

Texas Chainsaw Mantis

by

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Prologue

Tom Stockman crashed through his back door, nearly ripping the screen door off its hinges in the process. He pulled his screaming wife, Beth, behind him by her one remaining arm. The stump of the other, sliced clean off at the elbow only seconds before, spurted her life's blood across the three concrete steps that led to their back yard.

The night was muggy, and Tom's lungs burned as he sprinted the distance to his old tool shed. He prided himself on having a huge back yard, made to look even larger by the woods it emptied into at its rear. Tonight, however, the twenty five yards from his back door to his tool shed felt like twenty five miles. As he reached the shed door, he was practically dragging Beth. "Keep up, woman! Less you wanna be bug food!"

Dazed, the middle aged woman—still in hair curlers and nightgown now drenched in blood—stumbled into the cramped tool shed behind her dingy looking mechanic husband. Tom was perpetually in a state of greasy filth that never seemed to wash off, no matter how many times she got on to him about showering. "Hell we doing in here?" she said to him, doing her best to remain conscious.

"First we're fixin' that arm of yours," Tom said quickly.

Beth had never seen him with such focus and determination before. His lackadaisical, smart-ass attitude had vanished. He was in survival mode. Her hero.

He grabbed a box cutter off his work bench and slashed up the apron she always made him wear when he was working with wood so he wouldn't trudge sawdust into the house, then wrapped the

material around her upper arm, stopping the bleeding.

“Hold that tight, don't let go of it for nothin', got me?”

She was getting woosy again. Tom slapped her across the face. “Hear me, woman?!”

She grabbed her arm, reluctantly. She didn't want to acknowledge what had happened. Shock was set in so she didn't feel much pain yet, but that didn't prevent the dread from washing over her, causing her to shake all over. “What... were those things, Tommy?”

“You know damn well what they is. You see em in the garden every year, keep the bugs away.”

“B-but they were as tall as us...” She kept using the past tense as though it would keep the monster insects that bit her arm at bay. “Mantises are tiny, Tom. They're not...” She started crying. She could still feel those knife-size mandibles slice into her flesh like it was butter. It took only a second to take her arm clean off. “Monsters like that.. they don't exist.”

“Lots a things exist you don't know nothin' about, sweet heart,” Tom said, busying himself in the corner of the tiny shed, pulling heavy tool boxes off his work bench.

“This won't save us, Tommy. Why didn't we run? What are we doing in here?” Her voice rose, panic set in. “They're gonna get us in here!”

Her husband turned around, all bunched up, wiry muscle on his small frame. “Woman!”

Beth shut up, but continued to shake. She could hear the things in the house, ransacking the place. Those giant eyeballs, so full of.... intelligence.

The sound of screeching metal killed that train of thought.

Tom was straining with all his might to pull the bench away from the far wall of the shed. As he pulled the bulky wooden frame, Beth noticed a well-worn groove in the floor appear as the bench displaced the thick sawdust. The bench had been moved in this fashion many times before. After a moment, it was clear why.

When Tom had moved it far enough, he knelt down and brushed the remainder of the sawdust away, revealing a trap door. He pulled out his key ring and unlocked the thick padlock. Casting it aside,

he turned and looked up at his wife.

“I never intended to show you this, darling. But I never intended the world to get overrun with giant bugs, neither. If you wanna live, you're gonna have to do exactly what I say and question nothing. Them things in the house is worse than anything you're gonna see down here. Am I clear?”

Beth nodded. What choice did she have? She heard the creatures come out of the house and into the back yard. The flimsy shed doors weren't going to hold them for even a second once they realized she and Tom were hiding inside.

Tom threw back the trap door and crawled down the ladder inside to his secret basement room. Without a second thought, Beth followed.

Beth had been in bed reading her stories on her kindle. Tom didn't read, so she couldn't ever share the weird stuff she found buried in her searches for horror fiction, but that was ok. Tom liked to be left alone. He spent most of his late afternoons in his workshed building god-knows what. He always turned up his classic rock when he went in there. The few times she'd gone out to ask him to fetch something off a high shelf or open a stuck jar for her, she'd found the door locked from the inside.

