



Carolyn Fern

The Psychologist

AFTER A LONG MORNING CRAMMED full of new patient evaluations and all the documentation that came with them, Carolyn Fern finally took a break for a sandwich around one-thirty. Her legs had cramped after sitting so long in her office chair. A stretch would do her good, but she would keep it brief. Those patient notes wouldn't complete themselves, and she liked to record her observations while they were still fresh in her mind.

The waiting room was quiet save the clacking of a typewriter. Enid Phillips, her new secretary, had a real knack for deciphering Carolyn's notes. Her handwriting was usually quite nice, but in sessions she rarely had enough time to write things properly. But Enid never had a problem interpreting those hurried scribbles. Hopefully she would work out in the long-term. So far, Carolyn had not had terrific luck with secretaries.

The plump, motherly secretary paused her rapid typing to fix Carolyn with a stern look.

"Doc, you really need to come up for air more often," she said. "Have you even had lunch yet?"

"I lost track of time," Carolyn admitted. "I just need some coffee to wash it down."

"Allow me."

Enid took the mug and bustled out the door, turning toward the kitchenette at the end of the hallway. By the time Carolyn had finished half her sandwich, Enid was back with a steaming cup of coffee, prepared with cream and sugar just the way Carolyn liked it. She accepted the drink with a grateful smile.

"You're the best," she said.

"Honestly, you young people have your priorities all wrong. Just work, work, work, all day long. Do you even sleep?"

Carolyn yawned, the mere mention of sleep reminding her of the constant fatigue that permeated her down to the marrow. Enid was right – she didn't sleep, but that had nothing to do with her work habits. If anything, they sometimes helped chase away the dreams. The Dreamlands haunted her these days, even when she wasn't walking their twisting paths.

"I enjoy my job," she said, sipping her coffee.

"And you're good at it too, even I can see that. But when was the last time you went out for a night on the town with somebody special?"

Carolyn sighed. She was used to being asked such things by impertinent busybodies, but she'd hoped that Enid would know better. After all, they were both capable businesswomen, and what was so wrong with that?

"I don't need a man to be happy," she said quietly.

"Oh, honey, I'm not talking about needing a man," replied Enid. "I'm talking about having a *life*. You know what they say about all work and no play. Heck, you've said it yourself. I've read your notes. You're constantly telling folks to get out there and make healthy relationships. It's good advice; maybe you should take it."

Carolyn hesitated. Perhaps she was a little lonely, but nightlife and parties didn't appeal to her. She wanted intellectual stimulation, and that wasn't easy to come by. In her experience, most people spent time trying not to think at all. But Enid was right. She ought to do *something*.

"Perhaps you're right," she said. "There's a Historical Society meeting this evening. I read about it in the *Advertiser*; they're having a speaker on all the new construction in town and opportunities to preserve historical buildings and records. I thought it sounded interesting; maybe I'll stop by."

"Is there?" Enid perked up. "I've still got a sinkhole in my backyard. I'm of half a mind to come and demand it gets filled before somebody falls in." She hesitated. "Would you mind if I tagged along?"

Carolyn brightened. She'd never spent time with Enid outside the office, but maybe this was just what she needed – an evening out with a new friend. She liked the secretary's no-nonsense demeanor. Even if the meeting was a bust, it would be time well-spent.

"That sounds lovely," she said. "Perhaps we could get a bite to eat while we're out."



THE AFTERNOON FLEW PAST, AND THE next time Carolyn looked up at the clock, it was already four-thirty. Just enough time to finish her notes on Diana Stanley's most recent session. The poor girl's delusions remained persistent despite multiple sessions of hypnotherapy. As Carolyn leaned back in her chair to organize her thoughts on the matter, a gentle rap on the door drew her attention, and Enid stuck her head in.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, "but Sheriff Engle is here, and he says it's urgent."

Carolyn frowned. She'd done plenty of consulting for the police department, but the sheriff had never come to her office before. She put the Stanley folder in her desk drawer and nodded.

"Thank you, Enid," she said. "Show him in."

