

# SHADOWS AND TEETH

TEN TERRIFYING TALES OF HORROR AND SUSPENSE  
VOLUME ONE



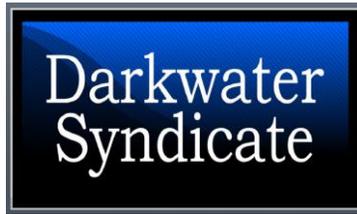
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## ABOUT THIS ANTHOLOGY

*"I highly recommend "Shadows And Teeth" for fans of horror... Each story is uniquely written by a talented author, and the writing styles varied so that each story stood out on its own... I really look forward to future volumes in this fantastic series."*

—Reader Views

This unique collection of ten stories features a range of international talent: award-winning authors, masters of horror, rising stars, and fresh new voices in the genre.

*Water, Ice, And Vice*, by Antonio Simon, Jr.

—Jeremy's new apartment harbors a demonic wish-granting fridge, which he uses to exact bloody vengeance on his obnoxious roommate.

*The Dinner Party*, by Trevor Boelter

—A dinner party devolves into a massacre when the blood flows as freely as the wine.

*Routine*, by Mia Bravo

—Edward's life is neat and orderly, just the way he likes it. It doesn't stay that way for long once bizarre apparitions threaten to end his life, and worse—break his daily routine.

*The Final Spell*, by Mark Meier

—Ken, a modern-day wizard, risks life and liberty in pursuit of the ultimate magick. How far will he go to obtain limitless power?

*Back Through The Mist*, by J.S. Watts

—Police Sergeant Comberton's investigation of a baffling murder strains her resolve to its breaking point. When the enquiry takes an otherworldly turn, she questions whether the past holds the key to her future.

*Spawn*, by Paige Reiring

—Assassin-for-hire Alice's personality is so keen, it can kill. She'll need every edge she can get when the hunter becomes the hunted.

*The Pied Piper's Appetite*, by Rich Phelan

—A competitive eater leads a ghastly double life in pursuit of a gruesome personal crusade.

*Riana In The Gray Dusk*, by Viktoria Faust

– A hastily taken photograph leads to a shocking revelation and a rare glimpse at a singular individual.

*The Autobiography Of An Unsuccessful Author*, by Brittany Gonzalez

– A one-hit-wonder's search for inspiration blurs the line between reality and insanity, with horrifying results.

*Crying*, by Darren Worrow

– Vinny's research into an urban legend about a haunted painting reveals more about himself than he ever dared to ask.

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## FOREWORD

*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.*  
— H.P. Lovecraft

Be honest. Whether you'll admit it or not, you're afraid of something. This is nothing to be ashamed of as nobody's fearless, and things that cause fear come in more varieties than dinner options at an all-you-can-eat buffet. This metaphor is all the more fitting when you realize there's never a shortage of fear. In fact, if you ask ten people what they're afraid of, you'll likely get ten different answers, ranging from such mundane things as public speaking and defaulting on a mortgage, to that mean dog living under the car on blocks, or even the bogeyman.

Regardless of our personal terrors, there are two fears most people can never shake and can only learn to manage: they are shadows and teeth.

Call it survival instinct. Human beings are hardwired to be afraid of shadows and teeth because our survival depends on recognizing the harm that can flow from them. A glint of ivory fang can mean death in a snap of the wolf's jaws or the flash of the cobra's venomous sting. And whoever said, "What I can't see won't hurt me," might have learned too late what dangers come in the form of nighttime predators.

The stories in this book delve into the shadowy places at the fringes of our everyday lives—places we glance into only from the corners of our eyes, out of fear that we may see something that will stamp itself indelibly into our fragile, timid minds. In these pages you'll encounter ghastly bacchanals and the perils of being persnickety; a wish-granting fridge that destroys the lives of two college roommates and a world where one's personality can kill as surely as a bullet to the skull; and more.

Oh yes, much more.

A final word of caution before you venture further: what scares us most about the shadows is the inability to know what lurks within. Sometimes, the only thing worse than not knowing is knowing. Take care as you reach into these dark places, for the things here bite, and you may withdraw a hand short of a few fingers.

## WATER, ICE, AND VICE

BY: ANTONIO SIMON, JR.

*Revenge is a drink best served chilled.*

It was too good to be true. He had suspected this when he'd read the Craigslist ad, but seeing the apartment in person only confirmed his suspicions.

The place was perfect.

Spacious two-bedroom with kitchen and living room, fully furnished, new appliances, within biking distance of the University of Miami. Roommate mandatory. Everything included. The rent was a dollar short of a thousand a month, which suited the limited means of a third-year world literature major.

Jeremy Mullins stepped in and groped along the wall for the light switch. The overhead fluorescents hummed to life, bathing the apartment in a stark white glow. He stood in a narrow foyer. To his immediate left was the kitchen, and further along the wall was a door that led to one of the apartment's two dormitories. The apartment swept wide beyond that, opening into an expansive living room. He settled down onto the couch and put his feet up on an espresso leather ottoman. Mounted on the wall opposite the couch was an eighty-inch flat-screen television. Its remote sat comfortably within reach, as though whoever had prepared the apartment for his arrival had set it up specifically for him.

Jeremy could not help but smile in spite of himself. The price was better than right and the accoutrements were outstanding. Still, he could not shake the feeling that the place was too perfect, if such a thing were possible.

