

THE BURNING

By

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Chapter 1

At five-thirty Friday morning, in San Francisco, Phyllis Blessing cried out in the dark. The names of her lost son and husband still echoed through the bedroom as she bolted upright. She clutched a pillow to her breast and, although there was no one else to hear, she buried her face in it to muffle her cries. It wasn't the first time in the last two months that she had woken in terror, calling their names, and she could no longer stand the sound of her own anguished voice.

She choked back the tears, determined not to drown in sorrow. She climbed out of bed, stumbled in the gloom, and found her way to the bathroom. The haunting dream had left her with not only an empty, cold feeling inside, but with the

sour smell of night sweat. She started the shower then struggled with her damp nightgown. It clung to her body as if afraid to let go, but she finally forced it up and over her head.

Afterward, her reflection in the mirror both shocked and scared her. Lost in grief, she hadn't realized how far she had fallen since the terrible loss of John and her sweet little boy, Max. The ugly, emotional scars left behind by their deaths were now visible in her physical appearance as well. She was only thirty-four, but her reflection looked much older. Her body was still slender yet shapely—stomach flat, breasts firm and small. But her face, pretty and soft just two months ago, now looked drawn and hard. Her black hair hung sweaty and limp to her shoulders, bangs matted against her forehead. Her olive skin had turned pasty. Her brown eyes were bloodshot. Sunken. Lifeless.

Phyllis grabbed the sink with both hands, fingers digging into the porcelain as if her life depended on keeping a firm hold. And maybe it did. She couldn't take being alone anymore, her heart aching, missing them. She needed to get away from San Francisco, her old life that didn't really exist anymore. She needed to heal. She needed to be with family. Her mother had died while giving birth to her. Her father had died five years ago with cancer, and she had no brothers or sisters. Therefore, the family that came to mind was her

Aunt Jean and Uncle Ron. They lived in Serenity Bay—a place that had always seemed magical to her while growing up. After the funerals, they had begged her to visit them. The room she had stayed in as a little girl was ready and waiting, they had assured her.

Taking a deep breath, Phyllis released her death-grip on the sink. It wasn't fair that John and Max were gone, or that she was left to carry on by herself. But fair or not, it was time to pull herself from the depths of despair. It was time to live again.

Phyllis arrived at Police Headquarters at eight o'clock sharp. Instead of dressing in her usual work attire, she wore a light sweatshirt over a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and running shoes. She had already packed. The suitcases along with her personal weapons—a Mossberg pump shotgun and 9mm Mauser pistol—were in the trunk of John's '68 Camaro. She had already phoned her aunt and uncle; they knew she was coming. Now there was only one thing left to do. Something she should have done two months ago.

She marched through the squad room with renewed vigor. She rapped on the captain's door and, without waiting for a reply, stepped in. "Captain, I need a minute of your time," she said and closed the door.

Captain Stoker looked up from his desk in surprise. "It

seems I don't have a choice, Inspector," he answered. He eyed her closer then slumped back in his chair as if he knew what to expect.

Phyllis took out her SFPD-issued .45. She dropped the clip into her hand, put it on the desk then shucked the round out of the chamber. The pistol and extra round went next to the clip. Seconds later, her shield and ID joined those items on the desk.

Captain Stoker looked hard at her. "Inspector Blessing, you should think about this," he said.

"I have," she answered, "this is what I have to do."

The captain stood. He towered over her. "Phyllis," he started, visibly uncomfortable addressing her by first name. He ran a hand through his thick, black hair, clearly frustrated. "Two months ago I tried to force a sabbatical on you," he said with compassion. "I knew you needed time. You begged me to let you stay. Against my better judgement, I caved in, gave you what you wanted. Now, you just up and quit on me?"

Phyllis stood up to him, determined not to let his size intimidate her. "It's what I have to do," she repeated.

He shook his head. Slammed a fist down hard on the desktop. "Damn! I knew this would happen!" he barked, all compassion gone from his voice.

Phyllis said nothing.

“Take the sabbatical, Phyllis. As long as you need. But don’t quit. You’re a damn good inspector and I don’t want to lose you,” the captain pleaded.

“No,” she said, shaking her head back at him. “I’m sorry, Captain, but I quit.” She turned to leave. Got as far as the door.

“Dammit!” He picked up her badge and piece. “I’m going to hold onto these, Inspector,” he yelled after her. “And by God I’m not putting the paperwork through either. I can sit on this.”

