

PART ONE

THE HOLLOW MEN

All concerns of men go wrong when they wish to cure with evil.

—Sophocles

CHAPTER ONE

This is how the world ends.

CHAPTER TWO

HARTNUP'S TRANSITION ESTATE
STEBBINS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

He was sure that he was dying. It was how he imagined death would be.
Cold.

Darkness flowed slowly into the edges of everything. As if the shadows under tables and behind cabinets were leaking out to fill the room. Soft. Not painful.

That part was odd. In his dreams—and Lee Hartnup often dreamed of death—there was pain. Broken bones. Bullet wounds. Deep knife cuts.

But this . . . this wasn't painful.

Not anymore. Not after that first bite.

There had been that one flash of pain, but even that was beautiful in its way. So intensely painful that it possessed purity. It was beyond anything in his personal experience, though Hartnup had imagined it so many times. With the quiet people with whom he worked. The hollow people, empty of life.

The police and the paramedics brought him demonstrations of every kind of pain. Brutalized and beaten. Crushed in car wrecks. Suicides and murders. Even the old people from the nursing homes, the ones everyone believed died peacefully in their sleep. Hartnup knew that they had experienced pain, too. For some it was the rat-hungry gnawing of cancer; for others it was the mind pain that came with having memories carved out of their brains by the ugly scalpel of Alzheimer's. Pain for all. Pain was the coin that paid the ferryman.

Even now Hartnup smiled at that thought. It was something his

father once said, back in the days when Lee Hartnup was the assistant and his father was the funeral director and mortician. Old John Hartnup had been a poetic man. Humorless but given to metaphor and simile. It was he who had started calling the bodies in their cold room the “hollow men.” Well, hollow people, to be PC. People from whom the sacred wind of life had fled through whatever crack the pain had chipped into them.

And now Hartnup felt his own sacred wind trying to blow free. The wind—the breath—was the only heat left in him. A small ball of dying air in his lungs that had nowhere to go. There wasn’t enough left of his throat for Hartnup to exhale that breath. There would be no death rattle, which amused the professional in him. He knew that some other mortician would hear it when preparing his body.

Of course, it would not be a mortician right away. First it would be a coroner. He had, after all, been murdered.

If you could call it murder.

Hartnup watched the liquid darkness fill up the room.

Was it murder?

The man . . . his killer . . . could never be charged with murder.

Could he?

If so . . . how?

It was a puzzle.

Hartnup wanted to cry out for warmth, but of course he could not do that. Not with what was left of his throat.

It was a shame. He was sure that he could manage at least one really good scream. Like the ones in his dreams. Most of his dreams ended in a scream. That’s what usually woke him up in the night. It’s what finally drove his wife into leaving him. She could take the fact that he worked with the dead all day, and she was sympathetic to the fact that his work gave him nightmares. But after eight years she couldn’t take the interruptions to her sleep two or three times a week. First it was earplugs, then separate rooms, and finally separate lives.

He wondered what she would think about this.

Not just his death, but his murder.

He heard a noise and wanted to turn his head. Could not.

The muscles of his neck were torn. Teeth and nails. He couldn’t

feel the wounds anymore. Even the coldness was fading. His body was a remote island, separated from his mind by a million miles.

The noise again. A clatter of metal, then the singsong of tools dropping to the tiled floor. Retractors and needles and other items. Things that he wouldn't need any longer.

Things that would be used on him in a few days.

He wondered who would prepare his body for the box? Probably that schmuck Lester Sevoy over in Bordentown.

Another crash. Then a sound. Like footsteps, but wrong somehow. Awkward. Disjointed. Like a drunk trying to stagger slowly across a barroom floor.

Lee Hartnup knew that it wasn't a drunk, though.

He didn't have a name for what it was.

Well . . . that was not exactly true.

It was a *hollow man*.

The room was darker now. Shadows were closing around him like a body bag being zipped up with him inside.

A smile. Dad would have liked that one.

Hartnup felt his body shivering. He felt the vibration of it but not the actual sensation. It was hard to understand. He knew that his flesh was trembling because his vision was shaking, but he felt no puckering of goose bumps on his flesh, no actual intensification of cold as his skin tried to retreat from it. And yet the vibration was there. The shaking.

He wondered at it. It was so violent that for a moment he thought that his body was going into convulsions. But that would have affected his eyesight, and he could still see as normally as the darkness allowed.

His head lolled on his ruined throat and he marveled that there was enough structural integrity left in his neck muscles to move his head so violently.

Then all at once Lee Hartnup realized what was happening.

