



TENDER PREY

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Excerpt

PROLOGUE

New Years Eve, 1984

When the frosty gray mist rolls in off the waters of cold Puget Sound, the old house is spooky enough. Its tall narrow face, gingerbread trim, gabled windows and dark balconies only add to its sinister force, reminiscent of an old Alfred Hitchcock film. Yet for one small mind, it's more, a virtual den of horrors as evening darkness descends and shadows fill every nook and cranny. Particularly frightening is the poorly illuminated third floor bedroom with its single window. Fat furry creatures, their eyes wide and shiny, align the shelves. Cute and cuddly during the light of day, they quickly become smirking, evil little critters in the twilight dimness, awaiting their chance to pounce on the small trembling form on the little white metal bed.

Through the glimmer of light from a partially open door, the lovable, funny clown with big red shoes, such a joy only a few hours earlier, seems diabolical, capable of evil deeds and untold mayhem. Even the soft, fat teddy bear transforms to become bloated and malicious.

Occasionally a wind gust will brush some bare Madrona branches against a windowpane or the shingled roof, making it very easy for a young mind to imagine demonic fingernails tapping, seeking to be let inside. A dull light two levels below faintly glows through the small door crack. It should bring a small measure of comfort to the frightened child. Instead, it only adds to the hellish atmosphere casting its shadows, evoking distant memories of a Halloween horror house the family had visited once in a far away place called California. Etched into memory from this single visit is a vision of a flickering gate leading to hell, a shadowy figure beckoning just inside its darkened passageway.

A shrill, intermittent scream slices through the night air, inciting the tiny hands to clutch at the bedcover. Wild laughter outbursts emanate from the bowels of the creepy old house, amplifying the grotesque effects of the dark room ten-fold. The displaced gaiety of clinking wine glasses and the surging and waning disco music periodically float upward, creating macabre sensations—akin to finding a perfectly formed rose in the midst of a bloody accident scene. From afar, a lonely barking dog wale punctuates the eerie night.

Under the soft yellow happy-face blanket, a small form huddles in a fetal position—as if this will afford some protection. It won't. At least it hasn't before. The sounds subtly change as the boisterous party below finally begins to break up. They would be coming soon. They *always* came after a party. As the thin arms hug at cramped knees and the weary, tired eyes squeeze tightly shut in a valiant but vane effort to hold back time, the small figure tries to will itself invisible. A soft sob escapes as the all too familiar sounds reach the bedroom door. *There!* The first tiny squeak—the seventh step of the old stairway! Those alert little ears know there will be yet another on the fourteenth—this one, louder. This dreaded knowledge gained from other episodes of lying awake late into the night, listening—listening for each memorized squeak to announce their coming. *There!* The loud fourteenth step. The squeaky door opens wide, a tall shadow filling the doorway. Pausing briefly, the male crossed to the bed, casting his shadow over the bright yellow bedspread. Frozen and terrified, eyes tight, the frightened child holds its breath, pretending sleep.

“Daddy and Mommy are giving our friends a ride home,” the deep gentle voice soothes, as huge hands snugly gather the happy-face blanket around the small trembling body. “They drank a little too much and aren't feeling very well, so we don't want them to drive. We won't be gone long, so stay awake and wait

for us sleepy head. Mommy and I will be back to tuck you in and play some of our games before we all go to sleep.”

The tall shadow moves away, exits, and the room falls silent once more. As the door closes, a click echoes off the old plaster walls, plunging the room into total darkness.

OK. There, it's the *loud* squeak again—and finally, the *last* one, signaling retreat of the immediate threat. As the silence settles, the child shudders, and with a deep sobbing breath raises a comforting thumb, then quietly begins to cry.

New Year's Day, 1985

Doctor Ben Popham observed the small child waiting patiently in his oversized leather chair; stoically quiet, with none of the fidgeting or squirming typical of kids that age. As he meandered about his large book-lined study, the wide, liquid eyes obediently follow him. Lonely and distant, they possess a lingering quality of . . . it was difficult to identify. Sadness maybe? At seventy-four, Doctor Popham had been practicing medicine for more than fifty years, frequently being called upon to break sad or unpleasant news to friends and surviving family members. He'd found the old saying, 'Practice makes perfect,' certainly didn't apply in these cases. He'd never done it well, nor found it to be easy. Having been this family's physician for about ten of those fifty years, he'd treated them all for common ailments, even attending to the birth of this disturbing child. *This won't be easy*, he thought as he faced away, staring through the sizeable picture window overlooking some bare maple trees that lined a large circular drive. He'd always enjoyed the view from his home office, especially during the fall when the leaves exploded with color. Now the sky and limbs were depressing, matching his mood. Having put off the inevitable for as long as possible, he sighed deeply, reluctant to turn. Carefully choosing his words, he cleared his throat.