She opened the door but stopped. Turned back around. “Suit yourself, Captain,” she answered. “I’m sorry, but I quit.” She walked out, leaving the door open behind her.

Phyllis enjoyed a coastal view, so she had planned to drive the Camaro down Highway 1, along the ocean face of both the San Pedro and Montara Mountains to Serenity Bay. Before she left home, however, old Harold Biggs next door told her that the section of highway past Devil's Slide—a 1,000-foot-long section of unstable ocean bluffs, consisting mostly of thin layers of shale and sandstone—was still impassable, the victim of a major landslide due to last winter's heavy rains. So instead, she drove south on Highway 280. This inland route took her seven miles farther south than she needed to go and put her on the eastern side

of the Santa Cruz Mountains. She took the exit to what California laughingly called Highway 84, a two-lane road that wound through the mountains then cut through the San Gregorio Valley to Highway 1 on the coast, where she would be forced to backtrack into town.

But she was in no hurry.

As she slowly ascended, the clear, blue sky, the warm sun, and the sea of bright-yellow leaves on the large old oaks lining the road did nothing to brighten her mood. She thought she had left the pain of her old life behind. She truly looked toward Serenity Bay as a new life. But she couldn't stop the dark shadows of the past from torturing her thoughts.

She scarcely noticed entering the small town of Woodside, except now quaint, rustic buildings lined the road instead of oak trees and the speed limit dropped dramatically to twenty-five miles per hour. But even at such a low speed, she quickly left Woodside behind.

She saw an occasional car or speeding bicycle coming down toward her as she wound ever higher. Mailboxes, belonging to houses hidden behind the thick yellow foliage of gnarled oaks and the dense, brown brush that crowded the road on both sides began to disappear. Soon, the wilds of a much denser forest replaced even those small signs of human life. Shadows, like her mood, deepened. Conifers and

redwoods towered overhead, creating an archway over the road. To the left, the mountain dropped into a creek-bottomed canyon.

She stole glimpses right and left, but just as the warm rays of the sun had failed to brighten her mood earlier so did the surrounding beauty of the redwood-conifer forest.

The Camaro slowly continued its struggle up the switchback road until it reached the summit and the road leveled.

Phyllis stopped at the four-way stop. A gas station and three restaurants cluttered the intersection. She thought briefly of stopping for a bite to eat, but the thought of food suddenly made her feel sick. Instead, she quickly began her descent.

The switchback road crossed over the creek three more times. Redwoods and conifers still surrounded her, but now small groves of eucalyptus mixed into the forest. She, however, was lost in the last memory she had of John and Max. Still alive:

After getting ready for work that morning, Phyllis had climbed back into bed with John to steal a good-bye kiss from her still sleeping husband. She nuzzled up next to his warm body and whispered in his ear, "Get up, baby. Time to get up."

“Mmmmm,” John murmured. “I’m awake, but don’t let that stop you.”

She bit his earlobe, pushed her pelvis into his butt, and slipped her hand down his pajama bottoms. “Oooo, you’re up now,” she giggled, “very much up.”

John laughed and turned around to face her. “You’re a bad woman,” he teased.

She pushed his blonde hair back, off his forehead, and stared into his green eyes. “You like me bad,” she teased back. Then kissed him hard on the mouth.

“Mom! Dad!” Max squealed as he ran into their bedroom. He jumped into bed, crashing on top of them. “Mornin’!” He squirmed down between them, giggling.

“Mornin’, yourself,” she said.

She kissed Max all over his little face. This resulted in more squirming and giggling.

“I have to get to work,” she said.

She kissed Max one more time then planted a hard kiss on John. She climbed out of bed and retrieved her pistol from the locked box she kept in the closet.

“Where are my keys?” she asked as she moved things around on the dresser.

John smiled at her. He wrapped his arms around Max in a loving embrace. “No, you’re taking my car today. Remember?” John reminded her. “I’m taking yours to the

shop. Oil change. Remember?” he said.

“Okay, then where are your keys?”

“Right there.”

She found the keys.

“Snake and they would have bit you,” John said.

Max giggled at this. “Yeah Mom, snake. And it bit you.”

She laughed at their corny joke. “Get him to school on time,” she said to John.

“Yeah, yeah. Like I don’t do this everyday,” he said.

“Gotta go.” She shook the keys at them. “Me and the snake.”

John laughed. Max giggled.

She looked back at them. John, no pajama top on, held six-year-old Max against his chest. Max looked like a smaller version of John. They both waved at her. Then they were wrestling on the bed. The sound of their laughter filled the house as she left.