The jangle of keys from beyond the front door snagged his attention. The door swung open, and in the doorway stood Jeremy's new roommate. He leaned forward to get a better look at him.

"S'up, brah?" said the man at the door. He was a man if ever Jeremy had seen one, standing a full six feet tall in his skinny jeans and white tank-top. His biceps were as big around as Jeremy's thighs; he could probably crush walnuts in the crooks of his elbows. Every inch of him was bronzed to a burnished orange glow except for the full-sleeve tribal tattoos on his arms. He slung off his aviator sunglasses and hung them from the collar of his shirt as he sauntered in.

"Hi," said Jeremy, standing up.

The roommate stood cross-armed, sturgeon-faced, assessing the apartment with a sweep of his gaze. His head bobbed as though motioning "yes-yes-yes" in rapid succession.

"This's a nice place," said the roommate, not noticing that Jeremy stood with an arm extended for a handshake.

Jeremy retracted his hand. "I'm Jeremy Mullins."

The roommate looked down his nose at him, then jerked his head back. "Scott Reynolds, lacrosse midfielder." He was kind of a big deal, as his tone put on.

Scott shouldered past Jeremy on his way to the couch. "You watchin' this?" he asked, but was already settling into Jeremy's spot.

The TV lit up with a cadre of sports commentators talking football. Jeremy knew enough about the sport to recognize it at a glance, but he was clueless as to the details. He'd always been an indoors, bookish sort of guy. Asthma and his overprotective mother had kept him from playing any more strenuous a sport than horseshoes.

"So, uh," Jeremy stammered, "I guess we're gonna be roommates?"

"Yeah, brah," Scott grunted without taking his eyes off the TV.

"What are you majoring in?"

Scott snorted, then gingerly ran a hand over the frosted tips of his spiky haircut. His hair was stiffer than the bristles of a wire brush. Jeremy would not have doubted that Scott went through his weight in hair gel each month.

"Psychology, brah," he said. "Fifth-year senior."

Jeremy knit his fingers, hoping the pause this bought him would be enough time to come up with another topic of discussion.

"Uh... cool," he said. "I'm getting a B.A. in world literature."

"That's awesome, brah," Scott said in a tone that insinuated he didn't think so at all. "Hey brah, you got any beer?"

"Uh, no," said Jeremy, taken aback. "I haven't done any groceries. I only just got here a little before you did."

"Do me a solid and go on a beer run. Thanks, brah."

Jeremy stood with his mouth agape in disbelief. "I can't buy beer. I don't turn twenty-one until next year."

Scott shot Jeremy a disapproving look.

"Get with the program, brah. Fake ID."

"I... I don't have one."

"Brah, do you even...?" Scott trailed off in disgust. "Check the fridge. And the pantry," he added, as though that last thought had just occurred to him. "There might be some Jäger in there."

"There won't be any..."

"All-included," Scott cut in. "The ad said this place was all-included."

"That doesn't mean booze."

"Check the fridge, brah," Scott insisted, stressing each word. His meticulously trimmed eyebrows pitched downward at the inside corners.

Jeremy locked his gaze with Scott's, then shifted his eyes away. It was no use defying him. Scott could fold Jeremy into a pretzel with one hand while playing paddleball with the other.

"I'll check the fridge," muttered Jeremy.

"The pantry too. Thanks, brah."

Jeremy stood at the entrance to the kitchen, deciding where to begin. The cabinets were made of particleboard but were dressed up in a faux cherry wood veneer. The treatment complemented the imitation granite countertop.

Set into the cabinetry were sleek black appliances—a range, an oven, a microwave, and a refrigerator. Each was brand-new, as evidenced by the scuff-resistant tape on their edges applied before they left the factory.

Jeremy set to work on the first set of cabinet doors, opening them two at a time. Before long he had run the circuit from one end of the kitchen to the other. The lower cabinets were empty save for a trash can and a single roach trap placed in the corner beneath the sink. The upper cabinets contained plates and drinking glasses.

He shifted his attention to the refrigerator. It was an oversized unit, bigger than the space for which it was intended. As a result, it seemed to thrust forward, extending beyond the countertop and the cabinets that surrounded it.

This refrigerator was the king of the kitchen court, foreboding, regal, and reserved. Jeremy could not help but liken it to the monoliths in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

This unit was a side-by-side model with doors on either side of a vertical partition—cooler on the right, freezer on the left. Yanking open the cooler door netted Jeremy a waft of chilly air and a whole lot of nothing else. Its interior light bulb came on gradually, casting an antiseptic white light onto the glass shelving. The fridge was empty. He shut the door, and then, to be absolutely thorough, he checked the freezer as well. It too was empty.

It wasn't until the freezer door had shut that the LCD screen mounted in that door powered on. Apparently, the refrigerator had been on standby mode. Opening the doors had jogged it to life. The corporate logo for Jovian Electrodomestics appeared in a silver-trimmed oval against a blue and white starburst. The design reeked of 1920's Art Deco style, but was done up in a surprisingly tasteful manner.

The corporate logo receded into the starburst. In its place came an on-screen manila card cocked to a diagonal. The word, *Features!*, flowed in cursive handwriting from left to right across the card, followed by a bulleted list.

