

ABSOLUTELY CORRUPTED

by

DAMOND FUDGE

The sky over Miller's Junction was heavy with post-sunset black and purple clouds. The wind seemed louder than it should be for how light it felt, carrying with it a moisture that was barely perceptible despite how desperately it clung to skin. The breeze rattled the trees, with their late September leaves that had almost turned color but hadn't quite given up on life.

Martin walked slowly down the middle of Main Street, dazed and slightly weaving as he marveled at the destruction around him. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, let alone that only one person was responsible. Even after witnessing today's events, his brain still refused to commit to the reality of it all. The cut on his head had stopped bleeding and he could feel the blood beginning to pull at the skin near his left eye as it dried. Glass crunched with every step of his Converse. The closer he got to the heart of town the shards became greater in number...as well as larger in size.

He stopped when he reached the intersection of Main and Founder's Drive. He reached up and gingerly touched his wound. For a brief moment Martin felt lucky it was all he walked away with, before his heart dropped into his gut as he thought about everyone else. Any strength he had left in his legs abandoned him, and he sank to the ground. Sitting there, he was shocked at how noisy the silence was. It felt like he could hear every little sound the town made. The methodic click click of the traffic lights above him. A distant, rhythmic ping as a hook occasionally connected with its flagpole. The lonely tumbleweed rustle of papers as they skirted along the pavement.

Martin gazed up at the rolling clouds. He hadn't paid a lot of attention during science class, but he was pretty sure they shouldn't be moving in several directions at one time. He knew, or at least figured he knew, exactly why they were acting this way.

The day started out like any old Thursday. The halls at the high school were filling up as the kids arrived and loitered in their usual groups. Martin had just gotten there and was emptying his backpack into his locker. His best friend, Gary, was leaning against the lockers, talking about his second favorite subject: Cars. Namely, the 1973 AMC Hornet hatchback he inherited when his grandfather passed last year. It was a heap when Gary got it, so bad his family had to have it towed on a flatbed the four blocks to their house. He had been working his ass off as assistant manager at the Freezie King in order to fix the car up, and it was well on its way to looking brand new.

"I found a guy online who has a refurber radiator I can have for only two fifty," Gary exclaimed, his excited gestures causing his backpack straps to slip halfway down his arms. He hiked the bag back into position before continuing. "Two fifty! Can you believe it?"

Not knowing cars as well as Gary, Martin tried to sound knowledgeably sincere when he replied, "No. That's awesome."

Gary saw right through this and smiled. "Nice try. Trust me, that's an incredible price. I haven't been able to find one within a hundred miles for less than four. I just have to go out to his lot in Haverbrook to get it. Figure I'll poke around while I'm there, see what else I can find. Feel like a road trip Saturday?"

"Always."

That was when Martin saw Kevin.

While Marin had nothing against him, Kevin was definitely the class Bully Target. It wasn't just limited to their class, either. When bullies from other classes got bored with their prey, they gravitated to Kevin. He didn't outwardly provoke the attention: He dressed pretty good, wasn't overly nerdy and even did all right when it came to sports. This treatment was just something that had apparently been ingrained since elementary school. Martin had only been in town since seventh grade, so he'd never been entirely certain what started it all. He even liked Kevin, when he wasn't getting all down on himself for letting people walk all over him.

But Kevin looked different today.

There was something about his whole body. His posture. His gait. His expression. It all felt to Martin like something had changed in Kevin's whole attitude. "Morning, Kevin," he called.

Without slowing or making eye contact, he replied, "Hey, Martin."

Martin and Gary exchanged a quizzical look. "You OK," Gary asked.

"Yeah. Fine." Kevin still didn't turn around. He just made a beeline to his locker.

Martin was a little concerned. He didn't know what he was feeling, but he knew something about the last half minute made him uncomfortable. Gary broke Martin's trance by slapping him on the arm and saying, "C'mon, Man. I want to grab a Red Bull before first period."

"Cool," he said absently. The duo started down the hall toward the Student Center.

They hadn't taken more than ten steps when they heard the voice of Jake call out, "Hey, Kevin!"

Martin stopped and turned to see Jake and his ponytailed toady, Fowler, approaching Kevin. Gary sighed heavily, "Aww, Dude. Stay out of it. It's not worth getting beat up, too."

