

The Gathering at Spider Hill

by Donald J. Hunt

As Ray Canfield turned into the subdivision, he bit his lower lip. Worry for his niece, Amanda, ate at him, and he took a deep breath to keep himself calm. He hated driving through the Sunnyside development, but Amanda lived here, and he needed to check on her. Her latest texts had been unsettling.

Unfortunately, the Miler boy also lived in here. Ever since the spider incident, he shuddered every time he saw the kid. Ray *hated* spiders. His older brother used to pin him down and put spiders on his face, letting them crawl around while Ray screamed until he was hoarse. In third grade, his brother had put a fist-sized wolf spider in Ray's lunch box. It had freaked him out so much when he'd gone to get his peanut butter and jelly sandwich that he leaped backward, tripped, and knocked himself out on the bench seat behind him. Although the years of tormenting by spider had stopped after that, the terror had remained. As the new Fire Chief, this posed some embarrassing challenges, but he got by.

Ray drove slowly into the 'new' subdivision on the west side of town. The tires of his red 2008 Explorer scrunched over some loose gravel that had blown onto the tar road. A faded sign with a couple of bullet holes in it read, "Welcome to Sunnyside! Custom Homes in the low 500s! Visit our Model Home today!" Someone had spray-painted "Up" next to Sunnyside in large yolk-orange letters. Just beyond that, the model home stood vacant, a board over the front window from the time some kids had thrown rocks through it. Brand new roads and curbs had been put in place, pipes and electrical wiring laid, but other than the model home in the front, and six houses in the way back,

empty lots full of weeds, barren dirt and scattered stones dominated the scene. Ray shook his head in sadness. Woulda been good for the town, for sure. His hometown of Braeburn, Illinois needed a break. Lots of folks had lost jobs and hadn't been able to find new ones with the economy all bolloxed up.

He saw the model home in his rearview and shook his head again, this time in annoyance. That house would probably need to be torn down. The idiots in Electrical always shut the damn electric off without getting the water turned off first. Sure enough, pipes burst come winter. Water had been running down the outside of the house for days, if not weeks, from the second floor until he'd noticed it and shut the water off himself. It'll take a miracle to get all the black mold out of that place now. Save a few pennies and ruin the tax base. Sure, brilliant.

A split in the road veered off to the right. Ray took it and wound his way up the hill and into the semi-wooded area in the back. As he drove past the first three empty houses, each in various stages of completion, he saw that all looked quiet tonight. The fourth house was a charred ruin of blackened beams sticking up like the lower mandible of some great, ebon-toothed leviathan from a bygone age. Teens had burned the place, intentionally or not, last spring, shortly before the last two houses were bought for a third of what they were worth. If you didn't mind driving through a wasteland, then you could get quite a deal.

The burned out husk was one reason why he had taken to patrolling the subdivision. The other reason was Amanda Harding. She lived in the fifth house up the hill, and she also happened to be his cousin Shelly's kid from a first marriage and called him Uncle Ray. Ray loved his cousin and Amanda, but didn't have much use for her

second husband, Tim. Tim's only redeeming quality had been that he'd moved the family back to Braeburn two years ago.

However, moving into a small town can be tough when all the clichés and social dynamics have already been in play for over a decade. Amanda didn't quite fit in. Every day, after school, Amanda walked over to the fire station, and they visited while he drove Amanda home. They talked about books, movies, teachers, and favorite foods. Amanda's was chocolate ice cream, which Ray argued was not a food, while the young lady doggedly insisted it was, with an impish smile above her pointed chin. Straight, lifeless, dusty-brown hair hung down to a small nose when it fell forward, and a few barely noticeable freckles adorned her cheeks.

Last week, he'd seen Tim at the house. He looked terrible. Thin, sallow-skinned and with a distracted expression on his face. Damp or greasy hair hung down his forehead, and a sheen of perspiration clung to his face, as if he'd been working out, but he wore jeans and a button shirt. When Tim had opened the door and seen Ray, he started backward.

"Jesus. I thought you were that pest, Johansson. Why do firefighters need a uniform anyway?"

"Ed? The police chief? Why? What's he want with you?"

"Nothing." Tim curled his lip in distaste. "Never mind. I've got to get back to work."

"What's his deal?" Ray had asked Amanda, regretting the question immediately. Amanda's less than enthusiastic relationship to her stepfather was no secret between them, but Ray tried to keep a sympathetic yet neutral stance.

Amanda grabbed two soda cans from the fridge and shrugged. They sat on barstools at an island, which also housed the dishwasher and sink and faced the fridge. Thin wisps of cobwebs interwove the sconces of the light over the island--a four pronged thing that looked more like an anchor than a lamp. More fine webs wafted in the corners. The kitchen opened up to the family room on the north side, and he could see more cobwebs around the TV and a floor lamp. Mentally, he shook his head.

Popping open the soda, she said, "He's been even more skeezy since the Milers moved in. He's been hanging around with Tod Miler and his parents a lot. Tod told me that he spells his name wrong on purpose to annoy teachers. Like they would care. Dickhead."

Ray ignored that. "Hanging out doing what?"

She shrugged again. "Research. Experiments. Dunno. Really whack stuff. Something about spiders. Come on, I'll show you."

Ray felt his stomach go cold and then hot. A tremor of nausea rippled through him. He took a swig of the soda.

"No, thanks. I don't want to interrupt your dad."

"He's in the basement. I mean his books. C'mon you big baby." She gave him a teasing grin and hopped off the barstool with all the joy of a kid embarking on a forbidden escapade and hurried across the living room. Along the north wall, beyond the family room, were a laundry room, a small bathroom and, in the northeast corner, furthest from the street, Tim's office.

"Look. He's been reading all these like crazy." She pointed at a three-foot particleboard bookcase along the wall. Four entire shelves were jammed with books

piled on top of other books. Ray set his soda on top, next to a fish tank, and squatted down to scan the titles. All on spiders, scientific and fantastic. *Spider Temples of Ancient Peru, Handbook of Neurotoxicology, Spider Venoms and Antivenins, The Wisdom of Anansi the Spider God, The Cult of Uttu.*

He reached up and grabbed his soda. As he did so, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. He realized with a sinking feeling that the glass habitat at eye level was not a fish tank, but instead a terrarium. Blue stones, a couple of shells, and the greenery had misled him at first. From under the plastic plants, a furry shape charged out from beneath a fake rock and thumped into the glass inches from his face. Amanda squeaked, which did not help his reaction. His jerked backward, and soda flew out of the can high in the air.

He looked at Amanda, with soda in her hair and dripping down her face, and they both started laughing. She ran to get a towel, and he took a closer look at his stalker. A tarantula or something like it. The face and legs were aqua-toothpaste-blue, with large hairy fangs hanging down in front, like frickin' walrus tusks, and the body was striped orange, reminiscent of a tiger. He grimaced at the sight, and the spider lunged at him again, slamming into the glass over and over.

"Sonuvabitch," he mumbled to himself. "I've never heard of an aggressive pet tarantula." He stood up and a shiver started in his shoulders and ran along his spine.

He turned, about to call out to Amanda, wondering where she had gotten to, and there stood Tim, his hands gripping Amanda by the shoulder, a falcon clutching its prey. Beside him stood Tod Miler. Grinning. As angry as Tim was, his eyes bulging, mouth in a tight line, Ray could only look at Tod.

The boy smiled, his hands in his pockets like a miniature store manager. The kid, maybe twelve, had a blond flattop haircut, with the rounded cheeks and belly that reminded Ray of some cartoon character; he had the look of a kid who sat around playing too many computer games, eating too many donuts, and would get off on setting houses on fire. Ray had seen him downtown one day, when he was stuck at a traffic light. The kid was standing on the corner, a foot from Ray's truck. He had stuck his tongue out at him, like kids do when they're sucking on a candy, and they want to show it off. He'd had a dark oval on his tongue. Ray didn't think much of it. He'd even smiled at the kid. He looked at the traffic light and back and the kid was pulling the piece of candy out. Only it wasn't candy.