Suddenly, something darted from the trees. Seeing it brought her abruptly out of the past, back to the switchback road. Phyllis slammed on her brakes. The Camaro skidded then jolted to a stop. A small coyote, looking scraggly and undernourished, stood in the middle of the road, less than a yard away. It surveyed the idling Camaro and the

surrounding terrain with furtive yellow eyes, as if considering different options of action. Then, with tail drooping, it skulked to the other side, disappearing into the forest.

Phyllis gasped as if she had died and just now came back to life. “Shit!” she said and slammed her hand against the steering wheel. She shook her head. Tried to catch her breath. “Shit,” she mumbled, “shit.”

She stepped on the gas. She continued her descent with new abandon, as if trying to outrun her memories. The Camaro's tires screeched around the curves. She shot through the small town of La Honda, the quaint, rustic buildings just a blur. Soon the redwood, conifer, and eucalyptus trees disappeared. She dropped down into oak woodlands then out onto hills covered with brown grass and grazing cows then lower still, into the San Gregorio Valley.

The valley was long and narrow, surrounded by gentle hills of brown grass and sporadic oak trees. The valley floor was mostly grazing land but some was farmland as well, with crops of Brussels sprouts and pumpkins looking ready to harvest. The road straightened and she increased her speed even more. She rocketed west through the valley, past two farmhands unloading bails of hay from the back of a pickup truck, through the tiny, dilapidated town of San Gregorio, screeching to a stop where 84 dead-ended into

Highway 1.

Sitting at the stop sign, she stared across the highway at the sun-dappled waves of the Pacific Ocean. She suddenly felt sharp pains on both sides of her jaw and realized she was clenching her teeth. Her grip on the steering wheel was that of a woman panicked by the thought of letting go. Her stomach felt knotted and pulled taut. She continued staring at the Pacific. She took deep breaths and tried to relax, but the same grim image darkened her mind:

John smiled at her. He wrapped his arms around Max in a loving embrace. “No, you’re taking my car today. Remember?”

She suddenly felt cold and empty, like after the nightmare. She quickly wound the window down. A wave of warm, salty air breezed into the car. She breathed deeply. But it didn't seem to refresh her.

She should be dead. Not them. Her car had the severed brake line. It was meant for her. Accident or not.

She shook her head violently.

If only John hadn't taken her car. Then she would be dead. Not them.

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She quickly wiped them away. She looked right, toward Serenity Bay. She wasn't ready to face her aunt and uncle. Not yet. She punched down on the gas and turned left onto the coastal

highway. She needed more time to collect herself. She knew of a beach farther south, the one she liked so much as a little girl. The one Aunt Jean always took her to.

Jeff Jordon stood in the bed of his pa's old pickup. He breathed hard and felt worn out. He had just unloaded the last bail of hay.

Jimmy, his snot-nosed, little brother, had stopped working long ago. Well, in Jimmy's defense, he halfheartedly helped now and then. But mostly he stood just where he was now, by the side of the road, staring off into the distance after the Camaro that had sped by. Obviously, he was daydreaming again. It seemed that's all the kid did anymore.

Jeff hopped down from the back of the pickup. He slammed the tailgate shut then leaned back against it. He stared into the distance, past his little brother, down the road toward the coast.

On the other side of the road, cows dotted the gentle, barren slopes. On their side, old, gnarly oak trees cluttered a streambed. The stream meandered through the middle of the flat, brown field. The water rushed over rock bed, gurgling musically. Farther down the road, toward the coast and out of view, their family had planted crops, mostly pumpkins this time of year. Their pa was working the pumpkin patch

right now: people came from all over the Bay Area to buy pumpkins in Serenity Bay.

Jeff removed his straw cowboy hat. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the red bandanna he kept in the back pocket of his jeans.

The San Gregorio Valley was beautiful, he admitted that, and it provided good crops if irrigated properly, and good grazing land, after the winter's rains came anyway. The land had been good to his family. But as he gazed toward the horizon, he couldn't help wishing for himself the same thing he knew his little brother constantly daydreamed of: To get away from this two hundred-acre farm, to no longer tirelessly sweat from sunup to sundown, doing the same mindless chores everyday but Sunday. He just wanted to have some fun.

