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JOHN SAUL



DARKNESS

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BANTAM BOOKS

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DARKNESS
A Bantam Book

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DARK SIBLING

The Dark Man reached beneath his cloak, and when his hand was once more revealed to the watching children, it held an ornately carved instrument, its handle worked from ivory, from which protruded a glistening needle.

The Dark Man held the device high, poised over the infant's breast, then began to bring it downward.

The child uttered a scream as the point passed through its skin, then pierced its sternum to sink deep within its chest. Though its body remained unharmed, the baby's spirit began to die, impaled on the tip of the Dark Man's weapon.

As the child's sigh died away, the Dark Man unscrewed the ivory handle, leaving the needle in place.

When he was finished, he held the baby high. "Behold your brother," he said to the gathered children. "Care for him, as I have cared for you."

The ceremony was over.

BANTAM BOOKS

BY JOHN SAUL

THE GOD PROJECT

NATHANIEL

BRAINCHILD

HELLFIRE

THE UNWANTED

THE UNLOVED

CREATURE

SECOND CHILD

SLEEPWALK

DARKNESS

SHADOWS

*For Tina, Brian, and Donna—
With Love*

PROLOGUE

Darkness wrapped around Amelie Coulton like a funeral shroud, and only the sound of her own heartbeat told her that she was still alive.

She shouldn't have come here—she knew that now, knew it with a certainty that filled her soul with dread. She should have stayed at home, stayed alone in the tiny shack that crouched only a few feet above the dark waters of the swamp. There, at least, she would have been safe.

She would have been safe, and so would the baby that now stirred restlessly within her body, his feet kicking her so hard she winced with pain.

But Amelie hadn't stayed at home. Now, huddled silently in the darkness, she could feel danger all around her, danger she knew her baby could feel, too.

Eyes were watching her, but not the eyes she was used to, the eyes of the animals that roamed the swamp at night, searching for food among the reeds and man-

groves, creeping through the darkness, ever vigilant for other creatures even hungrier than themselves.

Amelie was used to those eyes. Ever since she'd been a child, the creatures of the swamp had been her friends, and when she was growing up, she'd loved to sit in the darkness of her mother's house, staring out through the glassless window frame, watching their bright eyes glimmer in the moonlight.

Often she'd wished she could slip out into the night with the possums and raccoons, joining them in their wanderings through the wetlands. But she never had, for always she had known that it wasn't only the animals who hunted the swamp at night.

The children of the Dark Man lurked in the shadows.

Amelie had never been sure who they were, but she'd known they were there, for her mother had told her about them, cautioned her to stay away.

"Dead—that's what they be," her mother had warned her. "An' if'n you git too close, they be takin' you, too, an' givin' you to the Dark Man."

So Amelie had always stayed in at night, never venturing outside, where unspeakable terrors waited in the darkness.

Until tonight, when her husband had silently left the house. She'd asked George where he was going, but he'd said nothing, only staring at her with his flat blue eyes—eyes that sometimes frightened her, sending shivers down her spine the same way it did when someone walked across your grave.

She had waited until he was gone, then turned the lantern down low and slipped down the ladder into her canoe.

Amelie had known how to follow him, for his boat left a stream of ripples over the still waters of the swamp, and her ears had picked up the sound of his squeaking oarlocks above the soft droning of the frogs and insects.

She hadn't known how far she'd gone before she saw the light of a fire in the distance, but when its flickering glow had first pierced the darkness, her instincts made

her turn the canoe toward the shore, to creep silently forward in the deep shadows of the trees that overhung the water's edge.

Other boats had come, and she'd seen the people in them, though they had not seen her.

They were the Dark Man's children, prowling silently in the night.

They hadn't seen her, for as they passed her they'd looked straight ahead, their eyes fixed on the fire that had sent her into the shelter of the trees.

But after they'd passed, and she'd seen their boats pulling up to the shore of the island on which the fire burned, she'd crept forward again, and now she could see them clearly.

They stood in a semicircle around the fire, black silhouettes against an orange glow, unmoving, as if the flames themselves held them in thrall.

She tried to tell herself that she was wrong, that her husband was not standing among this silent group, but then her stomach tightened as she recognized a shock of unkempt hair that hung almost to the shoulders of one of the thin figures.

Hair that she'd promised to cut tomorrow.

No!

It wasn't true. If George Coulton was one of the Dark Man's children, she would have known.

But how?

How would she have known him from any of the other children of the swamp?

The figure at which she stared, transfixed, turned slightly. Orange fire-glow illuminated his face.

His eyes seemed to reach out into the darkness, searching for her as if he knew she were there, concealed just beyond the wavering light.

She shuddered, shrinking low in the boat, holding her breath, afraid her own body might betray her.

The baby, as if sensing her fear, struggled within her, and she lay her hands on her distended belly, stroking the infant until he finally relaxed.

Her eyes remained fastened on the circle of shadows around the fire until another figure appeared out of the darkness, nearly invisible at first as it emerged from the trees and moved across the clearing.

A match was lit, and the figure held it to a candle, and then another and another. The flames of the tapers glowed brightly, and at last the figure turned, and a new wave of terror gripped Amelie.