The thing unfolded, wriggling in the boy's fingers; the kid switched it to the palm of his other hand. It was a spider. A small wolf spider, a little bigger than a quarter. Ray had jumped, spilled his coffee in his lap, and sworn at the wet heat and the unexpected sight. Sometime around then, the light had turned green and the guy behind him started honking his horn. He'd driven off and the kid had watched him go, grinning. Just like he was now.

Tim's anger finally sputtered into truncated half-speech. "*What. Are. You doing in. My. Office?*"

"Um, looking for a book?" Ray gave an apologetic grin. He felt foolish with soda on his face. "Sorry about the mess. Spider scared me."

"Get. Out."

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Later that Friday night, he got a text from Amanda:

SD pissed. Gotta take bus for awhile. Sorry. :(

He had not seen her at all this past week, but her texts had become increasingly alarming. Her stepdad--"SD" as she called him--seemed to have lost it.

Monday: SD cooked and ATE spiders for dinner. Got mad when mom and I refused to eat them. GROSS!!

Tuesday: SD now has 6 pet spiders. Gifts from Tod. They creep me out. Just like him. Asshole.

Wednesday, 8:24 PM: SD spending lotsa time in basement. Won't let mom or I go down. Such a jerkface.

Wednesday, 10:11 PM: Dunno what SD is up to, but I've been finding spiders all over. Killed three in my room 2nite. Afraid tp sleep.

Thursday: SD and the Creep ate LIVE spiders tonite! Freak-ing GROSS!!!! Grabbed them out of a bowl and ate them like popcorn. Dozens of them. No idea where TOd's parents were. They're zombies anyways. Idiots.

Friday, 2:23 AM: I snuck into the basement. Spiders everywhere. Just running around loose.

Friday, 6:45 AM: had it out w/ Dickhead abut baement. He said not 2 worry. I'd understand soon. Creepy, creepy. I'm starting to get scared, Uncle Ray.

Friday, 3:44 PM: Can't stand it anymore. SD going off about spiders and powr and how hes been chosen for te gift. Thinks hes Spider-man or somthin. Going to pond to read. Life Sux!!!

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Ray had stayed out of the picture this week, trying not to cause any more trouble for Amanda, but enough was enough. First, he'd find Amanda. Then he needed to have a chat with Shelly.

He drove up past her house and then past the Miler's house. The creepy kid lived in the sixth and last house, bordered by a wooded lot. As if empowered with some psychic sixth sense, there the kid stood in the driveway. Tod had his hands in his pockets again, and stood perfectly still. Unnaturally still for a kid his age. Ray shuddered. Seeing the freaky kid now made the skin between his shoulders tingle. Tod watched Ray until his car drove around the curve on the south side and headed back down the hill. Ray took a deep breath and let it out, feeling like a fool. Stupid kids. The things they'll do for effect.

The road formed a backwards "C" as it curled around. As the hill leveled out at the bottom, it headed northeast again. Whenever he came around that curve, he always dreaded what he might find. On one of the north lots, the builder had excavated a deep hole intended to become a basement before the guy had gone belly-up. So, now, the pit had become a stagnant pool and served as an ideal breeding ground for mosquitos and frogs--a mud pit filled with clay-slip and slimy water. The town had filed an injunction to get the bank to fill it in, but the county, the bank, the creditors, and the investors were all arguing over whose responsibility it was. Last fall, during hunting season, a wounded deer had fallen in there and drowned. Ray had done his fair share of hunting as well, and he knew the value of deer hunting for keeping the tick population--and Lyme disease--in check. But he had no patience for incompetent hunters that wounded an animal and let it get away. It had taken a tow truck to haul it out and that had been fairly

gruesome, even by his standards. Ray worried that some foolhardy kids or drunk teens would fall in and meet a similar fate.

And, typical of a rebellious fourteen year old, Amanda had chosen this as her favorite refuge. As expected, she sat in her usual spot, perched on the edge of the excavation with an eReader. He sighed. He'd talked to her about that numerous times. She was leaning against a 2x4, with one leg dangling into the basement area, kicking back and forth while she read.

She wore a white, mock turtleneck shirt with flowers on it and brown corduroy pants.

The width of the basement separated them. He walked up to the near side and called out to her. "Hello there, young lady."

She started, her arms and shoulders jerking upward.

Ray took off his hat and smiled, "Sorry. Didn't mean to surprise you." He gestured at a no trespassing sign with his hat. "You know you're not supposed to be here, right? It's not safe."

The girl looked at the sign and then back at him, playing along with their established routine. "So's going to high school, but they still make me go."

Ray gave her a chuckle. "Speaking of, I saw your buddy, Tod, on my way over."

That got her going. "He's not my buddy," she said in disgust. "He's a nutbag-jerk."

"Sounds like this whole spider obsession has gotten out of hand. Don't care for spiders myself," he added dryly.

Amanda giggled, putting a hand over her mouth. Ray's near-paralysis when it came to spiders was universally known throughout Braeburn, if not the county. He

gazed eastward, pleased to have gotten a laugh. The woods along the undeveloped edge of the unfinished subdivision cast dense shadows in the gloomy gray light. The heavy pall sobered the moment.

"Do you want me to have a talk with your dad?"

She shook her head. "Nah." Her face looked alabaster pale under the gray sky. "I shouldn'ta bothered ya with my texts. Sorry." She looked at something behind him, over his left shoulder, and her eyes went wide with fear, and her already pale complexion turned white.

He turned in the direction she'd been looking and saw his truck--and, next to it, Tod Miler. His eyes were unnaturally large and black, which must have been a trick of the light. No one's eyes could be that large and that black. His face was a rictus of rage, his fists clenched and trembling by his side. The appearance of the boy and the clamped-down fury startled Ray.

"I...I have to go," she said and pulled her small frame up so fast, she slipped on the greasy clay edge of the pit, arms pinwheeling. Ray's heart pounded and his arms went out, even though the mucky water separated them, and he could not have helped her from where he stood. She gave him a half-wave and gathered her few belongings.

"You should stay away from Tod," she said. "He--" She broke off, eyes round. Without another word, she scurried away, back toward the houses up the hill.

"Hey, Amanda," he called after her, "Do me a favor, and stay off that ledge, okay?"

He turned his head to look at the boy again, but Tod Miler had disappeared. He saw only his Explorer, parked on the side of the road. The back of the hill rose

ominously to the west of where he stood. Trees poked up as if from the balding head of a man buried up to his neck. On the other side of that hill, just out of sight, the strange boy in question did--what? Played? Schemed? More likely. Ray pursed his lips and shook his head in puzzlement at his niece's odd behavior.

He got back in the car and headed out of the subdivision. As he turned another curve, the sun flared into view, blinding him for a second; he stepped on the brake, unable to see. He flipped the visor down and found himself looking at four shiny eyes. Two metallic blue-black circles met his gaze in the center, and two smaller copper-bronze orbs on the outside edges. Bristly black and white hair covered the head and body of a spider. Metallic blue fangs gleamed in its mouth. The body was the size of a large grape. Ray saw all that in a tenth of a second. He slammed on the brake and jumped out of the vehicle, his arm getting momentarily tangled in the seat belt as he hopped backwards, the car door still open, his heart beating painfully against his ribs.

Son of a bitch! Damn and Double Damn! I hate spiders. I'd rather go into a burning building than face a big spider. Small spiders, no problem. Usually. Wasps, snakes, rats, bears, rabid raccoons--nothing else bothered him. But spiders? No thank you!

The car started to roll forward. He hadn't put it in park.

Shit!

He ran over to the car, grabbing the door and the frame and peered in, running along beside it. The Metallica Spider was nowhere to be seen. *Shit!* The thought of jumping into the car with the spider somewhere unseen filled him with dread, but

explaining to the boys down at the firehouse how he'd wrecked his car was almost worse.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Holding his breath, he jumped in.

He threw the car into park, but before he could jump out again, something moved angrily under his butt. Startled, he leaped off the seat. Even as he thought, in a panic, *I'm sitting on the damn thing! Holy Shit!* He scrambled sideways and fell out of the car and onto the road in an undignified heap.