*Voice activation!*

*Multi-capable dispenser!*

*Instantaneous inter-dimensional sourcing!*

Jeremy mouthed the last two words to himself. They had a ring to them that insinuated advanced physics well over the head of anyone pursuing a degree in literature. The advertisement faded to black as the refrigerator's operating system finished booting up. Three words stood out in crisp blue capital letters.

WATER.

ICE.

VICE.

He cocked his head to one side. By no stretch was he a refrigerator expert, but he had enough common sense to know that this was no ordinary appliance. He plucked a drinking glass from the cabinet and held it beneath the refrigerator's dispenser. A new word lit up on the screen: Dispense.

He thumbed the on-screen button for water, then hit dispense.

Water jetted out of the nozzle, filling his glass in moments.

He took a sip. It was water all right – pure, crisp, and so filtered of minerals that it was tasteless, just the way he liked it.

He emptied his glass into the sink and stuck it back under the dispenser. He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped short. He felt stupid all of a sudden. What he was doing was stupid. This was magical realism, the sort of thing that only happened in South American literature and reruns of *The Twilight Zone*.

Still, he was curious. If his hunch was wrong, and that was likely, then he might feel silly for a little while. Even so, he'd never have to tell anybody he once believed he owned a magic fridge. Then again, if his hunch was right, the possibilities could indeed be endless.

He switched over to Vice and prodded the dispense button.

Nothing.

The glass in his hand remained empty.

"Vice," he said under his breath, and pressed the button again.

Still nothing.

"Hey brah," Scott called out to him from the living room. "I said get some beer, not make it. What's keeping you?"

Jeremy turned back to the refrigerator. "Booze," he spoke aloud.

"Yeah that too, brah." Scott had overheard him. His response had come so abruptly that Jeremy gave a start as he was halfway to pushing the dispense button.

Jeremy collected himself and pushed the button. The sudden *fwoosh!* from the jets filling his cup caught him off guard. In his hand was a glass full of chilled, clear liquid.

More water.

He smirked. He could kick himself for being so silly as to think this was a wish-granting fridge. Jeremy took a swig and spat the whole mouthful in a spray across the kitchen.

"You all right, brah?" Scott asked, though it was clear he could not have cared less.

Jeremy set the glass on the countertop and rubbed his mouth clean with his forearm. He smacked his lips. Vodka. It was vodka in the glass. He'd known the taste ever since he was eight, at a family dinner where his uncle tricked him into drinking some by telling him it was mineral water. Jeremy had almost wretched up his meal back then, and now fought his gag reflex to keep history from repeating.

His eyes widened. His hunch was right – this *was* a magic fridge.

No. No, that couldn't be right. He shook his head to dispel those nonsensical thoughts. There had to be a rational explanation. He returned to the fridge and opened the door. It was no longer empty. Sitting on the middle shelf was a frosted bottle of vodka.

His jaw dropped. Had it been there when first he'd opened the door? No, but then again, how could he have overlooked it? It was the only thing in the fridge.

He grabbed the bottle by the neck and pulled it out to get a better look at it. There was only a tiny bit left in the bottle, not enough for a full glass, but – and he took a ragged breath when he realized this – there was perhaps enough for a mouthful, about as much as he'd drunk from the cup. He put the bottle back in the fridge and shut the door.

Thoughts poured into his head too fast for him to process all at once. Was he losing his mind? And while he categorically dismissed these thoughts as nonsense, part of him insisted that what he'd experienced was real. No matter how hard he tried, he could not silence that one voice that urged him to trust his senses. It demanded another experiment be carried out.

He reopened the door and scanned the refrigerator's interior from top to bottom. Contents: one nearly empty bottle of vodka. He double-checked to be sure, then shut the door.

Now with a fresh cup in hand, Jeremy placed it under the dispenser. "Cash."

What filled the cup was an opaque fluid that looked like equal parts pond scum and green smoothie, complete with the froth on top. Cradling the glass in both hands, he held it up to his nose and sniffed. It smelled... green, was the only way he could describe it, with notes of earthiness, sweat, and printer's ink. Pinching his nose shut with one hand, he raised the glass to his lips and drank.

His stomach balled into a tight fist. Jeremy doubled over as his upper torso heaved in revulsion. Whatever was in the glass tasted exactly how dollar bills smelled. He flung himself against the sink, stuck his mouth under the faucet and ran the water to rinse out what remained of that horrible taste.

"What is wrong with you, brah?"

Jeremy tensed up at hearing Scott's voice so close by. He straightened and looked over his shoulder. Scott stood at the fridge with a meaty fist on the door handle, primed to yank it open.

"Don't!" Jeremy would have said, but his stomach leapt into his throat and he threw up a little into the sink.

The door flew open and the light from the fridge's insides set out Scott's alarmed expression in stark detail.

"Holy..." he began in a breathless whisper. Scott drew up both hands and reached into the fridge with such care as is only seen in doctors in the act of delivering babies. In his hands was a short stack of hundreds bound up in a ribbon. He thumbed through the stack in disbelief.

"When were you going to tell me about this?" he demanded, crushing the bills in his fist.

Jeremy turned to face him. "I only just found out it was there."

Scott's forehead furrowed into a dozen meaty lines. He grabbed Jeremy by his shirtsleeve and dragged him in front of the open refrigerator.

"And the booze too?" Scott asked.

Jeremy nodded.

"I don't believe you!" he roared, giving Jeremy such a vicious shake that he could feel his bones rattle beneath his skin.

"It's a magic fridge!" Jeremy blurted, and hated himself for having done so.