Those thoughts cast a shadow of guilt over him, although he couldn't be sure why. After all, he was only twenty-two. Why shouldn't he have some fun? And Jimmy was three years younger. After high school, everything changed. Working the farm everyday became their sole purpose in life. That was what their pa expected. They were to grow up. Their pa no longer allowed them to hang out with friends in town or go to movies or date.

Jeff took a deep breath. He had even wanted to go to college, but Pa hadn't allowed that either. Now he figured

college was out of his reach. But, like Jimmy, he still secretly longed for his freedom, preferably with a fast car such as that Camaro and maybe a girlfriend to share it with him.

Jimmy suddenly turned around and grinned at him.

He smiled back, unexpectedly amused by his snot-nosed brother's familiar freckled face, shock of fire engine-red hair, and silly crooked grin.

"Hey you little shit, what are you looking at?" Jeff asked teasingly.

"That Camaro. It was something, wasn't it?" Jimmy exclaimed loudly as if the car had just passed by.

"Jesus, Jimmy, that Camaro's long gone," he answered.

Jimmy ignored him. "What do you think it was ... a sixty-nine or seventy?"

He shook his head in amazement. Sometimes his brother could be so dense. "Naw, a sixty-eight for sure," Jeff said.

"Sixty-eight ... yeah ... a classic." Jimmy turned back around and stared down the road.

"I told you, you snot-nosed shit," Jeff called, "it's long gone."

As he spoke those words, a breeze brushed against his sweat-soaked skin. Suddenly, he felt strangely clammy. A deep chill rocked through him, causing his teeth to chatter.

The hair on his arms prickled. The hair on his head stood on end. His skin crawled, as if thousands of spiders continuously scurried across his body. A high-pitched piping noise filled his ears. The surrounding air became heavy, oppressive, and hard to breathe. He found it difficult to move through the dense air as he looked toward the sky for what he thought to be an oncoming storm. High above, a swirling cloud of light and color slowly descended. It looked to be a rainbow gone mad: a red-orange-yellow-blue-green-purple, pulsating tornado whirling to earth.

He called to Jimmy but couldn't hear his own voice over the strange, high-pitched noise in his ears. He tried to turn and run, but he couldn't move. His muscles locked, as if made of metal and rusted in place. Within seconds, the pulsating-tornado-thing swooped toward him. Somehow, however, it passed right through him, shooting an electrical shock through his body and throwing him to the ground.

He found himself sitting on the road. His head pounded. His eyes stung. Volcanic eruptions rumbled through his stomach, spurting lavalike, burning bile into his throat. He forced it back down. Wiping at his eyes with both hands, he tried to focus. Even with murky, tear-clouded vision, he saw it. The pulsating-tornado-thing headed straight for his brother.

"Jimmy!" Jeff screamed, finding his voice.

Jimmy didn't move. He didn't try to get away. His red hair stood straight up. His freckled face went slack with terror.

"Jimmy! Run!" Jeff screamed again.

But the glowing funnel-shaped cloud already had surrounded his little brother. It lifted him off the ground and carried him high into the air.

"Jimmy!" Jeff cried. He scrambled to his feet. He ran in the direction the tornado-thing traveled, keeping his eyes focused on it even as he moved. Jimmy appeared to be within the center of the swirling mass of colors. Even so, he could still make out glimpses of his little brother's head, spinning wildly within the glowing plasma. Jimmy's arms and legs flailed futilely, appearing from inside the funnel then disappearing—repeatedly as it took him higher.

Then, without warning, the thing that held Jimmy captive transformed itself into a ball of light as brilliant as the sun.

Jeff stopped directly underneath it. He shielded his eyes and continued to stare up at it. He frantically searched for some sign that his brother was still alive. Finally, the sunlike thing grew too bright, and he had to look away. When he looked into the sky again, the ball of light was gone. It had disappeared or burned out, taking Jimmy with it.

Jeff fell to his knees. He covered his face with both hands and rocked back and forth on his legs like a lost child, crying, afraid to look or even move. Only as the surrounding air grew heavy and oppressive again did he take his hands away and look around him.

A strange bubble surrounded him. The bubble was a collage of colors yet transparent. Sunlight shone through like a stained-glass window, but fresh air couldn't penetrate it.

Panic-stricken and finding it harder to breathe, Jeff struggled to his feet. He attempted to rush forward and break through the wall of the bubble, but he couldn't get up enough speed. When he hit the wall an electrical shock jolted through him, throwing him back to the ground.