Something buzzed in his back pocket again. His cell phone. Not a spider. It was his damned cell phone. He'd put it on vibrate mode during a meeting earlier today. With a sigh, he laid his head on the pavement and took the call. "This is Ray."

No one there. He dragged himself off the pavement and checked the ID. Missed call from Amanda. He tried to call her back, but it went to voicemail. He left a message and then leaned on the hood of his car and took a deep breath.

He stood outside the Explorer and peered in. He took another deep breath, closed his eyes for a half-second, opened them, exhaled. Wincing, he climbed into the car, closed the door, and put the car in drive. Gingerly, as if doing so might antagonize his guest, he pressed the gas pedal. He kept looking around, trying to find the damn spider, but he could not see anything.

As he exited the subdivision, he noticed dark shapes that looked like pears hanging in mid air. Thousands of dark fruit, blots on the heavy, overcast sky, *moved* up and down a network of threads that went from the power lines to the ground. He gaped, appalled at what he saw there. Spiders. Thousands of them, weaving, swaying and

dropping toward the ground in the fall breeze. Ray drove east toward town and his body trembled.

As Ray pulled onto Route 31, he felt something on his neck. In a panic, he batted at it. Then he swore something had crawled up inside his pant leg, and he stomped his leg and slapped at his slacks as if they were on fire.

Before he even reached Main Street in town, sweat drenched his back and the armpits of his shirt. His thin hair clung to his head.

Ray picked up his mic and called Maggie Truman, the county dispatcher. "Maggie, this is Ray. Come in." Mags was tough-as-frozen-jerky and quick as a whip, so she could hand it right back to the guys when they tried to bust her chops.

"Ray, hey sugar. How're things in your neck of the woods?"

"I could use a beer, but since I'm on duty, I'll settle for a smoke. I'm stopping at the Wiggly. Need anything?"

"You sound stressed. What's going on? I thought you quit smoking," Maggie said.

"I did. Hey, any news on Ed yet?" he asked, changing the subject. Ed Johansson was the town's police chief, but he had written a note saying he'd be out of town for the next week and disappeared three days ago, without any further explanation. No other notice to his kids, his girlfriend, his mother, the town council, or his barber. No one had been able to reach him on his cell, either.

"Nope. No word yet, chief."

He started to tell her about the spiders on the telephone wires, but as he pulled into the Piggly Wiggly, he saw a scene of utter and complete chaos. Everyone he could see was either screaming or swearing or both. All across the lot, he saw people staring

in dread from their cars or from the beds of their pickup trucks. One mother of three tossed her children into a truck like hay bails, swearing her head off the entire time.

Even Merle Evanston, a bouncer at the Silo Pub, and the meanest S.O.B. in town, was screaming like a little girl as he ran for his truck.

When he saw why he nearly passed out. As Ray watched, his worst nightmare appeared in front of him. A wave of spiders--fist-sized and furry--swarmed from out of nowhere and turned the black tar of the parking lot into the chocolate brown color of old canvas tents. Charlie Smothers, age five, fell to his hands and knees, as his mother ran ahead with his little sister. A particularly large spider used his head as a step and clambered up onto his back, continuing along with its trek west. Others crawled over his hands. For the rest of his life, Charlie would probably sleep with the light on.

Ray spotted the three elderly Weston siblings. Parker Weston dropped an entire case of champagne that he had special-ordered for their mother's 99th birthday next month, and the bottles burst, spraying out of the box in all directions. At 80 years old, he still managed to climb into the bed of a pickup truck like a teenager skipping school. The spiders, some as large as dinner plates, marched on unfazed. Audrey Weston, the youngest of the Westons at age 76, threw the same pickup truck into reverse, floored it, and slammed full on into the mayor's brand new Cadillac Escalade, almost throwing Parker over the side. Judy Weston was 79 years old. As Ray watched, her grocery bags slipped from her hands. A dozen eggs broke on the pavement, and Macintosh apples bounced across the parking lot; her eyes rolled up in her head, and she sank to the pavement like a dropped bathrobe. Her two siblings watched in dismay as the spiders continued to march over Judy's unconscious body. Each one ambled along, legs

alternating like hairy fingers stretching out to steal an unwanted caress. They walked over her torso, clad in a modest blue dress, and across her bare legs--and over her face in their unceasing parade to the west. Toward the Sunnyside subdivision, Ray realized.

A shotgun erupted eliciting more screams and people ducking for cover. Merle Evanston had retrieved his shotgun from the rack in his truck and had blasted a Frisbee-sized spider back to hell. He fired off four more shots before he paused to reload the shotgun. Three other yahoos followed Merle's idiotic lead. Ray hoped no one would get killed from the ricochets.

A few moments later, the spiders were gone, disappeared into the woods on the far side of the lot. They left a weeping and gibbering mass of townsfolk collapsed in their wake.

Ray grabbed the first aid kit. Miraculously, only three people had been bitten--a small boy and two men, all of whom appeared to have swung at the spiders--but the toxins were creating severe reactions. Trouble breathing, rapid pulse, swelling, with severe pain pulsating outward from the bite site. Two others had been grazed by flying shotgun pellets, but nothing serious on that front. Ray figured they'd been lucky.

Ray recruited two off-duty nurses and some other folks to take the casualties to the medical clinic over in Calville.

As he watched the caravan head off, Brian Simmons bubbled away excitedly next to him. "THAT was amazing! I've never seen or even heard of a spider march that big before!"

Brian Simmons, a science teacher at the high school had helped stabilize the victims. Brian was a local legend of sorts. He was a science teacher at the high school

and a spider fanatic. He'd been freaking kids and townsfolk out with his presentations since he got hired a few years back. If he was game, he might be useful.

"You mean they actually do that? This?" Ray said, appalled and waved his arm around at the parking lot.

"Oh, yeah. They march for breeding. It's rare, though, and never this far north--or this big a group. Just fantastic."

"Ugh. Great. So what kind were they?"

"That's the thing. I don't know." His pudgy kid-like face broke into a big, ecstatic grin. "And I should! I'm president of the Illinois Arach-Nuts Club. There's not a spider in North America I don't know." He held up his camera, "And I've got pictures! I've already got a title, 'The Great Spider March of 2013.'" He got a dreamy look on his face, the way Ray used to get when he thought about Marlene McGillan back in eighth grade.

Ray shook his head, dumbfounded that anyone would be even remotely interested in spiders, much less enough to join a club about 'em. "Well, I know where they're headed, I think, and I'm going out there now. If you'd like to tag along, I could use your insights." *And an extra pair of eyes to keep the spiders off my neck*, he added to himself.

"How do you know where they're off to?"

"A very strong hunch."

Brian got into Ray's SUV. Ray hesitated to get in. With no small amount of trepidation, Ray looked in his SUV for his eight-legged companion from earlier.

"Problem?" Brian asked.

"No, no problem," Ray replied. Not seeing the hitchhiker, Ray got in and headed west, back toward the Sunnyside development. He needed to find out where the heck these spiders were headed before more people got hurt.

Mags called him on the radio. "Justine Barstow had a heart attack. Her husband said she went out to get the mail and when she turned around, a mass of spiders had cut her off from the house. They just walked right over her. By the time they were gone, she was dead. Barney's on his way over there now." Barney Harris was the county coroner. Ray filled Maggie in on what happened at the Wiggly while he drove. Ray turned the corner at the end of Main Street and headed west on County Road 31.

"Be careful, Ray. I saw on TV some of these spider bites can kill the skin. Like permanently. And the dead part just expands and expands like a Danish or something." She popped her gum into the mic, making Ray jump and swerve the car.

"Whoa!" Brian yelled and clutched at the armrest.

"Dammit, Mags! I've asked you not to do that. And thanks for the visual. Its called necrosis, and I'll probably never be able to eat another Danish."

"Glad I could help your cholesterol, boss." She snapped her gum again. "Maggie out."

He could hear the smile in her voice and sighed.

