The residents of a lakeside village in Vermont undergo attacks by swarms of mutant lampreys. No one is safe from the voracious, slithering predators. Clamp is a delicious mix of horror and humor - a tale with plenty of bite!

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ISBN-13 978-1-60145-281-8
ISBN-10 1-60145-281-0

Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress # TXu1-342-321

The Kieron Press
Burlington, Vermont
Kieronpress.com
2007

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Chapter Four

At five foot eight, State Police Sergeant Paul Edwards carried his endomorphic two hundred pounds with the fluid grace of a quarterback. Atop powerful shoulders welded to a barrel-chest, the sergeant's shaved head capped him much the way a 45-caliber cartridge is tipped with lead. The analogy ends there, however, as he possessed a keen analytical mind. With arms as thick as fence-posts and legs as strong as those that support a Steinway grand, he spent much of his free time lifting weights, karate-chopping bricks in half and splintering wooden planks with chest-high kicks.

Sergeant Edwards tilted his chair back, placed his feet up on the desk and stared at a litany of disaster displayed on the monitor of an aging computer. The database contained all the lake-related deaths that had occurred in the last 25 years – every drowning, boat collision, suicide jumper from the Champlain Bridge – plus the ice fishermen that broke through the ice out on the vast frozen expanse.

"It's enough to make a person move to Arizona," he decided. Sergeant Edwards swung his feet off the desk, opened a new file and entered the name of the latest casualty to the list – one Thaddeus Steady. A call had come in from the little town of Krampton in what at first looked like a simple case of a missing person. He'd driven out from police headquarters in Middlebury and talked to the victim's wife. Convinced that her concern was genuine, he'd searched the water pumping facility, only to discover a disarticulated skeleton lying amidst shredded clothing on the bottom of a cistern.

The bones had been gathered up and sent to the state forensic lab for analysis, but the results had not yet come in. Sergeant Edwards added details to the file but paused at the line labeled "Cause of Death." As if on cue, the fax machine awoke from its electronic slumber, scrolled out three pages and beeped. Edwards snatched them and began to read: "Using a gas spectrograph, the lab identified an organic poison in tissue samples taken from the remains – an extremely virulent nerve toxin originating from such an improbable source that, fearing error, we repeated the analysis three times, but the results never varied. The venom is remarkably similar to that produced by the Australian blue-ring octopus. Gouges and incisions on the bones were caused by species unknown."

This can't be right, thought the sergeant. In fact, it's preposterous. The blue-ring octopus lives twelve thousand miles away, on the opposite side of the planet. And how could the experts possibly fail to identify the species responsible? It made no sense.

The report went on:

"Producing one of the most potent poisons in nature, a bite from the blue ring is not required as mere contact with the cephalopod's skin can be fatal."

Edwards read the report with growing incredulity.

"According to Australian authorities – once bitten, the victim feels a tingling sensation around the lips and tightness in the chest, followed soon thereafter by the inability to speak. Paralysis sets in quickly and each breath becomes shallower than the one before. The victim remains fully conscious to the end."

"A pitiless little bastard," the sergeant concluded. He tossed the report onto his desk and imagined the scene on an Australian beach: The sunlight hammering down from a cloudless, blue sky as the surf hissed and boomed nearby. And there, lying inert on the sand, eyes wide – fixed and staring – the unfortunate victim hears his own epitaph, "This bloke's had it. He's dead."

The sergeant picked up the phone and dialed the state pathologist's office in Montpelier. It rang only once before someone answered. "This is Sergeant Edwards at State Police headquarters in Middlebury. Let me speak to Hendrik, please. Yes, I'll hold."

After a minute of vapid Muzak, a gruff voice barked, "Hendrik here."

"Hello H guy, this is Paul in Middlebury. I just read your report on the late Thaddeus Steady. The blue-ring octopus you say? Gouges on the bones caused by species unknown? What's going on over there in Montpeculiar, are you guys breathing toxic fumes or what?"

"Let me assure you, sergeant, we have entirely adequate ventilation in the lab. And yes, we identified the toxin as that of the blue-ring. Its venom has no antidote, incidentally. Other than that, we haven't a clue as to what dismembered the guy in Krampton. I performed the autopsy myself; I've never seen anything like it. The bones were stripped almost entirely clean of flesh, but the most intriguing detail concerns the tibias and femurs. They looked as if they'd been gouged with chisels."

"Tell me you're kidding."

"No. I never kid," said Hendrik, "especially when there's been an unexplained death. And I don't mind telling you, we had some difficulty identifying the toxin's molecular signature. Other than poison ivy,

mosquitoes, ticks and a few rattlesnakes in the quarries near Fair Haven, there aren't any toxic organisms in Vermont. We were forced to expand our search radius, and eventually linked to a lab in Sydney."

"Australia?"

"That's right, and they identified it as belonging to the blue-ring. I spoke with their senior toxicologist for quite a while. Christ, you think we've got problems? Our most virulent venom is only a minor annoyance in comparison to those the Aussies have to deal with. Imagine an entire continent crawling with critters we've never heard of – many right in their own backyards – all just itching for a chance to bite or sting anyone or anything that gets in their way."