It wasn't a wave of cold shivers. The cold, in fact, was nearly gone. It seemed to flee as the darkness grew. It wasn't convulsions either. The movement was not caused by any muscular action or nervous flutter anywhere in his body. This was purely external.

He was being shaken.

No . . . “worried” was the word. The way a terrier worries a rat.

That’s what was happening.

And yet not . . . This wasn’t a hunting dog trying to break the neck of a rodent. No . . . This was something else. Even down there in the darkness, Hartnup realized how wrong it all was. He could not feel the teeth that clamped onto him. He was beyond the sensation of pressure or pain. All that was left to him was the savage movement of his body, and the uncontrollable lolling of his head as the hollow man bit at him and tore him to pieces.

The cold was gone now. The darkness closed over him, shutting out all light. Even the trembling vision faded into nothingness. Hartnup could feel himself die.

He knew that he was dead.

And that terrified him more than anything. More than the man on the gurney. More than when that man had opened his eyes. More than that first terrible bite. More than the cold and the darkness. More than the knowledge that he was being eaten.

He knew that he was dead.

He *knew*.

God almighty.

How could he be dead . . . and *know*? He should be a corpse. Just that. Empty of life, devoid of all awareness and sensation.

This was something he had never imagined, never dreamed. The wrongness of it howled in his head.

He waited in the darkness for the nothingness to come. It would be a release.

He waited.

He prayed.

He screamed in a voiceless voice.

But he did not become a corpse.

He became a *hollow man* instead.

CHAPTER THREE

MAGIC MARTI IN THE MORNING
WNOW RADIO, MARYLAND

“This is Magic Marti at the mike on a crisp, clear November morning. Coming at you live from both sides of the line, here on WNOW and streaming live from the Net. Your source for news, sports, weather, traffic, and tunes. The news is coming up at half past the hour, so let’s take a look out the window and see what Mother Nature’s cooking up . . . and darn if she isn’t cranky today. Looks like we can wave good-bye to the sunshine, because there’s a whopper of a storm front rolling in from Ohio. It parked itself over Pittsburgh last night and the Three Rivers got pounded by two inches of rain. Ah . . . getting pounded by two inches makes me think of my first husband.”

Sound of a rim shot and cymbal.

“This is a slow-moving storm, so we can expect to see the first drops later today. This storm is clocking sustained winds of thirty miles per hour with gusts up to fifty. Button up, kids, this is going to be a bad one.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SWEET PARADISE TRAILER PARK
STEBBINS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Some days have that “it’s only going to get worse” feel, right from the moment you swing your feet out of bed and step flat-footed into a pile of cold vomit. Even then, feeling the viscous wrongness of that, you know that the day can get worse.

Desdemona Fox knew that it was going to be that kind of day. She was an expert on them, and this one promised to be a classic.

The vomit belonged to the long-haired, lean-bodied, totally gorgeous piece of brainless trailer trash who lay sprawled on the floor with

one tanned leg hooked over the edge of the bed. Dez sat up and stared down at him. By dawn's early and unforgiving light he still looked ripped and hunky; but the stubble, the puke, and the used condom stuck to his left thigh let the air out of last night's image of him as Eros, god of love. The only upside was that he'd thrown up on his own discarded jeans instead of the carpet.

"Fuck it," she said and it came out as a hoarse croak. She coughed, cleared her throat, and tried it again. It was louder the second time, a bit less phlegmy, but it carried no enthusiasm or authority.

Dez picked up her foot, fighting the urge to toss her own cookies, and looked around for something that wasn't hers that she could wipe it on. There was nothing within reach, so she wiped it on Love God's hip.

"Fuck it."

Sounded better that time.

She got up and walked on one foot and one heel to keep any residual gunk off the carpet. She rented the double-wide and didn't feel like losing her security deposit to that prick Rempel over a stained carpet. She made it to the bathroom, turned on the shower, set the temperature to something that would boil a pot full of stone crabs, and stripped off the T-shirt that she'd slept in. It was vintage Pearl Jam that had seen better decades. Dez took a breath and held it while she stepped under the spray, but her balance was blown and she barked her shin on the edge of the stall.

She was cursing while she stood under the steaming blast and kept cursing while she lathered her hair with shampoo. She was still cursing when the hot water ran out.

She cursed a lot louder and with real bile as she danced under the icy spray trying to rinse her hair. Rempel had sworn to her—sworn on his own children—that he had fixed that water tank. Dez hated him most days, but today she was pretty sure that she could put a bullet into his brainpan without a flicker of regret.

As she toweled off, Dez tried to remember the name of the beef-cake sprawled on her floor.

Billy? Bart? Brad?

Something with a *B*.