As they pulled into Sunnyside, they looked up at the "Welcome to Sunnyside" sign. Brian pointed out a pie-sized spider covering up the "W", making Ray feel slightly nauseous. Then Brian spotted the spiders hanging from the telephone and electrical wires.

"No way! Pull over, pull over!"

Of average height, Simmons was still a large man, perhaps from eating too many necrotic Danishes. He wore khakis and a midnight-blue button shirt with a subtle black pattern on it. He had short, neatly cut hair that nevertheless hung down over his eyes. He brushed it aside distractedly, and started snapping off pictures with a long-lens camera.

"Isn't this amazing?!" Simmons said.

Ray unfolded his long body from the car and shuddered as he got out. "Yeah. Can't say it'll do much for property values, though."

Simmons missed the comment, too caught up in the spectacle before him. "I've never seen this breed of spider before. This one is even different from the one at the Wiggly. New species are being discovered all the time, though, but usually in remote places. Last year, they discovered five new species."

He pointed to the scores of spiders spinning webs from the lines. "I've only seen that in Brazil." He gave him a sheepish grin, "Well, I've seen it on YouTube. I've never been to Brazil. You?"

"I don't like traveling." He thought, but did not say, too many bugs.

Brian looked through his lens again and said, "The spiders on the telephone lines appear to be the same species as at the Wiggly. Can't be sure though without a closer look."

"Well, here come the migrating ones now." Ray nodded his head back to the turnoff from Route 31 into Sunnyside. The army of arachnida crept across the road. Brian snapped off pictures as fast as his camera would allow. A green mini-Cooper slammed on the brakes to avoid driving over the bizarre crossing.

If they had gone straight west, they would have skirted along the southern edge of the Sunnyside property. That would have been the natural flow, based on their trend so far. This time, however, instead of staying the course, the spiders followed the curve of the road, straight for them.

"Shit!" Ray said and ran for the Explorer.

"Hey," Brian yelled. "Where are you going? They won't hurt you. This is historic, man."

"I've got three people on the way to the clinic who say otherwise."

Ray watched, appalled, as Brian crouched down and took photos at ground level and then took more photos standing up as the invaders surrounded him and crawled over his brown leather shoes. He shuddered as he watched, and he could taste bile in his throat.

Ray stared in horrified fascination, unable to close his eyes or even look away. He hated the fact that he could not see the ones that passed under his SUV. Hated not knowing if they kept going or if some of them decided to stop and set up shop in the undercarriage of his car. Not that he had any inclination to get out and look. He watched in horrid loathing as the creepy-crawly little bastards inched along like dismembered but still animated hands. They were brown and grey striped, with black bands, and as hairy as the Methodist choir director's legs in the middle of winter.

Ray, sitting in the car alone, said, "They say idle hands are the devil's workshop. Seems to me that the busy ones are more of a problem at the moment." He looked in the rearview mirror at his haunted face. "Great. Now I'm talking to myself, and I look crazy, too."

It took twenty minutes for the parade to pass by, a river of the creatures Ray hated most in the universe. When the last of them meandered up the hill and disappeared toward the weird kid's house, Ray raised a trembling hand and wiped the sweat off his brow as Brian got in the car, gushing like a football fan during playoffs.

"Did you see that big one toward the front? It must have been as big as a tire! Amazing!"

"You're sick. Has anyone ever told you that? Sick."

The man chuckled. "My students tell me that all the time. I *love* spiders! C'mon, let's follow the marching band."

Ray shook his head, but he put the car in drive and started up the hill. The clouds had peeled back from the horizon, and the setting sun was blinding as day drew to a close, so the fire chief flipped down his visor and that's when it happened--again.

He caught a glimpse of the metallic spider as it spilled down from the sunscreen. He tried to bat at it as the pesky thing fell, but it bounced off his arm and right into the opening of his button-down shirt.

Ray's voice rose an octave as he beat at his chest like a man trying to give himself CPR, which he figured wasn't far off. He had never been more religious than at that moment. "Oh, Jesus, Jesus! Get it off me! Oh, Christ!"

For the second time that day he jumped out of a moving car. He whipped up his shirt bottom and shook it like a sail in the Americas Cup. He pulled the shirt over the top of his head and practically whimpered when his hands got caught in the cuffs. He whipped his arms around and, when that didn't work, he stepped on the offending shirt and pulled until his hands popped free.

He looked over and saw Brian sitting in the driver's seat and staring at him with round eyes.

"What?" Ray snapped.

"Nothing," Brian said, his voice a careful study in casualness. He put the car in park and stepped out of the vehicle.

Ray picked up his shirt and shook it. A spider fell out and landed on the pavement.

Brian flipped it over with a pencil and said, "Ah, *Phidippus audax*. The bold jumping spider. Never seen one this big before, though. Harmless, really. Very pretty chelicerae."

"What?"

"Mouth parts. These metallic green parts that look like fangs. The fangs are in there, but they're actually much smaller."

"Very reassuring. Come on." He yanked his shirt on, ignoring the few missing buttons, and got back in, slamming the door shut. Brian moved his larger bulk around the front of the car with surprising speed and got back in.

He waited until Brian buckled in and then punched the gas, burning rubber. "Look," he growled, knowing he was being unreasonable, but not caring at the moment. "No more science crap, okay? I just want to check on my cousin and her daughter and find out what the hell the damn spiders are doing and get out of here."

"Uh, okay. Sure."

The spiders came to the veer-off that Ray had followed a few hours ago. Instead of going straight, as one would reasonably have expected, that being the path of least

resistance, they turned right. Toward Tod Miler's house. And toward Amanda's house. Although it made no rational sense, some part of Ray was not surprised.

Although they could have easily climbed over them, the curbs channeled the spiders, and kept them mostly on the road. On the right side, the land sloped off in a hill that led to a band of trees too thin to be called a woods before opening out into another street empty of houses down below. The left side had empty lots sparsely populated with weeds. Ray cranked the wheel hard left and jumped the curb. He gunned it, spraying up clods of dirt and stones that pummeled the undercarriage.

"Whoa!" Brian yelled for the second time and grabbed on to the handle as he was bounced around like a stuffed sandy-blond bear.

Ray hit a large spider that had wandered off the road and onto the dirt lot. "Splat," he said and laughed. He gave Brian a big smile.

The fire chief off-roaded it past the three empty houses, then past the burned out ruin, popped over the crest of the hill and onto the manicured lawn of Amanda Harding's house and plowed directly into a sea of overly large tarantulas. A wave of spiders was leaving the road and swarming into the Harding's rural dream home. Ray hit dozens of them, and they made a sound like squelching mud. He cranked the wheel and the Explorer slammed into a tree. Spiders ranging in size from baseballs to medium pizzas fell to the hood and roof with dull thuds. One landed on the windshield and raised its front legs, hissing. Ray hit the windshield wipers and knocked it off the glass.

He'd more than half-expected the spiders to leave the road, but at the same time thought he was crazy for even thinking it, and he'd expected them at the next house over, at the Miler's, not here at Amanda's house. That would have been bad enough.

Thinking of his young niece in there with this eerie wave of spiders was much, much worse.

All the windows of the home were open, as well as the front door and the garage. The spiders flowed inside, shambling eastward now, like a waterfall running in reverse. Ray thought he might be sick.

"Son of a bitch," he said. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel and closed his eyes for a moment.

"You okay?" Brian wore a worried expression, as if he feared he might have to give Ray CPR or something.

"Yeah. Peachy. Okay, Spider-man. Let's go."

Brian raised his eyebrows. "Go?"

"Yes. Go. My cousin and her daughter--my niece--are in there." He jabbed an angry finger at the house, as if it were the house's fault. Ray swallowed and finished his sentence. "We're going in."

"Cousin and niece? Is that some sort of rural someone-married-their-sister thing?" Brian asked.