Scott reeled at this. "You think I'm stupid?"

"Who puts money in a fridge?"

"The hell if I know," said Scott, clenching both fists into Jeremy's shirt collar. "But you're gonna tell me what's going on, or else we won't get along so well."

Jeremy craned an arm past Scott to point at the LCD screen. "Look, you see there? It dispenses water, ice, and vice."

Scott looked over his shoulder. "That doesn't say vice," he said, snarling. "It can't say vice; that doesn't make sense."

"No, really, it's..." said Jeremy, but Scott cut him short.

"You really do think I'm stupid," Scott said through clenched teeth. "I ought to kick your ass."

Scott adjusted his grip to grab Jeremy by the scruff of his neck. He shoved Jeremy's face against the refrigerator until his nose butted up against the screen.

"Get a good look, genius," Scott said. "It's not a V. What you think is a V is just an arrow to show you where the ice comes out. They just put it too close to where it says ice."

Scott's sausage fingers dug painfully into the flesh where the back of Jeremy's skull met his spine.

"I can prove it!" Jeremy groaned.

"Oh yeah?" said Scott, releasing him with a shove. "Then prove it."

Jeremy fetched a glass from the cupboard and offered it to Scott. He accepted it, grudgingly.

"Now what?" asked Scott.

"Set the fridge to vice, tell it what you want, and hit dispense," Jeremy said.

Scott shot Jeremy a hard look. "This is stupid," he said, but went along with it anyway. "And now?"

"You have to say what you want," said Jeremy. "Say it out loud."

Scott sighed so heavily that his shoulders bowed.

"Cigarettes," he said flatly.

The dispenser jetted a thick brown fluid into the cup.

"What the hell is this, a chocolate shake?" said Scott, raising the glass to eye level. He dipped his index finger into the liquid then stuck it in his mouth.

"Ugh!" he grunted, doubling over, catching himself with a palm braced against a bent knee. His mouth went full-on trapezoidal as his eyes pinched shut in disgust.

"What is it?" Jeremy asked, panicked.

Scott went into a fit of hacking coughs. "I'm gonna... I'm gonna...!"

He shoved past Jeremy on his way to the sink and heaved until he threw up. He stood there, silent, for a long string of moments, propped up with both hands against the countertop. His fingers had curled so tightly around the counter's edge that his knuckles were white.

"Cigarettes," Scott rasped. His breathing was ragged. He took a hand off the counter to wipe his face. Then he butted his head against his shoulder to look back at Jeremy. The ire in that one eye Scott locked on him seemed to possess physical weight—Jeremy could feel it threatening to crush him flat at any moment.

"It tasted like cigarettes," Scott forced each word.

Jeremy looked away from him, turning his attention to the inside of the fridge. "That's not all," he said.

Scott moved up alongside him, and they both peered into the fridge.

It didn't take telepathy for Jeremy to know that they both were fixated on the same object within the refrigerator. Resting on its side within the vegetable crisper was a single cigarette. Slowly, with the movements of a man waking from a dream, Scott reached for the cigarette and held it between his fingers.

"It's real," Scott murmured. He held it lengthwise under his nose and sniffed it. "It really is real."

Next he reached for the vodka bottle and drew it out. He held these objects before him, bottle in one hand and cigarette in the other, his gaze flitting between them.

"Well, hell, if you ain't Harry Potter..." Scott trailed off in disbelief.

"I didn't do this," said Jeremy. "It was the fridge."

Just then Scott's mouth formed a wide O. His eyebrows shot nearly to his hairline as he said, "I've got an idea!" He slammed the refrigerator door shut, nearly sweeping Jeremy inside in the process.

Scott faced Jeremy with arms before him, hands trembling, his back rounded with excitement.

"Hookers!" Scott blurted as his lips tore into a wide grin.

"What?!"

"Hookers!" Scott repeated. "Prostitutes!"

Before Jeremy could protest, Scott had jammed a glass under the dispenser. What filled the glass had the color and consistency of a melted box of red crayons. Rust-colored clumps floated to the surface as the drink settled in the cup.

Scott held the cup under his nose for a tentative sniff. He fought back a cringe.

"Here," he said, offering the glass to Jeremy.

"Hell no!" Jeremy replied, backing away.

Scott jabbed the air between them with the glass. "Dude, drink it! It'll be awesome!"

"I said..."

Scott flung the drink at him in mid-sentence and caught Jeremy with his mouth open.

"Jesus Christ!" Jeremy shrieked. A glob of red dribbled out of his mouth. His tongue brushed against something that felt like a clotted scab, the type he used to get as a kid whenever he fell on pavement. The taste was at once recognizable and unmistakable, a coppery tang that clung to the palate. Blood.

"Son of a..." Jeremy trailed off as his knees gave out. He crumpled, then folded over and rested his head on his knees.

The refrigerator door opened with a swish.

"Oh no..." Scott groaned.

Jeremy raised his head. Scott stood with one hand on the door handle and the other at his mouth.

"No, no, no..." Scott murmured, backing away without taking his eyes off of what was in the fridge. His shoulder bumped the wall and he slid down it, mouthing, "No, no..." under his breath.

"Scott," Jeremy said in a sharp tone. "What's in the fridge?"

Scott blinked twice quickly as if rousing from a stupor. His wide-eyed gaze shifted in his direction, but he kept silent.

