# Evil at Heart

## Chelsea Cain

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Extract

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# 1

**The rest stop** off I-84 on the Oregon side of the Columbia River was vile, even by rest-stop standards. Graffiti covered the white subway-tile walls; the paper-towel and toilet-paper dispensers had been emptied, their contents now strewn on the concrete floor. Two of the metal stall doors were pulled off their top hinges and hung at odd angles. It smelled like a parking-garage stairwell, that peculiar marriage of urine and cement.

Eighteen miles from the nearest bathroom, and they end up at a rest stop trashed by hooligans. There was no alternative. Amy put her hands on her hips and stared at her eleven-year-old daughter.

'Come on, Dakota,' she said.

Dakota's blue eyes widened. 'I'm not going in there,' she said.

This is what the whole road trip had been like. They had been making the annual drive up from Bakersfield to see Erik's family in Hood River every summer since Dakota had been a toddler. She had always loved it. This year she

had spent the whole trip texting friends and listening to her iPod. Maybe if Dakota hadn't been such a little jackass for the last two days, Amy would have been more sympathetic.

'Just squat over the bowl,' Amy said.

Dakota bit her lip, leaving a glob of pink lip gloss on her front tooth. 'It's gross,' she said.

'Want me to see if the men's room is any better?' Amy asked.

Dakota's cheeks flushed. 'No way,' she said.

'You said you had to go,' Amy said. In fact, after not going in the restaurant they had stopped at for dinner, Dakota had quickly begun insisting that her bladder was going to burst and that if it did she was going to use it to seek emancipated minor status under California law. Amy didn't even know what the fuck that was, but it seemed serious. So here they were, at a rest stop in the middle of nowhere.

There was a banging at the door. 'What are you guys doing in there?' Erik called. They were twenty minutes from his sister's house. If they didn't get there soon, Amy knew that Erik was going to lose it. He had already been white-knuckling the wheel for the past ten miles. Who was she kidding? She was the one who was going to lose it.

'She doesn't want to use any of the toilets,' Amy called to her husband.

'Then come outside and go behind a tree,' Erik called back.

'Dad!' Dakota said.

Amy pushed open the door to the last stall. It was cleaner

than the rest, or at least less filthy. Toilet paper in the dispenser. No visible human waste. That was a start. 'What about this one?' Amy asked her daughter.

Dakota took a few tentative steps up behind her and peered into the toilet bowl. 'There's something in there,' she said, pointing limply to the pale pink water in the bowl.

Amy didn't have time to explain to her daughter the effect of beets on pee. 'Just flush it,' Amy said. She turned and walked over to the row of white sinks and waited. She heard the toilet flush and felt a little bit of the tension bleed from her shoulders. They would be on the road soon. Erik's sister would have wine waiting. Erik's sister always had wine waiting.

'Mom?' Amy heard her daughter ask.

*What now?*

Amy turned and saw her daughter standing in the stall, the metal door swung open. Dakota's face was white, blank, her hands balled into fists. The toilet was overflowing, water spilling over the lid onto the floor, forming a puddle that seemed to almost have a tide. Only there was something in the water. It swirled with veins of red. It looked almost menstrual. And for a second Amy thought, *Did Dakota get her period?*

The bloody water streaked down along the outside of the white toilet bowl, onto the floor, under Dakota's sneakers, and towards where Amy stood frozen. There was something in the toilet, something that had bobbed to the surface and now sat at rim level. A piece of something raw. Flesh. Like some maniac had skinned and drowned a rat. It sat on the

edge of the bowl for a moment and then slopped onto the floor and slid forward, skimming Dakota's sneaker and disappearing under the next stall.

Dakota shrieked and scrambled forward out of the stall into Amy's arms, not even looking back when her iPod slipped from her hands and landed at the base of the toilet with a deadening splash.

Amy forced herself to swallow the warm saliva that rose in her throat, marshalling her will not to gag. It wasn't a rat. It was definitely not a rat.

'Mom?' Dakota said.

'Yes?' Amy whispered. The iPod was still playing. Amy could hear some tinny pop song coming out of the half-submerged white earbuds. Then, just like that, it stopped.

'I don't have to go to the bathroom any more,' Dakota said.

# 2

**Detective Henry Sobol** lifted the evidence bag out of the rest-stop bathroom sink. The contents, four fistfuls of severed flesh, three of which had been plunged from the toilet, glistened under the clear plastic. It was heavier than it looked – dark, almost purple – and the large medallions of flesh were frayed, like they had been cut with a serrated blade. Blood and toilet water formed a triangle of pink juice at the corner of the bag. It didn't have the sanitized look of the clean, plump, pink meat under cling film at the supermarket; something had been killed for this. Or someone had tried to make a kebab out of roadkill.

'Tell me again where you found this?' Henry said.