The question didn't fully register with Ray. He was focused on getting out of the Ford. He opened his door with trepidation, nerves in hyperdrive, but the spiders had cleared away from the truck's sudden appearance. He went around back, his skin crawling, eyes scanning the tree above in constant paranoia of a spider dropping on his head like a scene from *Aliens*. He put on his bunker gear--pants, jacket, boots, as well as his Nomex hood, his gloves, and his helmet. He handed Brian an axe and a fire extinguisher and picked up a long multi-tool and a second fire extinguisher for himself.

"What is that thing?" Brian asked.

"Halligan bar. Axe, hammer, and pry bar all in one."

Brian looked at him, his face barely stifling a smirk. "Aren't you a tad overdressed?"

"I'm not taking any chances with these eight-legged bastards. Let's go." He stepped over a tarantula, his stomach doing a little flip, and then flicked aside a group of three more to make a stepping spot. Working as quickly as possible without pissing off the spiders any more than necessary, they made their way to the front door.

They went in and paused for a moment, simply watching, taking it all in. Ray could not believe the transformation that had taken place in Tim and Shelly's home in such a short time. It seemed utterly impossible to him. Thick nests of white silk hid under tables and in corners in the room off to the right and in the hallway that stretched out straight ahead of them, leading to the living room just visible further back. Webs stretched from the chandelier overhead to the second floor walkway that went perpendicular to the ground floor hallway where they stood. Ray knew that the open passage above connected the bedrooms on the left and right side of the house. More white luminous sacks clung to the walkway up overhead, overripe and evil nests. As a firefighter, Ray kept his bearings instinctively. East lay straight ahead, toward the back of the house; the road was behind them to the west.

The spiders they could see moved in an unending stream into the first floor, flowing somewhere toward the family room in the back, the office and the basement. With a glance at each other, they followed the grim procession. If they had walked into the room on the right, a basically unused sitting room, and seen the funnel-shaped nest

in the corner, out of sight from the entryway, they might have avoided tragedy. Instead, they moved further into the house.

Ray's skin tingled with spasming nerves as they stepped under the open hallway and into the family room and kitchen area. The living room opened up from the first floor up to the second with a vaulted ceiling. A set of stairs parallel to the front of the house went up to an open hallway that looked down from the walkway overhead. East of the kitchen, they could see through a sliding glass door and onto a deck. Ray knew from summer barbeques that stairs led down to a small backyard and another sliding glass door into the walkout basement.

Ray and Brian watched a moment while the spiders flowed north and then back west before disappearing into the basement stairwell.

Although Ray wanted to see what the spiders were doing, he needed to find his family first. They turned left and went up the staircase that hugged the wall on the west side and opened out into the room on the east. Ray could imagine kids tossing paper airplanes into the room from their various stalking points along the stairs. No longer. Those spindles were the perfect haven for web-spinners, and now threads and sheets of gossamer took over the railing.

"What the hell happened here?" Brian asked.

Ray grunted. "What the hell is still going on here?"

"There are at least five species of spiders I've never seen in Illinois before."

Ray didn't respond. When they reached the landing on top, the master bedroom lay off to the south, which was now on his left, and across the walkway. Amanda's bedroom was closer, but the master bedroom door was open most of the way, and they

had a clear view. At the sight on the bed, Ray let out a low and an involuntary, "No," which sounded more moan than spoken word.

A mutant, giant silk cocoon domed up over the bed. The two men moved forward with slow, reluctant steps. The dense, sick-sweet smell of death clung to the room like the spider webs all around them. Ray pointed at a human foot with a tattooed ankle just outside the web. A thick, well-knotted rope secured it to the Shaker-style footboard. They could see ropes through the gauzy webs at all four corners of the bed. Ray recognized the butterfly and thorn tattoo as Shelly's. He remembered when he'd gotten the tattoo at sixteen, and there had been hell to pay with her folks. He also recalled playing around the creek by their grandparents' house one time when she'd grabbed hold of some roots to climb up the bank--and a large hairy brown-gray spider had climbed out of the dark and onto her forearm. She'd screamed and wet her pants. Shelly and Ray had shared a loathing of spiders ever since.

Despite the grisly scene, he stepped into the room. He had to know. Even though she had to be dead, he still had to *know*.

With his second step forward, an orange-yellow shape the size of a football and with multiple flailing legs darted out from the side near the door and attacked Ray's leg. It felt like a kid knuckle-punching his Kevlar-reinforced pants. He leaped backward, back into the hall, and fell over, dropping his fire extinguisher. He knocked the spider off his leg with his Halligan bar and it raised its front legs, readying for another charge.

Brian's axe cut it in half and it twitched on the floor. His breath came in and out in ragged breath. "African Trapdoor spider of some sort. Unusually large. Not usually so aggressive." He gave Ray a weak smile and gestured into the room. "After you."

They reached the head of the bed without another attack. Shelly was, thankfully, dead. Dozens of spider babies crawled around her face and in and out of her gaping mouth. She looked like she had died terrified. Ray could relate.

He heard a retching noise and turned to see Brian gagging and holding his hand over his mouth. He turned to go back into the hall. Ray made to follow after, his mind numb with shock and grief. Childhood memories crowded his thoughts, making it hard to focus. Even so, he noted in a distracted way several other bundles of silk around the room and wondered if they were egg sacks or spider traps. Brian, his stomach roiling, stumbled and grabbed the edge of the door. Ray, behind him, saw something move, but his reactions were off, too slow. The science teacher screamed and ran into the hall. He flung his arm around like a man on fire, and a spider, easily as wide as Ray's hand with fingers extended, landed on the ground and charged after the large man, legs flying like a professional typist. It pounced on Brian's leg and tore ferociously at his pants. Not wanting to bash Brian's legs with his multi-tool, Ray turned the fire extinguisher on the arachnid to blast it off. As he did, he caught a good look at it. The thing was another walking freak show. The front of its body gleamed black like a freshly waxed car. The abdomen, by contrast looked like a flat-black leather baseball, but shaped like a poisonous kiwi. As if sensing him, it turned, jumped off Brian, and took a challenging leap at Ray. The fire chief triggered the fire extinguisher and held his Halligan bar out in front of him like a spear. Blasted backward and covered in foam, the spider skittered over the edge of the walkway and disappeared.

Brian moaned and cradled his arm.

"Let me see your arm."

Brian held it out. "Nothing you can do. Some type of Australian Funnel Spider. Fatal without antivenin. None around here. Musta been a nest." He closed his eyes and grimaced. "Behind the door."

Ray saw that the arm had been ravaged. Six bites that he could see, with bright red welts. He checked Brian's leg; the pant leg and hiking boot had been ripped and torn as if by a jagged knife, but it had not gotten through to the skin.

"Jesus." Ray pulled a strap off of his utility belt and quickly tied a tourniquet around Brian's arm. "How fast is the poison?" he asked.

"Half an hour. Maybe four days." He bit his lip. "Give or take. Funnel guys...bite through shoes."

"Yeah, I see that. Let's get you to the clinic. They can FedEx it overnight."

He groaned. "Shit, man. Burns. Blood is pounding."

"That's the tourniquet."

Brian swallowed thickly. "Spider's not local," he repeated between rapid, shallow breaths. "Owner might have antivenin." He swallowed again. "Fridge."

Ray hesitated. If they went back downstairs, they'd lose valuable time. He picked a bare spot on the wall and told Brian, "Sit here. I've got to look for Amanda before we go back down."

"Not alone."

"Yes, alone." Ray said firmly. "You sit. I'll just be a minute." Before Brian could argue more, Ray took off.

Amanda's bedroom was dark, heavy curtains drawn. Holding his breath, Ray hit the light switch. The room blazed into light, sending some spiders skittering, while

others held their ground. None of them charged him, thankfully. His nerves sang like an out of tune piano in a church basement. He checked Amanda's bedroom, the guest room, and a bathroom. He found no new victims.

When he came back out into the hall, Brian had worked his way into a standing position, and he held the axe in his good hand, but sweat covered his head and darkened the armpits of his shirt. Ray picked up the second fire extinguisher, and they headed downstairs.

Ray and Brian stuck to the middle, heads jerking this way and that in reaction to movements, real and imagined. They did not see the funnel spider, but that did not reassure either of them very much.

