

Maxwell's Daughter

Part Four

There was the familiar scratching coming from under Stephen's bed. It was completely dark save for the beam of moonlight through the window. A clawed hand sprung from under the bed and clawed at Stephen's thigh. He kicked out as another hand scratched along the side of the bed and went for his other leg. He pulled his legs into his chest and shuffled backward, away from the clawed hands. He felt a breath on his neck from beside him and turned, hoping to grab Andrea but instead found the girl, long black hair flowing infinitely onto the bed. She reached for him with her clawed hands and plucked his eyes from his head like they were cherries from a cocktail glass. Her hair entangled his body, pulled him in and engulfed him.

Stephen woke in a sweat. He rolled over instantly to see that Andrea had already gotten up.

'Morning honey,' Stephen said, addressing Andrea as she handed him a steaming cup of coffee.

'Morning. Linda's taking Robbie to football with Xavier but we're meeting them there at ten.'

'Sure. Big game isn't it for him?'

'Yeah.' Andrea said, sipping her own coffee but drawing back instantly. 'Something wrong with that milk.' She said and poured the contents down the sink.

'Bottle of wine says Xavier scores.' Andrea gasped in a half-joke.

'Did you just bet against your own son?' She said apparently shocked.

'No. I just betted on someone else's. Oh come on, his dad was close to playing professionally.'

'Okay. And if Robbie score's and he doesn't...' Andrea thought for a second then; 'You don't get any for a week.'

'Done.'

The whistle blew and the football was kicked, the boys all hurried after

it. Stephen stood on the side-lines, his eyes directed at the boys but he wasn't *looking* at them. Instead his eyes stared into nothingness, two wide black holes that ironically drew nothing in, consumed by the fabric of their thoughts. Why now? Why had she come? What did she really want? The thought of living across the road from her for the rest of his life sent a chill down his spine.

'What would you think about one day moving house?' He asked apparently to Andrea who had moved over a minute ago from his side. Maxwell did not even notice that no one had answered his question.

He then noticed with a horrible stomach-turning sense of *deja vu* that his eyes had been fixed on Maria for some time. She was standing a while behind the opposite side lines, among some dark trees and Stephen had to squint to see that she was actually there. He followed the edge of the field around and headed toward her but as he drew closer, he saw that she had not seen him. Instead her eyes were watching his son. In the space of a second, her eyes flicked away from Robbie and she turned, still without seeing Maxwell, and disappeared from view.

Stephen broke into a run to keep up with her, following her into the car park. He ducked behind a car as she stopped in her tracks and turned her head slowly like an eagle. Did she already know? But she turned her head and continued to her own car. When she got in and started the engine, Maxwell followed the line of cars, still ducked out of sight, to his own. He started his engine and followed Maria slowly out of the car park.

The route was a familiar one, traffic pushing them directly into town where Maria took a back road through a suburban street and slowed outside the back entrance to a shop labelled 'Witcher's Abattoir.'

Maxwell drove on past and pulled in a few houses down the street. He watched in the rear view mirror as Maria after a few minutes returned with a balding man in an apron carrying a large box. He deposited the box in her boot and went back for another two. She drove past and out of sight. Stephen sat back in confusion and thought for a moment before driving back to the football field.

'Where the hell have you been?' Andrea asked.

'I'm sorry dear I had to do a couple errands for work real quick. Who scored?'

'Neither,' Andrea sighed. 'That weedy kid from Robbie's school but they lost three-one.'

A few minutes later, Robbie returned from the changing rooms, limping ever so slightly.

'Alright little champ?' Maxwell asked, ruffling Robbie's blonder hair and picking him up. 'Wanna go grab some food in town? What do you fancy?'

'Can we have pizza Daddy? Then ice cream? Please Daddy pleaseeee.' Maxwell laughed genuinely, his troubles leaving him momentarily.

'Whatever you want boy.'

It was dark and Stephen was walking out the front door, his feet carrying him with such little effort that he might as well have been gliding along the ground. Someone, or rather something, was calling his name. His feet carried him across the road where rain was running in a stream downhill, and towards the house. The iron gates opened of their own accord, swinging back graciously to let him through. His feet were suddenly heavier; they made splattering sounds as they slammed down onto the rain-covered path. The front door opened silently and Stephen found himself inside the house. There was screaming from somewhere inside the house. Somewhere unknown even to the elements. A darkness concealed from the demons themselves, so dark that they pulled at each other for comfort. But as the demons wrapped their arms around one another, their clawed fingers scratched large gashes into their blackened flesh. Then Stephen realised it was the demons that were screaming his name, calling him as an abandoned child would for its mother. They called for his comforting presence, his salvation from the darkness that was descending on them. Then another scream and he knew it was pure evil; a high-pitched scream of pain, anger. It was at heart a cry for revenge. It would have blood.

A scream. Stephen's own. He sat bolt upright, his face drenched in sweat. His arms stung and he craned his neck to see long scratch marks

across both his arms, hot blood trickling. The lacerations were thin but painful as if alcohol was being constantly trickled over them. He looked down at his hands. They were stained with dry blood but there was none under his fingernails.

