

Tim woke up thirsty. Thirsty as hell. As dehydrated as he'd ever been in his life. For a second, while contemplating how thirsty he was, a garden spigot came to mind. He didn't know why he'd think of that rather than a tall glass of beer or a nice lemonade, so he ignored the thought.

He sat up with a groan, wondering at the other physical discomfort he felt, which was a severe headache. This felt like a hangover. How much did he drink last night?

The funny thing was, he couldn't remember drinking anything last night. Nor were there any empty bottles or cans next to the bed. He also didn't feel hung over per se. Other than an unbelievable thirst and the entire right side of his head which pounded like a rotting tooth he had no other symptoms. No, that wasn't exactly right. The left side of his head also hurt, but his right side hurt ten times worse so that overwhelmed any other pain.

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/2.

Clarissa wasn't in her usual spot next to him on the bed. Not surprising, she was an early riser.

He heard the doorbell ring again. As Tim heard it, he realized that the first ringing was what had waken him. Clarissa would get it if she was here. Otherwise he wasn't answering it. Whoever it was would have to come back, the way he felt right now.

He tried the water faucet in the bathroom even before using the toilet. Nothing came out. "Damn it, not again!" This was happening too much lately, he was going to have to call and complain to the landlord. It was 2023 for crissakes, they couldn't keep the water pipes working? It was outrageous.

Tim used the toilet and stopped himself from flushing just in time. Who knew how long the water was going to be out?

All in all, this was shaping up to be a really crappy day.

Clarissa was in the living room, wearing only panties. She was beautiful, even to the biased eye of a husband of twenty-five years. Her breasts were still perky, her luxurious long blonde hair gleamed in the soft light. Her face twisted into a smile when she looked up and saw him in the doorway. His wife set aside the knitting she'd been working on and stood. She held her arms out in the universal want-a-hug gesture.

Tim obliged her. "I hope you weren't going to answer the door dressed like that."

Clarissa squeezed him and pecked his neck. "Of course not! I'm not going to answer it, either. It's those awful nosy neighbors of ours. They probably want to borrow something."

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/3.

Tim released her and started for the door. This was not the morning for people to be bothering him. Especially those lecherous sponges. They probably got as much out of looking at Clarissa as they did from getting something for nothing.

"I don't think anyone's going to answer." Someone said from behind the front door.

For some reason the voice scared Tim. He halted, his annoyance forgotten. It was a feminine voice, and the tone was conversational, so why did it frighten him so? He didn't know. Clarissa came up behind him and put her arms around his waist. She kissed his neck, and this time her tongue snaked out to lick the sensitive skin there. "Never mind them," she purred. "I'm standing here almost naked and you care more about the neighbors?"

He turned and kissed her deeply. When he found himself sucking on her tongue, though, it occurred to him how powerful his thirst was. He broke the embrace. "Just let me get something to drink. I'm dying here." He couldn't believe how thirsty he was. He usually only got this way when he was deep into a wood sculpture.

She smiled sweetly and gestured as if to say 'hurry up.'

Something occurred to him as he headed for the fridge. "Honey, the water is out again. But apparently not until you had your shower this morning, you look and feel clean as a whistle!"

"I guess I lucked out. I hate going without my morning shower." Clarissa replied playfully. She was always perfectly groomed and gorgeous. He couldn't remember the last time he saw a hair out of place on her.

"I just hope you can stand to be around me." He returned. There wasn't much in the refrigerator. He selected the milk but

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/4.

it had turned. He spit out his swallow and replaced the bottle. There was soda left. It wasn't good to drink them in the morning, but he was thirsty enough to quaff mud puddle water. He had to have something. He opened the bottle of soda and downed a third of it in one gulp. The pleasure and relief was nearly orgasmic. Nothing had ever felt so good going down his throat. The heat must have been up too high last night because he had been incredibly thirsty.

He drank the rest standing there in front of the fridge and tossed the drained bottle in the trash. Sated for now, he rejoined his wife and let her led him to bed.

At some point during their frantic, passionate love making, Tim realized that the neighbors were walking in his backyard. *"This yard hasn't been looked after in weeks, from the looks,"* one of them said. Fuck them, Tim thought to himself. He'd been sick, and the lawn was his task. He really didn't care what any neighbors thought, but the opinions of nosy trespassing neighbors had even less impact.

Clarissa didn't seem to notice them at all, so Tim ignored them and focused on pleasing his wife and her endless ability to please him.

They lay together afterward, limbs intertwined. "That was awesome." Tim breathed. He'd forgotten all about the neighbors.

Clarissa trailed soft fingertips across his chest. "I'm glad you liked it. I know that I did."