"Scott? What is it?" Jeremy asked. He stood up on wobbly legs.

Scott shook his head from shoulder to shoulder. It was slow, funereal gesture.

Jeremy rounded the open refrigerator door and glimpsed inside. All at once the color drained from his face.

"Oh Jesus!" he yelped, slapping both palms against his mouth.

Within the fridge was a severed head. It sat on its ragged stump of a neck seeping runnels of blood in every direction, looking like some nightmarish octopus. It was a woman's head—a brunette—painted up in so much blush and eye shadow that she looked almost clown-like. Her irises were gone; her glossed-over milky eyes stared blindly forward, not at Jeremy but into him. Her jaw hung sidewise. It was clearly broken. The top of her left mandible jutted out of her cheek an inch from the corner of her mouth.

"Get rid of it," Scott said, about to break into tears. His chin was pinned against his chest and his hands cupped before his face to shut out the horrible thing within the fridge.

Jeremy yanked the trash can out from under the sink. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed the head by its scalp and chucked it into the trash, making sure as little of him as possible touched the head. It hit the bottom of the bin with a sodden plop.

"Brah, I... uh..." Scott began, not knowing how to finish. "I... I'm going out."

“You do that,” said Jeremy with a stern glare.

Scott picked himself up and was out the door without another word.

Once the door had shut behind Scott, Jeremy slung off his shirt and wiped his face with it. He took his pants off and his underwear too, for good measure, and flung his clothes into the trash. Then he cinched up the drawstrings and knotted them twice. When he was done, he ran the shower as hot as it could get and bathed, scrubbing himself down at least a half dozen times until he felt clean. Afterward, he brushed his teeth until he was out of toothpaste.

Jeremy went to bed and did not awaken until the following morning.

\* \* \*

The alarm clock went off, rousing Jeremy from uneasy sleep. He was awake, though just barely, as he could hardly see through swollen eyes. Everything ached. It was a deep, ground into the bone sort of hurt that was deeper than any bruise he'd suffered.

He slung a leg out of bed and used that momentum to lever himself upright. His head spun. With his elbows propped on his bent knees, he cradled his head in his hands. His forehead burned with fever. He snorted back a thick wad of mucus and swallowed, but instantly regretted it—his throat felt like it was lined with sandpaper. He could not remember ever feeling this sick.

Jeremy stood and nearly fell over, caught himself with a palm braced against the wall. He shuffled to the bedroom mirror and looked at himself. His bloodshot eyes were deep-set in a face that was pallid at the extremities and flush at the center. A constellation of angry red blisters had erupted across his face, from earlobe to earlobe and down to his chin in some bacteriological semblance of a Glasgow smile.

His lip trembled. His mouth opened to speak but words eluded him; in their place came shuddering little breaths. His knees slackened and he fell onto his backside, depositing him onto the bed once more. He felt faint.

He snatched the phone off his nightstand and dialed 9-1-1.

\* \* \*

When next Jeremy's eyelids drew open, harsh light stung his eyes. An enormous spotlight hung from the ceiling directly overhead. He jerked his head up off his pillow and looked both ways on noticing he was no longer in his apartment.

He lay on a cot in a room so small it must have been built as an afterthought. A small bubble-back TV hung from a mount in the wall directly ahead. A watery cough came from behind the curtain to his left. It was an old man's cough, racked with pneumonia.

"Settle down, Mister Mullins," said a stern voice.

Jeremy turned his head to face its source.

Suddenly the curtain drew back a foot and a man in a lab coat approached. He was trim, almost wispy, but moved with razor precision.

"Mister Mullins," he said, reading from the clipboard in his hands. The piercing blue eyes behind his horn-rimmed spectacles locked onto Jeremy like a vise. He assayed him for an instant, then turned back to his paperwork.

"My name is Doctor Seward," the man went on. "Do you know what day it is?"

"Where am I?" Jeremy asked.

Seward snatched a pen out of his coat pocket and jotted a note. "You are in a room at Jackson Memorial Hospital. Paramedics responded to an emergency call at your home address. They found you unconscious in your bedroom and brought you here for observation. Open your eyes as wide as you can, please."

Seward shined a light into Jeremy's eyes. Then he clicked the light off and took more notes, murmuring occasionally.

Jeremy collapsed into his cot.

The old man in the next bed over went into another fit of shuddering coughs.

"Mister Mullins," Seward began, then pressed his lips into a tight line. "Mister Mullins, even with all my years as a doctor, it never gets any easier to share these sorts of diagnoses with patients."

Jeremy swallowed hard in a dry throat.

"Initial lab results are in," Seward went on. "Of course, we'll have to run more tests to rule out false-positives, but..."

"What is wrong with me?" Jeremy interrupted.

The doctor sighed out his nose. "A lot, son. I've prescribed you antibiotics. They should clear up your gonorrhea. The syphilis is pretty advanced, but the antibiotics should resolve that too. There may be some permanent facial scarring as the sores heal."

Seward paused. "Son," he began, "how long ago did you get it?"

Jeremy's brow knit. "Get what?"

The doctor's face hardened. "AIDS, son."

Jeremy's heart leapt into his throat.

Seward nodded, and it was a sad thing to behold. "There is no cure, but with an anti-retroviral regimen we may be able to slow its progress." His eyes shot to the floor, then darted up in line with Jeremy's. "It, too, is rather advanced."