The Dark Man stood silently in front of an altar ablaze with candles, his tall figure shrouded in black, his face veiled.

At last he spoke, his deep voice carrying clearly across the still waters. "Give me what is mine!"

A man and a woman stepped forward. As the light of the altar candles revealed their faces, Amelie gasped, instantly clamping her hand over her own mouth to prevent any sound from betraying her presence. She knew these two people, had known them all her life.

Quint and Tammy-Jo Millard, who'd gotten married a few months ago. Amelie had been with Tammy-Jo the night before Quint came for her, just the way Tammy-Jo had sat with Amelie the last night before she'd been claimed by George.

And yesterday Tammy-Jo had had her baby. Amelie was with her then, too, going in her canoe to the shack a mile from the one she shared with George, holding Tammy-Jo's hand and mopping her brow with a wet rag while Tammy-Jo screamed with the pain of her labor.

The pain Tammy-Jo endured had scared Amelie, but not half so much as the sight now of Tammy-Jo standing next to Quint Millard in front of the Dark Man, her baby cradled in her arms, its mouth fastened to Tammy-Jo's naked breast.

As Amelie watched, the Dark Man held out his arms.

"Give me what is mine!" His voice boomed across the water, the words striking Amelie like hammer blows.

Silently, Tammy-Jo placed her newborn babe in the hands of the Dark Man, who turned and laid the baby on the altar like an offering, unfolding the blanket in

which it was wrapped, until its pale body was uncovered in the candlelight.

From the folds of his robes the Dark Man withdrew an object. Amelie couldn't quite make it out, until the light of the tapers reflected from it as from the blade of a knife.

"Whose child is this?" the Dark Man asked, the blade held high above the baby's naked body.

"Yours," Tammy-Jo replied, her voice flat, her eyes fixed on the Dark Man.

Though his face was invisible, the girl in the canoe shivered as she felt the Dark Man's cold smile.

She wanted to turn away, but knew she couldn't. Fascinated with the black-clad image of the Dark Man, she watched unblinking as he raised the instrument in his hands high, poising it over the tiny infant on the altar. The candlelight flickered, and tiny brilliant stars flashed from the tip of the instrument.

It began to arc downward.

It hovered for a moment, just over the child's breast.

There was a short scream from the infant as the tip of the blade entered its chest, a scream that was cut off almost as quickly as it began.

The glinting metal sank deep into the child's body.

Involuntarily, a shriek rose in Amelie's throat, a small howl of pure horror that she cut off almost as quickly as the Dark Man had cut off the infant's scream.

The Dark Man looked up, gazing out over the fire and the water, and Amelie imagined that his unseeable eyes were boring into her, fixing her image on his mind.

My baby, she thought. He wants my baby, too.

Silently she dipped her paddle into the water and backed the canoe away. But even as she moved noiselessly through the black shadows, she could still feel the eyes of the Dark Man following her, reaching out to her, grasping at her.

No.

Not at her.

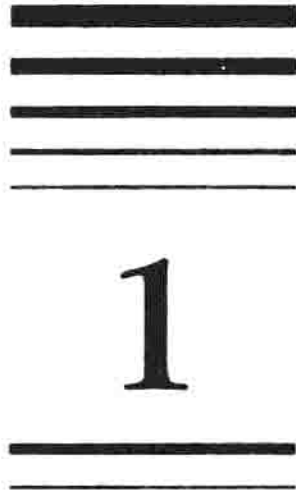
At the baby within her.

As she turned the canoe, intent on fleeing into the darkness, she heard the Dark Man speak once again.

"George Coulton," the heavy voice uttered. "When will you bring me what is mine?"

There was a moment of silence before Amelie heard her husband reply. When at last he spoke, George's flat, expressionless voice was clear.

"The night he's born. The night he's born, I be bringin' him to you."



Kelly Anderson could feel his presence close by, feel him searching for her, reaching out to her.

He'd been there, usually hovering just out of sight, for as long as Kelly could remember. Even when she'd been a tiny baby, long before she could walk or talk, she'd caught glimpses of him.

In her dreams, his face would come to her out of the darkness of sleep, leering at her, horrible features twisted into a malicious smile, his fingers—the clawed talons of a carnivorous bird—stretching toward her. She would awaken screaming, and her mother would hurry to her, lifting her from her crib, cradling her, soothing her, whispering to her that she was safe.

Those words were the first she learned.

You're safe.

Safe.

Even now, at sixteen, she could remember speaking the word.

Safe.

But she hadn't been safe. Not then, when her mother had whispered to her that everything was all right, that she'd only had a terrible dream, and not now, when even wide awake she could feel him creeping closer to her, reaching out, reaching. . . .

For what?

What was it he wanted from her?

She knew nothing about the monstrous figure of her nightmares; had no idea who he was, nor where he'd come from.

All she knew was that he was there, never far from her. Waiting. And he wanted something.

Tonight, as Kelly moved restlessly around the small house she shared with her parents, she knew he was closer than ever.