"That's all very interesting, Hendrik, but what does it have to do with us?"

"Hear me out, Paul, this is fascinating stuff. They've got this little green snake that has a particular fondness for backyard swimming pools, chlorine and all. If it bites you, the game's over. And that's just on dry land. Their indigenous marine life is twice as deadly and I'm not referring to all the crocodiles or sharks or stingrays that abound in their coastal waters. Forget vacationing in Australia."

"Good advice," said the sergeant, "but tell me, what have you done with Steady's remains?"

"Cremated."

"Already? That was quick. Your report left more questions than answers and you know how I hate unanswered questions."

"I do too, Paul, but we don't have the space to store everything that falls into our laps. The guy's widow wanted closure. Now she's got an urn full of ashes on her mantelpiece."

"Speaking of cremation, what can you tell me about the Jet Ski fatality?"

"Not much," said Hendrik. "The rider was smashed to a pulp and then burned to a crisp. We're assembling dental fragments for identification. Were there any witnesses?"

"Sort of. A crazy artist named Snee claims to have seen the Jet Ski zoom by just before the crash. But he was on the mainland and too far away to be of much help. Half of everything he said was gibberish, although he said the rider was screaming and kicking his legs just before impact."

"Build it and they will crash," said Hendrik. "Listen Paul, I've never heard of anyone running a Jet Ski into a rock wall at full speed. Sounds to me like a suicide – or should we say, 'jeticide?'"

The sergeant took a deep breath and frowned. “That makes two fatalities so far this season, both unexplained and both connected, in one way or another, to the lake.”

“What did your team find at the site?”

“About what you’d expect. I went out on the police boat with the divers and we found wreckage and a greasy smudge on the rock cliff, caused by the fire. I spoke to the owner of the island, a guy named Stryker. He’s a professor at the University of Vermont and lives on the island year-round. He heard the crash and called us.”

“So,” said Hendrik, “We’ve got one crispy-critter Jet-Ski suicide and a guy who was apparently killed by a tiny octopus that lives halfway around the globe. Not what I’d call a typical week in the North Country. The season hasn’t even started yet but I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be one hell of a summer.”

“Christ, I hope you’re wrong. Keep me posted.”

Sergeant Edwards hung up, then turned his attention to the “Cause of Death” line in the database file and typed ‘unknown.’

Chapter Five

Professor Stanley Stryker stood behind a rickety wooden lectern in the oldest lecture hall in the University of Vermont, a cavernous chamber long overdue for either restoration or demolition. He scrutinized his fledgling marine biology students as they climbed the steep amphitheater and wedged themselves into uncomfortable hundred-year old folding seats. The scene reminded him of the painting by Thomas Eakins, the one in which a group of 19th-century medical students listens with rapt attention as the Master dispenses Knowledge, while a partially dissected cadaver reposes before them on a slab.

Any similarity between the painting and the class disappeared when the professor cast his gaze about the upper tiers, watching through pale crocodilian eyes. His forehead rose steeply above a furrowed, craggy brow to meet a coiling thatch of silver hair as electric as the volatile filament in an old-fashioned flashbulb. The crease between his eyebrows deepened into a scowl.

"College students," he muttered; another batch of illiterate nitwits nurtured on MTV, rap music and graphic novels – a fidgeting throng of sexually active children.

The professor tapped his pointer stick on the side of the lectern. He waited until the commotion subsided, then began: "Charles Darwin's revolutionary – and evolutionary – theory evoked scorn when first published. Today, 150 years later, the debate still rages. Anyone care to hazard a guess as to why?"

All 137 seven students froze like so many nervous, wide-eyed impalas under the gaze of a hungry leopard. "You there, yes you," said the professor, pointing his stick at a music lover in the top row. A pair of earbuds came out and the student blushed crimson.

"Could you repeat the question?"

"Good of you to join us. I asked if anyone could tell us why the theory of evolution remains a hot-button issue, all these years later."

No one said a word.

The professor surveyed the class and shrugged.

"I'll tell you why the Creationists still wrestle with the Darwinians. The 'Old Man' himself answered this question in the introduction to his book,

'*The Origin of Species.*' It's quite simple, actually. The controversy persists with undiminished ferocity due to Man's inability to grasp the sheer immensity of time required to produce life on our planet. Add to that the equally inconceivable span of time necessary to evolve the countless permutations we see alive today and in the fossil record. The lifespan of a human being is the merest blink of the eye when compared to the hundreds of millions of years the Earth has whirled through space in its orbit around the sun."

The students took notes using pencils, pens and laptop computers. In one instance a tiny tape recorder caught his every word, and it was to this electronic eavesdropper that he addressed his next remark.

"In other words, my glossy young chimps, you are simply not intelligent enough to be able to grasp the depths of Time, so you might as well accept that fact right now!"

The sharp crack of his pointer stick hitting the lectern emphasized the point. The students glanced at one another nervously, much the way sailors embarking on a three-year voyage might react upon first encountering Bligh, their new captain.