Tim felt better than he had, but his head was still pounding. And he still felt thirsty, though it was nowhere nearly as

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/5.

voracious as it had been when he woke this morning. He smiled at his wife, and amazingly realized that her caresses were arousing him again.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone said, "*I'm telling you, I heard someone in there.*"

Tim sat up and screamed toward the back wall that was the only thing between him and whoever was in his backyard. "I have an idea! HOW ABOUT YOU FUCKERS GET OFF MY GODDAMNED PROPERTY!!!" A stunned silence followed. Clarissa glared at him, seeming uncharacteristically upset. "Tim! I don't want you pissing off our neighbors! I'm the one who has to stay here all day when you go off to work." She leaped out of bed and rushed into the living room.

Tim thought he heard the neighbors say something else, but he ignored them and crawled out of bed and followed his wife. She was curled up in their easy chair, shaking.

He stopped in front of her. "I'm sorry."

"You don't know how scary they can be. Leave them alone, Tim. Please."

"I will, I promise."

There was a knocking on the sliding glass door leading to the backyard. He could see two shadows through the curtains. He heard one of them call his name. He ignored them and knelt next to Clarissa to embrace her. She kissed him and by the time their embrace grew hot and all was forgiven, the knocking on the back door had stopped.

After they made love again, Tim went into the bathroom and checked the water again. No dice. He was about to leave when he

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/6.

caught a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror. Both sides of his head were caked with dried blood, especially the right side which was covered almost completely.

And then it was gone. Just like that. Tim rubbed his eyes, then felt his face and head. Nothing. No wounds, and no blood. But he'd seen it!

Frowning, Tim left the bathroom and passed through the bedroom without slowing.

"What's wrong?" Clarissa called out. "Come back to bed."

He ignored her and kept going down the hallway. Cindi's bedroom door was closed. As it had been for the past ten years. He opened it and turned on the light. Except for a light layer of dust, it was exactly how it had been when Cindi died. Apparently it was time for Clarissa to clean it again, but the dust was not more than a couple weeks worth. He looked fondly at the large teddy bear curled up on her bed. It looked frail and lonely lying there by itself.

His wife was in the doorway. "What are you doing?" She demanded.

"I was just missing her."

"Get out of there."

Tim eyed her. "I have an idea, how about you stop telling me what to do?"

Clarissa crossed her hands over her bare breasts and stared at him in stony silence.

He surveyed the silent, abandoned room. "I couldn't save her," he moaned.

"Why do you want to drag all this up again?"

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/7.

Tim sighed, ignoring her question. "I should have killed Roger Morris for this. I promised myself that if I didn't save her I was going to make him pay. Even if I did save her I was going to see him in prison, but if I didn't, I was going to kill him."

"You did the right thing by changing your mind." Clarissa insisted.

"What the hell was he thinking, giving it to her? She was only 14!"

"Tim, come back to bed. Forget about all this."

Tim rubbed his head. "Ten years and it still hurts so badly. I wasn't paying attention to her. I didn't say more than three words to her at a time for weeks before she did it. She practically begged me for attention and I ignored her. Especially after you went into the hospital and she needed me the most."

"It's done, Tim. What's done is behind us."

"I always hated Immersions. I despised anyone who did it."

Clarissa was looking impatient. "But you proved your love for her by doing it to try and save her. So you redeemed yourself. Now it's time to put it behind you."

"She was your daughter too! Didn't you love her?"

"Yes, Tim, I did. But it's been ten years and you're still alive. So you're my priority. So come back to bed with me and let me help you forget about all this."

Tim rubbed his aching head while he stared at her. "Something is wrong with you, Clarissa. Having you started taking something?" It would be easy for her to have a habit. His job kept him away so much.

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/8.

"Yes." She replied playfully. "I'm a hopeless Tim addict and I need some more. Right now, baby."

The thirst was starting to get the better of him again, and his head was as painful as ever, but added to those two physical discomforts was a very real fear of his wife. His mind raced as he tried to find a way to ask his next question. There was obviously something wrong with her. She was either taking drugs or drinking, or maybe she was on one of those wire devices that tapped into the nervous system and gave you instant, intense pleasure. He was gone so much she could be doing any of those things and he'd never know-

-except. Except, how much had he been gone the past couple weeks? He'd been sick, right? In fact, he'd been home a lot lately. In fact, when was the last time he remembered actually leaving the house and going to work?

Tim tried to swallow and found he couldn't. His throat felt like sandpaper. His mouth was drier than hospital cornbread. Added to those other questions he could ask when was the last time he remembered his awful thirst being totally quenched?