Not Brad, though. Brad was the guitar player she'd nailed last

week. Played with a cover band. Retro stuff. Green Day and Nirvana. Lousy band. Guitar player had a face like Channing Tatum and a body like—

The phone rang. Not the house phone. Her cell.

“Damn it,” she growled and wrapped the towel around her as she ran back to the bedroom. What’s his name—Burt? Brian? She was sure it started with a *B*—had rolled onto his side and his right cheek was in the puke. Charming. Her whole life in a single memorable picture.

Dez dove onto the bed but mistimed her momentum so that her outstretched hand hit the phone instead of grabbing it, and the cell, the clock, her badge case, and her holstered Glock fell off of the night table onto the far side of the bed.

“Shit!”

She hung over the bed and fished for the cell underneath, then punched the button with her thumbnail.

“What?” she snarled.

“And good morning to you, Miss Sunshine.”

Sergeant JT Hammond. He was her partner on the eight-to-four, her longtime friend, and a frequent addition to the list of people she was sure that right now she could shoot while laughing about it. Though, admittedly, she would feel bad about it afterward. JT was the closest thing to family she had, and the only one she didn’t seem able to scare off.

“Fuck you,” she said, but without venom.

“Rough night, Dez?”

“And the horse you rode in on.”

JT chuckled softly.

“Why the hell are you calling me so goddamn early?” grumbled Dez.

“Two reasons,” he said brightly. “Work and—”

“We’re not on until eight o’clock.”

“—and it’s not as early as you think. My watch says that it’s eight-oh-two.”

“Oh . . . shitballs.”

“We didn’t set out clock last night, did we? Little much to dri—”

Dez hung up.

She lay there, hanging over the edge of the bed, her ass in the air, her weight resting on one elbow.

“Oh, man!” said a slurry voice behind her. “Now that’s something to wake up to.”

Dez didn’t move, didn’t turn around.

“Here’s the morning news, dickhead,” she said very loudly and clearly. “You’re going to grab your shit and be out of here in ten seconds, or I’m going to kick your nuts up between your shoulder blades.”

“Damn . . . you wake up on the wrong side of—”

“Ten. *Three*. Two . . .”

“I’m out.”

There was a scuffling sound as Brandon or Blake or whoever the hell he was snatched up his stuff. Then the screen door opened and banged shut. An engine roared and the wheels of a Harley kicked gravel against the aluminum skin of the trailer.

Dez shimmied back onto the bed, turned over, and sat up. The room took a seasick sideways turn and then settled down. She looked around at her bedroom. Stark, cheerless, undecorated, and sparsely furnished. So much of it reminded her of herself. She closed her eyes. Insights like that she didn’t need on her best days. Today it was just mean.

She opened her eyes, took a breath, and stood up.

Love God had left a trail of puke droplets all the way to the front door, and she didn’t have time to clean them off the carpet. Rempel would be delighted—he hated returning a security deposit.

“Fuck it,” Dez said to the empty room. Her eyes stung with unshed tears. She got dressed in her last clean uniform, twisted her blond hair into an ugly approximation of a French braid, and buckled on the gun belt with all the junk and doodads required by the regs. She grabbed her hat and keys, locked the trailer, and stepped into the driveway.

The parking slip was empty.

She screamed “Shit!” loud enough to scare the crows from the trees.

Buck or Biff or whoever had driven her home from the bar. Her car was four miles down a dirt road and she was already late for work.

Some days only got worse.

CHAPTER FIVE

PINKY'S DONUT HEAVEN

STEBBINS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Sergeant JT Hammond's first name was really JT. His father's idea. JT had a sister named CJ and a younger brother named DJ. Their father thought it was hilarious. JT had not sent him a Father's Day card in eleven years.

JT sat in his cruiser and waited for Dez to come out of Pinky's with coffee. After he'd picked her up at her place and dropped her so she could retrieve her car, they arranged to meet at the gas station convenience store on Doll Factory Road to have some coffee and go over the patrol patterns for the day. Stebbins was a small town, but they shared patrol duties with the three other towns that made up all of Stebbins County. The county was the size of Manhattan but 95 percent of it was farmland, with only seven thousand residents. JT preferred to start each shift with a "game plan" for patrol, backup, and tasks. That way, if all that went on the duty log was parking tickets, a couple of DUIs, and accident reports, then at least all the i's would be dotted and t's crossed.

However, today was likely to be the kind of day when attention to detail was going to matter. If the storm was anything like the weather service was predicting, then all of the officers would be working well into the night, shepherding people to shelters, closing the schools early, coordinating with fire-rescue and other emergency services to pull people out of flooded areas, and who knew what else.

