

Case File RMNB608 Open

By Jodi Lee and Rhada McKai

I remember thinking that New Bedlam was an unfortunate name for a town, even for a town as small as this one. I killed the lights and engine as the car eased to a stop on the side of the road. It'd been a long drive, and I couldn't wait to get out and stretch my legs.

After the blood flow returned to my toes, I perched on the hood of the old beater to light a smoke and contemplate the town just a mile or so down the hill. Not really much of a town, with only 1800 people in residence, and that seemed to include the rural area immediately surrounding the town. Lit up as it was, it was almost pretty. I shivered; a cold, damp breeze wafted over the hood of the car and tickled the back of my neck.

It wasn't just the eerily drifting fog or the full moon above that gave me a case of the jitters. It was unnatural that out of the entire population tucked into their beds in the homes below, at least *half* were writers of some degree, probably more. Further half of those were writers of such disturbing material that would give even Freddy Krueger nightmares. And that didn't include the small artist community, either. *Some of that shit just*

wasn't right.

The federal issue radio crackled on the seat where I left it. Reception was bad, nothing but static.

How the hell did I end up out here, in the asscrack of Neverwhere? Oh. Yeah... my middle-aged raging hormones.

Reports of all sorts had been leaking from the local authorities who didn't know how to handle what looked like a serial killer with numerous Modus Operandi. The townspeople themselves had been loose-lipped too; the internet was alive with conspiracy theories and tales of mysterious goings-on in New Bedlam. The Assistant Director thought someone ought to check it out.

As usual, when he asked for volunteers, I wasn't paying attention. I was busy checking out Special Agent McKai's ass filling out her skirt, when I realized the room was silent and almost everyone was looking at me. Fifteen hours later, here I was, contemplating the view from the crest of the hill outside New Bedlam.

Next time I'd pay attention. I hopped off the car, got it running and headed on down to the New Bedlam Inn. Time to get to work...

** * **

The message boards had postings from people like 'Anon-ee-mouse' and 'IGottaTell' and other pseudo-anonymity

jargon. No one wanted to be up front and forward and give a name. No, that would have made my job much more simple. Instead, I'd pulled a disc from the stack on McKai's desk; I'd just snag the IP numbers from the posts using her nifty little programs, and work my way down from there. *Wham Bam, thank you, McKai...*

What caught my eye, over and over, were comments that included insomnia, nightmares and writer's block. I wasn't sure what writer's block was exactly, but I figured a few glasses of Metamucil wasn't going to help matters.

I pushed the crappy hotel room chair away from the crappy hotel room desk and reflected on those last few postings. I knew from experience that insomnia could make you think things, even see things, that weren't quite right. Maybe it was something in the water around here that was keeping everyone feisty and they were developing a form of mass delusion.

As I was mulling over that possibility in my drained brain, I glanced out the window and felt my heart stall, skipping a beat before thudding back into action.

A girl stood outside the window, staring in at me; she looked to be in her late teens, long dark hair hanging well over her shoulders in stringy tangles. I'll be honest here, she looked like a frickin' *ghoul*. The moment I made to

leave my chair, she was gone. I dove to open the door, but noticed something had been shoved through the ample crack between it and the floor. An envelope - and of course inside was a note:

'They couldn't keep them confined.

Now they're out of their minds.

The dark ones have woken.

No words can be spoken.

Before the last is bitten.

The end word must be written.'

There was no signature, but I was sure the ghoul-girl had not only left it, but had written it as well.

I pushed the chair back to the desk and sat down, loading the browser on the computer. I searched the 'Net for the poem and after a fair bit of link drilling, I found it. A writer's blog, loaded with crazy ramblings of monsters of the mind unleashed on the remains of humanity.

By the time I finished reading the entire blog, I was shivering. Mostly from what I'd read, but also the air in the room; the air conditioner must have fucked up. It was cold, but damp and muggy at the same time. I closed the drapes over the window after checking numerous times to make sure there wasn't a creeper out there, waiting for me to fall asleep - or worse - to leave the room.

I understand now. The writers can't sleep and the monsters they've written about, contained on pages of what was once thought fiction, are loose. No longer *contained*.

What is the '*end word*'? How is it written? Where?

That's when I thought I should call on you, to help me.