Dazed, he sat where he had landed. He shook his head, trying to clear it. But it only made his temples throb harder. When his ears filled with the high-pitched piping noise again, he found it difficult to reason. His skin crawled. His throat burned, intensely hot. And each shallow, laboring breath he took only seemed to fan what felt like a raging fire within him.

Wheezing, Jeff struggled to find his legs and regain his footing, but the invisible weight inside the bubble bore down on him, pinning him to the ground. His last thoughts as he drowned in a vacuum of empty space were of Jimmy,

the speeding Camaro, and the wish that he could have somehow found a little fun.

Phyllis left the Camaro in the small, unpaved parking area. No other cars were around. She would have the beach to herself. Just as well. Her nerves were frayed. She needed time to collect her thoughts and calm down, before seeing Aunt Jean and Uncle Ron.

She began the half-mile walk down the dirt road trail but abruptly stopped. A cold chill raced along her spine. Suddenly she felt as if she were not alone, after all. She felt as if someone or something watched her, so she stood very still. Simultaneously, she scanned the countryside and listened for sounds of an intruder. But there was no sign of anyone. There were no unusual noises. Seconds later, the strange feeling passed, and she resumed her walk to the beach.

Cornwell Ranch State Beach, with its rugged, scrub-covered sea cliffs, was her favorite, ever since she was a little girl. Other beaches all around Serenity Bay were easier to visit. But she remembered that surfers and tourists usually crowded those beaches—during the summer months anyway, hoping to see the sunset but usually disappointed by the fog-shrouded horizon. She and Aunt Jean both loved *this* beach. They used to walk the long, narrow strip of sand,

picking up small bits of smooth driftwood, tiny blue-purple shells once inhabited by California Mussel, and bone-white sand dollars. At low tide, they searched out the starfish and crabs that clung to the rocky sides of the exposed reef.

Phyllis stopped. She hooked her black, shoulder-length hair behind her ear and peered out over the surrounding terrain. The dirt road trail sliced through old ranch property once owned by the Cornwell family. A two-story, white-clapboard house stood to her right, behind a wire fence that ran the length of the trail. It had stood up to the harsh coastal wind and the hot western sun since the late 1890's. No trees were in sight. Two old horses lazily searched the dense, low-growing coastal scrub and pampas grass that surrounded the house for something edible.

Phyllis' gaze meandered across the road to her left and the field of Brussels sprouts behind another fence. The crop stretched north to the base of the hills and west down the length of the road, not stopping until the very edge of the sea cliffs. Only the Pacific lay beyond.

A rustling noise suddenly came from behind her. Startled, she turned abruptly. Within the scrub and pampas grass, she thought she saw two tiny yet chubby faces peeking out at her. They were childlike and rosy, eyes large with innocent wonderment. She rubbed her eyes with both hands. When she looked again, the cherub faces were gone.

Seconds later, two brush rabbits darted out of the scrub. They scampered across the dirt trail, right in front of her.

“Only rabbits,” Phyllis muttered. She smiled broadly with relief. “I must be cracking up.” She was alone but felt embarrassed as she watched the rabbits squeeze under the fence then scurry into the rows of Brussels sprouts. They began gnawing eagerly on the vegetables. She heard the whisper of stirring branches from behind again, but this time paid it no mind. *Only rabbits*, she thought. She left the hungry creatures and continued down the trail.

She pushed the image of the two cherubs from her mind and took a deep breath of salty air. She began to relax again as she walked. She loved this area. It truly was serene here, almost magical and untouched by time. As a teenager Montara Mountain to the north, the Santa Cruz Mountains to the east, Waddell Bluffs to the south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west had made her feel cutoff from the rest of the world. Now she longed to be isolated, away from civilization. Here she had sharp, dramatic cliffs overlooking white, sandy beaches and forested mountains that were still home to hawks, eagles, deer, coyote, bobcats, and even mountain lions. She planned to rediscover it all. She planned to explore every valley, streambed, ridgetop, and beach. She hoped that nature, along with the quaint, historic town of Serenity Bay with its friendly people, and the support of her

aunt and uncle would somehow let her find peace again.

Phyllis approached the familiar viewpoint overlooking the sea cliffs. Gulls squawked overhead. Willets and Godwits flocked together on the shore below. They probed the sand dampened by receding waves with their beaks, searching for crabs. The fiery sun lit up the horizon in an array of yellow-orange-red color. She took in another deep breath of salty air as she descended the long, wooden stairway to the beach.

