

Exclusive Excerpt
Grimm: The Killing Time
by Tim Waggoner

CHAPTER ONE

Dana Webber was getting a sack of groceries out of her car when she felt a prickle on the back her neck, an irritating scratchy-crawly sensation like tiny ants walking on her skin.

Someone was watching her.

She shifted the groceries to one arm, careful to keep her purse from sliding off her shoulder, then shut the door to her ancient station wagon. She still had hold of her keys, and she adjusted them in her hand so the ignition key jutted from between her index and middle fingers. Not much of a weapon, maybe, but it was better than nothing. She wished she had a small container of pepper spray hanging on her keychain, but she'd never trusted the things, had always worried they'd go off accidentally. Now she scolded herself for being so foolish.

She turned away from the car, stepped onto the sidewalk, and started toward her house. Their driveway was short and narrow, and right now Rich's Chevy – which was badly in need of a new transmission – was parked there, leaving her to park the station wagon on the street. And since the other houses in this neighborhood were all like the one she and her husband rented – old, small, built close together with tiny yards and even tinier driveways – lots of people parked on the street. It wasn't 8:30 yet, but cars lined the curb, and she'd been forced to park almost a block from her home, and she'd been lucky to get that space. She didn't feel lucky at the moment, though. She might've only had to walk a block, but right now it felt as long as a mile. She imagined eyes on her, a watcher hidden in the shadows, tracking her movements with predatory fascination.

She told herself it was only her imagination. How many times had Rich told her the same thing when she jumped at every creak their old house made, woke startled in the night, convinced she'd heard a sound and that someone had broken in, only for Rich to get up, check, and find no evidence of a prowler? Too many times.

When she'd been a child, her mother had told her that her imagination was her greatest asset as well as her heaviest burden. She'd been a talented artist, covering her bedroom walls with detailed drawings and paintings of friends, family, and pets. But she'd also worried she was dying whenever she came down with a stomach bug, and when she'd got her first period, she might not have reacted as badly as Carrie White in Stephen King's novel, but it had still been something of a trauma for her. She was in her mid-twenties now, and while her imagination still got the better of her sometimes, in general, she'd learned to manage it.

She and Rich had been high school sweethearts, and they'd married soon after graduation. She'd gone to work as a barista at a coffee shop near Portland Community College, while Rich found work with a landscaping company. She'd been taking classes on and off at PCC for a few years, but this semester she'd gotten serious and had decided to channel her artistic ability into a marketing degree. She wanted a job that was both creative *and* practical, and she viewed her new goal as a sign that she was finally, if reluctantly, growing up.

But now, walking down the sidewalk, holding her breath as she moved from one island of fluorescent light to another, she felt like a child once more, gripped by a fear she couldn't control.

Stop it! she told herself. This was a safe neighborhood. Sure, there was the occasional domestic disturbance and sometimes there'd be a party on the street that got too loud and went on too late, but that was about it. No robberies, no assaults, and certainly no murders.

A little voice, one that came from deep inside her, whispered, *There's a first time for everything.*

It was early November in Portland, and it wasn't all that cold out. Around fifty degrees, she guessed, maybe a bit lower. She wore a long-sleeved pullover beneath a denim jacket, and usually that was enough for her to be comfortable this time of year, but now she shivered as if she were freezing. *Just nerves*, she told herself, but it didn't stop her from trembling.

But instead of becoming calmer the closer she came to her home, the more her anxiety rose, and the stronger the prickling on the back of her neck became. Her breathing came in ragged gasps, and her pulse beat like the staccato *rat-a-tat-tat* of a snare drum. She felt an impulse to drop her groceries and run the rest of the way to her house, and she might have, if at that exact instant she hadn't seen the child step out from between a pair of parked cars ahead of her. Dana guessed the girl was in her early teens, if that. She was thin, with a round face and a head full of curly strawberry-blonde hair. She wore a T-shirt with a rainbow design on the front, a pair of old jeans with holes in the knees, and no shoes.

Dana's anxiety drained away. The sinister watcher she'd imagined was just a neighborhood kid, but something still didn't feel right. It wasn't that cold a night, but it wasn't warm enough to be going around without a jacket, and barefoot yet. Dana feared the girl was in some kind of trouble. She knelt, put the sack of groceries on the sidewalk, then hurried over to her.