“Corky, do you remember when God took your kitten so it could go live with him?”

“God didn't kill Cupcake. A dirty white van did.” the child muttered defiantly.

He was right. This wouldn't be easy. The old doctor continued to face the window, intent on not looking at the child's sad eyes during the next part of his message. “Yes, yes. I know, I know. But you remember what your mother told you about it not being the driver's fault? That it was just God's way of taking Cupcake to Kitty Heaven so he could be with God.” Thick silence greeted his remarks so he plunged blindly ahead.

Best to just get this over with, he thought again as he hastened on.

“When something dies, Corky, it doesn't just go away and that's the end of it. It's not really gone at all because it lives on in heaven, forever.” He paused, but greeted with silence, continued, carefully selecting his next words. “Last night, God took your parents, like he did Cupcake. They're going to live in Heaven with him from now on. As they drove friends home from their party last night, they skidded on black ice and failed to negotiate that curve by the small bridge near the main road. Their car plunged into the water and never came up. Honey, all four of them drowned.”

The child emitted a small muffled sound. Hot tears sprang to the old doctor's eyes. He stared straight ahead, daring not to turn until his task was completed.

“Does that mean they won't ever be coming back again?” The tiny voice sounded so very distant, frightened.

Popham steeled himself for the final part, that which would come when he finally faced the child and attempted to offer whatever comfort he could manage. “Yes, I'm afraid it does, Corky. They're with God now,” he replied, rapidly blinking his stinging eyes. The old man removed a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed at his watery eyes, his voice cracking, “I'm terribly sorry, Corky...so very sorry.”

Those small sniffing sounds had grown stronger. He knew the time had finally come for him to face the child's sorrow. Sighing deeply, Doctor Popham stiffened his resolve, reluctantly turning to face those large, hauntingly sad eyes. Corky had not moved, but the eyes were no longer distant. Startled, chilled to the bone, Popham discovered he'd been badly mistaken about the noises he'd thought were sniffles. A dark realization washed over him as the child struggled to hold some emotion inside—it wasn't grief and tears! The hair on the back of the old doctor's neck stiffened as shivers shot through him. These weren't the sounds of a child's grief. It was *laughter!*

Corky was happy!

April 14, 2005

The Seattle rain deluge was heavy, even for this early in the spring. Beginning as intermittent showers just before noon, the steel gray sky had finally split wide open and by late afternoon the weather had turned into a real “*rat drowner*”, as locals often called it. By evening, rain still continued to pour steadily, then off and on, well past midnight. Slackening momentarily, the clock tower in Pioneer Square could clearly be seen for the first time in several hours; 2:21 a.m. Puddles glistened, dotting the cobblestone plaza, while torrents of dirty water threatened to inundate swollen gutters.

Only one vehicle could be detected in a nearby alley, a late 1980’s battered white van with tinted blackout windows. Parked in the shadows, it might never have been noticed had it not been for the flashing neon lights of a nearby espresso shop. To a casual observer the van could’ve seemed deserted; just another vehicle left overnight from the day’s bustling activities. A closer more careful scrutiny, however, would reveal thin vapors whiffing skyward as the raindrops splattered upon its warm hood.

The driver’s side door finally swung wide. A black clad figure emerged, briefly glancing at the dark sky, seemingly impervious to the chilling rain. Yanking the van’s side door to the rear, the figure entered the dark interior, and then reappeared, hoisting a heavy elongated plastic wrapped object. Stooped by the weight of this heavy burden, the figure walked briskly to the center of the alley, slowly knelt, then gently placed the bundle onto the wet pavement.

Quickly reentering the van, the figure retrieved another parcel, round but much smaller, placing it beside the first. The figure carefully unwrapped each, working over the objects lovingly for several minutes then straightened briefly as if to admire the finished work. Apparently satisfied, the plastic sheets were hastily collected and tossed into the rear of the van.

Without warning a heavy squall hit, then quickly began to dissipate as the van crept slowly toward the street entrance, as though reluctant to leave. Midway to the exit, the powerful engine finally revved and labored as it gained speed.

A young black woman, clad only in a brief camisole, a short leather skirt and spiked heels, tried to hold her umbrella low to protect her carefully braided hair from the wet wind. She stepped into the alley entrance just as the van lurched in front of her—traveling any faster it might have easily hit her. Startled, she jumped backward.

“Motherfu . . .!”

She gestured angrily, belligerently glaring at the black tinted windows then continued her stride toward the red Mustang parked near a dim gaslight half a block away. The van paused briefly, accelerated and swung out of sight around the next corner.