Clarissa had him by the hand. "Darling, come with me to bed."

Tim allowed her to lead him back to the bedroom. For a second, as he passed through the living room, he smelled something horrid. And then it was gone as quickly as the mirror hallucination had been gone. Tim stopped and looked around the living room, trying to identify what could have caused that horrible smell.

The doorbell rang again, distracting him.

"What the hell do they want? I think it's time I had a talk with those bastards!"

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/9.

Clarissa refused to let go of his hand. "Tim! You promised me! Just yesterday you promised me that you wouldn't bother them!"

Tim tried to swallow again. His thirst was getting excruciating. "Yesterday?" With a start he realized that he was wearing jeans he hadn't been wearing before, and her panties were a different color. They'd gotten out of the bed naked. Had they just pulled on different clothes at some point?

He craned his neck around her and peered into the bedroom. There was no sign of the clothes they'd been wearing before. Not on the floor or on the bed. For a second he thought he saw the sculpture he'd been working on when Cindi died. But that was impossible. Then the impression was gone and that corner of the room was gone. Tim was thankful because the thought of the sculpture still being there was horrifying.

A different appalling thought occurred to Tim. He seized Clarissa's shoulders. "Darling. Sweetheart. Tell me something."

His menacing tone didn't seem to frighten her, as he wished. "What?" She asked insolently.

"Do you remember when I went in after Cindi?"

"Of course I remember." She snapped. "Come back to bed and stop asking stupid questions."

"Do you remembered that you promised to get me out after three days, no matter what? No matter what you had to do?"

Clarissa nodded mutely.

"I loathed the thought of going in. I knew that I might be trapped like Cindi, and that is something I fear more than anything. But I loved her and it was my fault because you were in

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/10.

the hospital when it happened and it was my responsibility. So I went in."

"I know," she spat.

"I hear something again. Have they called back yet?"

The nosy neighbors were back at the front door again. Tim ignored them.

"What did you promise me?"

"That I would get you out, no matter what. No matter what I had to do." His wife's expression was hateful.

"What else did I say?" Tim appealed.

Clarissa's mouth twisted, any trace of her great beauty was gone. "You said you'd kill me if I didn't get you out."

Tim had been carving an especially intricate wood sculpture. He was going to get half a million dollars for this one. Even with inflation as it was these days, that was still a lot of money. It was a crucial job for his career. If he completed this one he'd be able to quit working for the furniture company and go into business for himself. He'd be able to stay home with Clarissa and Cindi a lot more.

This was a crucial job, and this kind of creation was what he loved doing the most. He spent countless hours doing it and paying attention to nothing else until hunger or thirst or other biological needs forced him to put down his knife and rejoin the rest of the world. Only then did he think to check on Cindi. She was 14, after all, and she could take care of herself. Clarissa was in the hospital, recovering from a vicious bout of flu.

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/11.

For two days Tim worked almost nonstop on his sculpture, actually grateful that his wife was sick and out of the way so that no one could interfere with his concentration. At one point he remembered giving Cindi some money so she could go to a party or something. He vaguely remembered her mentioning her friend Roger Morris.

What finally shook him from the zone he was in was the realization that Cindi had been gone a long time. He had finally put aside his carving knife to use the bathroom and slake his thirst after a ten hour work session. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized how quiet the house was. He checked his daughter's room. It was empty, as was the rest of the house.

It took an hour and calls to every one of her friends that he knew, but he finally dug out the truth. She'd gone to an Immersion party last night. Someone knew Roger Morris and told Tim the address. Pausing only to dress and get his carving knife, Tim rushed over there.

The party was winding down when Tim arrived. Most people could handle Immersion. For most people the physical needs eventually intruded on the fantasy and they forced their minds to return to reality. The usual trip into Immersion for normal people was between 6 to 10 hours. By then, having to go to the bathroom, hunger, thirst, and other biological needs created enough pressure to force them to admit they were in a fantasy world and that it was time to leave.

But people with addictive personalities, or those who had trouble dealing with reality, were very likely to become trapped and never be able to leave. This is why use of Immersion technology

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/12.

carried a mandatory 20 year sentence. Even knowledge of someone using it without immediately reporting it to the proper authorities carried 10 years. People had become trapped inside their heads without hope for the remainder of their short lives. But Immersion was so enjoyable for those who could handle it that only the stiffest and most harsh penalties would keep people from experimenting with it.

Underground Immersion parties became popular with teenagers and young adults. Not everyone would go in at the same time. Some would stay in reality and care for the ones under. With proper care, the time in Immersion could be doubled safely. The implants could be linked as well, allowing parties-goers to share the same fantasy.

