

Mr Monster

Dan Wells

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MR MONSTER

DAN WELLS

headline

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From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were – I have not seen
As others saw . . .

– *Alone* Edgar Allan Poe

Prologue

I killed a demon. I don't know if it was really, technically a demon – I'm not exactly a religious person – but I do know that Mr Crowley, my neighbour across the street, was some kind of monster, with fangs and claws and the whole bit. He could change back and forth, and he murdered a lot of people, and if he'd known that I knew who he was, he would have murdered me too. So for lack of a better word I called him a demon, and because there was no one else who could do it, I killed him. I think it was the right thing to do. At least the killing stopped.

Well, it stopped for a while.

You see, I'm a monster too – not a supernatural demon, just a messed-up kid. I've spent my whole life trying to keep my dark side locked away where it couldn't hurt anybody, but then that demon showed up, and letting my dark side loose was the only way to stop it. And now I don't know how to lock it back up.

I call my dark side 'Mr Monster' – the side that dreams about bloody knives, and imagines what you'd look like with your head on a stick. I don't have multiple personalities and I don't hear voices or anything, I just . . . it's hard to explain.

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I think about a lot of terrible things, and I want to *do* a lot of terrible things, and it's just easier to come to terms with that side of me by pretending it's someone else; it's not John who wants to cut his mother into tiny pieces, it's Mr Monster. See? I feel better already.

But here's the problem: Mr Monster is hungry.

Serial killers often talk about a need – some driving urge that they can control at first, but which builds and builds until it's impossible to stop, and then they lash out and kill again. I never understood what they were talking about before, but now I think I do. Now I can feel it, deep in my bones, as insistent and inevitable as the biological urge to eat or hunt or mate.

I've killed once, and it's only a matter of time before I kill again.

Chapter 1

It was 1 a.m., and I was staring at a cat.

It was probably a white cat, but here in the dark I couldn't tell for sure; what little moonlight filtered through the broken windows turned the room into an older version of itself, a scene from a black and white movie. The cement-block walls were grey, the dented barrels and stacks of wooden planks were grey, the piles of half-used paint cans were grey – and there in the centre, refusing to move, was a grey cat.

I played with the plastic jug in my hands, turning it back and forth, listening to the gasoline as it sloshed around inside. I had a book of matches in my pocket, and a pile of oily rags at my feet. There was enough old wood and chemicals in here to fuel a spectacular fire, and I desperately wanted to light it, but I didn't want to hurt that cat. I didn't even dare scare it away, for fear that I might lose control.

So I stared at it, waiting. As soon as it left, this place was *gone*.

It was late April, and spring was finally winning its battle to transform a dull, frozen Clayton County into a cheerful, green one. A big part of this, of course, was the fact that the Clayton Killer had finally left us alone. His vicious

killing spree had lasted almost five months, but he'd stopped very suddenly, and no one had heard from him since January. The town had huddled in fear for another two months, barring its doors and windows every night, and waking up each morning hardly daring to turn on the TV and see another shredded corpse on the morning news. But nothing had come, and slowly we'd started to believe that it was over for real this time, and there wouldn't be any more bodies. The sun came up, the snow melted away, and people started smiling again. We'd weathered the storm. Clayton had been tentatively happy for almost a month now.'

I was the one person, in fact, who hadn't been worried at all. I'd known for certain that the Clayton Killer was gone for good, way back in January. After all, I'm the one who killed him.

The cat moved, turning its attention from me to drop its head and lick its paw. I held completely still, hoping it would ignore me or forget me and go outside to hunt or something. Cats were supposed to be nocturnal hunters, and this one had to eat sometime. I pulled my watch from my pocket – a cheap plastic wristwatch that I'd torn the straps off – and checked the time again. Five past one. This was going nowhere.

The warehouse had been built as a supply dump for a construction company many, many years ago, back when the big woodmill in town was new and people still thought Clayton County might turn into something. It never did, and while the woodmill still struggled along, the construction company had cut its losses and gone home. In the years since, I wasn't the only one who'd made use of this long-

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abandoned building – the walls were covered with graffiti, and the ground inside and out was littered with beer cans and empty wrappers. I'd even found a mattress behind some wooden pallets, presumably some vagrant's temporary home. I wondered if the Clayton Killer had got him, too, before I stopped him; either way, the mattress was musty from disuse, and I figured nobody had been out here all winter. When I finally got a chance, that mattress was slated to be the core of my carefully crafted fire.

Tonight, though, there was nothing I could do. I followed rules, and those rules were very strict, and the very first one said *Do not hurt animals*. That made this the fourth time the cat had stopped me from burning down the warehouse. I suppose I should have been grateful . . . but I really needed to burn something. One of these days I'd take that cat and— No. I wouldn't hurt the cat. I'd never hurt anyone again.

Breathe deep.