Tom didn't like questions, so she never worried about it. As long as a hot dinner was on the table when he wondered in a little after dark, he didn't give her too much gruff and left her alone with her stories when she went to bed.

Tom was washing up, getting ready to come to bed when she heard the noise outside. It sounded like someone was fussing with the handle of the front door.

“Tommy? You expecting somebody this late, hon?”

“WHAT!” he yelled from the bathroom.

She didn't like his tone. That's the tone that might end her night with a steak pressed against her

eye if she had too much else to say. She got up and walked to the living room.

She heard something rustling outside like something hard scraping up against the siding. She didn't like that sound. It sounded... big. "Hello? Is somebody out there?"

They'd had problems before. Tom didn't exactly make friends down at the garage where he worked. He'd been known to pop customers in the mouth if they back talked him too much and, since they lived in a little white trash Texas town of 20,000, it wasn't hard to find out where he lived. Guys had come by and thrown rocks at the house and vandalized Tom's truck a time or two, but he'd been good lately. Since he cut back on his drinking, there hadn't been any incidents at work. At least none Tom had fessed up to. But Beth would have heard about it at the hair dressers on Fridays if he'd done something too crazy.

Peg, the kid, had fled the coop the minute she was old enough to go to college. She wasn't the type to prank, either. She was off in Austin, shacked up with some black boy. She and Tom hadn't talked because of it in almost two years.

Whatever was outside shouldn't have been out there.

She turned on the porch light and pulled the curtain on the door back. She didn't see anything out there. Just a normal, quiet summer night on the corner of 5th and Broadway. She opened the door and stepped into the archway, crossing her arms. There was a smell out there that gave her the heebie jeebies. It was strong and thick, but not unfamiliar. It took her a minute to place it.

That's when she saw it. She thought it was a tree branch at first. Standing completely still across the street, just close enough to the street lamp for her to make out the side of its head and foreclaw. The realization hit her like an electric current. Some primal fear telling her to get her butt moving if she wanted to live.

Bugs weren't supposed to be that big.

Once she'd made out one, like finding the mistakes in one of those side-by-side drawings for kids, she saw more. What doesn't belong in this picture?

What didn't belong were the heads big as basketballs with eyes nearly the same size on each side. Antennae a foot and a half long gently swaying in the summer breeze. Two of them. Four. Eight. Sixteen. The block was covered in giant bugs, all standing in the dark. Waiting. Staring directly at her.

That's when she remembered the smell. When she was a little girl, playing with lightning bugs or grasshoppers. That insect smell that stayed on her hands, faint, even after she'd washed them. She used to lay in bed and huff that smell on long summer nights at great grandma's house.

The fear had her stiff as the giant praying mantises watching her. Instinct told her to stay that way. That movement is what they were waiting for. She silently cursed herself for turning on the light and opening the door. She felt like she was under a spot light, or the heat lamp at McDonald's, seemed more appropriate.

"The fuck are you going on about, woman?" Tom yelled, too loudly as he came into the living room, toweling off his hands.

Too loud. Beth turned to shoo him.

That's all it took.

The mantis above the archway, partially on the roof, hanging upside down just above her that she hadn't even sensed, let alone seen, darted out lightning fast. So fast all Tom saw was a green blur. Then Beth was in the air, gripped up into the huge foreclaws of a praying mantis at least six foot long with claws the size of the scimitars Tom loved from old Sinbad movies.

The mantis went right to work on the closest flesh to it, sawing into Beth's arm, severing it in half in the amount of time it took Tom to rush forward and grab the coat rack from where Beth had stood only a split second before. If the creature had grabbed her by both arms instead of the one, she'd have already been dead.

As it was, she was in bad shape, dangling from one of its claws as it went to work on her dismembered limb so fast, Tom couldn't even see the individual parts of its mouth. Just a red blur as it devoured six inches of the arm in a heartbeat.

Tom reacted with instincts he'd honed for decades. Instincts no one but him knew he possessed. No one living, anyway. The instincts of a shark. A predator.

He ran forward and jammed the upper prongs of the coat directly into the biggest, most vulnerable target on its body.