In one of his glances, Ray looked through the twilight gloom overtaking the great room and saw the cherubic form of Tod Miler stepping out of the first floor office. Unreasonable rage filled him. He did not know *what*, exactly, he suspected the kid of having done--for how could he possibly be involved with something that had caused all *this*? At least in the sane, rational world Ray had lived in only yesterday, there was no way a child could have been involved in something so surreal. Ray charged down the last few steps and after the kid. He felt a spider squish under his booted foot and cringed; he ignored the sensation. Plenty of time to be sick later.

The boy startled upright at Ray's sudden movement, eyes wide "O"s of surprise, and then he bolted for the sliding glass door at the back of the eating area. The chief grabbed the kid by the shirt and spun him around.

He had planned to demand answers, but the boy's eyes had changed to round, black baseballs. Impossible, unfathomable, onyx orbs framed in a face of hate. The

thing opened its mouth and the fangs--not fangs, Brian had said; cholera-something-or-other--of a spider quivered within. Black, fleshy and hairy protuberances hung down, reminiscent of a walrus' upper lip, with smooth black curves that sprouted from that bristled, jutting flesh, and sure as shit looked like fangs to Ray. Tod Miler hissed and lunged at him, and Ray fell over backwards onto the floor as he backpedalled away in fear.

The door flew open and the mutant boy-slash-spider was gone. As Ray got up, he saw that the little creep had dropped a book. A quick flip through the book revealed it to be a diary, but he'd have to read it later. He slipped it into his pocket.

The fire chief turned back and saw Brian leaning against the fridge, eyes closed, breathing heavily. He'd clearly missed whatever the hell had just happened.

"Brian," he said. The large man opened his eyes. Ray looked a question at him, and did a head bob toward the fridge. Brian shook his head. No antivenin. Sweat beaded the man's face and dampened his blond-brown hair. He cradled his injured arm.

Ray's phone rang. He had taken it off vibrate, and it sounded shrill in the silent spider mausoleum. He looked at the caller ID and answered the phone. "Amanda! Where are you?" Ray said.

He heard her voice, tinny and distorted, as if far away, interspersed with silence. "Uncle.....the basement. Oh, God! Please..... it's..... my dad.....it.....mons....." For a moment, he thought he heard banging and scraping, but then he lost the connection completely.

He heard more scraping and banging and took another look at the phone. No connection. Then he realized the sound came from the basement.

He looked at Brian. "Go. Go!" Brian waved his uninjured arm. "Right behind you." He threw himself upright, off the fridge he had been leaning on, with obvious effort to show Ray he could make it. He waved his hand to emphasize the message. Go ahead.

Ray headed for the basement door. He wanted to go faster, but even if Brian hadn't been injured, he couldn't. There were simply too many damned spiders in the way. He moved through them like a kid shuffling through leaves in the fall and felt, once again, slightly queasy as he did so. When one of the spiders--a brilliant orange thing with black bands--started to crawl up his leg, he did not realize he had been whimpering until after he'd knocked it off with the base of his fire extinguisher.

As he reached the top of the basement stairs, Ray heard a sound like a bookcase being dragged and then more of that odd banging, as if someone were hitting a full metal garbage can. As Brian caught up to him, he hit the light switch to the basement and they heard a whispering noise and then silence. They waded down the basement staircase, which ran parallel to the road out front. Ray used his booted feet to brush the knotted mass of spiders off the creaky wooden steps in quick sweeps, again feeling his gorge rise. At the bottom, the pale light of a single low wattage bulb hung down from an electric cord looped over a pipe--a safety violation, the fire chief noted in passing; it swung slightly as if troubled by a breeze and revealed a perdition scene.

A man in black robes lay on the floor, blood on his arm, face and chest. Ray took a second look and recognized Tim Harding's face, but what he saw shocked him. The thirty-something year old had painted his forehead with very realistic spider eyes as well drawing curved mouthparts on his long, bony visage. His painted face emulated the grotesquery that Tod Miler had recently revealed.

The size of the bite marks added to Ray's growing dread. It looked like someone stuck a damned harpoon in him.

Ray had been well-trained to look for danger before going in to help someone and, despite his revulsion, his instinct was still to try and help Tim. Ray scanned the scene. Spiders of all shapes and sizes crawled all around the man but, eerily, did not climb on or near him. The acrid and cloying smell of something burned and pungent pricked at his firefighter's senses. He spotted black candles toppled nearby, and a circle had been inscribed on the floor with strange symbols or letters he did not recognize. Some kind of cult-circle, or whatever the hell these nuts called those things.

The basement windows were choked with sheet webs. The rafters overhead rippled with cobwebs and tent webs. God, he wished he had not looked overhead. Spiders hung above them by the score, upside down spectators and specters to the scene they observed below. He could feel their multiple eyes upon him as they considered whether or not he was prey.

Off to the right, toward the south side of the room, beyond Tim's unconscious body, an old rusty and dented fridge lay on its back, looking like a pastel green coffin. Straight ahead of the fridge, he saw a sliding glass door for the walkout basement, which is precisely what he wanted to do now. Walk. The Hell. Out. To the far right, beyond the fridge, he could see workbenches, Bunsen burners, racks with frames in them, and piles of boxes in the moldering dim light. And more spiders shifting around in the dim murkiness. Of course.

Ray looked to the left, past the staircase they had descended, and he almost passed out. A cinder block wall went up to chest height; from there, a crawl space

should have gone back under the rest of the house, with a fifteen or twenty foot wide opening. Instead, on either side someone had cemented cobblestones, random rocks, brick and debris into the wall. The opening was now perhaps five feet by five feet, and it was covered in the dense cyclone shape of a funnel web.

"Ray! There's somebody in here!" He tore his eyes away from the horrid lair and saw Brian yanking on the handle of the mangled fridge. "It's jammed."

"Amanda!" Ray raced over, slipping on some vials and packets that lay scattered on the floor in front of it. He joined in and they both pulled, but the door would not budge. He could hear a feeble beating from within and knew that she must be running out of air by now.

Ray grabbed his Halligan and said, "Watch out." He swung the tool like an axe. Sparks flew from the metal, and on the second blow, the latch clunked to the floor. They pulled the door up and helped Amanda up and out of the container as she gasped for breath.

"Had to hide." Deep gasp. "Tried to kill me. My stepdad." Another gasp. "I couldn't get out the door." She gestured at the sliding glass door of the walkout basement. She started to cry at that memory, and he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. Another deep, shuddering breath.

"Easy. Slow down." He held her out at arms' length.

As her breath came more easily, so did the words. "He tied my wrists. But not my feet. He had a knife, and he made me kneel down. Tod started chanting in some strange language and walking around the circle, with us in it, and the spiders everywhere." She bit at her fist as if trying to fight back terror with pain, which perhaps

she was. "Tod was waving this lantern-thingy with a horrible smelling smoke coming from it. And when I looked in his face, I saw--I saw--"

But she couldn't finish the sentence any more than Ray could volunteer what he'd seen. Not there. Not then. "Easy. Easy does it," Ray said again.

"I heard something crack, super loud, like the house broke, you know, or a mountain? And then a gust of hot air with strange smells, like Aunt Muriel's spice cabinet all mixed up with a dried up scummy pond. Tim...he looked into the crawlspace and I jumped up and kneed him." A hint of a smile touched her lips at that.

"I grabbed the knife and ran, but I couldn't get out the door," she said again. "Locked. Tod kept chanting, louder and faster, and Tim was getting up, pissed, you know? So I dumped the stuff out of the fridge and climbed in. I pulled the door shut, and I thought, 'If I can just call Uncle Ray, I'll have a chance.'"

"They kept banging on the fridge. Flipping it over. I thought I was going to die." She looked into her uncle's eyes. "I was so scared," she whispered.

"And incredibly brave," Ray said.

Ray looked over at the crawl space. He knew, without a doubt, that something lurked in there, waiting.