Case File RMNB608 Pending

By Rhada McKai

We bought the house *almost* sight unseen.

The realtor sent us pictures of the house, of course, inside and out. Three stories; kitchen with breakfast nook and laundry room on the side, formal dining room, living room, sitting room, den and half-bath on the main floor, four bedrooms and a bathroom with an old-fashioned claw foot tub on the second floor. The third floor was almost completely open space and was to be my office. The pictures showed some wear on the walls and cupboards, at least two of the windows were cracked but the oak floor shone. He told us the pictures were a few years old, but that the house had stood up well despite having been empty for so long. The name of the caretaker and her schedule for the house were also included in the paper work he sent us.

The day it cleared escrow we drove up the coast to celebrate at our favorite bed and breakfast. Dinner and wine with the owners before settling in for the night, tucked away in the honeymoon suite. It was unlikely we'd ever be there again, so we took full advantage. Darren went fly-fishing with the proprietor the next morning, and we all had trout for breakfast. It was almost an emotional

goodbye as we packed the car to leave, as though we were leaving a favorite great-aunt and uncle's home.

Two days later, we were on a plane, flying three thousand miles to our new home. The plan was I would stay at home for six months, renovating and decorating the house, and Darren would commute to his job in the city. New Bedlam was a very small town, and our house - *my dream home* - was a mile or so just outside of it. Small piece of property with a large lawn, and a couple of out-buildings in case we wanted to have some sort of animals later. I thumbed through the pictures and made design notes while Darren watched the in-flight movie.

The drive from the city to New Bedlam took longer than expected. Darren began mumbling about false information, chuckling to himself. He worried that the distance between the house and his office was going to be a problem. I sighed and stayed out of his ramblings... once he got ranting to himself he was beyond any distraction I could offer. The scenery outside began to blur and my eyes drifted closed. The next thing I knew, Darren was yelling profanities at the windshield.

"That lying sonofabitch," he whispered as he ran out of epithets.

I rubbed my eyes and turned to follow Darren's gaze.

There, in front of the car, stood our house. The paint was peeling, most of the windows were broken and the frames were rotten and falling off. Darren turned to me, his face reddening in anger. "I'm going to sue that fucker."

My heart fell, and tears slid through my eyelashes. If the outside was like this, the inside was going to be worse. I couldn't stop the silent tears and the horrible, shuddering feeling in my stomach. In my mind, and I knew it had been like this in Darren's too, our new house was shining in the sunlight, surrounded by a white picket fence and graced with purple petunias in planter boxes all around the veranda. The perfect house, the house from the pictures.

I could see the faded hint of color in the overgrown flowerbed beside the crumpled steps. Hitching in as deep a breath as I could, I left the car. As I walked towards the house, I could see what that color was from. A planter box, broken, empty and partially covered with old soil and rangy vines. It wasn't long before Darren joined me and together we steeled ourselves for the inspection of our nightmare home. He bypassed the steps, and jumped onto the veranda then offered me his hand, as much as pulling me up as anything else. I fished the keys out of my pocket and..

We didn't need them. The door wasn't locked, and was

only barely latched. I was certain a weak breeze would have popped it open. As we crossed the threshold, I noted the long scratches on the jamb, as though someone had taken a meat fork and dug it through the wood. Leaves blew across the floor as Darren closed the door, deciding our path as we followed them through the hall and into the kitchen. The sink was piled high with filth; dishes, pots, containers of all sorts were scattered across every inch of counter space. The table was still set for a meal, as though the previous owners had just stood up and left everything.

It was creepy, and I didn't like it. I backed out of the room without releasing Darren's hand. As he stumbled along behind me, he broke the silence. "The appliances are gone, but the table is set."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to go any further, but followed my husband as he took careful steps on the stairs leading to the second floor. Several brown stains covered the formerly gorgeous hardwood and I wondered if they were bloodstains. They certainly looked like they could be, and that only served to make me want to turn around and go home.

But this was *supposed* to be home now.

The second floor was slightly better. The windows weren't as bad off as those on the main floor, and there

was no other mess. The beds, the furniture and the carpets were all gone. I was oddly saddened to see the claw foot bathtub had a lot of damage and would have to be replaced. After that I didn't feel the need to check the third floor, my floor.