This was the kind of party Tim crashed. There were at least twenty teenagers sprawled on mattresses all over the otherwise bare living room. Most of them were naked. A couple of them were awkwardly walking here and there, their eyes rolled back in their heads like drugged zombies. But most of them sat or lay in bizarre positions. One frail looking boy of about 18 was cupping the air with skinny hands and pumping his hips furiously. As Tim watched from the doorway the boy ejaculated, crying out in a weak voice. His skin looked feverish.

This and other things that were going on told Tim this was a Porn Immersion party. Some of them involved role playing games, either fantasy, science fiction, or mystery. Some of them involved adventures like climbing mountains or exploring jungles. He had ever heard of ones about gladiator style combat. But a large number

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/13.

of them were unimaginative sexual fantasies. These bastards had wired his daughter into some sick orgy.

One of the attendants noticed Tim and approached him. "What's happening?" He noticed the broken front door and his friendly expression turned wary. "Are you the police?" His tone implied that someone had been bribed to keep this party from being busted.

Tim removed his long carving knife and snarled, "I have an idea. How about you tell me where my daughter Cindi is before open your stomach?"

The boy, who didn't look old enough to be shaving yet, whitened. "Um, she's in the next room." He seemed frozen with a fatal dilemma and he grew increasingly ashen.

Tim sensed that boy was debating whether to confide something. He seemed terrified of what would happen if Tim took the news hard. "What is it? If you tell me now, I promise I won't hurt you."

"Um, we sorta can't bring her out of it."

Before Tim realized it, he had the boy jacked up against the wall with the knife to his throat.

"What's going on?"

Tim remembered his promise and released the boy. The person who'd spoke was standing a few feet away, between a copulating couple and a girl wildly gesturing as if she were dancing while lying down. The man was completely bald, but his head was covered with several elaborate colored tattoos. One was of a spider locked in mortal combat with a scorpion, the other involved a buxom redhead and a skeleton. Tim didn't look close enough to see if they were doing what he thought they were.

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/14.

"I'm Roger Morris. This is my party. Can I help you?"

Tim fought his overwhelming rage. "You will take me to Cindi Carpenter. You will remove the implants from her head. If she's okay I'll think about stopping myself from killing you."

Roger nodded thoughtfully, not looking scared in the slightest. "Come with me."

Cindi was the only one in the next room. A blanket was on the floor, as if kicked there by a thrashing leg. Cindi was nude and slowly running her fingers up and down her sweat soaked body. Her face was twisted into what might have been ecstasy. The skin on both sides of her head was reddened from the implant injections. They were small and could be implanted in seconds. If someone could get out of Immersion on their own, it wasn't necessary to have them removed between trips. There was some danger of slipping into Immersion without being aware of it, though, so a lot of people had them removed as a precaution.

Tim took the blanket and draped it over his daughter. "Her clothes. And get whatever you need to remove the implants. Now."

Roger pointed to the floor to the left of the couch. "There are her clothes. Good luck trying to get them on her, she's resisted every attempt. As for removing the implants, there is a great chance she could be brain damaged if we do it before she comes back."

Tim brandished the knife. "Your attitude is a trifle cavalier for someone who is about to die."

"You need my help to save your daughter." Roger pointed out calmly. "Only a fool threatens someone when they don't have to."

"What do you mean?" Tim asked, uncertain.

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/15.

"Do you honestly believe I want a kid to die on my watch? I could never get anyone to take another bribe if people start dying on me. I run a safe, clean operation here. She passed our field test. Anyone who fails that gets shown the door. Unfortunately there is a 1% error in field tests. Every now and then someone who shouldn't do it slips through."

This made sense. Roger made a lot of money on this scam. He wouldn't jeopardize that. He wanted Cindi back as much as Tim did. Tim put away the knife. "Okay. I'm not normally a violent man, but this is my fault. If I had paid atten-."

Roger silenced him with one raised hand. "Say no more. I understand."

"So what can we do?"

"All we can do is ride it out. Hopefully the need to use the bathroom, or the discomfort of doing it where she is, or starvation or thirst will force her to emerge. She might just has a higher than normal ability to ignore such discomforts. The pleasure is a strong lure."

"And if that isn't the problem?"

"Then we have no choice but to rip out the implants and hope it doesn't damage her. Sometimes it doesn't."

Tim didn't like that. But there was still hope. He sat heavily on the floor next to the couch and waited for his daughter to emerge on her own.

"You never got me out, did you? I'm still trapped in Immersion, aren't I?" Tim growled.