Martin stood and watched. Jake was the epitome of old money. His family had been in some sort of power since the founding of Miller's Junction, with his dad currently serving his third term as mayor. Fowler was the epitome of the guy who would've grown up to become an abusive trailer park husband had he not hooked in with someone like Jake.

Jake stood directly behind Kevin, but spoke at a volume one would use across a crowded auditorium during a rock concert. "How many fucking times have I told you not to block my locker when I need to use it?"

Kevin just kept unloading his backpack into his locker, ignoring Jake.

"Didn't you hear me, Dickmunch? I said get out of my way."

Fowler laughed, "Dickmunch."

"You like that one? Came up with it last night." The bullies fist bumped.

Kevin continued to ignore them.

"Hey! You go deaf, or something?" Jake reached out and grabbed Kevin's shoulder. "I'm talking to you, Retard."

Martin decided he should step in to help.

Before he could make a move, Kevin grabbed Jake's wrist and squeezed. The pain was instantly visible on Jake's face. Kevin kept hold as he slowly turned around to confront his bully. He was eerily stone faced, made even scarier by his silence. In what looked like one smooth move, Kevin twisted Jake's arm. The bones in the lower part twisted and snapped, tearing through the skin and completely separating in a hot spray of blood.

Jake's screams were rivaled only by the ones coming from the surrounding students. Several had already started running for the exits, while others, like Martin and Gary, were frozen with either fear or disbelief.

Fowler stepped forward with his arm cocked to deliver a jaw-shattering punch. Kevin easily slapped the fist away and he grabbed Fowler's ponytail, violently yanking his head back. The ponytail and a large portion of Fowler's scalp ripped away from the back of his skull. Kevin took the clump of bloody hair and stuffed it into the screeching maw of Jake's toady. Kevin's new strength kept his fist going deeper into the mouth, ripping Fowler's cheeks open as his jaw broke.

Those students still not running for cover had now taken out their cell phones to dial 911, Gary included. Kevin cocked his head as if he could hear everyone simultaneously dialing. Fingers of electricity reached out from the light fixtures and wall outlets, striking every visible phone, causing them to explode. Greater and louder screams came from every victim with a mutilated hand. Or worse. Gary slumped to the floor, his brains seeping from the smoking hole in the side of his skull where his cell phone had been seconds earlier.

Martin was almost speechless. Somehow, though, he managed to call out, "Kevin!"

Kevin turned his head and glared at Martin. His eyes crackled with green energy. Martin unconsciously took a step backward. Kevin turned and slowly walked in the opposite direction, blood dripping from his clenched fists.

Martin didn't have a car of his own. Living only two blocks from the school made it unnecessary during the day, and he could borrow his godmother's at night. So, because of this, Martin was running the fastest he had ever run in his life, trying to get to Annie's Women's Wear downtown. He was moving so fast that he had to use the shop's door handle to help curb his

forward momentum. He whipped the door open, practically pulling it off its hinges, and clamored into the tiny store.

It may have had a longer name officially, but most of the locals just called it "Annie's," after Martin's godmother, the shop's owner. He had come to live with her after his parents died in a multi-vehicle pileup one icy February evening. Annie had just opened for the day's business when the cacophonous dervish that was her godson interrupted the peace and quiet.

"Martin? Why aren't you in school?"

Martin stumbled forward, steadying himself on the counter. "Kevin...killing...Gary's dead..."

"Kevin? From-your-school Kevin? He killed Gary? When?"

"Just now...at...school."

Annie grabbed the phone. "We need to call the police."

As she was dialing 911, Martin shook his head. "No, we need to...get out of here. Something is...wrong with Kevin."

"Damn right, if he's killing people." The phone buzzed its busy signal at her. "Busy? How is 911 busy?"

"That's what I'm trying to...say. There's something different about Kevin. He's got super strength and controls elec...electricity. He's become..." He took a deep, composing breath, "...evil. We need to get out of town." Annie grabbed her purse and they rushed to her car.

As she peeled away from the curb, Annie said, "We should go home, get some things to..."

"No! We need to leave!"

Annie had never heard Martin so scared. "OK, OK. We'll get what we need on the road." Martin slumped back into the seat and let his eyes close. Annie took his hand, reassuringly. "It'll be all right. I promise."

Martin opened his eyes and looked down at their hands. He smiled. She was right. They'd get out of town and everything would be...

SCREEEECH!!!!

