the chase.

"Not someone! Some *thing*. Or it was an accident," Ross shot back.

"We don't know that either. Not for sure. In fact, what we don't know about this young man and what happened to him is more than what we do know. That's why we need to inform the council. You know I'm right."

Ross did know she was right. He just didn't like it. The implications for what this might mean was a road he didn't want to go down. That none of them wanted to go down. The chances were that Ross was correct, that this was an accident with some wild animal their late-night visitor had run into.

"Okay, yes, we will let the council know first thing in the morning. Let's get him settled first, and then I will go and call on Dr. Kelly. He won't like it but I don't want to be responsible for another person's life any longer than is necessary."

Mattie still didn't like the idea of putting the stranger in Tommy's room but her husband was correct, Tommy wouldn't be home for at least six more months. Once this terrible night was over she could wash the bedsheets and return the room to the way it was. She washed the sheets monthly anyway so this would not be out of the norm.

They carefully lifted the young man, easing him to the spare bedroom and onto the bed. It was not easy work and they took extreme caution so as not to reopen his wounds. Next, they cut away his tattered trousers and shirt and Mattie gave him a warm sponge bath, wiping away the blood, grime, and mud from his body. Ross went and found some of his old clothes to redress their guest. Mattie drew a hard line with using Tommy's clothes. While Mattie dressed the young man, Ross cleaned up the living room and porch. Their guest had made quite a mess with his entrance.

Ross finally slipped on his canvas overcoat and walking boots, intending to head for Dr. Kelly's home. He was not looking forward to having to wake up the good doctor.

That's when he heard the shouting. Outside and in the distance.

"What's that commotion outside?" Mattie rushed into the living room, a look of panic on her face.

"No idea, I was just about to check." Ross pulled back the front curtain, straining to look down the street toward the town center. "There's someone out there. He's running from house to house, banging and yelling. I think it's Harv Connor but I'm not sure." Ross looked back at his wife, a puzzled expression on his face.

The King's Disease

"This is crazy," she whispered. "What's going on out there tonight?"

As if to answer her question, heavy footfalls bounded onto the McCloud front porch followed by pounding on the front door – for a second time that night.

"Ross! Ross! You awake? Open your door," came a wild call.

It *was* Harv Connor, his gravelly voice unmistakable. Ross ripped open the front door.

"Ross! I saw your light on. Come quick. We're all meeting over at O'Leary's. It's an emergency." Harv was winded, his face shining with sweat behind his grizzled beard, eyes wide.

"What's happening, Harv? What's going on?" Ross questioned.

"It's the cave, Ross. There's trouble at the cave. Something's happened, that's all I know. But you need to come quick. I've got to find the rest of the council. Just come now." And with that Harv Connor tore off into the night.

Trouble at the cave.

Trouble in his back bedroom.

Trouble.

Ross looked at his wife one more time. That same knowing look they'd shared earlier returning to each other's eyes.

"I'll be back. Lock. This. Door." He made a move onto the porch and grabbed the front door handle, about to pull it closed.

"Wait," Mattie called to him. She shoved the cold steel of a stock and long barrel into his hand. "Take your gun."