Its eyes.

He hit it square on, puncturing both giant orbs at once. A loud popping sound followed by the gushing of whitish fluid before the monster's eyeballs sort of crumpled inward like a wilted flower. That's when it screamed and dropped Beth to the ground. Not a screech or a monstrous bellow. It screamed like a man, thrashing out in defense as it fell off the door frame onto the porch. Its scythe-like foreclaws only barely missing Beth's dazed form curled around the stump of her arm in an instinctually defensive posture.

The silence of the night exploded after the creature's scream. Porch lights up and down the block came on. Doors opened and dogs ran out onto porches only to be immediately attacked by the monsters lying in wait in the shadows.

Three giant bugs charged the porch in a blur, but didn't go after Beth. They set upon the wounded bug still thrashing in front of the bewildered humans, sawing off its limbs and head with surgical precision by the time Tom had managed to drag Beth out of the doorway and slam it shut.

“Beth honey, you gotta get up!” Tom shouted, shaking his wife's shoulder, trying to rouse her from her shocked stupor.

Her eyes fluttered, confusion crossed her face and she tried to raise her right arm to wipe at her face which had been bruised in the fall. When she saw the stump she panicked and screamed.

Tom covered her mouth, dragging her to her feet. “Ain't got time for that right now, baby. We gotta move.”

Their reprieve from the insects lasted only a moment before the windows in the living room were smashed by massive foreclaws in unison, almost like a coordinated attack. The sounds of

screaming neighbors, dying neighbors filled the room as the bugs crawled through the window.

As Tom grabbed Beth's hand and dragged her through the hallway toward the back door, what he heard was unmistakable.

“Follow them! Don't let them get away! No survivors!”

One of the giant bugs spoke.

Beth clumsily dropped the final few feet into the secret room Tom had somehow built under his work shed without her knowledge. When she turned around, he stood in the center of the room with the strangest look on his face.

“Remember, I love you honey. I'd never hurt you or the kid. I promise I never meant for you to be a part of this stuff.”

The stuff, Beth realized as her eyes adjusted to the dark room, illuminated only by a pair of oil lamps Tom had lit while she struggled one-handed with the ladder, was the stuff of nightmares.

The room was more of a crudely dug hole with barely enough room to stand fully upright. The dirt hung from the ceiling in clumps. It was fairly long and wide enough to move around in.

Wide enough to hang the rotten, dismembered corpses from the walls by rusted meat hooks.

Beth gasped and choked on the rancid smell. A work table smaller than the one upstairs in the shed sat against the far wall. On it lay all manner of torture devices. Pliers, all manner of knives, a blow torch, steel contraptions that looked like they'd be better off in a dentists office all stained with blood. All heavily used.

Tom let her drink the horror in. “Let me explain, Darlin'.”

She recoiled at the sound of his voice, her one remaining hand stuck firmly across her mouth to keep her from screaming out in abject terror.

Beth read the papers, even if Tom was disinterested in them and always threw them out right away. She also listened to all the gossip at the hair dressers and the grocery store. She was well informed about the happening of her small town. And what had been happening, off and on for the past seventeen years in Growler's Hollow, Texas and the surrounding tri-city area was bad.

Local police refused to use the term, but everyone knew there was a serial killer on the loose. He'd never been caught because he never developed any kind of discernible pattern, and never taunted police or media with notes or clues as some of the more famous killers throughout history had done.

The reason the locals had branded him a serial killer was because one single thing connected every disappearance that had been associated with him. Every one of his victims had gone missing in the middle of the night, from their own beds, with absolutely no sign of breaking and entering in their homes. It was as though they'd just up and vanished, never to be seen or heard from again. No bodies, no fingerprints. Nothing. This caused the locals to brand him The Growler's Phantom.

Except now Beth was staring at their corpses in various states of decomposition. Some were nothing but bones with putrid, gray skin hanging off. Others were more fresh, as the Phantom had been ramping up the kidnappings in the last year and a half.

Leaving absolutely no doubt as to her husband's true identity was a cage on the far side of the room containing a still living girl. A teenager from a town over named Theresa. She'd gone missing only two weeks before.