Still peering into the dark funnel, for a brief moment, too quickly for him to even cry out, within those layers of webbing, Ray saw the sheen of polished black stones, numerous orbs the size of fists. He noted with numb, unholy terror that they were in a setting of bristled hairs. Eyes? Were they eyes?! Looking at him, marking him. Unblinking eyes--but larger than a spider's eyes, impossibly larger. Much, much larger. Surely, they could not be a spider's eyes? But then, the opening of the funnel, at the

point where it drove deeper inward, stood maybe three feet wide. And then, so fast he thought perhaps he had imagined it all, they disappeared, lost in that labyrinth of web.

He took an involuntary step forward, trying to see, unable to believe that he could possibly be seeing what he *thought* he was seeing. Moving his hand slowly, Ray reached up and flicked on his helmet light. The piercing light could not completely penetrate the woven silk.

Within that shadowy lair, they heard a noise like a giant madman scribbling furiously on parchment with an oversized pencil, and then the clamor shifted to a repetitive thrumming that brought to mind his grandmother working away on her old foot-powered sewing machine. The thrumming ended in an emphatic *thunk* as if a heavy wooden cabinet door clicked shut, making the three of them jump.

After a moment's pause, a different noise began, and this last set of noises chilled his blood. An emphatic tapping that sounded like some bizarre and alien version of Morse code--overlapping and arrhythmic--started up. The unnatural sound grated against and disturbed the mind. When the sounds stopped, they waited, both grateful and yet frozen in terror, waiting to see if the perpetrator of such an incongruous bedlam would show itself. Instead, the whole pattern repeated again.

The spiders gathered on the floor below the crawl space raised quivering front legs toward the opening. Dozens and dozens of them, all facing that silken funnel, and all in the same posture, as if giving homage to a liege lord or praying to a god.

He shook his head and came back to himself, as if from some sort of drugged daze or hypnotic episode, that Amanda clutched at his arm. He knew he should be

doing something, but his shocked brain wouldn't work, couldn't process all this. He moved in a numb catatonia.

"We really need to get out of here," Brian said.

"Yeah," Ray said. "Yeah. Help me with Tim." He could make sure he was stable after they got the hell out of here. Screw protocol.

He took a step closer to that gauze-covered murk, preparing to pick up Tim's shoulders, but he'd have to go closer to that fetid pit, and then turn his back on it to lift him. Good God, how could he do it? He was just considering dragging Tim away from the area by his ankles when Ray once more thought he caught a glimpse of movement within that unnatural chamber. There! An object shiny and black and *goddamn huge!*

It shifted out of view, disappearing yet again, and Ray shuffled backwards a couple of steps.

"Did you--" but when he turned to Brian, the larger man was scrabbling and tossing aside vials and packets on the floor, looking for the antivenin. Amanda nodded, bone-pale under the bare incandescent bulb, mouth pressed into a thin, downward curve.

Ray whipped his head back around and he imagined he could see coarse hairy limbs shifting in the impenetrable gloom. He would have sworn he saw the glassy alienness of a spider's eyes glittering at him.

Keeping a wary eye on the opening to the crawl space, Ray slid forward once more. Leaving the fire extinguishers over by Brian, he moved next to Tim, and set the Halligan next to him.

Ray set aside his revulsion and checked for a pulse and breathing. Freak's alive? Check. Pulse racing, breathing labored. The wounds appeared to be insect bites, swollen and bright red, but the size of the punctures made it look like he'd been stabbed with a screwdriver instead of a bite. Tim did not stir, but he seemed stable enough to move.

"Okay, Amanda, you'll have to help me. Brian's been--"

Amanda suddenly screamed and Ray ducked instinctively and staggered away from the crawlspace. He glanced behind him. Something the size of a small car, black and hairy with glass eyes and articulated legs stabbed and gnashed it's way toward him. There was no way he could grab the pry bar, so he did the only thing he could. He screamed and scabbled away from the thing as quickly as he could.

Paralysis gripped his mind, and he watched in horror as the creature--far too large to be called just a spider--snatched up Tim Harding from the floor with its front legs and with terrifying speed reversed course and dragged the man back into its den. His right leg and shoe caught on the lip, but then disappeared with a final tug. Ray backed up until he bumped into Amanda.

A fresh round of panic-sweat popped out all over his body. He suppressed a whimper for Amanda's sake, and Ray pushed her gently but insisently toward the sliding glass door. "Go!" he said. Inside, his mind screamed in near-hysteria. *Go, go, go! Get out. Gotta get out. Out. Gotta get out. Gotta get away from here.*

Unwilling to leave behind his only weapon, his Halligan bar, he stepped forward and stretched out his fingers with great trepidation toward that preternatural beast. Just before he grasped the pry bar, noises started coming from the crawl space again and

he jerked his hand back in reflexive panic. An insistent and urgent alien staccato punctuated the air and dust sifted down from the rafters overhead. The spiders crowded closer to the crawl space, although none presumed to scale the wall.

Then, as one, the spiders turned toward Ray, Brian and Amanda. Ray lunged out, grabbed the Halligan bar from the floor and ran.

"Time to go," Brian said and they joined Amanda at the basement's sliding glass door. It would not budge. Harding had nailed it shut. As one, Ray swung the Halligan and Brian swung the axe at the glass wall before them. The glass turned opaque in a parody of spider webs that mocked their efforts to escape, but then crashed to the ground when they kicked at the glass. Amanda went first, then Brian. Ray turned and looked behind him and saw the entire room of spiders shift toward them.

"Shit!" he said, his voice higher than normal.

"What?" Brian yelled over his shoulder.

"Just run!"

Ray and Amanda grabbed Brian's arms, helping him stumble along. They ran outside and to the left, up a grass slope with a brick walled off storage area between them and the house. They dodged stray spiders who apparently hadn't received their marching orders yet.

When they reached the truck over toward the side of the front yard, Ray pointed north as he yanked open the back.

"Go to the burned out house next door. I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

"What? What are you doing?" Amanda said, her voice awash with hysteria.

In answer, Ray pulled out one of the two cans he kept for running generators. He spun off the front and back caps and poured one of the cans down the hill where the spiders were coming at them. Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a pack of matches. Only one. Damn. He ripped off the cardboard match and lit the book on fire. He tossed it on the gasoline flowing downhill, and the encroaching spiders, went up with a *whoosh!* The spiders make a crackling noise as they burned and shriveled in on themselves.

"Go on!" he yelled at Brian and Amanda. They didn't argue but instead took off running.

Fortunately, the brick storage area kept the house from catching fire as well. Even a fast house fire would not suffice for the hellspawn Ray had seen in the basement.

He stuffed a rag in the second can. He knew he did not have much time. Whatever that was in the basement was issuing orders. He climbed into the cab, popped the lighter in, and gunned the engine toward the front of the house, heedless of the spider bodies crunching under his tires.

The lighter popped as he pulled up to the open front door. He considered lighting and throwing his Molotov cocktail in, but had another idea. He pushed the lighter back in to keep it hot, grabbed the Halligan, and ran inside the house, his nerves jangling from repeated fear-reactions. He ran to the kitchen and cranked up all the burners on the stove; but he knew even with all four going full tilt, it would take too long for the gas to spread.

He ran into the laundry room, over by the garage--and the stairs going down, which he did not want to think about. He pulled the dryer away from the wall. He was in

luck. Gas, not electric. He grabbed the mini-bolt cutters off his tool belt, murmured a prayer, squinted, and cut the gas line.

He was still there, so the house hadn't blown up. Yet.

He hurried from the room, past the kitchen and under the walkway. He was heading for the door when someone tapped him insistently, angrily on the shoulder.