Stephen walked to the bathroom and dabbed a damp towel over his arms. The sounds of Andrea and Robbie hurriedly dressing for church were seeping through the floor. Stephen never went; he had never believed in any kind of being but he respected that Andrea did.

A few minutes later, Maxwell heard the door shut and the car rumble away. He poured himself a glass of whisky and turned on the news. He took the bottle out onto the porch and watched the same car that he had followed just yesterday pull out of the drive and follow the road. Was she too a churchgoer? The duration of her absence played across Stephen's mind as he watched the black gates slowly shut.

'Fuck it,' Stephen muttered, setting the glass down. He took his keys from the small clay bowl that Robbie had made one day at school, and headed for Maria's house.

Stephen Maxwell surveyed the street before pushing himself up onto the wall and swinging over the large iron fence. He snagged his left calf slightly on the fence and felt a searing pain as he landed. Stephen pushed the pain to the back of his mind and approached the house. As Stephen tried the doors to the house and found them locked he thought to himself that he had not thought this far into the plan. He had never broken into a house before, was he supposed to pick the lock like a fucking ninja? But as Stephen began to lose hope, he spotted an open bathroom window on the second floor. If he climbed up the log-store, he could probably jump up to the roof and let himself in the window without too much difficulty.

So ignoring the stinging from his arms and now his fresh cut to the leg, Stephen hoisted himself up onto the log store and climbed onto the roof. His foot scuffed on the tiles and Stephen had to grab onto the window frame to keep his balance. He ducked his head and climbed into the bathroom. An eerie scratching like that of his dreams was coming from below him. He exited the bathroom and followed the corridor, down the stairs where he paused. A low whining was coming from below the

kitchen. Stephen searched around with no success until after a few minutes, discovered the door he had assumed to be of a pantry was in fact not. Behind the door was another, this one made of sheeted steel. Stephen slid back the heavy-duty bolt, took the torch from the wall and descended the steps into a hidden basement.

Now he could hear gentle moans of discontent, echoing around the dark space. The horrific stench suddenly hit him and he coughed uncontrollably. The noise ceased.

He stepped slowly into the room and his eyes took a second to adjust but when they did, they grew wide. Many carcasses were slung up against the walls and there were several large freezers, all of which were stained in brown and red. Stephen took a step back, vomit stirring in his stomach. He shone the flashlight to the left where a long splatter of crimson stained the floor. He backed off quickly and slowed to a stop, his breathing heavy. There was a warm breath on his neck.

Stephen spun around and felt a pair of clawed hands grab him. He dropped the torch and reached for the hands that held him. A flash of black hair and even blacker eyes made him shrink like a mouse. There was a rattle of chains and Stephen felt his neck swell. The creature was choking him. He hit out at where he presumed its head to be and felt his fist disappear into empty flesh. The thing screamed a ghastly two-toned scream; one a high-pitched ringing, the other a deep, demonic rage.

A loud bang filled the air, making Stephen jump back and the creature simultaneously released him. He fell back to the floor and scurried backward on all fours. A light snapped on and Maria stood beside him, a look of terrified bemusement playing across her face. Stephen could now make out the creature which was in fact a young girl; naked and skinny; all its features shrunken and blackened. Even the exaggerated veins running across her skin were shrivelled and pumped thick black blood through her body. Stephen instantly wished he had remained ignorant of the sight for the rest of his days. The girl had long clawed hands and black matted hair that flowed across her bony shoulders. Her eyes consisted of only pupils, the sclera grey and cracked like an old road. Her flesh was literally rotting slowly over the years.

Maria threw the girl a large piece of meat that the girl immediately

engulfed, ripping the flesh like a wild animal. Stephen could only stare; he knew for every second of his life, the image of this... this thing would never truly leave him.

Stephen sat on a low leather sofa, staring out the window at the rain from a Starbucks. A steaming cappuccino was wafting up into his face but the stench of filth was still strong in his mind. Maria sat opposite him, watching him carefully.

‘What the fuck is that thing?’ He said after a while. Maria felt that she owed him answers.

‘I... I don’t know. I took it to a priest and they offered to take it from me. They tried to exorcise it but how can you force a demonic presence form a demonic form. If that’s what it even is. It killed them.’ She broke off for a moment and took a sip of coffee before continuing. ‘It craves meat. Over the years it’s come to sort of trust me, it’s strange. I guess I should tell you why I really came to you. She needs to feed every night. When she doesn’t, she becomes powerful with hunger. If she starves and dies, we as her parents die with her. That’s what I’ve been told and the one time I tried to... It was many years ago.’

Stephen recollected the few days he had degraded completely, he had felt beyond death. His mind had slipped into a living nightmare, almost a coma although the doctors had found nothing. ‘That’s the thing Stephen. I’m dying. I have a matter of weeks and when I do, you have to look after her.’

Stephen’s eyes for the first time since he had seen the girl, met Maria’s. He saw genuine fear in her soul and unconsciously nodded his head.