Sheriff Engle normally projected the sort of confidence one might expect from a small town sheriff, but today, the tall man looked rattled. His lips were bloodless, his eyes narrow with tension. He controlled himself well under pressure, but Carolyn had made a profession out of reading people. She could spot the telltale signs of panic within seconds.

She gestured to the comfortable chair opposite hers, her expression open and inviting.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"No." His voice came out hoarse. "No, thank you."

"That will be all then, Enid." As the door clicked shut, Carolyn continued, "What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"I have a new consultation for you. It's..."

He trailed off, his throat working to produce words that refused to come out. Interesting. Arkham might be a small town, but it had seen more than its fair share of tragedy, especially in recent months. She'd known Engle to be unflappable in a crisis. She'd heard rumors that he'd sandbagged the police station himself during the floods, defying the wall of water through sheer force of will, although she couldn't substantiate that. The truth of the story didn't matter anyway, except to put his obvious anxiety into perspective. There must be something special about this consult; perhaps some link to a traumatic event in his past.

"Why don't we start with the facts?" she suggested, picking up a pen and preparing to jot some notes.

"White male, no identification, approximately 5'10", 130 pounds. Hasn't said a word since my boys picked him up in the Orne Library. It's all closed up for construction; no one's supposed to be in there. He was..." Engle swallowed, his throat clicking. "Well, he had a bowl of fingers."

The scratching of her pen paused, and she lifted a brow at him.

"Fingers?" she prompted, hoping she'd misheard him.

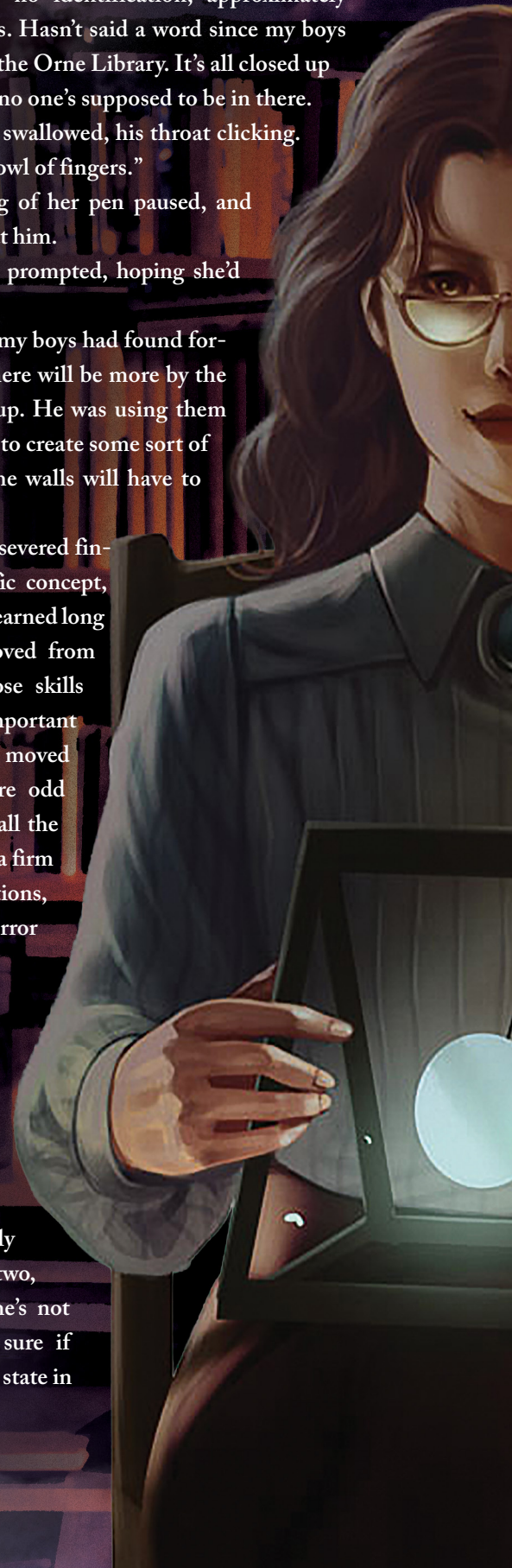
"When I left, my boys had found forty-six. I'm sure there will be more by the time they finish up. He was using them like paintbrushes to create some sort of bizarre mural. The walls will have to be painted over."