I set down the gas jug; I didn't have time to wait for the cat, but I could burn something smaller. I grabbed a wooden pallet and dragged it outside, then went back in for the gas. The cat was still there, now sitting in a ragged square of moonlight, watching me.

'One of these days . . .' I said, then turned and walked back out. I drizzled a little gas on the pallet, just enough to make it easy, then placed the jug by my bike, far away from where the fire would be. Safety first. The stars were out, and the trees in the forest loomed close, but the warehouse was in a clearing of gravel and dead grass. Somewhere through the trees the interstate rumbled by, filled with late-night semis and the occasional drowsy car.

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I knelt down by the wooden pallet, smelling the tang of gas in the air, and pulled out my matches. I didn't bother to break up the planks or build a proper fire, I just struck the match and dropped it on the gas, watching it flare up bright and yellow. The flames licked up the gas and then, slowly, started in on the wood itself. I watched it closely, hearing the little snaps and pops as the fire found pockets of sap. When it had a firm grip on the board, I took the pallet by a safe corner and turned it on its end, letting the fire climb up, and then flopped it down on the other side so the flames could spread to the rest of the boards. It moved like a living thing, probing the wood with a thin yellow finger, tasting it, then reaching out greedily and lapping it up.

The fire caught well, better than I had expected. It seemed a shame to waste it on just one pallet.

I pulled another pallet from out of the warehouse and dropped it on top of the fire. The blaze was big enough now that it roared and crackled, jumping on to the new wood with obvious delight. I smiled at it, like the proud owner of a precocious dog. Fire was my pet, my companion, and the only release I had left; when Mr Monster clamoured for me to break my rules and hurt someone, I could always appease it with a good fire. I watched the blaze tear into the second pallet, hearing the dull roar as it sucked in oxygen, and sighed with pleasure. It wanted more wood, so I went inside for another two pallets. Just a little more wouldn't hurt.

'Please don't hurt me.'

I loved it when she said that. Somehow, for some reason,

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I always expected her to say, ‘Are you going to hurt me?’ but she was too smart for that. She was tied to the wall in my basement, and I was holding a knife – of course I was going to hurt her. Brooke didn’t ask stupid questions, which is one of the reasons I liked her so much.

‘Please, John, I’m begging you – please don’t hurt me.’

I could listen to that for hours. I liked it because it got right to the point: I had all the power in the situation, and she knew it. She knew that no matter what she wanted, I was the only one who could give it to her. Alone in this room, with this knife in my hand, I was her entire world – her hopes and her fears together, her everything at once.

I moved the knife almost imperceptibly, and felt a rush of adrenaline as her eyes twitched to follow it: first left, then right; now up, now down. It was an intimate dance, our minds and bodies in perfect sync.

I had felt this before, holding a knife to my mom in our kitchen, but even then I’d known that Brooke was the only one who really mattered. Brooke was the one I wanted to connect with.

I raised the knife and stepped forward. Like a partner in a dance, Brooke moved in unison, pressing back against the wall, eyes growing wider, breath growing quicker. *A perfect connection.*

Perfect.

Everything was exactly as I’d imagined it a thousand times. It was a fantasy come real, a scenario of such utter completeness that I felt it begin to gather me up and sweep me away. Her wide eyes focusing completely on me. Her pale skin trembling as I reached towards her. I felt emotions

surging, roiling inside me, spilling out and blistering my skin.

This is wrong. This is exactly what I've always wanted, and exactly what I've always wanted to avoid. Right and wrong at the same time.

I can't tell my dreams from my nightmares.

There was only one way it could end; only one way it ever ended. I shoved the knife into Brooke's chest, she screamed, and I woke up.

'Wake up,' said Mom again, turning on my light. I rolled over and groaned. I hated waking up, but I hated sleeping even more – too much time alone with my subconscious. I grimaced and forced myself to sit up. *I made it through another one. Only twenty hours before I have to do it again.*

'Big day today,' said Mom, pulling open the blinds in my window. 'After school, you've got another appointment with Clark Forman. Come on, get up.'

I squinted at her, bleary-eyed. 'Forman again?'

'I told you about this last week,' she said. 'It's probably another deposition.'

'Whatever.' I climbed out of bed and headed for the shower, but Mom blocked my path.

'Wait,' she said sternly. 'What do we say?'

I sighed and repeated with her our ritual morning phrase: 'Today I will think good thoughts and smile at everyone I see.' She beamed and patted me on the shoulder. Sometimes I wished I just had an alarm clock.

'Corn flakes or Cheerios this morning?'

'I can pour my own cereal,' I said, and pushed past her to the bathroom.

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My mom and I lived above the mortuary in a quiet little neighbourhood on the outskirts of Clayton. Technically we were across the municipal line, which put us in the county rather than the town, but the whole place was so small that nobody really noticed or cared where any of the lines were.