Their cruisers were parked in a V, front bumpers almost touching. JT's unit was a seven-year-old Police Interceptor with 220,000 miles on the original engine. The vehicle was spotless, however, and was the only car in the department's fleet of six that did not smell of stale beer, dried blood, and fresh urine. JT was fastidious about that. He had to be in the thing eight hours a day and sometimes double that, and tidiness mattered to him. His house was just as clean and had been ever since Lakisha had died. JT's kids were grown and gone—LaVonda

was saving the world with Doctors Without Borders and Trey was a state trooper over in Ohio. Living neatly was the only way that living alone was bearable.

By contrast, Dez's cruiser was newer and uglier. Mud-spattered, dented, and tired-looking even though it was less than two years old. She drove it hard and ached for high-speed chases. If it was up to her she'd be driving a stripped-down monster truck with a front-mounted minigun and a couple of rocket pods.

At least three times a year JT offered to help Dez detail her car and also clean and decorate her trailer, but that suggestion was invariably met with the kind of enthusiastic vulgarities usually reserved for root canals and tax audits.

JT looked at his watch and tooted the horn lightly. Dez peered out of the dirty store window. He tapped his watch and she gave him the finger.

JT smiled, settled back, and opened the copy of *JET* he had been reading. He was halfway through an article on black superheroes in comics and wanted to finish it before Dez came out. Not that she would jab him for reading such an ethnic-specific magazine—after all, she had every one of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour DVDs, and there was nothing whiter than that stuff—it's just that Dez tended to bust on JT for his love of comics. JT was pretty sure that Dez had never been a kid.

Donny Sampson, who owned a tractor parts store on Mason Street, came out of the store with a blueberry Slurpee in one hand and a Coke Slurpee in the other. He was laughing out loud, and JT guessed that it was one of Dez's jokes. Donny always liked a filthy story, and Dez was a walking encyclopedia of them. Donny saw JT and saluted with a Slurpee cup; JT gave him a nod.

Dez was taking her damn time, so he settled back, but instead of reading the magazine he laid it in his lap and stared through the windshield at the closed door of Pinky's, thinking about Dez. They were often paired for patrol and, since neither of them had family living close, they usually did Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Super Bowl together. Nothing romantic, of course; JT was old enough to be her father, and she was very much like a niece to him. Maybe a daughter if she would pull the goddamn Democratic voting-booth lever at least

once before the world went all to hell. In his way, JT loved her. Felt protective of her. She was tough, though. She laid a pretty comprehensive minefield between her and the rest of the world. The rest of the guys in the department hated and feared her in equal measures.

Dez was a very good cop, better than a small-town police department deserved, but she wasn't a very nice person. Well, maybe that was unfair. She was damaged goods, which isn't the same thing as being bad natured. That, and she was way too deeply entrenched in the nihilistic and often self-defeating mentality of rural small town America. She cursed like a pirate, drank like a Viking, and screwed the kind of people the two of them usually arrested—providing they were well built, well hung, and in no way interested in any species of “committed relationship,” especially since the last time she broke up with Billy Trout.

That was a damn shame, too. Billy Trout and Dez had grown up together and had been a hot item more times than JT could count. They were never able to make it work, which frustrated JT because he knew—even if they were both too damaged to see—that the two of them had real magic together. JT never liked to use a phrase like “soul mates,” but he couldn't find a better label. Shame they were like gasoline and matches whenever they were together. All of the guys Dez dragged to her lair were clones of Billy; but saying so to Dez would be exactly the same as saying “Shoot me.”

So, instead of a lover, Dez Fox had a partner. A middle-aged black man from Pittsburgh with a college degree in criminal justice and a set of well-used manners that had been hardwired into him by his librarian mother. Dez, on the other hand, was pure backcountry Pennsylvania; a blue-eyed blonde who could have been a model for fitness equipment if not for what JT personally viewed as an overactive red-neck gene.

The radio buzzed. “Unit Four, what's your status?”

JT lifted the handset and clicked the Send key. “Dispatch, I'm code six at Pinky's. You got something for me, Flower?”

Flower Martini, twenty-eight-year-old daughter of love generation boomers, was the dispatcher, secretary, booking photographer, and court stenographer for the Stebbins County Department of Public Safety. She looked like Taylor Swift might look if her career took a sharp downward turn past a long line of seedy country and western bars. She was

still cute as a button, and JT was pretty sure she had her eye on him, age and race differences notwithstanding.

"Yeah," said Flower, "Looks like a possible break-in at Hartnup's Transition Estate."