While she strolled lazily across the sand, hungry birds reluctantly moved out of her path. She stopped short as the cold salt water gently lapped onto the beach, the waves not quite reaching her shoes before receding back into the mass of ocean. She stared out at the horizon and the plummeting sun. The day was perfect—waves calm, wind gentle, sky clear. The temperature was somewhere in the mid-seventies. She felt quite comfortable in her light sweatshirt. What most people didn't understand about northern California was that summer on the coastside usually meant foggy, windy, cold weather. September and October were the best time to come to the beach, and with Halloween quickly approaching and the first rains of November looming ahead there wouldn't be many more days like this one.

In fact, she thought, this day seemed so perfect she might even see the green flash at sunset. She stared at the

horizon, the sun still completely visible. She had first heard the story about the green flash from an old sailor who worked at the harbor in Serenity Bay. To see the flash the conditions had to be perfect, such as today's, and you had to be standing at sea level. The fisherman had said it looked like a green flashbulb, flaring on the horizon just as the last bit of sun disappeared. He also had said it would be over in the blink of an eye, so she must concentrate. In thirty years at sea, the old man figured he had seen the green flash only a dozen times. Phyllis had never seen it.

Now, standing just short of the surf, she concentrated. The sun almost touched the horizon. Its rays sparkled on the ocean in dazzling flickers of yellow and orange, like stars in a sky of water. But as a quarter of the sun disappeared, that cold feeling came over her again, as if someone watched her every move.

The cherubs again?

She slowly turned. Looked over her shoulder. A man and woman in their late fifties were coming down the long, wooden stairway, holding hands, their heads together as they talked, eyes only for each other. The couples' appearance on the beach, however, didn't explain her uneasy feeling of not being alone.

She turned. Looked over her other shoulder. A dark figure stood on the cliffs high above her, not quite hidden in

the darkening shadows. The figure didn't look childlike as the faces in the scrub had. This was definitely an adult. She rubbed her eyes as she had done on the trail, but when she looked, the figure was still there. It hadn't disappeared. It hadn't changed into harmless rabbits.

Someone else enjoying the sunset, she thought. Like me. Probably.

But she couldn't convince herself. As she turned back toward the horizon, she couldn't shake the feeling that he had been watching her all along.

Then she saw the green flash. It lasted only a second, as the old sailor had said it would. A second later the sun completely disappeared and she stood in the gloom of dusk, green spots floating within her vision. Then she saw it again. A flash of green. This time it did not disappear but remained in the form of a green ball reflecting off the black waters of the Pacific Ocean.

It was behind her.

She turned around. A large, green ball—semi-transparent, with snakelike shapes inside that wriggled and flickered—floated down from the sea cliffs toward her. She watched it, frozen with fascination and fear. And as the thing got closer, she heard a strange hissing or sizzling, like bacon frying in a pan. The green ball stopped right above her, hovering. It gave her a feeling of being examined or

probed. She felt an electrical tingling sensation run through her body as her hair stood on end. A sudden flash of heat from the ball thawed her frozen limbs, changing fascination to fear. Simultaneously, she caught a flicker of white light out of the corner of her eye, just over her right shoulder. A musical voice whispered in her ear, “Run.”

She didn't understand where the warning had come from but turned immediately and obeyed. She ran for the wooden stairway. The man and woman had already started back up the stairs, their backs to her, oblivious to any danger.

“Run!” Phyllis screamed.

They turned to look at her. Saw the green ball of light. Turned back around and began climbing the stairs as quickly as they could.

Phyllis caught up to them. Dared to look back. The green ball remained where it was. It hadn't followed. Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe the musical voice had been wrong in its warning. Maybe it posed no danger, after all. But she didn't wait to find out. She continued climbing the long flight of stairs, urging the older couple to move faster. At the top, she dared to glance back again. The ball of green light now bounced up the stairs behind them. And it had grown larger. Brighter. More ominous.

Phyllis ran down the dirt road trail. She had gotten

around the older couple, slightly in front of them, but was unwilling to leave them behind. When she turned to check, she saw the woman trip then fall to her knees.

“Jerry!” the woman screamed. “Don’t leave!”

The man stopped. “Harriet!” he yelled, running back to her.

The green ball flew toward them in a mad rush. Before Jerry could help Harriet to her feet, it surrounded them.

Phyllis stopped. She watched in horror as Jerry joined Harriet on the ground within the ball of light. They both clutched at their throats as if choking, unable to breathe.

“No!” Phyllis yelled, not willing to leave the couple to die without trying to help.