The corners of Jeremy's lips pulled down and before he knew, he was bawling with an open mouth. Tears flowed in solid streams down his blazing cheeks. It hurt to cry. His body felt tighter than a drum skin, and each heaving sob sent more of that familiar dull hurt through his frame. It hurt to cry, and yet it would hurt still more not to. Eyes pinched shut, he let out a groan that would have been a howl had he not felt so weak.

Seward patted Jeremy's shoulder and turned to go.

"I want to leave!" Jeremy shouted.

Seward wheeled in place. "Mister Mullins..."

"Leave!" he screamed with spittle frothing at his lips. "I want to leave," he muttered through clenched teeth. "Leave," he grunted, staring daggers at Seward.

"As you wish," said the doctor, backpedaling a step. "I'll get your discharge papers in order."

\* \* \*

The cab ride home from Jackson Memorial took all of thirty-seven minutes. For Jeremy it had felt like an eternity. His heart pounded between his temples and his vision blurred—he had to shake his head occasionally to refocus his eyes. Eventually the cab rolled to a stop outside his home. He paid the fare with the credit card his father had given him in case of emergencies, and then stepped out onto his front porch.

It was midmorning, which meant that Scott was either still asleep, in class, or at the gym. The odds were two out of three that he would not be home, which played in Jeremy's favor.

He hustled to the front door as quickly as he could without pitching over headlong. He was ashamed—given everything else that had happened to him recently, he knew this feeling should have been the last thing on his mind, but he was ashamed. He was naked when the hospital had admitted him, and so the only clothing he wore now was the medical gown. A passing breeze prickled the skin on his exposed backside.

He fished his house key out of the zip-top plastic bag containing his personal effects and jammed it into the lock. The door popped open as he leaned his weight against it. He lost his balance and nearly spilled to the floor, catching himself in the doorframe.

"Scott?" he called out. No answer. He tried again and got halfway through before a coughing fit overtook him.

With a hand against the wall for support, he made his way to the kitchen. The refrigerator's LCD panel was dark. Then it lit up, as if sensing his presence.

*WATER.*

*ICE.*

*VICE.*

Jeremy pulled a cup out of the sink and stuck it into the dispenser. He thumbed the on-screen button for vice, and then paused because he had not yet thought out his request.

"Remedy," he said. His finger stopped halfway to the dispense button. That request was too vague. He tried it anyway. At this stage, he had nothing to lose.

A shocking pink fluid oozed from the dispenser. It was thick and ran like syrup from the nozzle. Jeremy wasted no time in downing the glass.

Surprisingly, it didn't taste as awful as it looked. The drink bore a strong bouquet of root beer with subtle notes of sidewalk chalk.

He smiled, pleased with himself.

Only, he did not smile for long, as he soon recognized the taste as Pepto-Bismol, a common over-the-counter stomach remedy.

He stamped his foot in frustration, and the sudden movement set him off balance. The glass he held tumbled out of his hand. It gave a sharp pop and shattered on impact with the floor. Jeremy's legs crossed and he half spun around as he fell face-first to the linoleum.

A firecracker went off in his brain, dazzling his eyes. When he finally could see straight, shooting pain ignited in his face. Red warmth dribbled out of the nostrils of his freshly-broken nose. He hurt too much to move. Jeremy hugged his knees to his chest and rode out the pain.

However long he had lain on his side was impossible to gauge. He drew himself up to crouch, then stood.

He placed another glass into the dispenser as he gave the circumstances some thought. His previous request had been unsuccessful because it was too vague.

"AIDS remedy," he said, and pushed the button.

Nothing.

"AIDS cure," he said.

Still nothing.

And then it struck him that the refrigerator was equipped to dispense vices, and that what he sought was not a vice. It probably dispensed the digestive medicine earlier only because stomachaches went hand in hand with gluttony. He reflected on how to couch his request in terms of a deadly sin.

"AIDS destroyer," was the best he could come up with.

This time, a yellow-tinged, transparent liquid trickled into his cup. He reached for it with eager hands, but stopped short of raising it to his mouth. Acrid fumes wafted from the cup. He thought he recognized the smell, but just to be certain, he dipped his pinky into the cup and then dabbed it to the tip of his tongue.

He gagged. It was bleach, and a glance within the fridge confirmed this. A gallon jug of bleach sat at eye-level on a refrigerator shelf. He shut the door and emptied his glass into the sink.

Jeremy nearly leapt out of his skin at the jangling of keys from outside the apartment.

Scott was home.

Jeremy's mind exploded with thoughts of vengeance. His life was ruined, and it was all Scott's fault. Now would be his only chance at revenge – but how? A glass of steaming magma? Too obvious. Scott would never willingly drink that, and there was no way Jeremy could ever force it upon him in his current state. A cup of murder? Too vague.

His eyes flew to the door in time to catch the deadbolt knob flip to the unlocked position. He wheeled to face the fridge and barked his request in a single harsh whisper. The jets filled his glass with a chilled black liquid.

Scott barreled into the foyer and stopped abruptly, surprised to see his roommate.

"Where the hell have you been, brah?" he asked. "And what happened to your face?"

"I've been sick," said Jeremy. He coughed into his fist, not out of theatrics, but it emphasized his point just the same.

"Yeah, well, don't drink out of the same glass as me." The tiniest bit of regret darkened Scott's face. It was the sort of expression one put on when he knew he'd done wrong but refused to own up. He glanced down at his feet for a moment before resuming eye contact.