Clarrisa backed up a step. "What are you talking about?"

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/16.

"YOU SAID YOU'D GET ME OUT AFTER THREE DAYS! YOU DIDN'T, DID YOU?"

"Honey, calm down."

Tim reached for the lamp next to his couch and hurled it across the room. It shattered against the wall next to the sliding glass door. "This isn't real, is it? I'm still inside! I'm never getting out!"

"It's really sounding ugly in there. I say to hell with waiting any longer. Call him back."

"AND YOU TWO OUT THERE CAN GO TO HELL TOO!" Tim shouted at the sliding glass door.

Clarissa was livid. "I told you not to talk to them! What is wrong with you?" She fought to control her frantic breathing.

"Are you denying I'm still Immersed?" Tim demanded.

"Of course. It's been ten years! You'd have died long ago."

She had him there. Still, he was confused. "When was the last time I've been out of this house?"

"You got groceries yesterday, silly. And before you got sick you went to work every day."

That reminded him of his overwhelming thirst. He had to drink something. Now. "Then there's something for me to drink! Right? If I got groceries, there's something for me to drink!" He made his way to the kitchen. The water still didn't work. He would rant about that but he was too thirsty for any more shouting. There was no soda left, in fact the only thing left was the bottle of spoiled milk. "If I went to the store, where are the drinks?"

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/17.

He checked the freezer. There wasn't even one cube of ice left. He vaguely remembered sucking them one by one sometime in the past. Had that been last year? The year before? How long had the water been off?

He glared at Clarissa. "There isn't any drinks left! I'm dying of thirst here! I haven't been to the store."

She looked cross. "So you're not going to come back to bed with me?"

Realization struck Tim. "This was a Porn Immersion! No wonder you're insatiable. That's why most of what I remember is us having sex. You're just carrying out the intention of the Immersion!"

"You're not making any sense, Tim." Clarissa cried.

"Don't give me that. You're not real. None of this is real. All that is real is my insane, unquenchable thirst. And that is how this works. Once it gets strong enough that allows me to break free. I'm almost free of you. All my life I'm been able to ignore biological needs for the sake of what was more important to me, usually my work. So I was trapped in here a lot longer than most people would be. But even I have my limits, and that has almost been reached."

Clarissa looked at him as if he were a child. "Ten years? You really believe you've been in here for ten years?"

"If Clarissa couldn't get me out, even though I demanded that she do so by any means necessary after three days, she would be caring for me. So I could last a long time."

"But ten years? Get real."

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/18.

"Maybe time is different in here. It probably hasn't been nearly that long, you just want me to think it was so I would accept this reality. I'll bet it's only been a week or two."

Clarissa shook her head. "You're foiled by your own logic. If this other Clarissa is taking care of you, why would you be so thirsty? Wouldn't she be giving you water?"

Tim looked longingly at the milk in the fridge. "You're using that out of context. If I've been in here a long time then obviously I survived because she took care of me. But my point is that I don't think I have been in here a long time and my thirst proves that. She knows the only way for me to escape is through physical discomfort." He unconsciously rubbed the right side of his head.

His wife threw up his hands. "You're forgetting one important thing. You said you'd kill me if I didn't get you out of that Immersion. So why would I not get you out and instead take care of you?"

Tim tried the water tap again. A single drop squeezed out. He stuck his tongue out but no more drops followed. "I'm not arguing with you anymore. I'm still in it. I know it."

"Tim! Come back to bed now! We could be having passionate, pleasurable sex instead of this silly conversation."

"It's about time you called us back! We've been waiting here for hours!"

That came from the front door. Tim ignored it. "That's over with. It's not real. I have an idea. How about you find me something to fucking drink? Make yourself useful for once."

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/19.

Clarissa looked furious. "No, I have an idea for YOU, bucko. How about you get in bed with me or I'll talk to you about that sculpture you destroyed. Your life's work."

Tim moved his mouth but no sound came out. He suddenly felt terrified beyond all reason.

"It's been two days since she went in." Roger said.

Tim woke with a start. He'd been dozing with his head against the couch. He'd been here for hours. At some point, after he fell asleep, Cindi kicked off the blanket. She was thrashing about wildly, moaning with abandon.

"Jesus Christ, we have to do something!"

Roger seemed genuinely sorry. "At this point I think it's time to consider removing the implants. It's the only way."