“Y-you gotta help me lady! PLEASE! I-I'll do anything! He, He...” Theresa broke down into hysterical screams as she shook the small cage. The girl was filthy, covered in cuts and sores, clothed only in the remnants of the nightgown she'd been sleeping in when Tom had kidnapped her.

He turned around and casually picked up a nail gun from his torture table. Seeing this caused the girl to scream even louder as Tom approached her cage. Without a word or a hint of hesitation, he stuck the nail gun into the cage as Theresa cringed back, covering her face with her arms, shrieking. Tom put three nails into her brain and her body slumped over.

“That's not good,” he said in a quiet voice. His demeanor had changed. The twangy slurred accent that Beth had known as his voice for more than twenty years had vanished. His slight stoop was gone. He stood upright. Powerful. “They know we're down here. It's only a matter of time before they get that hatch open.”

Beth stared at the stranger in front of her as he placed the power tool back on the table. “Y-you... You're the... you... Phantom...”

Tom sighed. “How was I supposed to know this would happen? Giant bugs?” He grinned and shook his head, as though he was almost impressed with the threat above. A master predator faced with a brand new challenge. He motioned to the ground, which Beth had neglected to inspect in the face of such horrors in front of her.

There she saw that he'd laid boards down, creating a makeshift floor. On the floor was a complex series of wide circles and symbols that reminded the uneducated woman of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs she remembered from her school books. There was a large space in the middle of the circles containing no symbols. This area was stained dark red. It was where Tom had done his killings.

“Why?” Beth whispered, shaking her head back and forth, trying to make sense of these terrible revelations. Tom wasn't a good man. He was barely tolerable, but he kept a roof over her head and Beth had settled for that, decided it was enough a long time ago. She could never have suspected he was the Phantom. Not her Tom.

But this man in front of her, this was the true man behind the twenty year mask he'd perfected. This man in front of her was fully capable of inflicting endless suffering and torture. She could see it in his eyes. They were different. The sheen of ignorance was gone. These eyes were sharp. Focused. And entirely devoid of humanity.

“There are things about this world, about the mechanisms that control the world that most people refuse to acknowledge.” He laughed again. “I've never actually said these words out loud to anyone before. You're going to think I'm nuts, but I've been places. I've seen things that would make

normal people tear their eyes out.”

Beth's jaw hung open. A complete lack of understanding showed across her features.

“The flesh, honey. The flesh and the blood. The fear and the soul, along with these rites and incantations.” He motioned to a small shelf above his torture station that contained a series of worn and battered books.

She'd never seen him read a book one time in their entire marriage.

“The power is in the blood, Beth. I've used it many, many times. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

She shook her head no.

“Down here, with this,” he pointed at the bloody spot inside the circles. “I can protect us. You have to trust me. I must use the dead girl's blood to summon a portal to a safe place. A place I created just for an occasion like this. That's how I get them down here. Do you understand? It's why they never caught me! I reached through the fabric of space itself into their bedrooms!

“When... whatever this is, whatever these bugs are, whenever this is over, I promise I'll show you dimensions full of horrible beauty. I'll show you the true gods of this universe. You can help me. You can help me write the greatest incantation of all and we can live forever, Beth! Just trust me! Do you trust me?”

She turned around and bolted for the ladder, jumping and grabbing a rung halfway up. She cried out, nearly losing her awkward, one-handed grip as Tom lunged for her, but she managed to get to the trap door before he could yank her free.

“No! Don't let them in! The portal is not ready yet!”

Beth pushed the door open, balancing herself against the ladder.

Tom grabbed her gown and pulled, but it was too late. Her body was violently yanked up into the shed. If he wanted to keep the creatures out of his ritual chamber long enough to perform the teleportation incantation and get himself to safety, he'd need to get the hatch shut again.

He climbed the ladder as a river of blood and chunks of flesh washed down the hole. The gurgling, thrashing, gasping final moments of his wife's life poured over him as he reached up and tried to grab the latch. A foreclaw swiped across his face for his effort and he fell off the ladder into the pile of gore that was so recently his wife. His human anchor. The lie that had kept him hidden from the world. Now dead. But so, it seemed, was the world he knew. The game had changed. Monsters roamed the Earth just as suddenly as a freak summer storm or an earthquake in the night.

