

they realized they would not live to see sixteen; she had a fondness for bizarre practical jokes that involved dog manure pressed between sandwich bread; and it was widely rumored that she was behind the explosion of pipes in the girls' bathroom at Zephyr Elementary last November, when every toilet was clogged with notebook paper.

She was, in a word, weird.

And now her royal weirdness was staring at me.

A slow smile spread across her crooked mouth. I couldn't look away from those piercing black eyes, and I thought *She's got me*. The thing about adults is, when you want them to pay attention to you and intervene, their minds are worlds away; when you want them to be worlds away, they're sitting on the back of your neck. I wanted my dad or mom or anybody to tell Brenda Sutley to turn around and listen to Reverend Lovoy, but of course it was as if the Demon had willed herself to be invisible. No one could see her but me, her victim of the moment.

Her right hand rose up like the head of a small white snake with dirty fangs. Slowly, with evil grace, she extended the index finger and aimed it toward one of her gaping nose holes. The finger winnowed deep into that nostril, and I thought she was going to keep pushing it in until her whole finger was gone. Then the finger was withdrawn, and on the tip of it was a glistening green mass as big as a corn kernel.

Her black eyes were unblinking. Her mouth began to open.

*No, I begged her, mind to mind. No, please don't do it!*

The Demon slid her green-capped finger toward her wet pink tongue.

I could do nothing but stare as my stomach drew up into a hard little knot.

Green against pink. Dirty fingernail. A sticky strand, hanging down.

The Demon licked her finger, where the green thing had been. I think I must've squirmed violently, because Dad gripped my knee and whispered, "Pay attention!" but of course he never saw the invisible Demon or her act of prickly torment. The Demon smiled at me, her black eyes sated, and then she turned her head away and the ordeal was over. Her mother lifted up a hand with hairy knuckles and stroked the Demon's fiery locks as if she were the sweetest little girl who ever drew God's breath.

Reverend Lovoy asked everyone to pray. I lowered my head and squeezed my eyes shut.

And about five seconds into the prayer, something thumped hard against the back of my skull.

I looked around.

Horror choked me. Sitting directly behind me, their pewter-colored eyes the hue of sharpened blades, were Gotha and Gordo Branlin. On either side of them, their parents were deep in prayer. I imagined they prayed for deliverance from their brood. Both Branlin boys wore dark blue suits, white shirts, and their ties were similar except Gotha's had black stripes on

white and Gordo's had red. Gotha, the oldest by one year, had the whitest hair; Gordo's was a little on the yellow side. Their faces looked like mean carvings in brown rock, and even their bones—lower jaws jutting forward, cheekbones about to tear through flesh, foreheads like slabs of granite—suggested coiled rage. In the fleeting seconds that I dared to look upon those cunning visages, Gordo thrust an upraised middle finger in my face and Gotha loaded a straw with another hard black-eyed pea.

"Cory, turn around!" my mother whispered, and she tugged at me. "Close your eyes and pray!"

I did. The second pea bounced off the back of my head. Those things could sting the whine out of you. All during the rest of that prayer, I could hear the Branlins back there, whispering and giggling like evil trolls. My head was their target for the day.

After the prayer was over, we sang another hymn. Announcements were made, and visitors welcomed. The offering plate was passed around. I put in the dollar Dad had given me for this purpose. The choir sang, with the Glasses playing piano and organ. Behind me, the Branlins giggled. Then Reverend Lovoy stood up again to deliver his Easter sermon, and that was when the wasp landed on my hand.

My hand was resting on my knee. I didn't move it, even as fear shot up my spine like a lightning bolt. The wasp wedged itself between my first and second fingers and sat there, its blue-black stinger twitching.

Now let me say a few things about wasps.

They are not like bees. Bees are fat and happy and they float around from flower to flower without a care for human flesh. Yellowjackets are curious and have mood swings, but they, too, are usually predictable and can be avoided. A wasp, however, particularly the dark, slim kind of wasp that looks like a dagger with a head on it, was born to plunge that stinger into mortal epidermis and draw forth a scream like a connoisseur uncorking a vintage wine. Brushing your head against a wasps' nest can result in a sensation akin to, as I have heard, being peppered with shotgun pellets. I have seen the face of a boy who was stung on the lips and eyelids when he explored an old house in the middle of summer; such a swollen torture I wouldn't even wish on the Branlins. Wasps are insane; they have no rhyme or reason to their stings. They would sting you to the marrow of your bones if they could drive their stingers in that deeply. They are full of rage, like the Branlins. If the devil indeed ever had a familiar, it was not a black cat or monkey or leather-skinned lizard; it was, and always will be, the wasp.

A third pea got me in the back of the head. It hurt a lot. But I stared at the wasp wedged between my first and second fingers, my heart beating hard, my skin crawling. Something flew past my face, and I looked up to watch a second wasp circle the Demon's head and land on her crown. The Demon must've felt a tickle. She reached back and flicked the wasp off without