The state cop who'd called him stood next to Henry with his 'Smokey Bear' hat in his hands. The bathroom's fluorescent lights gave his skin a pale green sheen. 'The john,' the state trooper said, tilting his head towards an open stall. 'Got a nine-one-one call. Family reported some blood in the bathroom. I responded.' He shrugged. 'Plunged it. That came up.' Maybe it wasn't the lighting, Henry thought.

Maybe the trooper was green because he was sick to his stomach. The trooper swallowed hard. 'Medical examiner thinks it's a spleen.'

The Hood River County medical examiner stared at Henry, nodding slightly. He was wearing a DaKine T-shirt and cargo shorts, and had the weathered skin that everyone in Hood River seemed to have, thick from snowboarding and windsurfing and whatever the hell else they did out here.

Henry scratched the top of his shaved head with his free hand. 'It doesn't look like a spleen to me,' he said.

Claire Masland appeared next to him, her gold badge on a lanyard around her neck. Two hours ago they had been at his apartment. She'd had fewer clothes on then.

The ME lifted his hands to his hips. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Let me clarify.' He made a chopping motion with one hand. 'It's a spleen that's been cut up. And jammed in a toilet.'

Henry laid the gory package back into the sink.

This is what it had been like over the past two months, since the Beauty Killer, Gretchen Lowell, had escaped. The Beauty Killer Task Force worked around the clock, tracking down tips. It had taken them ten years to catch her the first time. This time they knew what she looked like. The task force had doubled. And still Henry wasn't sure they'd ever catch her. They wasted too much time following false leads. A suicide in the river. A drive-by in North Portland. It didn't matter what it was, people thought that Gretchen Lowell was behind it.

Henry knew it was hysteria. Gretchen didn't have a victim profile. She'd claimed to have killed two hundred people.

They'd convicted her of killing twenty-six, adding another twenty to the list once she was in jail. Men, women, black, white, it didn't matter. Gretchen was an equal-opportunity serial killer. But she was also a megalomaniac, and she always left a signature.

Claire wandered away. Henry was already thinking about getting home. *Co-ed Confidential* was on Cinemax at eleven and Claire had said she'd watch it with him. He cleared his throat. 'Some kids probably bought an organ at a butcher shop,' he said. 'Thought they'd scare the crap out of someone.'

'Maybe,' the ME said. 'Can't tell until I get it back to the lab. But the size looks right to be human.'

The state cop gripped his hat a little tighter. 'We figured we should call you guys,' he said.

Gretchen had removed some of her victims' spleens. Both pre- and post-mortem. But she left bodies in her wake, not organs. 'It's not Gretchen Lowell,' Henry said. It wasn't right. No body. No signature. 'It's not her style.'

'Henry,' Claire said. 'Look at this.'

Henry turned towards Claire. She was facing the opposite wall, past the stalls. There was seepage where the toilet had flooded onto the concrete floor and Henry had to navigate around it, his attention shifting between his new black cowboy boots and the reflection of his large frame in the puddle. When he got to Claire, he looked up.

The graffiti was recent. Other pencilled and scratched musings had been marked over by the thick, neat red lines. The same shape, rendered over and over again. The hairs on

the back of Henry's neck stood up, his shoulders tightened. 'Fuck,' he said.

'We need to tell Archie,' Claire said softly.

'Archie Sheridan?' the state cop asked. He stepped forward, his black boots slapping through the puddle.

Archie had run the task force that had hunted Gretchen. It had made him the most famous cop in the state. For better or worse.

'I heard he was getting inpatient treatment,' the ME said from the sink.

Inpatient treatment, Henry thought. That was a nice euphemism for it. 'Officially he's a citizen until he gets his psych clearance,' Henry said.

'You have to call him,' Claire said again.

Henry looked back up at the wall. Hundreds of tiny hearts, executed perfectly with what looked to be a red permanent marker. They covered everything, obliterated everything. The heart was Gretchen's signature. She carved it on all of her victims. She'd carved it on Archie.

And now she was back.

# 3

**It was long past** visiting hours at the Providence Medical Centre psych ward. Henry rode the back elevator up to a small waiting room with a locked door, a telephone, two chairs, and a table with a sign-in sheet and a stack of Al-Anon brochures. He didn't sign the sign-in sheet. No one ever did.

He picked up the phone. It automatically connected to the nurse's station inside and in a moment a female voice picked up.

'Can I help you?' the voice said. She didn't sound like she meant it.

'I need to see Archie Sheridan,' Henry said. He didn't recognize her voice. He didn't know the night-shift nurses. 'My name's Henry Sobol. It's police business.'

There was an extended pause. 'Hold on,' the voice said.