She ran back toward the ball of light. Planned to ram it at full speed. But before she could get close, a bolt of green lightning flashed in front of her. A single, sharp crash of thunder followed. She flew backward. Hit the ground hard. She lay on her back, unable to move. Then her right arm began to twitch. She couldn’t stop it. As the twitching in her arm increased, her heartbeat slowed. It throbbed. Stopped. Throbbbed. Stopped.

What in God's name is happening?

She struggled to breathe. Couldn’t.

Helpless, she stared upward. The night sky began to spin.

Chapter 2

Upstairs, chairs overturned. Glass broke. Chuck Lackman screamed obscenities.

In the musty basement, sixteen-year-old Lucy McDanell shook with fear. She sat on a small army cot, knees pulled to her chin, and leaned back against the thin pillow between her and the cold concrete-block wall. To keep the chill out, she covered herself with the only threadbare blanket allowed her. In one hand, she clutched the ankh she always wore about her neck. Just the feel of it comforted her. Her other hand nervously fingered a well-worn, paperback copy of Anne Rice's *Interview With The Vampire*. A small lamp on the end table next to the cot was all that lit the underground room.

It was here that she lived the life of a prisoner. She had lost track of how long and held little hope of escape anymore. Nevertheless, she remained ever vigilant and prepared, fully dressed in black jeans, a black baggy sweatshirt, sweat socks, and black tennis shoes. Her long, untamed red hair hung about her face, like a lion's mane,

covering her delicate features and white, almost translucent skin. Her pale-blue eyes stared up the old, wooden staircase. She focused on the closed door that stood between her and her captor.

Upstairs, something smashed against the other side of that door. She knew Chuck would soon be coming for her.

She forced her gaze away from the staircase. Wanting desperately to tune out the drunken noise above, she closed her eyes.

All her life, people had abused her. Taken from her. Beaten her down. Sucked the life out of her. First, her father. Now, Chuck.

Her only defense against this cold reality was her dream world. A world inhabited by vampires. She had dreamed of a vampire almost every night since she was thirteen, since discovering Rice's five novels known as *The Vampire Chronicles* and becoming fascinated with the vampire character, Lestat. Her vampire's name was Victor. Like Lestat, he was a predator of humans. He had the power and strength to kill as swiftly and efficiently as a wild animal, but he was also beautiful and sensual. He was not just an unfeeling, blood-sucking beast. He was passionate, loving and caring, at least with his own kind. After these nightly visits, she always felt tired and listless. Yet somehow, she felt hopeful as well. Victor offered her a way

out, salvation as one of the living dead. As a vampire she'd be immortal, a predator, rather than a victim, and at no one's mercy.

Now, to renew that feeling of hope, she conjured up images of that recurring dream:

Lucy's eyes blinked open. Victor stood by her bed, illuminated only by the light of the full moon shining through her open, bedroom window. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. He was tall and slender yet powerful-looking. His thick, blonde hair fell in waves to his shoulders. The skin of his handsome face looked pale and smooth as he stared down at her.

"Lucy," he whispered, "what is it you want?"

"I want to be taken away," Lucy answered. "I want to live forever. I want to be saved."

He smiled and bent over her. "Be careful," he whispered. "Be careful what you wish for." He kissed her.

Then they were flying through the calm, night sky, just missing the tops of trees. They held hands as they flew, and his touch felt hot rather than cold as she imagined a vampire's touch. The full moon shone brightly and stars twinkled overhead. She felt alive and happy, finally escaping her dreadful life. She felt free.

Chuck's wolfish howl echoed throughout the house. His heavy footsteps shook the ceiling.

Lucy jumped from her thoughts.

"Lucy!" he screamed. "Lucy!"

He was almost ready, almost drunk enough.

And in reality, she was not a vampire and didn't know how to become one.

Chuck staggered back and forth overhead. He threw things. Pounded. Shouted.

She stared at the staircase and started to cry. She had never really lived. She was still a prisoner and victim. First, she was her father's victim. He had raped her repeatedly until he tired of her. Then he gave her to Chuck to pay off a gambling debt. Chuck lived somewhere near the coast, in a rundown, three-room house, and he kept her in this underground room. Like a vampire, she never saw the light of day. But unlike a vampire, she was the prey rather than the predator.

"Lucy!"

Chuck threw the door open. It banged against the inside wall.

She jumped out of bed. The vampire book thumped onto the floor. She backed against the cold concrete wall and stared up the wooden staircase.