An act of God. But which god? Tom intended to live long enough to find out.

The wound on his face was deep. He reached up and felt his teeth through his cheek. Pushing off the wall, he crawled through his wife's gory remains into the center of the room. spurts of his own blood onto the stained floor inside the circles alerted him that his face wound extended down onto his neck, perhaps nicking an artery. Pulling off his blood-soaked shirt, he wrapped it around his face and throat, buying himself a little more time.

The mantises were already poking their heads into the hole in the shed floor. It was only a matter of seconds before they'd be down there on top of him, ripping him to shreds faster than he could die from it.

It was time for plan B.

It wasn't a great plan, but of the incantations he knew by heart, it was the only one sure to help him now. Pulling the shirt away, he allowed his blood to pool on the floor for a second, before re-wrapping himself. Then he began to draw symbols in the blood. They were more crude than he'd intended, spells like this required the utmost accuracy, lest he accidentally summon a giant Yuggoth into the cramped space and ruin everything.

Still, Tom had faith that his drawings would suffice. He had, after all, performed this ritual more than a thousand times since his great grandmother had taught him what she had called her witch tricks. What he came to understand as blood magic.

Grandma Haggan had been a simple woman, mostly illiterate. Those few spells she knew

mostly by oral history and not from any direct study of the ancient grimoires passed down a thousand years through his family line.

Two of the creatures scampered into the secret room, one winding around the wall to the south, the other pausing, upside down on the ceiling in front of Tom's wounded body.

He spit out a mouth full of blood and rolled onto his back, beginning the chant.

The insect on the wall moved onto the floor, cocking its head. Its bulbous eyes were trained on Tom, assessing him as a threat as its antennae moved wildly. "What's it doing?" the creature said to the mantis on the ceiling. In English.

Its voice was an awful mix of chirping and screeching, like it was forcing tendons and muscles inside its throat that were never meant for speech to replicate human communication.

"I don't care," the bug on the ceiling said, advancing forward. "Kill it."

The talking bugs had momentarily halted Tom's chant. Knowing his time would come to an end if he didn't act hastened him to continue. The ritual was short. By the time the creatures were on him, it was done.

The ceiling mantis struck out, grabbing him by the leg in its powerful foreclaws, burying its head into his shin as the other creature gripped him around the torso and bit into the meat between his neck and shoulder.

The torture tools behind them on the table began to shake as Tom screamed. As his leg was severed from his body, a long knife from the table rose into the air and shot across the room like a dart, impaling the creature feasting on his stump through the arm, causing it to scream and let him go.

A scalpel flew across the room, hitting the other insect in the face, just above its mouth, leaving Tom's mangled body to fall helplessly to the floor.

"What's the trouble down here?" another mantis said, scuttling down the ladder into the basement.

It cried out in surprised when it was met with more of Tom's cruel tools, impaling it against the

wall as Tom crawled to the back of the room.

The two wounded bugs yanked the objects free of their bodies and moved toward him, only to be met by the remainder of the sharp knives flinging themselves off the table.

Pushing himself with his one remaining functioning arm and leg, he scooted himself up against the dead girl's cage and hooked his foot around the closest table leg, yanking it toppling over, revealing what he was looking for.

Using the same foot, Tom pulled a long chainsaw which had been stored on a lower shelf out from under the fallen table as three more killer bugs swarmed into the basement.

With his final bit of strength, Tom placed his hand on the power tool and began another ancient chant. As the three mantises charged him, he closed his eyes and willed all the torture objects to rise and fly around the room in a chaotic tornado of metal, cutting down the insects in a final violent deluge, chopping and tearing at them until all that remained inside Tom's nightmarish ritual chamber were green smears across the ceiling, walls and floor.

His body slumped over the chainsaw, dripping the last of his life's blood onto its razor sharp teeth. And with that, the Growler Phantom's seventeen year reign of terror ended.

Along with mankind's dominion over the Earth.