Tim couldn't get the thought of brain damage out of his mind. "Don't do anything yet. Give me a chance to wake up and think." Roger agreed, and Tim headed for the bathroom. A lot of the people who had been in the living room were gone now. Only about five remained. A sixth, a woman who looked a little older than the rest, was wrapped in a blanket and sitting up. She looked weary but extremely happy. As he glanced at her on the way past she was finishing a pint of water. "Thanks," she was saying, "I can't believe how thirsty I got. I was ready to drink out of the toilet!" The person assisting her, the same kid Tim had threatened upon entering hours ago, laughed knowingly with her.

Tim used the bathroom, then held his hands under the tap. He was a bit thirsty himself, but he didn't want to ask for anything from these bastards. They didn't seem as evil as he had thought

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/20.

at first, but he still thought they were vampires conducting an illegal and dangerous operation for profit. He would still see Roger in prison after Cindi was safe. He drank several handfuls, dried his hands, and found Roger.

"What about someone going in and linking with Cindi and telling her to come out?"

The Immersion seller shook his head. "We tried that. She rejected everyone we sent in. I even tried myself. All she wants to do is have sex and dance. If someone starts talking, she rejects them and out they come."

"What about me? She wouldn't look at me that way, I'm her father."

"That's true. If anyone has a shot, it's you or your wife. But you have to pass a screening first."

Tim shrugged and went along. The screening involved staring in a binocular apparatus for several minutes. He saw flashes of lights, some color dilation, and thought he heard a weird noise a couple times. Other than that, it was monotonous.

Roger studied his palmtop computer for another minute after he told Tim the test was over. Finally the other man sighed. "I'm sorry, but you've failed utterly. You're a serious risk to become trapped. I've never seen someone with dissociative tendencies as high as yours without actually having a dissociative disorder. You're a poster child for precisely the kind of person who should never try Immersion."

He was scaring Tim. Especially since he knew that no matter what, he had to go in and rescue his daughter. There was no alternative. He'd risk his own brain being damaged from having

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/21.

the implants ripped out of his head before he'd risk that happening to his daughter.

"That's enough. I get the idea. I have to do it anyway. It's my fault this happened to her, so I can't ask my wife to go in and risk it. I have to be the one. No matter the personal risk to myself, I have to go in, so I don't need to hear anymore."

Roger folded his hands in his lap. It was a stubborn, resolute gesture. "I'm not going to be responsible for you getting trapped. I'm not going to help you be Immersed."

"Yes, you will." Tim stated with deadly finality.

Several attendants closed in behind Tim. Roger nodded to them slightly before returning his attention to Cindi's father. "And what if I refuse?"

"Then one of us is coming out of this house in a body bag. Better yet, maybe I'll just cut you up into little pieces and stuff you down the drain."

Roger waved away his backup. "There's something wrong with you. You have so much barely repressed anger. That makes you being Immersed even more dangerous. I'm going to ask you one more time to reconsider."

"I can't leave Cindi like this," Tim replied, ignoring the warnings for the last time.

"Fine. But you're not doing it here. I wash my hands of you and your daughter. I'll implant you, then you take her out of here and never come back."

Tim agreed impatiently.

Ten minutes later Roger personally used the implant gun and Tim had two implants, one on each side of his head, above and

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Thirsty/Dexter Goad/22.

behind his temples. "This control activates the implants. DO NOT use it until you've finished driving and are somewhere safe. Obviously a public place would be bad, unless you want to spend the next 20 years in prison. I suggest having someone monitor you, but that's up to you. I would suggest telling whoever monitors you to not feed or water you. The only chance someone like you has is to be forced to realize you're not in reality the hard way. It might take you to be near death to finally realize it, but you have no chance otherwise."

"How do I link up with Cindi?"

"I've set your implants to automatically link with hers. You don't have to do anything except be near her and activate your implants."

Tim accepted the control. "Thank you. I'm sorry about threatening you before. I'm not usually like this. I just blame myself..."

Roger shrugged. "You're a fool. Only a fool threatens someone they need help from. But I'm not a sensitive person, you didn't hurt my feelings."

"I appreciate your help." Tim replied simply, ignoring the insults. He bent, picked up his blanketed daughter, and took her away from this madhouse.

Roger watched the man leave.

"You know he's going to the police if he gets her back." The redhead attendant observed. "And if he doesn't get her back he's coming back for you."

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/23.

Roger grinned. "He's not coming back. You saw his readings. I didn't even bother giving him one of our special implants. I didn't have to."

"You don't think he'll come out?"

"As I said before, he has the highest dissociative readings I've ever seen for someone who didn't actually have a dissociative disorder. He's going in deep, boys," Roger replied, amused. "He's going deep into the rabbit hole, and he's never going to hit the bottom."

Clarissa was home by the time Tim got back. She went into hysterics, screamed that this was all his fault, then eventually calmed enough for Tim to tell her what he planned to do about it.