"I..." Scott stammered. "I don't want to catch what you have."

"You won't," Jeremy said, taking a shuffling step toward him.

Scott recoiled.

"But there's worse than this, you know," Jeremy went on. He chortled inwardly. Scott's unease brought a wry smile to his face. Everything was so backward. What did this two-hundred pound gorilla have to fear from a sickly bookworm? And yet, backward though it was, this could not get any more real. In his weakness, Jeremy had found a strength no one, not even a bully like Scott, could resist.

Jeremy plodded forward. "I poured you a drink." His eyebrows—what remained of them between frailty and scabby sores—bobbed excitedly. "This one is special."

"You keep that away from me!" Scott roared. He backed against the wall and put out an arm to ward him off. "Come closer and I'll snap you in half!"

Jeremy spread his arms, smiling, inviting him to do his worst. "You wouldn't dare touch me," he hissed. "I am a leper."

"Stay back, man!" Scott yelled, wild-eyed. "Stay back or else I swear I'll kick your ass!"

Jeremy halted in place, then rocked forward and lunged for Scott. Scott took the bait, launching himself in a headlong tackle that folded Jeremy over Scott's shoulder. Jeremy landed flat-backed against the floor with Scott on top of him.

"What were you thinking, picking a fight with me?" Scott screamed in Jeremy's face. "If your face weren't already rotting off, I'd pound your skull in."

Jeremy shifted his weight, attempting to sit up. Scott forced him back down with a shove. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Scott noticed the cup still in Jeremy's hand. Much of its contents had spilled onto the floor, but about a third remained. Scott's hand descended onto Jeremy's, enveloping it like a catcher's mitt grips a baseball.

"Well, would you look at what we have here?" Scott taunted as he wrested the cup from Jeremy's feeble grip. "You sneaky little rat. It's poison, isn't it?"

Jeremy snorted up some phlegm and spat in Scott's face.

"With my compliments," he added.

Scott's lips drew back in a tooth-baring sneer, and it was quite a sight as every muscle north of his shoulders corded up in the movement. Even the tendons in his neck stood at attention, bulging visibly under his skin. He clamped his free hand onto Jeremy's lower jaw and worked his mouth open.

"Bottoms up, bitch!" he screamed as he poured the drink down Jeremy's throat.

Jeremy choked on the fizzy black drink as it shot straight into his gullet. It had a complex taste—intensely sweet at first but with a bitter finish, not unlike diet cola. He coughed as its bubbles burned his nostrils, but slowly his coughing gave way to laughter.

"What's so funny?" Scott demanded, sounding not so sure of himself anymore.

Jeremy gave a weak smile. "I got you."

Scott's brow furrowed. "Huh?"

"That was never meant for you to drink." Jeremy reached back behind his head and curled his fingers around the lower lip of the refrigerator door.

"It was for me," Jeremy went on. "A tall, ice-cold glass of revenge!"

As the last word left his lips, he yanked the refrigerator door open.

What came next happened so quickly that, in retrospect, it would take Jeremy weeks to piece together the events. Once he'd felt fairly certain of what he'd witnessed, he wished he could shove the memory back into whatever forgotten broom closet his brain had filed it in.

It happened like this.

First, both refrigerator doors flapped open like a mighty black bird stretching its wings. Then a tangled mass of gleaming mechanical tentacles burst from inside the appliance. Scott screamed—at least, Jeremy thought he did. He wasn't sure if he'd had enough time to.

The tentacles hammered into Scott, knocking him bodily into the air. Scott landed on his shoulder blades and immediately sat up, began scrabbling furiously at the ground with his heels and hands to backpedal away from the fridge.

It was a futile effort.

A pair of tentacles whipped around his ankles and dragged him toward the fridge's waiting maw. The appliance spread his legs as though to snap him like a wishbone. Scott had one leg in each of the refrigerator's chambers, one in the cooler and the other in the freezer. The doors clapped shut against Scott's kneecaps.

Scott howled with each impact, leaping and arching his back, looking like a maggot tossed into a hot skillet. The doors opened and slammed shut again, and again, and with each blow Scott's legs were bent at odder and odder angles.

The refrigerator let up on its assault, letting its doors hang open, but did not release Scott. From within the appliance's chambers, its mechanical tentacles slinked out in unison. The tentacle tips fanned open, blossoming like flowers in spring, shaping themselves into drills, saws, pincers, claws—chromed metal monstrosities that prodded and stabbed and ripped and groped and tore.

Two scissor-pincers accorded out of the fridge and bit down just beneath Scott's shoulders. Jeremy could not bear to watch as a pair of whirring circular saws plunged onto Scott's body. Jeremy covered his face with his arms, but little was left to the imagination between Scott's screams and the hot jets of blood that doused him.

It was over in moments. Jeremy withdrew his trembling hands from his face, and what he saw made his stomach clench to the size of a tennis ball. Scott lay sprawled on the floor at the center of a corona of blood. His arms were gone, having been severed just above the biceps. Knowing how the fridge operated, Jeremy surmised it had drawn the arms into itself, perhaps to keep them as trophies or even a midnight snack.

Jeremy staggered across the kitchen to the phone mounted on the wall. He unhooked it from its receiver and dialed 9-1-1.