We lived in Clayton, and thanks to the mortuary we were one of the only families that didn't have at least one person working in the woodmill. You might think that a small town like this wouldn't have enough dead people to keep a mortuary in business, and you'd be right – we were on the ropes most of last year, struggling to pay the bills. My dad paid child support, or more correctly the government garnished his wages to pay it, but it still wasn't enough. Then last fall, the Clayton Killer had shown up and given us plenty of business. Most of me thought it was sad that so many people had to die to keep our business solvent, but Mr Monster loved every minute of it.

Naturally, Mom didn't know about Mr Monster, but she did know that I had been diagnosed with Conduct Disorder – which is mostly just a polite way of saying that I'm sociopathic. The official term is Antisocial Personality Disorder, but they're only allowed to call it that when you're eighteen or older. I was still a month shy of sixteen, so Conduct Disorder it was.

I locked myself in the bathroom and stared in the mirror. It was encrusted with little notes and Post-its Mom left to remind us of important things – not daily things like appointments, but longterm 'words to live by'. I could sometimes hear her recite them to herself as she got ready

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in the morning: things like ‘Today will be the best day of my life,’ and other crap like that. The largest was a note she had written specifically for me, compiling a list of rules written on lined, pink notepaper and taped to the corner of the mirror. These were the same rules I’d created years ago to keep Mr Monster locked up, and I’d followed them just fine on my own until last year, when I’d had to let him out. Now Mom had taken it upon herself to enforce them. I read the list while I brushed my teeth:

Rules

I will not hurt animals.

I will not burn things.

When I think bad thoughts about someone, I will push the thoughts away and say something nice about that person.

I will not call people ‘it’.

If I start to follow someone, I will ignore them as much as possible for a full week.

I will not threaten people, even implicitly.

If people threaten me, I will leave the situation.

Obviously, the one about burning things had already been tossed out. Mr Monster was so insistent, and my mom’s

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supervision so restrictive, that something had to give, and that was it. Lighting fires – small, contained fires that wouldn't hurt anyone – was like a release valve that let out all the pressure building up in my life. It was a rule I *had* to break, in order to have any hope of following the others. I didn't tell Mom what I was doing, of course; I just left it on the list and ignored it.

Honestly, I appreciated Mom's help, but . . . it was getting very hard to live with. I spat out the toothpaste, rinsed my mouth, and went to get dressed.

I ate breakfast in the living room, watching the morning news while Mom hovered in the hall behind me as far as her hair-curling iron could reach. 'Anything interesting going on at school today?' she asked.

'No,' I said. There was nothing interesting on the news, either – no new deaths in town, at least, which was usually all I cared about. 'Do you really think Forman wants to see me for another deposition?'

Mom paused for a moment, silent behind me, and I knew what she was thinking: there were things we still hadn't told the police about what happened that night. When a serial killer comes after you, that's one thing, but when that serial killer turns out to be a demon, and melts away into ash and black sludge right before your eyes, how are you supposed to explain that without getting thrown into an asylum?

'I expect they just want to make sure they have it all written down right,' she said finally. 'We've told them everything there is to tell.'

'Everything except the demon who tried to—'

'We are not going to talk about that,' said Mom sternly.

‘But we can’t just pretend—’

‘We are *not* going to talk about it,’ Mom repeated. She hated talking about the demon, and almost never acknowledged it out loud. I was desperate to discuss it with someone, but the only person I could share it with refused even to think about it.

‘I’ve already told him everything else twenty-seven times,’ I said, flipping to another new channel. ‘He’s either suspicious or he’s an idiot.’ The new channel was as dull as the last one.

Mom thought for a moment. ‘Are you thinking bad thoughts about him?’

‘Oh, come on, Mom.’

‘This is important!’

‘I can do this myself, you know,’ I said, putting down the remote. ‘I’ve been doing this on my own for a very long time. I don’t need you reminding me constantly about every little thing.’

‘Are you thinking bad thoughts about me now?’

‘I’m starting to, yes.’

‘And?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘You look very nice today,’ I said.

‘You haven’t even seen me since you turned on the TV.’

‘I don’t have to say sincere things, just nice things.’

‘Sincerity will help, though.’

‘You know what will help,’ I said, standing up and taking my empty bowl into the kitchen, ‘is for you to stop bugging me all the time. Half the bad things I think about are caused by you breathing down my neck every second of the day.’

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'Better me than somebody else,' she called from the hallway, unfazed. 'I know you love me too much to do anything drastic.'

'I'm a sociopath, Mom, I don't love anybody. By definition.'

'Is that an implicit threat?'

'Oh, for the—! No, it was not a threat, Okay, I'm leaving.'

'And?'

I stepped back into the hallway, staring at her in frustration. We recited it again: 'Today I will think good thoughts and smile at everyone I see.' I picked up my backpack, opened the door, then turned around and looked at her one last time.

'You do look very nice today,' I said.

'What was that for?'

'You don't want to know.'