"I need you to watch over me." He told her not to give him food or drink. She could keep him comfortable, and clean. But her most important job would come if he failed. "If I don't come out of it after three days, I need you to get me out by any means necessary." He broke into a sweat, contemplating the horror of being trapped inside his mind. "I mean it, Clarissa. This is the most important thing you'll ever do in your life. You HAVE to get me out."

His wife nodded fearfully.

"Hopefully I'll be out before then, with Cindi. And if I fail, then I'll take her to the hospital and I'll serve whatever time I get for this. I'll leave you out of it. But they'll lock her up too after they get her out, so I want to try this first."

"I wish there were some other way," Clarissa cried.

"There's not. Now, what are you going to do after three days?"

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/24.

"I'll get you out."

"How?" Tim demanded.

"However I have to."

He raised his carving knife. "Even if you have to dig the implants out of my head?"

Clarissa hesitated.

"CLARISSA! I CAN NOT STAY TRAPPED IN THERE! YOU HAVE TO GET ME OUT!"

She was crying now. "Okay. I-I'll do it."

"I mean it Clarissa." Tim warned. "Get me out, however you have to, or I swear to God I'll kill you."

She whitened and started to back away from him, towards the door.

Tim seized an arm. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong. I just want to impress upon you how strongly I feel about this. The thought of being trapped in a false reality scares the hell out of me. I'm only doing this because it is my fault that Cindi got into this mess. I love her and I'm going to get her out. But I need your help." He released her. It was all up to her now. If she tried to leave he wouldn't stop her. Better that she abandon him now than after he was Immersed. If she left now, he'd just have to call the police and take his medicine. As Cindi would take her medicine if they managed to get her back at a federal hospital. There was no way Tim would go under alone. So it was up to his wife now.

Clarissa held her position.

"If you can't go through with this, leave not. I won't stop you. I'll be forced to call the police, but I'll leave you out of

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/25.

it, as I said. But whatever you decide now, you have to stick with it. There is no turning back if you agree to help me."

Clarissa still didn't move. "I'll stay." She sounded so tiny and so frightened that Tim almost called it off anyway. Then he decided to ignore his reservations and her fear and focus on what was important, helping Cindi.

Ten minutes later he was stretched out on their bed with the control in his hand. "Three days."

Clarissa sniffled and nodded. "Three days. I promise."

Tim's eyes wandered to the sculpture across the room. It was the best thing he'd ever done, and now it might never be finished. It depicted a running woman just crossing a finish line. The line was breaking around her, and her face was filled with exhausted elation. He'd spent countless hours working on it, and it greatly exceeded anything he'd ever attempted before. He was going to get a lot of money for this if he finished it. He would give it all up to have paid more attention to his daughter.

Tim's eyes returned to his wife. "By any means necessary," he warned. Then he pressed the button, activating the implants.

The world went dark, and then he was someplace else.

The doorbell was ringing. That was followed by an insistent pounding on the door.

"I used to think I knew what thirst was." Tim told Clarissa conversationally as he drank the rotting milk that was all had been left in the fridge. "I remember one time when I was growing up, my older brother locked me out of our house right before bedtime. I was afraid I'd get a spanking if I knocked and woke

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/26.

our parents, so I sat on the porch all night. I got so thirsty that I eventually got on my knees in the filth next to the house and shoved my face against the water spigot on the house in the backyard." Tim took another swig from the milk bottle. It was thick with chunks and it was quite possibly the worst taste he'd ever experienced. But it slaked a little of his maddening thirst. "The water pressure on that spigot was such that I had to practically swallow the nozzle to get any water. Ten o'clock that night I'd never have dreamed of doing it. By midnight I didn't mind the thought of kneeling in the filthy moss mud under the spigot. Around one or two, when swallowing felt like I was rubbing sandpaper against my throat, I found myself sitting next to the spigot, looking longingly at it. By three a.m. I sucked that rusty nozzle into my mouth and wouldn't have cared if everyone in the neighborhood had been watching me and laughing. It felt so good going down. Later, when I was back inside and it was my brother getting the spanking, and I was enjoying a tall glass of chocolate milk, I started to feel ashamed of what I'd done. But at the time, at the time Clarissa, I didn't give a fat flying fuck who saw me or what anyone thought of it, because I was more thirsty than I ever believed anyone could get." Tim finished the milk, smacked his lips in satisfaction, and tossed the bottle aside. "As I said, I USED to think I knew what thirsty was. But even that lovely experience couldn't hold a candle to how thirsty I am right now."

"Come to bed, Tim." Clarissa demanded.