The enormity of what he'd witnessed struck him with the force of a mallet on a railroad spike. His ears rang. He heard not a word the public safety operator said.

"Uh," he murmured into the phone.

His ears popped. In a heartbeat, his hearing came rushing back.

"Caller, what is your emergency?" Judging by the operator's insistence, this had not been the first time she had asked that question during the call.

"I..." Jeremy paused, swallowed hard in a dry throat. "I'd like to report a murder."

\* \* \*

Jeremy sat cross-legged atop his cot, scribbling furiously into the marble notebook on his lap. Time was short. His health had deteriorated since his incarceration to await trial. Purple lesions had erupted on his mouth. They ached far worse than any cold sores he'd suffered through in the past. Worse, the syphilis was robbing him of eyesight.

His public defender said the state would pursue murder-one. If convicted, he faced the death penalty. Jeremy chuckled inwardly at this. Horrible as he felt, he surmised he'd die of his illness long before sentencing, thereby denying the state the satisfaction of executing a murderer.

Jeremy wasn't a murderer. Still, it did not help his credibility any that the police had found a severed head in his kitchen trash can. Scott, lying unconscious with his arms off and his blood strewn about the kitchen, was merely the icing on the cake.

He unfolded his legs and stretched. As he shifted position, the letters from Scott he'd kept tucked into his notepad spilled onto the floor.

In the time since Jeremy had seen him last, Scott had turned his life around. Scott dropped out of school and moved back in with his parents during an extended period of physical rehabilitation. His arms were beyond saving, and his legs, while intact, were too damaged to ever support his weight. He would need a power wheelchair for the rest of his life. It went without saying that he'd never play lacrosse again.

Still, his time in rehab had given him an opportunity to rethink his life choices. His last letter to Jeremy expressed how excited he was to be enrolling in school again, with the hopes of attaining a bachelor's in child development. Scott hoped one day to become a high school guidance counselor.

Jeremy would never have expected a meathead like Scott to undergo such a 180-degree turn. Even so, perhaps the biggest surprise of all was that Scott had refused to press charges. His last few letters had an apologetic ring to them, almost as if Scott regretted how he'd treated Jeremy in the short time they were roommates. He even closed his final letter with: "Your friend, Scott."

Jeremy had saved these letters, not for their sentimental value, but because they were important to his aims. Truth be told, the letters infuriated him, as did the very memory of Scott. Scott was the reason he was dying of AIDS in jail. Jeremy had kept these letters because they corroborated the observations in his notebook.

Ever since landing in jail, Jeremy had jotted down his experiences in the apartment as best as he could recall them. He supplemented this with research conducted from the jail's Internet center.

Jovian Electro-domestics, who built the refrigerator, was an actual company. That is, it existed, once. It was a British manufacturer of durable consumer goods. The last refrigerator the company offered before closing its doors saw modest success in the years leading up to the Second World War. The company never recovered after the aerial bombing of London. It was liquidated in 1946. How on Earth a futuristic refrigerator came from a company that had closed seventy years ago was a mystery that vexed Jeremy.

Footsteps from up the hall snagged his attention. The footfalls were urgent, insistent; they paced up the walk to Jeremy's cell door with volition. When finally they stopped, a man stood peering into his cell from the other side of the bars.

His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his beige overcoat. The wide brim of his hat was pitched low to cover his face. Everything above the man's wiry brown mustache was cloaked in shadow.

"Jeremy Mullins?" said the man. It wasn't so much a question as a statement. The man knew whom he had come to see.

"Y-yes?" Jeremy stammered.

The man plucked a cigarette from his coat pocket. He pinched it between his lips and lit it with a flick of his flip-top lighter. His hands were back in his coat pockets as soon as the maneuver was completed. It had happened so fast that Jeremy could not help but think this was a practiced movement.

"Come here," the man said. Smoke plumed out his nostrils.

Jeremy squinted to get a better look at him. The way he was dressed—hat and overcoat, white business shirt and drab necktie underneath—he looked like a detective from the early years of cinema. No one wore a trench coat in Miami, not even in winter, when temperatures bordered on the lower side of beach-going weather.

"I said, come here," the man barked. The glowing cigarette danced on his lip with each word. "I need to talk to you."

Jeremy tucked the notebook under his arm and went to him. He stopped at his cell door just a scant few inches away from the man on the other side of the bars.

Staring him in the face, Jeremy doubted the man had a face at all. The light in the jail played with the shadow of the man's hat in such a way that there was a black emptiness above the bridge of the man's nose.

The man reached between the bars and plucked the notebook out from under Jeremy's arm.

"That is all, Mister Mullins," the man said, stuffing the notebook into the inner fold of his coat. He turned on his heels and started a brisk march up the hall.

"Hey wait!" Jeremy called after him. "I need that! Wait!"

The man paced up the hallway.

Jeremy pushed his face up against the bars as the man slipped into the margins of his field of vision.

"Who are you?" Jeremy shouted. "Are you with the police?"

The man halted, his heels squeaking against the smooth concrete floor. He stood stark still, hands in his pockets, legs apart slightly in an acute isosceles. Then his head shifted ever so deliberately, moving with the calculated slowness of a pit viper rearing back to sting its prey. He peered over his shoulder at Jeremy. Jeremy could not see the man's eyes, but he could feel them, feel the weight of his stare.

"No," the man muttered. "I'm with Jovian Electro-domestics."

**END OF SAMPLE**

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