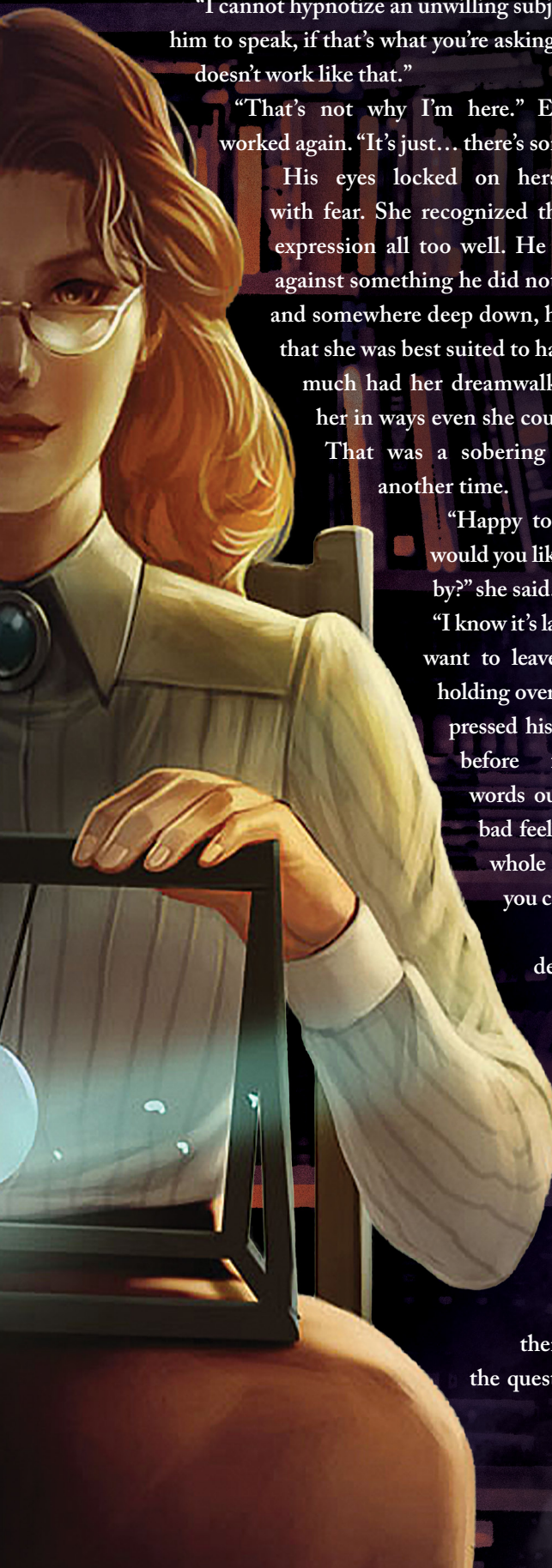
A bowl full of severed fingers was a horrific concept, but Carolyn had learned long ago to stay removed from such things. Those skills were even more important ever since she'd moved to Arkham, where odd things happened all the time. So she kept a firm hold on her emotions, setting her horror aside for later.

"Do you know where they came from?" she asked.

"The fingers?"

"The fellow is missing his pinkies, but obviously that only accounts for two, and like I said, he's not talking. I'm not sure if we should call the state in





or send him straight to St. Mary's or lock him up and throw away the key. I'd like your take on it."

"I cannot hypnotize an unwilling subject or compel him to speak, if that's what you're asking. I'm afraid it doesn't work like that."

"That's not why I'm here." Engle's throat worked again. "It's just... there's something..."

His eyes locked on hers, brimming with fear. She recognized that unhinged expression all too well. He had brushed against something he did not understand, and somewhere deep down, he had sensed that she was best suited to handle it. How

much had her dreamwalking changed her in ways even she could not sense?

That was a sobering thought for another time.

"Happy to help. When would you like me to come by?" she said.

"I know it's late, but I don't want to leave this guy in holding overnight." Engle pressed his lips together before forcing the words out. "I've got a bad feeling about the whole thing. Can you come now?"