His bulk filled the open doorway. The rickety steps

creaked under his weight as he came down the stairs. He gripped the banister with one hand, steadying himself. Every other step he staggered, stopped to regain his balance, and took a deep breath.

“No!” she cried.

This had happened many times before, but suddenly one more time seemed more than she could bear. She felt sickened by the thought of Chuck hitting her, touching her, and especially being inside her again.

"Lucy. I'm coming for you." His voice softened, slurring over the words. "I'm coming."

She closed her eyes and imagined herself a bat, flying like in her dreams. She soared over the treetops, the clear sky above her, nothing but freedom stretching out ahead of her.

"I'm coming for you, Lucy," he repeated.

Chuck's heavy footsteps no longer creaked on the stairs. Even with her eyes closed, Lucy knew he had made it down the staircase, onto the linoleum floor.

"Lucy. Lucy?"

She kept her eyes shut tight. She still saw herself as a bat. Only now, she swooped out of the night sky, toward Chuck. She saw the fear on his ugly face as she dive-bombed toward his thick neck, her fangs bared. His arms swatted furiously at her, trying to keep her away. But she got to him

anyway. She sank her fangs deep into him. She had developed a taste for blood.

"Lucy!" Chuck screamed.

He stood close to her. His whiskey-foul breath made her cringe. She hadn't really become a bat. She hadn't developed a taste for blood, after all. And Chuck still lived.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

His large frame swayed drunkenly. His eyes looked wild. His long beard was matted and greasy.

"That's it," Chuck slurred. "Open your eyes." He reached for her. "I've come for you."

She tried to back up more, but there was no place to go. She flattened herself against the block wall.

"We can do this easy." His voice hardened. "Or we can do this hard, you little bitch." Spit flew from his mouth. It clung to his unkempt mustache, slowly dripping and catching again in his raggedy beard. He took another step toward her. He reached out and grabbed Lucy's ankh in one big, fleshy hand.

Now she no longer concentrated on him. Instead, she looked past him. She stared wondrously at a small, red ball of light. It bounced down the stairs, hissing and glowing softly, emitting sparks from its edges as it bounced.

"Bitch!" he screamed and slapped her across the face with his other hand. "Pay attention to me! I want you to look

at me!"

She focused on the semi-transparent ball of light as it floated gently across the room, silently sneaking up behind Chuck.

"I'll show you!" He pulled hard on the ankh.

The chain broke at the back of her neck. Her head snapped forward. A flash of hot pain shot along her spinal column. The pain spread out at the base of her skull and ran rampantly onto her head.

Behind Chuck, the ball of light grew bigger, brighter.

"Now I have your attention, don't I, little bitch." he said, holding the ankh up and shaking it at her.

With her neck and head throbbing, she gazed into the red ball. She saw a dark patch within it. Looking closer, she recognized her reflection.

The lamp on the end table flickered as the ball continued growing in size and intensity. In seconds it was the size of Chuck and too bright for her to stare into. She squinted and turned her face away just as the light bulb in the lamp exploded.

"What the shit?" Chuck started at the loud noise. He wheeled around. "Jesus H—" he yelled. He dropped the ankh and held his hands in front of him as if to ward the ball off, but it quickly surrounded him.

The air crackled and popped. A strange, singeing odor

overpowered the usual mildew smell. Lucy shaded her eyes against the red light. She squinted at Chuck—held prisoner within the ball—with a mixture of horror and fascination. His head and arms flailed in different directions as if he were a marionette being controlled by a mad puppeteer. His mouth gaped open. A light-gray smoke poured from it.

Without warning, he fell to his knees. A mass of flames burst through his chest. He made an agonizing sound that didn't seem human. He fell face forward, but instead of squelching the fire, flames shot out his back. He had become a blazing inferno.

She hated this man. Wished him dead. But not like this.

A billowing, black smoke quickly filled the room. The flames licked high into the air, but it didn't spread. Although her blanket and pillow lay close by, the fire contained itself on its victim.

She coughed and gagged on the smoke as she took one last look. *To hell with him*, she thought. He was certainly almost dead. Then this thing, whatever it was, would come for her. She wouldn't wait. She wouldn't be a victim again. This is what she'd been waiting for. This was her chance to escape.

She ran to the stairs. She had not been out of the underground room for a long time, but the house was small and she soon found the front door.

Outside, it was dark. Tall trees surrounded her. She ran away from the house, not knowing where to go. She just ran. She would not let that thing get her.

She was free.

Continued in *THE BURNING*

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