She overpronounced the name, giving it a nice blend of wry appreciation and tacit disapproval. The Hartnup family had been morticians in town for generations, but in the mideighties, during the New Age inrush, the son, Lee, had given the place a makeover. Changed the name from Hartnup's Funeral Home to the trendier "Transition Estate." Nondenominational services and a lot of Enya music. It actually sparked a rise in business that drew families from as far as Pittsburgh. Now, with the New Age covered in dust, the name was a local punch line. People still died, though, and the Hartnups still prettied them up and put them in the ground.

"Cleaning lady called from the mortuary office," said Flower. "Witness is a non-English speaker. All I could get was the location and that something was wrong with the back door. No other details, sorry. You want backup?"

"Dez is with me."

"Copy that."

There were only two units on the road at any one time despite the size of the county. Unit One was reserved for Chief Goss and Unit Three was in reserve.

"We'll investigate and call in if we need backup."

"Respond Code Two. Proceed with caution . . . JT." There was the slightest pause between "caution" and his name, and JT thought he heard Flower start to say "Hon—." She called him "honey" off the radio all the time and was constantly getting yelled at by the chief. She was the mayor's sister, and it was more than the chief's job was worth to fire her.

"Roger that."

JT clicked off and then tapped the dashboard button to give the siren a single "*Whoop!*" A moment later the door to Pinky's banged open, and Dez Fox came out at a near run, a white paper bag between her teeth and two extra-large coffees in paper cups in her hands. She handed a cup through the open window then leaned half inside and opened her mouth to drop the bag in his lap.

“What’s the call?” she asked, looking irritated that police work was interfering with the ritual of caffeine and carbs. JT knew that it was sacred to her.

“Possible break-in at Doc Hartnup’s place.”

“Who the fuck would want to break into a mortuary?”

“Probably a drunk. Even so, I could use some backup.”

“Yeah . . . let’s do ’er, Hoss . . . But lights, no sirens though, okay? My head’s held together with duct tape right now.”

“Won’t make a sound,” he promised.

Dez reached in and took the bag back and carried it with her to her cruiser.

“Hey!” JT yelled. She gave him the finger again. When she looked back, JT stuck his tongue out at her and Dez cracked up, then winced and pressed a hand to her head.

“Owwwwww.”

JT leaned out the window. “Ha!” he yelled.

A few seconds later Dez blew out of the parking lot in a spray of gravel. She hit the blacktop, punched the red and blue lights, and the big engine roared as she rocketed north on Doll Factory Road. JT sighed, snugged his coffee into the holder, and followed at a discreet seventy miles per hour.

CHAPTER SIX

GREEN GATES 55-PLUS COMMUNITY
FAYETTE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

The old doctor sat on a hard wooden chair in the kitchen and stared at the phone. The call from the warden at Rockview Prison—where the old man worked as the chief medical officer—had been brief. Simply the warden conveying an interesting bit of information. Six words stood out from that conversation.

“We transferred his body this morning.”

Those six words, so casually spoken, were like knives in the doctor’s chest.

We transferred his body this morning.

Forcing his voice to sound calm, forcing himself not to scream, the doctor had asked for, and been given, the names and phone numbers of the mortician who had arrived to take the body and the relative of the deceased who had made the arrangements. A relative the doctor had not known existed. No one had known. There were not supposed to be any relatives. The corpse was supposed to go into the ground after the execution. It was supposed to be in the ground now.

“Oh my god,” the doctor whispered.

He got up from his chair, walked like a sleepwalker into the living room, up the stairs, into his bedroom. He opened the closet, reached up onto the shelf, removed a zipped case, opened it, and stared dazedly at the gun. A Russian Makarov PM automatic pistol. He’d bought it new in 1974. When he had defected, the CIA took the pistol away, but eventually returned it to him. A sign of trust. He sat down on the edge of the bed. There was a box of shells in the case and three empty magazines. The doctor opened the box and began feeding shells into a magazine. He did it slowly, methodically, almost totally unaware of what he was doing. His mind was elsewhere. Miles away, in a small town where a mortician would be opening a body bag.

“God,” he murmured again.

He slid the last bullet into the magazine and slid the mag into the frame. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it for ten seconds, then exhaled it slowly as he pulled the slide back to feed a round into the chamber.

The gun was heavy and cold.

It would be quick, though. He knew where and how to place it so that death would be certain. All it would take was a moment’s courage. If courage was the right word. Practical cowardice, perhaps.

Two cold tears boiled out of the corners of his eyes and rolled unevenly over the lines that age, anger, and mania had etched into his cheeks.

He weighed the gun in his palm.

“May God forgive me for what I’ve done,” he whispered.