It would derail her evening plans,

but she couldn't turn him down.

The obsession with fingers was fascinating, and then there was the question of where

the painter had gotten them. Was he a simple grave robber, or had they stumbled onto something worse?

"Let me get my coat," she said.



AT THE STATION, SHERIFF ENGLE escorted Carolyn to an interrogation room, stopping at the door. He'd put his gruff mask back on, but he couldn't fool her. His stiff gait and tight shoulders betrayed his continued tension.

"He's cuffed to the table," he said. "But do me a favor and stay out of reach. Keep your pen on you at all times; don't leave it on the table. You got anything in your pockets?"

She checked them and came up empty.

"Good. I'll be right outside."

As she reached for the doorknob, she found herself quite curious. The sheriff wasn't usually so cautious, and while the concept of actual finger painting was gruesome, Engle's reaction struck her as overblown. It would be interesting to see if her evaluation matched his.

The small room held only a single table and a pair of metal chairs, all bolted to the floor. In the chair facing the door sat a man in paint-blotched coveralls. He was tall and painfully thin, with cheekbones that looked like they could cut glass. Greasy, unwashed hair stuck out over his ears, badly in need of a cut. His nails were unkempt and jagged, their edges crusted with grime and paint. The stumps of his missing pinkies had healed, but the flesh remained red and swollen. He stared blankly at the table as she sat opposite him.

"My name is Dr Fern," she said pleasantly. "I'd like to ask you some questions about your art."

That got a reaction. The man's empty eyes flicked to her face, although he did not move otherwise. But he'd heard her. She could use that.

"I'm no artist, although I love the greats. I think Renoir is my personal favorite," she continued. "Less stuffy than the other Impressionists."

The painter remained silent as she chatted about paintings, pausing occasionally for a reply and then continuing on as if he'd given one. But he was listening, his eyes fixed on her mouth. It was time to push him and see what happened.

"Of course, you've elevated the art form with your choice of brushes," she observed.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Where did you get the fingers?" she prodded.

Instead of answering, he moved like a striking snake, grabbing her wrist before she could pull out of range of the cuffs. She'd gotten too careless, strayed too close. She let out a startled squeak, her heart hammering. His grip squeezed her, the bones grinding together painfully as his eyes locked onto hers.

"Poor Carolyn Fern," he said, his voice surprisingly high and child-like. "They haunt you, don't they? All those patients you lost. You wonder if you failed them, if they wait for you in the Dreamlands. Viktor Zhuk. Annaliese Gardner. Mary Therese Lisbon. Rudolph Lazarus. Little Gretchen Phillips."

Every name hit her like a bullet. The painter was right; she dreamed of them every night, the patients she'd failed, the ones she'd lost. But how did he know? Fear gripped her spine with clammy hands, sending chills down her back.

"But don't worry. His hand is upon you, and soon nothing else will matter. Those ghosts will trouble you no more," continued the painter, lips curling in a disturbing grin.

"Let me go!" she demanded, recoiling.

He released her suddenly, and she nearly fell off the chair. But he didn't even seem to notice. He'd returned to his semi-catatonic state, staring blankly at the table. If not for the red marks on her wrist and the thumping of her pulse, she would have thought she'd imagined it.

"Whose hand?" she asked. "Whose hand is upon me? Where did those fingers come from? Are they his?"

He didn't even blink. She tried all of his triggers, but he gave no sign of listening to her questions about paintings and fingers. The familiar comfort of psychiatric evaluation helped her to regain her composure, but eventually she had no choice but to give up. She would get no further information out of him today.

The sheriff waited for her in the hallway, leaning

against the wall with studied casualness. He jerked upright as she closed the door behind her.

"So?" he demanded. "There's something off about him, isn't there?"

She wasn't about to admit what the man had said to her. She didn't think she could without betraying how much it had rattled her. So she simply nodded.

"I'd like to have him transferred to St. Mary's for further evaluation," she said. "But I can't promise any useful information that will lead to the identification of those fingers."

His lips pressed into a grim line.

"Yes, well, I'm used to that," he muttered. "When you work here long enough, you will be too."

As much as she wanted to argue with that, she had to admit that deep down, she knew he was right.