"Here's another interesting brain teaser," said the professor in an amiable tone of voice, as if employing good teacher/bad teacher tactics borrowed from the cops. "Why did the turtles, snakes, crocodiles and other reptiles survive while the dinosaurs perished?"

A hand waved in the air.

"Yes, and your name is…?"

"Ms. Bryan. The dinosaurs died because they weren't allowed on Noah's ark."

A sudden hush descended upon the hall.

"The ark you say? Tell us where you gleaned this pearl of wisdom."

"The Bible is clear as to where the animals came from and when God put people upon the Earth: The Lord made everything in six days, four thousand years ago."

The professor heaved a sigh of disgust and said, "Let me remind you, Ms. Bryan, the study of mythology is done on the other side of the campus, a very long way round the bend."

A flurry of snickers rippled through the hall.

Another hand fluttered aloft. "What about intelligent design?"

"I do not allow superstition to intrude upon my science class. Although here again, the incremental evolutionary advances – the dazzling array of complexity and bio-diversity – occurred over such an unimaginable

expanse of time that we humble simians are ill equipped to grapple with, let alone comprehend, such enormity. Now, if there are no further questions, we'll move on.

"The dinosaurs dominated our planet for 100 million years. Try to wrap your diminutive brains around that! One hundred million years is a span of time 100 times greater than the entire existence of Man as a species. We know this because we have irrefutable fossil evidence and a very reliable way to date these fragments of once-living creatures. And yet, the turtle still lives and thrives, a creature that gives every indication of having completed its evolutionary development."

A hand waved in the front row, the position traditionally occupied by "A" students.

"What do you think of all the recent 'Champ' sightings? Could there really be something swimming around in Lake Champlain that was thought to be extinct?"

"First of all, there would have to be more than one, as it takes two to tango. And if a pair of Champosaurs did exist, the most likely candidate would be the reptile known as a plesiosaur. Plesiosaur is Greek for 'nearer to a lizard.' We've all seen the painted renditions – the bronto-shaped body with a long neck, paddle-shaped fins and a lengthy tail. We know from fossils that there were hundreds of species of plesiosaur. The remains of entire specimens have been found, complete down to the smallest bone in their tails and a bellyful of gastroliths – the small round stones in the creature's stomach used to help grind their food. But to answer your question, I strongly doubt such a possibility, for the simple reason that a large carnivorous reptile could not withstand a Vermont winter."

The "A" student posed another question. "Wouldn't an aquatic creature have a better chance of surviving whatever it was that caused the mass extinction?"

"Good point, but the answer is no – which brings us to the question: What caused the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago? For many years the 'Gradualists' fought the 'Catastrophists' over this issue. The 'Gradualists' believed in the theory of Racial Senescence, a theory that claims the dinosaurs perished because they had developed overspecialized physical traits, traits that impeded or prevented the modifications necessary for survival."

Professor Stryker clicked a remote and projected the image of an immense flaming meteor entering the Earth's atmosphere.

"Imagine a meteor with a diameter of six miles and a trajectory that resulted in a collision with the Earth. The meteor struck a cataclysmic blow equal to thousands of nuclear bombs going off all at once. The explosion threw an immense cloud of iridium-bearing dust into the atmosphere – a cloud that encircled the globe and drastically reduced the amount of sunlight reaching the surface, creating an 'impact winter.' A pre-meteorite theory spoke of gradual climate change, but thanks to Louis Alvarez and his son's discovery of the iridium layer in the earth's crust, the 'Catastrophists' have carried the day. Iridium is a rare element on Earth, but plentiful in meteors.

"After this cataclysmic strike, the sea became acidified – killing all plankton – and so, starting at the very bottom, entire food chains were wiped out. All photosynthesis stopped. Plant-life quickly ceased. The herbivores succumbed, as did the carnivores that preyed upon them.

"Of course, the iridium theory was just that – a theory – until the Space Shuttle photographed the remains of a crater in the Yucatan Peninsula. Geological forces, combined with vegetation, obscured the crater from all eyes on the ground; but there it is, a crater six miles wide, formed 65 million years ago."

The professor clicked the remote again and projected a view of the Earth from space, a perspective from which the crater's circumference was clearly visible.

As the lecture droned on for another 40 minutes, the squirming in the narrow wooden seats gradually increased. Aware of the growing restlessness, the professor concluded by saying, "I'd like you to think about why the crocodiles managed to survive while the dinosaurs perished. Crocs have been around for a very long time. Was it an accident? Or did they owe their survival to a lack of specialization?" A loud buzz from the clock above the door signaled the end of the lecture.

"That's it for today. I'll expect you to have read chapters one through four in book one of Hardisty for next time. This may seem like a heavy assignment for so early in the semester, and it is, but we have a lot of ground to cover."

Laptops snapped shut and the miniature tape recorder clicked off. Pens, pencils and notebooks vanished into knapsacks and a dozen pairs of earbuds were quickly inserted. The folding desktops were pushed aside as 137 students rose to their feet and clattered down the amphitheater's steep wooden steps. The mob surged through the hall, burst out the main door and into the afternoon rain.

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