His blood froze. *No one else is here!* screamed in his brain. He beat at his shoulder in panic and a black spider flew off and into the hallway wall. Ray recognized the odd mix of shiny and flat black on its body--the Australian Funnel Spider that bit Brian. *Shit!* It charged back at him, moving incredibly fast. It slammed into his leg and tore at his boot like a bulldog. Not having luck chewing through the Kevlar, it turned its head, and black-glass eyes stared into Ray's own eyes. It launched for his face, climbing up his body like a tree. Ray shrieked and, waving his arm wildly, flung it aside, more by luck than anything. It landed on its back, but flipped over and rounded, advancing on him yet again with blazing speed. Before it could leap at him, though, Ray, crazed with fear-adrenalin screamed a challenge of his own and charged. He swung the pry-bar end of the Halligan like a golf club. The spider flew backwards, bounced off the front door and lay still on the oriental carpet. Ray didn't pause. He swung the multi-tool around and slammed the spike through the thing's body. Terror channeled into rage, he kept swinging the pike end, the curved steel biting through the spider and into the hardwood floor beneath. He had to wrench it loose after each blow.

"Sonuva..."

Thunk!

"Goddamn..."

Thunk!

"Bitch..."

Thunk!

With the last blow, and to make sure it was dead, he rotated the tool and brought the hammerhead down on it, turning it into a flattened mess. He stood up, breathing hard and looked back into the hallway. A cascade of spiders moved toward him.

Ray ran outside, slamming the door shut. He grabbed the lighter from its socket in the dash, and held it to the rag, but it would not catch. It had cooled off already. Ray laughed, a mad, frenzied sound. "Of course!" He pushed in the lighter and rocked back and forth in the seat as he waited for it to heat back up. "Comeon-comeon-comeon," he said, fresh beads of sweat covering his forehead. He watched, captivated, as spiders attempted to climb out of the open windows, while others, newcomers who had not yet received the latest order to kill Ray Canfield, still attempted to scurry into the house.

The lighter popped out and Ray let out a little sob of relief. He drove the car in front of the window, lit the rag, the flames dancing dangerously close to his face, and hurled the can in like a medicine ball, shattering the glass. He did a 180-degree turn in the front lawn and pressed the pedal to the floor, churning up grass and dirt. He was unaware that he giggled, laughed, and wept as the vehicle bucked its way off the Harding property.

The house erupted into a column of fire as he picked up Brian and Amanda at the house next door.

#

Winter had come and gone. Spring had arrived for its traditional day or two and then turned into a blazing hot summer, which had rolled back around to fall again. The townsfolk had moved on with their lives, but one could not say things had gotten back to normal.

The two elderly men bitten at the Piggly Wiggly had ended up dying, although the boy had lived. Brian also lived, thanks to the antivenin he had found in the basement. But necrosis set in, despite chemical treatments, surgery, and even maggot treatments to remove the dead skin. Secondary infections had set in and, in the end, his arm had to be amputated. He and Ray had become friends and got together every week or so now. Brian was still an expert on spiders, even moreso now, perhaps, but he no longer gushed enthusiastically about the eight-legged bastards.

With both of Amanda's parents dead, and no other relatives, she had become Ray's responsibility and they'd turned a spare room into her bedroom. Amanda had later told him that she'd seen Tod Miler by Ray's truck that day, but she'd been afraid to say anything. He'd glared and pointed at her from behind Ray's truck, and she'd panicked. Tod could be quite...cruel...if he chose to be. She'd regretted running as soon as she got away from the pit, and she'd tried to call him right away, but he hadn't picked up.

She still woke up screaming from nightmares.

So did he.

Tim Harding's journal had not helped. Excerpts of it haunted his nights.

I shall always be indebted to the Author for putting me on this path. My daily diet of live spiders has already made a difference. After only three weeks, I am more vibrant

and alive. I can feel myself growing more powerful each day. The venom treatments are also making me more resistant to the toxins of my arachnid friends...

I met the archaeologist, Dr. Michael Miler, today...

...Dr. Miler says that his work in Peru uncovered mystic knowledge regarding the Spider God...

...convinced me that there is a better means to using the Arachnida for even more power. They have invited me into their Circle and made me an initiate...

...Soon, I shall be the perfect servant, and I shall begin my transformation and become one of the Uttu-Ashipu, like the Milers before me...

With the help of the Internet, Ray learned that Uttu was a spider god from ancient Sumeria. An ashipu was, as far as he could make out, a conjurer of the gods.

The last sentence read:

Christine and Amanda shall help me achieve my life's purpose today. All gods require sacrifices, after all, and they will be the seminal gifts to the rebirth of a god! Uttu, Uttu! Come to us! Come to me! Grant me power beyond mortal imagining! Remake me in your image! Let me be one of the Apkallum!

Ray had let the fire at Spider Hill burn for over a week. It had consumed the Harding and Miler homes, as well as all the unoccupied houses and a good portion of the woods nearby. Once the fire burned itself out, one of the officers scouring the area spotted tire tracks travelling downhill toward the basement excavation where Ray had met Amanda Harding. They found Police Chief Ed Johansson's car submerged in the muddy water. His body sat in the car seat, buckled in, with hundreds of spider bites on his hands, arms, and face. Close to a dozen dead southern black widows were found in

the car, presumably crushed by Ed as he struggled against some hell that Ray's imagination hounded him with in the waning hours of sanity. Ray had since learned that the "southern" black widow could be found as far north as Canada--and their venom was fifteen times more lethal than a rattlesnake's bite. That helped. Ray shuddered at the thought of Ed's body below the surface while he and Amanda chatted about reading and Tod Miler. Fingerprints on the trunk of the squad car indicated the car was most likely pushed into the excavated pit. The three sets of prints--two adults' and one child's--were not in the system.

The spider activity had died down somewhat over the past year, at least compared to that frenzied day in October, but remained inexplicably high for that area of Illinois. It also housed a disturbing variety of species that should not have been in the state, as well as several new species previously found no where else. When the county Corn Festival rolled around, people had been unwilling to use the Skip-2-Loo portable toilets because of the influx of spiders.

Ray had the house fumigated regularly now.

The feds had also been around, wanting to question the Milers for "irregularities in research importation procedures," but their car, and the Milers themselves, were never found.

Three days later, their postal worker, Larry Rosewall, delivered a package to the station addressed to Raymond Canfield, Braeburn Fire Chief. Inside was a wrapped box with a ribbon. Ray didn't think much of it, since people were often grateful to the firefighters for saving their homes or loved ones. He shook it gently, curious as to what it might be.

When he took the lid off the box, dozens of black widows ran out, and he got several bites on his hands. If it had not been for the antivenin they now kept on hand in the station and the rigs, he would have died within minutes. Fortunately for him, Maggie also kept a large can of spider spray in the dispatch office.

A card within read, "Best Wishes from the Milers." There was a picture of Tod Miler smiling into the camera. He was standing in front of a famous sculpture in Chicago called, "The Egg."

Last night, Ray and his crew had assisted with a fire in Springwater, the next town to the west. A house on the edge of a forest preserve caught fire from old wiring. Shortly after leaving the scene, Ray spotted an old abandoned farmhouse lit by a partial moon and the haze of starlight that still exists in the rural Midwest. A long, furrowed field of land, blue-gray in the eldritch night, led up to a decrepit barn sagging with age.

Next to the barn he spotted several people. Adults and children stood beside what he thought was an odd looking tractor or excavator. Maybe one of those foreign jobs. Even so, something about the shape of the tractor seemed wrong. Too curved in the back, too angular in the front.

When he took a second look, though, the tractor was gone. So were the people. All of them. Nowhere to be seen. Only then did he realize that they had been standing outside without any source of light, other than the moon.

He thought he saw a silhouette pass in front of the silvered light filtering through the barn's empty husk. Then he saw the people swarming up the sides of the barn and up onto the roof. Climbing. Like spiders.

His arms broke out in goose bumps, and he quickly looked away, some primordial, superstitious part of his being afraid that, if he kept looking, he would draw unwanted attention to himself. Ray's hand trembled when he lifted it from the steering wheel as he drove the rest of the way home. He couldn't sleep that night; the next morning, he and Brian drove back out there. The house and the barn were both abandoned, but showed signs of recent activity. Footprints, candy wrappers. No corpses, fortunately. And lots of spiders. Big, steering wheel sized spiders.

Ray took a long drag from his cigarette and flicked it out onto the runnels of gasoline he and Brian had laid down around the base of the house and barn. They watched for a while as the old, dry wood burned and tossed sparks into the early morning sky.