It was an oppressive night, unseasonably hot for early June, the kind of thick, muggy night that hung heavily, threatening to suffocate her. She'd opened the windows an hour before in the vain hope that even the faintest of breezes might stir the air, might cool her skin, might even drive away the madness that threatened to destroy her tonight.

She knew that's what it was.

There was no man; there were no hands reaching out to her.

It was in her mind, all of it.

That's what she'd been told, first by her mother, and then by the doctors her mother had taken her to.

The man who pursued her, who skulked eternally on the fringes of her life, existed only in her own mind. She'd made him up sometime long ago, and should have forgotten him, too, sometime almost as long ago.

She'd talked to the doctor for an hour a week, and tried to do what he'd told her, tried to figure out why she might have invented the man. For a long time the doctor had insisted that it was because she was adopted, telling her that she was imagining a father to replace the real father she'd never known. Kelly hadn't believed him—

after all, if she was going to create a father, he wouldn't be anything like the terrible image she saw in her dreams. And why wouldn't she have imagined a mother, too? Besides, she'd seen the man long before she'd ever known she was adopted, long before she'd begun to understand how different she was from everyone else.

Finally, when the nightmare man refused to go away, and she'd known he never would, she stopped talking about him, stopped trying to think of reasons why he might be there. Instead, she'd simply reported to the psychiatrist that he was gone, and at last she'd been allowed to stop going to the doctor.

For almost five years, she hadn't mentioned him at all. But the frightening image that haunted Kelly's nights had not gone away.

She'd stopped crying out in the night when he suddenly appeared out of the darkness of her slumber; stopped telling her mother when she caught glimpses of him at the veiled edges of her sight.

She stopped talking about much of anything, terrified that somehow she would slip, and her parents, or her teachers, or the other kids she knew, might find out that she was crazy.

For that's what she was.

Crazy.

Her terrible secret was that only she knew it.

But tonight it would end.

She stopped her aimless prowling of the house and went to the small bedroom that had been hers for as long as she could remember. The hot, humid night seemed even more cloying in the confines of the room, as Kelly glanced over the few objects that stood against its faded walls.

It was, she thought, a tired-looking place, filled with worn-out furniture that had never been any good, even when it was new.

Just like herself: tired, worn-out, never any good even to start with.

A few months ago Kelly had covered the walls with

posters—strange, dark images advertising the bands whose records she collected but rarely bothered to play.

Another of her secrets: she didn't care about the bands, didn't really like the music, didn't even like the posters very much. But they covered the dullness of the walls, just as the clothes she wore—mostly black, decorated with metal studs and large ugly pins—were meant to cover up the aching emptiness she felt inside.

Except that Kelly wasn't empty anymore.

She could almost feel the baby she knew was growing inside her.

Where had it come from?

Could the man have put it there?

Could he have taken her one night, creeping up on her when she was asleep?

Wouldn't she have known it? Wouldn't she have wakened, feeling him inside her?

No, she wouldn't.

She would have shut it out of her mind, refusing to recognize what was happening, for had she allowed herself to experience it, she would have screamed.

Screamed, and wakened her parents, and then they would have seen how crazy she was.

No, she must have kept silent, must have retreated into sleep while the man took her. But she knew he'd been there, knew what he'd done.

She'd known it a month ago, when she'd begun being sick every morning, fighting not to let herself throw up, terrified of letting her parents know what had happened to her.

Last week, when she'd missed her period, Kelly had begun planning what she was going to do.

She wasn't sure where the idea had come from. But now that the time had come, and she was alone in the house, and had made up her mind, she had the strange idea that she'd *always* known it would end this way—that some night, when she could no longer stand the sight of herself, she would end it all.

She left her room, not bothering to turn off the light,

and entered the tiny bathroom that separated her room from her parents'. She stood in the gloom for a few minutes, staring at the image in the mirror. Only half her face was lit, illuminated by the dim light that filtered from the hall. She could see one of her eyes—the eyes her mother insisted were green, but that she knew were only a pale brown.

The eye stared back at her from the mirror, and she began to have the peculiar sensation that it wasn't her own reflection she was seeing at all. It was someone else in the mirror, a girl she barely knew.

A stranger.

A stranger whose features looked older than her own sixteen years, whose skin seemed to have taken on the pallor of age, despite her youth.

She saw a lifeless face, devoid of the joy and eagerness of youth. The face of the orphan she truly was, despite what the parents who had adopted her tried to tell her.

And then, over her own darkened shoulder, another image appeared.

It was the man. The man Kelly had seen so often in her dreams but only caught glimpses of when she was awake. Now she saw him clearly.

He was old, his loose skin hanging in folds, his eyes sunken deep within their sockets. He was smiling at her, his lips drawn back to reveal yellowing teeth.

Kelly gasped and spun around.

Except for herself, the room was empty.

She reached out, switched on the light, and instantly the gloom was washed away. She stood still for a moment, her heart pounding, but then her pulse began to ease. Finally, controlling her panic with the same grim will with which she had hidden her madness for the last few years, she turned back to the mirror once more.

He was still there, leering at her, his aged, ugly face contorted, the claws that were his fingers reaching for her throat.