

Marvin Gray



DARK

GRAY DEMONS

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Dark Gray Demons

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DEDICATION

To Duane, who has encouraged my writing since Baghdad

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunday

My goddamn arm screamed out in agony as I edged toward the cellar doors, hoping to find a way out of the crawlspace where I was trapped under Stephen Bracken's house. The burning pain in my right arm throbbed up to my shoulder, reminding me that Bracken's mountain lion of a dog had nearly shredded my forearm about an hour ago. The blood started seeping through the homemade bandage that I'd ripped from my black cowboy shirt. I was losing blood at an alarming rate. The lightheadedness returned. I had a headache that a belt of morphine couldn't have slaked. My thirst was so overwhelming that I damn near would have drunk Bracken's dog's piss if he'd have lifted his leg and squirted me a shot.

I was hung over and sleep deprived and regretting the hell out of coming to Bracken's property all alone, to snoop around without notifying anyone. But no one's ever accused me of being very smart.

My whole body was shivering from the cold rain water that had soaked me through and from the blood loss and the fear. I might even have had a fever. I certainly couldn't stop trembling. I wanted to bury my pounding head in my arms and just sleep, except that I needed to find an escape route before Bracken got home. If he arrived before I found an exit, God only knew what he would do. I had literally *no* idea what he would do if he found me. I didn't really know much about him, except that he was a part-time flower delivery man who had a lot to hide. My private investigative instincts told me that any sicko who had killer dogs to guard his house and concertina wire strung across his crawlspace had to have something to hide.

Behind me the concertina wire served as a barrier to the only exit from the crawlspace I knew about. It also served to protect me from a killer dog that wanted to rip my throat out. I had killed his smaller buddy and poked this one's eye

out, but if he got to me again, I knew I wouldn't be so lucky next time. My strength had all but escaped me, my courage with it.

My only hope was to push through the pain and dehydration and try to find a way out. Maybe those old abandoned cellar doors were not entirely abandoned. Lots of farmers had built new structures around old root cellars. My own grandparents had enclosed a porch off the back door so that they could kick off their muddy boots before entering the kitchen, and so they could go down to the cellar in all types of weather.

Bracken might have done something similar when he added onto to the original structure, which meant he probably had a trap door through the floor and into the house. I just needed to find it and get the hell out of here before he returned and found my trespassing ass on his property. Here in Bumfuck, Kentucky, a lot of farmers still shot trespassers first and saved questions for later.

Fear drove me on. My head throbbed and my right arm squealed in resistance as I frantically searched for an escape route, one painful stride after the last.

That's when I heard a cat whining. Only it wasn't a cat. It was the whimpering of a small child. It was coming from the cellar. A little girl was crying. I crawled toward her, armed with only my screwdriver, a cell phone with no signal, and a dying cigarette lighter.

"Honey, what is your name?" I said, gently.

"Rosa."

"Rosa, my name is Marvin. I have come to help you. Take you home."

I tried to coax her out of the cellar.

"The door won't open enough for me to crawl down in the cellar and get you. But you can crawl out. Come up here to me."

Nothing.

"I promise you that I am going to take you home. Can you do that? Can you crawl out here?"

Nothing.

My right hand wasn't working. I looked around in the

lighter's light. It was growing dim. I would run out of fluid soon.

I found a stone and with great effort, I propped it under the door. I wedged it as close to the hinged side as possible, propping the door opening up a few inches. I stuck the lighter in the gap and lit it.

"Come on, Rosa. Can you see me?"

I feared she had sunk back into a dark corner of her dungeon, hiding from me.

Then I saw the faintest outline of her face. She was Hispanic, a tiny little thing.

I switched to Spanish.

"Venga Rosa. Venga. Voy a llevarle a sus padres." Come Rosa. Come. I am going to take you to your parents.

Ever so gently she eased closer to the door. I could make out stone steps leading into the bowels of the cellar.

The lighter got hot, and I released the button.

"Come on, honey. Let's go home. My lighter is almost out. I can't turn it on. You have to trust me."

"El va a hacerme daño," she whimpered. He will hurt me.

"No he won't. I won't let him touch you anymore. That's over. I promise."

Her tiny hand reached the door, and she pushed it. I heaved the door with my good hand, giving her as much space as I could.

Her arm surfaced. Then her head, and her shoulders. She squeezed out the door and exited her torture chamber. She crawled into the belly of the new house. I let the door slam closed.

She jumped and screamed. That made the dog bark and growl, and we both screamed. He was at the vent at the front of the house. Only a few feet away.

She fell against my shoulder, and I hugged her. She was a frail little thing. She smelled of urine and kid's sweat.

"It's OK. We're going home."

I asked if she was alone, and she told me about the other two little girls, Carolina and Armanda. Stephen had taken

them away right before I got there. He drove down the lane just as I had arrived. I had dived onto the grass in the pounding rain so he wouldn't see me. He didn't, but his dogs had.

And I had arrived too late to save the other two girls. Story of my life.

While I was laying there feeling sorry for myself, I heard the front door slam.

Stephen was home.

Rosa started shivering. She let out a tiny shriek.

"Shhh," I said, and put my hand over her mouth. I squeezed her gently against me to give her warmth. Then I realized my clothes were drenched from the rain outside. I was probably making her colder. I realized I was shivering too, partly because my body temperature had dropped and partly because I was frightened out of my mind.

"Be quiet, honey. We're gonna be OK," I whispered in Spanish, trying to sound authoritative, but instinctively I knew that I was failing. Kids have a sixth sense about things like this. They know when you are bullshitting them.

The dog let out a roar, and we jumped. Rosa shrieked loudly this time.

"Shhh," I said. "Stephen doesn't know I am here."

A growl started deep in the dog's throat and then erupted into ear-shattering roars.

"Shut up you little bitch. I'll deal with you in a few minutes," Bracken yelled to Rosa through the trap door directly above us.

I knew I should have been madly searching for another way out, but my eyes were glued to the trap door. If he opened it, I wouldn't stand a chance. My right arm wasn't working. My right leg was numb and swollen. My ankle was badly sprained. I had lost a lot of blood, and I was weak. I couldn't have fought off Rosa had she put up much of a struggle, let alone a grown man half my age.

Our only hope was silence. Maybe Bracken would take a nap before attending to Rosa. Or maybe he would make himself a fuckin' bologna sandwich. Or maybe he would take