Annie slammed on the brakes. Martin looked out the windshield to see Kevin standing in the middle of the road. The green light he saw in Kevin's eyes before now danced under the boy's skin. It even sparked between his fingers as he slowly flexed them. Kevin stared them down like a bull sizing up a matador.

Annie quickly shifted into reverse.

Kevin waved his hand.

A fire hydrant dislodged from the ground, shooting across the street faster than Annie's brain could tell her foot to press the gas. The hydrant smashed into the driver's side of their car, flipping it onto the passenger's side before it finally rolled onto its roof. Martin had instinctively closed his eyes and covered his head with his arms when the hydrant hit. When the car stopped moving, he looked at his godmother. Her body was in an odd position, pinned between the

crushed door and her seatbelt. Her eyes were wide open, staring at nothing specific, and there was an odd bulge in her neck that Martin knew could only be her spinal cord.

He reached toward her, tears fogging his vision. He made that gesture he thought only people in the movies did, closing her eyelids for her. He blinked away the tears. The second his sight cleared, Kevin appeared in the window behind Annie's head. Martin tried to scramble backward, his hands feverishly working at the seatbelt latch, only to find it jammed. Kevin examined Annie's corpse with a silent curiosity, but without physically touching her. Once satisfied with whatever he wanted, he shot Martin a cursory glance before heading on his way.

Martin continued to struggle with his seatbelt. He thought maybe he could climb out of it, but it was twisted in a way that made it too tight against him. The sounds of screaming, explosions and general chaos began to fill the air, becoming a chilling soundtrack to his escape attempts. He felt a trickle of something roll down his forehead, from above his left eye to his hairline. Martin spied a large shard of glass on the ground, just barely within his reach. While stretching for it, some rapid movement caught his eye, and in what was left of the passenger's side mirror he saw the town's barber, Mr. Potsdam, running down the street toward the car. Seconds later, Mr. Potsdam's head exploded and the rest of his body flailed forward like a rag doll tossed away by an ornery child.

Martin used his fingertips to inch the glass shard closer until he was finally able to get a better grip on it. While he used it to saw through the seatbelt, the sounds of the horror show that was once the idyllic town of Miller's Junction grew in intensity. The more intense the noise, the faster he sawed. When he got it to a point where he could get a good grip on either side of the cut, he pulled and pulled until it tore through and he dropped out of the seat onto the car's roof.

He scrambled out the window and headed straight to the alley between Chan's Chinese Restaurant and the Baby Again second-hand clothing store. He opened the dumpster next to Chan's back exit, climbed in and covered his ears to drown out the overwhelming sounds of his town systematically dying.

The sound of crunching glass drew Martin back to the present. He looked up to see Kevin walking down the street, his clothes and hair a mess of scorch marks and blood. Martin found it difficult to focus on the approaching figure, so he just lowered his head and stared at the ground. When the toes of Kevin's shoes eventually stopped at the edge of his sightline, Martin exhaled and mumbled, "Why?"

"Why? Seriously? You've seen how I've been treated over the years. And trust me, it wasn't any better before you moved here, either."

"But...the whole town?"

"To be perfectly honest, it wasn't all about me. My revenge was just a good place to start..."

Yesterday, Kevin had stopped at the Freezie King after an afternoon of studying. He had realized a long time ago that if he was ever going to have a chance to get away from this dump for good, he needed to get into a great college. Preferably one on the other side of the country. To that end, he spent almost three hours every afternoon at the library, making sure he hung onto his 4.0. He was always open to letting his grade point drop to a 3.8, but no further than that. A

medium Freezie King strawberry shake was his usual reward for a good day's studying, but today he felt so happy that he was going to treat himself to an extra large.

Gary was working the counter, and his attention was drawn to a trio of sophomore girls in the corner booth. He stood up straight when Kevin entered. Gary might like to girl watch, but he could turn on the professionalism when needed. "Hey, Kev. The usual?"

"I'll go with the extra large, today."

"Ooh. Special day, huh? What? Did ya get laid?"

Kevin laughed nervously. "No, just...just a good day of studying."

"OK, Man. To each their own, I always say. One extra large strawberry shake coming up."

Kevin believed there were few things in this world better than a real ice cream shake from Freezie King. Once Miller's Junction was finally in his rear view, it would be the only thing he'd truly miss. As he was paying for that frosty goodness, he saw Jake's car pull into the lot. His plan was to try to slip out the door and around the building before they could see him.

That plan failed.