More pounding on the door. *"Tim Carpenter! This is the police! We have just received authorization to enter your residence by force unless you open the door immediately!"*

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/27.

Tim ignored the neighbors. Sickness overcome him and he dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor. Before he knew it, he'd thrown up the spoiled milk. He gagged and heaved for a long time after the last of it was out of him. "Does the not crying thing count for thrown up milk?" He gasped. Clarissa didn't answer.

The pounding had changed. They were trying to break down the front door now. In a moment they would remember the sliding glass door in the back and it would be easy for them to enter.

"Remember the sculpture, Tim?" Roger said.

Tim looked up. His wife was gone. In her place stood Roger Morris. He didn't look a day older than the last time Tim saw him. He certainly didn't look ten years older.

"That's because it's only been a couple days, hasn't it? A week on the outside, huh? I'm been wandering around the house, supplying my own drinks and food, though I haven't felt much like eating. Thirst gets you a long time before hunger, doesn't it, Roger? Hunger ain't shit compared to thirst, is it?"

"You just couldn't go with it completely, could you?" Roger chuckled. "So now she's gone and I'm here to keep you company."

"I don't understand something. I thought if I finally realized this wasn't reality I could get back to reality."

Roger nodded. "That's true."

"Well, if that's true, what the fuck is going on?"

"You haven't been Immersed for two days now. Your wife removed the implants two days ago, you can't be Immersed if your implants are gone."

Tim shot his hands up to his head. He could now feel the holes. The right side was worse, she'd apparently had to dig around

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/28.

to find it. She must have done that one first. The left side was much cleaner, a much smaller hole that hadn't bled much. "But ... but if my implants are gone ..."

"You didn't want to leave, Tim. You were only ever halfway in touch with reality anyway. Being Immersed sent you over the edge. You were never coming back, it didn't matter if you realized it or if the implants were removed or what happened. There was no getting you back."

Tim ignored that. He was too damned thirsty to listen to any more of this shit. He rose and stumbled to the kitchen sink. Still no water came from the tap. "Looks like I have another hot date with a garden spigot. I can't take the thirst anymore."

"What did you do after you thought your wife got you out of Immersion?" Roger pressed.

Tim unlocked the sliding glass door and pushed it aside. "I thanked her for releasing me and told her I couldn't get Cindi out. Cindi died that night, so there was no reason to go to the police. We went on with our lives for the next ten years. We had sex a lot and I can't remember working a single day."

A final blow struck it and the front door exploded inward. *"Be careful, we don't know how far gone he is."*

"What happened with the sculpture you were working on before?" Roger asked gleefully.

Tim knelt on the ground.

"Guys, he's in the backyard. We're approaching with caution. You two continue to search the house."

"I tried to keep working on it, but my knife slipped and I cut my head. I was so angry I never worked on the sculpture again."

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/29.

"It really stinks in here! What the hell happened?"

"What happened to the sculpture?" Roger insisted.

"We found the daughter in her bedroom. There is no reading from the implants, so they're turned off. She must be out of it. She's just sleeping off the effects."

"It pissed me off." Tim lowered his head and turned on the spigot. At first nothing came out.

"Mr. Carpenter? Mr. Carpenter, can you hear me?"

"I got mad and cut it into little pieces."

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Look in the master bedroom!"

Water was starting to flow now. It tasted foul, especially foul, but Tim was so thirsty that he actually moaned with pleasure as it flowed over his tongue and down his throat.

"Mr. Carpenter!"

"I was mad." Tim told Roger, who existed only in his mind. "I was mad so I cut the sculpture up and shoved it down the drain. Down the toilets and down the drains. All of it. Every little annoying interfering piece of that goddamned sculpture. Down the drain it went." Tim drank more of the foul water. It tasted vaguely familiar. Almost like-

"Blood! There's blood everywhere! Oh my God!"

Tim ignored the taste and drank some more. "I don't have to be thirsty anymore." He giggled. "There's plenty of water here!"

"Mr. Carpenter, you're going to have to come with us."

"I have an idea," Roger Morris said in Tim's mind. "What if you wanted to avoid returning to reality so much that you did anything you had to do to keep Clarissa from bringing you out?"

"Grab his arms."

(CONTINUED)

Thirsty/Dexter Goad/30.

The foul tasting water was drying up. If he could just get some more before it ran out. He was so thirsty. Tim didn't even feel the hands grabbing him, lifting him up. He didn't hear the police who'd responded to an anonymous tip about illegal Immersion use in this house talking to him. He heard nothing but Roger's laughter in his mind, and felt nothing but an overwhelming, unquenchable thirst.

THE END