"Let's go into town and find that prick so I can kill him." Darren was already nearly halfway down the stairs, looking back over his shoulder. "I want to get this cleared up before nightfall."

"Darren, it's only an hour or so before it gets dark. Why don't we just go and book a room at the hotel for the night, and find the agent tomorrow?"

"Well, on our way to the hotel, I'm going to stop by his office. It'll only take a minute to strangle the needle-neck con-artist."

I really couldn't argue too much. I wanted to kill him, too.

* * *

"What the fuck?"

My mouth was open, but I didn't echo Darren's words verbally. The town of New Bedlam was dark as we turned onto Main from Anders. The streetlights were all dark, not one of the houses, shops or other buildings had lights. Nothing. No one was on the street, not even a parked car.

It was dead.

"I really don't like the looks of this, Darren. I want to go home."

Instead of replying, he put the car in park, right there in the middle of the street, and got out. It suddenly seemed far darker than it should have been, and I leaned over to honk the horn to get his attention. Before my hand touched the steering wheel, Darren spun around, covering his ears.

I watched as for just a moment, a light surrounded his body, and the town lit up behind him. It looked like a town should, like any town would, at nine on a summer's evening. I turned and opened the door, setting one foot on the pavement outside before he screamed to me.

"Beth, stay in the car! Get out of here!"

I stood with the door open, ready to dive back into the car in a flash. The air around Darren shimmered, and I could hear a humming noise. It rose in pitch until I recognized it as a scream.

I saw my husband standing there, in the lights from the car and the strange atmosphere that surrounded him. I saw the man run past him, screaming until it seemed his lungs would burst and my ears would bleed. I saw the atmosphere collapse around Darren, crushing him, sucking

him in. And then, it was gone. A dark, deserted street lay before me like the ghost towns of the old west.

The man pushed me into the car, slamming the door and running behind it to slide into Darren's seat. As he started the car, he informed me he was a federal agent, that New Bedlam was officially under quarantine, and that I was safe now.

"What? What do you mean? Where's Darren? What happened to my husband?"

"Ma'am, your husband is gone and now you've got to get gone, before it sucks you in, too." He paused for a moment, the car slowing to a crawl so he could turn it around and look down at the 'dead' town below. He got out, so I figured it'd be ok for me to get out too.

"Three weeks ago, I stood on this hill looking down at a living, breathing nightmare of a town. Something was happening down there, and now they're all gone. The families, the men, the women, the children... *All gone*. Everything those sick twisted minds imagined would never be more than a late night scare actually came to get them. It's just all gone, and from the look of it, it's been gone a lot longer than three weeks."

He dug in his pockets until he found a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "I was trying to quit, before this. I'm back

on 'em for good now."

"What happened here, Mr...?"

"I don't know what it was. I was assigned to figure out what the hell was going on, and all I managed to do was find a whole lot of writers, not able to do what they did best, and their monsters got loose. No one knew... no one *seemed* to know how to stop it. Once that little boy wrote those words, it was over, but it was over in a reverse big bang. It was gone."


Flames licked the edge of the farmer's market stands. He'd set fire to something down there, and with this wind, it'd take the whole town. I started to scream for Darren and then the world went black.

* * *

The agent left his file with me before he disappeared, too. When I turned it in, I was told it never happened, and not to go back to New Bedlam. I left their office, knowing it wasn't over. I didn't get it then, and I don't get it now. My brother in law, Darren's best friend and I are all going back. We're going to go find Darren, because I know he's still there. I know he's looking for me, too. I know he is.

It really isn't the end, not yet. Maybe not ever.

Mid-Town Map
(for Courting Morpheus)

Residential Area							
Johns	Haven	Quest	King	Welston	Adams	Market	Anders →
				Hardware		Pharmacy	Farmer's Market
Sports Complex	Main Street N ↑						
		Hair Salon	Antique Shop	Book Store	Grocery Store		
	Residential Area					New Bedlam Inn	

Assume the Avenues run through the residential areas. Once the town spreads off the map, writers are free to create streets and the like to their own imaginations - just don't change the ones above!


Symbols:

 - School

 - School Bus Yard


 - Bus Depot/Gas Station

 - Police

 - Firehouse

 - Post Office

 - Coffee Shop

 - Bar

 - Hospital