Jake and Fowler cornered him just outside the door. "Hey, Fucktard," Jake chided, "who said you could come here?"

"It's a free country."

"*It's a free country*," Jake mimicked in a nasally voice that sounded nothing like Kevin. "If it's a free country, then I can do this." He shoved Kevin's shoulder, forcing him into the wall.

"Or this." Strawberry shake splattered against the glass of the door after it was knocked from Kevin's hand. "Or this." Jake hauled off and punched Kevin in the gut, who doubled over and fell to the ground, coughing.

Jake and Fowler laughed and high-fived. "My turn. My turn," Fowler said, between laughs. He backed up some to get more momentum as he pulled his leg back to deliver a hard kick to Kevin. Before he could make good on that promise, the meaty hand of Mr. Trubo, owner of the Freezie King, grabbed Fowler's shirt collar and yanked him backward.

"That's enough, you two," Trubo warned, his deep baritone making every word sound like a threat. "You're both banned for one month."

Jake protested, "What? C'mon!"

"You wanna make it two?" Trubo asked. The bullies shook their heads. "Didn't think so. And, before you leave, you're gonna clean up this mess on my door. Go get the mop from Gary."

The duo grumbled as they entered the shop. Kevin looked up and saw Mr. Trubo holding out his hand to help him off the ground. Once Kevin was back on his feet, all the shop owner said was, "You shouldn't let people get the better of you like that, kid." Then he entered the Freezie King without another look at the disheveled teen.

Kevin took the long way home, cutting through the woods. He picked up a long branch when he entered. It started as a walking stick, but soon became an extension of his arm as he swung it around, accenting his gestures of frustration.

"Fucking Jake and Fowler. Fuck them. I wish they'd just fucking die."

He was too agitated to notice both the fact that he was veering off the path and that tears were rolling down his face.

"You shouldn't let people get the better of you, kid," he said in an almost perfect imitation of Mr. Trubo. "No fucking shit, old man." He smacked the branch against the nearest tree. Tiny pieces of bark sprayed from the stick. Kevin kept walking.

"Why does everybody say that to me? Like I don't know that?! Goddammit! Why don't they do something to stop this shit rather than lecture me?" He turned his face to the sky, calling out to the universe, "Huh? How about that?! Why not help instead?!" He punctuated his words by smacking the branch into a tree, over and over. "Why?! Why?! Why?! Why?! Why?! Why?! WHY?!"

He let out a long primal scream until his throat couldn't take it anymore and the branch finally shattered. He collapsed to his knees, the screaming replaced by uncontrollable sobbing. He curled up into the fetal position and cried until his eyes ran dry.

Kevin laid in the dirt and leaves for ten more minutes, shaking.

When he eventually gained some composure, he slowly maneuvered onto all fours, taking deep breaths before he attempted to stand. Once upright, he noticed the Ol' Wishin' Well was only twenty feet in front of him. He'd stopped here many times over the years, sometimes more than once in a day, holding out hope of hopes that wishes were real. He dug out what change there was in his pocket, chose a particularly shiny and new looking penny and approached the well. He stood at its edge, kissed the coin and whispered into Lincoln's ear, "I wish I was never bullied ever again."

The slight plunk as it hit the water far below was almost comforting in its familiarity.

As he walked away, knowing he was headed back to his wishless reality, a voice behind him said, "I can help you with your problem." Kevin turned around and saw a man dressed in clothing similar to the Puritan garb the town's leaders wear every Founder's Day parade. He was floating up from the bottom of the well, surrounded by a green glow. "If you so desire, Kevin."

The teen couldn't believe what he was seeing or hearing. "Who...who are you? And how do you know my name?"

The man floated forward, the lower half of his body passing right through the rock of the well. He came to rest directly in front of Kevin, who noticed he could see the features of the forest through the man. "I apologize. My name is William Case."

Kevin's eyes went wide. "William the Witch?" he asked, in an almost reverent half-whisper.

Case smiled and said, "I prefer the term warlock, but I have so enjoyed listening to the campfire tales about me, especially how they have changed over the years, becoming taller and taller with every generation." He started floating around as if he was pacing. "That is not the only thing to which I have been listening. I have heard each and every one of your wishes, since you first came to my well almost ten years ago."

"Every wish?"

Case nodded. "Every. Wish."

"And you can grant them?" Case nodded, again. "Then why have you waited this long?"