After a few minutes the door buzzed and then popped open, revealing a tired-looking woman in scrubs and a Peruvian cardigan. 'I'm only letting you in because he said he'd see you,' she said with a tight-lipped smile.

'I know the way,' Henry said. 'I'm here three times a week.'

'I'll walk you anyway,' the nurse said.

There were no TVs in the rooms, but Henry could hear the Animal Planet channel blasting from the break room. Animal Planet was always on in the break room. Henry didn't know why.

The place had been shocking at first. Fluorescent lights, tile linoleum floors, patients in green scrubs. Everywhere you looked were reminders of suicide – the patients wore socks so they couldn't hang themselves with their shoelaces, the garbage bags were paper so patients couldn't pull the plastic ones over their heads, the utensils were plastic so patients couldn't stab themselves in their jugulars, the mirrors in the rooms were metal sheets so patients couldn't use the shards to fillet their wrists; there were no outlets in the rooms that could be used for electrocution, no electrical cords that could be used for nooses.

Archie had now had two run-ins with Gretchen Lowell, each of which had left him near death. He was addicted to painkillers. She'd done a number on his psyche. Henry, more than anyone, knew he needed rehab, knew he needed a mountain of analysis. But what he hadn't expected was that once Archie got in, he wouldn't want to get out.

The night nurse followed Henry into Archie's room.

Archie's room-mate was asleep, snoring loudly, that particular kind of wet, choking apnea that was a product of being overweight and heavily sedated. It was the kind of

thing that would drive you crazy, if you weren't already crazy to begin with.

The caged sconce over Archie's bed was on and he was sitting up, on top of the white sheets, the wafer-thin pillow folded behind his curly brown hair, a thick biography open on his lap. He had graduated from scrubs the month before, and now got to wear his own clothes, a sweatshirt and corduroys, slippers instead of socks. He'd lost weight and from a distance he looked like the man Henry had met fifteen years before, good-looking, healthy. Whole.

Up close, the furrows on Archie's forehead and worry lines around his eyes told a different story.

Archie's dark eyes fixed on Henry, and Henry felt a strange unease. Archie's affect had changed. Henry didn't know if it was the meds they had him on, or the fact that he'd been high on painkillers for two years and now he wasn't. It was like he had grown older, stiller. Sometimes Henry couldn't believe he was only forty.

'What's happened?' Archie asked.

Henry shot a look up at the camera mounted in the top corner of the room. It still made him feel strange, being monitored like a prisoner. He pulled up the guest chair on Archie's side of the room – light plastic, so you couldn't hurt someone if you threw it – and sat.

'Can I have a minute?' Henry asked the nurse.

'Don't wake Frank,' she said, and stepped out of the room. Henry looked at Frank. A sheen of saliva collected at the corner of Frank's mouth.

Henry swung his head back to Archie.

'There's a crime scene,' Henry said. He reached into the front pocket of his black jeans and pulled out a pack of gum. 'They found a spleen at a rest stop east on eighty-four. There are hearts drawn on the wall. I need you to come take a look.'

Archie didn't react at all; he just sat looking at Henry, not moving, not blinking, not saying anything. Frank made a gurgling sound like a dying chicken. A tiny light blinked red on the surveillance camera. Henry slid a piece of gum from the pack and unwrapped it and put it in his mouth. It was liquorice-flavoured, warm and soft from being in his pocket. He held out the pack to Archie.

Archie said, 'It's not her.'

Henry folded the gum back in his hand and repocketed it. He would never understand Gretchen's pull on Archie. He knew about Stockholm syndrome. He'd read half a dozen books on it since Archie's captivity. He understood his friend's obsession. They'd hunted her for a decade, living and breathing her, working her crime scenes. Only to discover that she was right under their noses posing as a psychiatrist consulting on the case. It had been hard on all of them—hardest on Archie. 'What if it is?' Henry said.

'She said she would stop killing,' Archie said. The corner of his mouth twisted. 'She promised me.'

'Maybe she had her fingers crossed,' Henry said.

Archie's eyes fell back to his book, and then he slowly closed it and set it on the table next to his bed. He lifted his chin. 'You still there?' he said in a loud voice.

There was a split-second pause and then the night nurse appeared in the doorway.

'They never go far,' Archie told Henry with a faint smile. His eyes flicked to the nurse. 'I'll need to get a day pass,' he said. And then, almost as an afterthought, 'And shoes.'

'He's needed at a crime scene,' Henry said.

'You don't have to convince her,' Archie said. 'I've been here two months. They want me out of here. Thing is, they can't make me leave the ward until I tell them I won't kill myself. And I've got excellent health insurance.'

'A pass shouldn't be a problem, Mr Sheridan,' the night nurse said.

'*Detective* Sheridan,' Henry said. The night nurse looked at him, an eyebrow raised. 'It's "Detective",' Henry said. 'Not "Mister".'