"I had to be certain that you were at a point where you would accept my help. To be perfectly honest, you are not the first person I have approached over the last two and a half centuries. You are, though, the first one that I am one hundred percent certain will accept my terms."

"There are terms?"

"Of course. Something on a scale such as this requires a little *quid pro quo*."

Kevin thought this over for a minute before deciding that he was too curious not to ask, "What are they?"

"It is very simple. I want revenge on this wretched town and the descendants of those who dared burn me at the stake. That is all I ask of you. If you agree to help me with my revenge, I will give you the power to exact your own."

Martin sat back, placing his hands on the ground behind him for balance as he looked up at Kevin. There was nothing recognizable left in his classmate. "That's it? This is all about William the Witch's revenge?"

"William the *Warlock*," Kevin hissed.

"Right. And he gave you the power to exact his revenge for him?"

"In a way. Yes."

"So...you're just his errand boy?"

Kevin's eyes flared with green electricity. He stopped himself and took a deep, calming breath. "You'd better be careful, Martin. I might reconsider sparing you."

"Why did you?"

"Technically, you aren't a descendant of any of the founding families. But, on a personal note, you were one of the only people who went out of his way to be nice to me, even when you really didn't want to be. No, don't deny it. I wasn't so oblivious I couldn't tell when I was irritating to you. As a thank you for tolerating me, I give you your life."

"Great, even though there's nothing left of it. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"You can follow me. Now that I'm done with Miller's Junction, I plan on spreading out across the country, then the world, becoming more and more powerful until everything is mine." Streams of green energy surged and flowed under his skin and around his extremities. "You should feel the power within me just from taking out this shithole. I can already tell the possibilities for me are endless. And you can have the privilege of being a front row witness to history."

"Really?" Martin responded. He rolled to one side in order to get better leverage and push himself up onto his feet. Once standing, his back was to Kevin. "I'll pass." He swung around, thrusting a large shard of glass directly at Kevin's throat.

Martin's momentum suddenly halted.

An arm, bathed in the same green glow, was protruding from Kevin's shoulder. It appeared to waver between transparent and corporeal, and it had grabbed Martin's wrist. It squeezed until Martin dropped the glass, but kept hold of him.

Kevin's face changed, slightly at first, then the teen's features began to merge with those of another's. The visage of William Case slowly emerged, gradually coming into its own as it pulled free from Kevin, creating an almost of grotesque 3D effect. Once Case's entire head was free of its human casing, it looked at the hand wrapped around Martin's wrist.

The creepiest smile Martin had ever seen slithered across the ghostly image in front of him. He heard the snap before he felt the searing pain. He screamed and collapsed to his knees as the ghost let go of his arm.

William the Warlock continued the process of freeing himself from the physical body he had joined with in order to carry out his mission. He pushed and wriggled his way out of the spell binding them the same way a snake separates from its old skin. Once the last piece of his essence was clear from Kevin, Case stretched his arms toward the sky and arched his back. He held his hand above Martin's head. The young man felt a force attach to the top of his forehead, pushing against it. He tried to resist with everything he had as his head bent back to its limit.

"No!" Kevin screamed. "He's my friend! He's not related to anyone in town."

The sinews in Martin's neck vibrated with strain. Every centimeter of definition on his Adam's apple was visible through the skin.

"Stop it! Please!" Kevin begged.

Case decreased the invisible force he was applying until he could see relief in Martin's face, as the pain subsided. At that exact moment, the warlock sent all of the power he could into Martin. The back of the teen's head met the back of his neck, forcing his spine to sever and rip through his throat.

Kevin screamed in horror. "Why did you have to do that? He was one of the good guys."

Case spun on Kevin, "Good guy? Might I remind you that he was just about to stab you? We cannot allow anyone who opposes us to live. Anyone. It is a weakness, and weaknesses can be exploited by an enemy."

Kevin slowly approached Martin's corpse, watching life drain from its gaping wound. "Still...he was a nice guy. I think we could've convinced him to join us."

Case rolled his eyes in exasperation. He flexed his fingers, testing their solidity. Satisfied that he was free of the need for a host, he flicked his fingers at Kevin. The boy's clothes and skin to flew from his body, fluttering away in the wind like a sheet blown free from its clothesline. His skeleton and organs stayed upright for a good, long moment before falling into a pile at Case's feet.

"Weakness," Case spat at the remains.

William the Warlock took a deep breath, composing himself before he floated down the street, on his way toward destiny.

The End