"Are you okay, honey? Is something wrong?"

The girl stood in a patch of shadow between two streetlights, but now that Dana was closer, she could see that there was something off about the girl's appearance. For one thing, her facial features were remarkably uneven. Her left eye was set lower than her right, significantly so, and her left ear hung lower than it should, and it was tilted backward, giving Dana the impression that it might fall off any moment. The left side of her mouth drooped too, and the flesh on that side of her face sagged, as if the girl was a wax statue in the process of melting. But that wasn't all. Her curly hair was thinning, and her scalp was bare in several places. As Dana watched, a lock of the girl's hair above her drooping ear detached and fell onto her shoulder. The girl didn't react, and Dana wondered if she was even aware that it had happened.

Dana experienced a wave of revulsion and felt an urge to back away from the girl. But she ignored the impulse, the kid was clearly suffering from some kind of medical condition – one that maybe had affected her mind as well, given the way she just stood and stared at Dana without expression. This poor thing wasn't a threat. She needed help.

Now that she no longer had need of a weapon, Dana tucked her keys into her purse and stepped closer to the girl. She crouched down so she could look her in the eyes, and so hopefully she wouldn't seem too threatening.

"Are you lost? Is there someone I can call for you?"

The girl didn't reply, but her gaze focused on Dana. She took that as a good sign. It meant the kid wasn't completely out of it. Dana gave her a quick once-over. She didn't appear to be injured. There were no signs of blood or bruising. None visible, anyway. Whatever was going on with the poor thing, Dana couldn't leave her like this, standing out in the cold, confused, underdressed and barefoot.

Moving slowly so as not to startle the girl, she reached out and gently took hold of her hand. Her skin was clammy, and even though Dana didn't supply any pressure, the flesh seemed to give under her fingers.

She suppressed a grimace of distaste. "Why don't you come with me to my house? It'll be warm inside, and I'll make you a cup of cocoa while we figure out what to –"

Dana froze as the girl raised her other hand, flexed her fingers, and three-inch black spines jutted from her fingertips. Before Dana could react, the girl grabbed hold of her throat and squeezed, the spines sinking into her flesh with the ease of hypodermic needles. At first it felt as if her throat was on fire from the inside, but the pain quickly vanished, replaced by an almost pleasant numbness. *She's drugging me somehow*, Dana thought, panic rising in her chest. She felt the paralysis rapidly spread through her body, and she knew that she had to fight back and try to escape now, while some strength remained in her.

No longer was the girl's face expressionless. Her eyes were wide, filled with life and energy, and her lopsided mouth – which Dana saw was not so lopsided anymore – was stretched into a cruel, satisfied smile. And her hair had changed. The strawberry-blonde curls were now straight and brown. Just like Dana's.

Dana took hold of the girl's wrist with both of her hands and tried to break her grip. But despite the girl's slight frame, her hand wouldn't budge. Maybe the girl was stronger than she looked, or maybe those finger spines had sunk too deeply into her neck. Given how numb Dana's throat was, she could be doing all kinds of damage to herself by trying to pull the spines free, and she wouldn't know it. She let go of the girl's wrist and started hitting her. Her arms felt heavy as lead now, and it took an effort of will to raise them after each blow and strike again. She wasn't able to hit with any real force, and the girl ignored the blows as if she didn't even feel them.

The girl seemed taller now, and had to crouch to stay level with Dana. Her clothing had changed too. She was now wearing the same denim jacket and pullover Dana was, her jeans no longer had holes in the knees, and her once bare feet were now covered by a pair of boots identical to Dana's. Her body remained that of a female, but now she looked like an adult. And not just any adult – she looked exactly like Dana.

Dana could no longer raise her leaden hands to strike at the girl. No, it wasn't a girl, was it? It was some kind of *thing*. She was so weary, so empty, as if she had been hollowed out inside. It wasn't just her energy that was gone. Her mind had become a complete void. She no longer remembered where she lived. No longer remembered her husband's name. She couldn't even remember her own name, nor was she aware of ever having had one. Her body fell limp, and she would've collapsed to the sidewalk if the creature who now resembled her in every detail didn't have its finger spines embedded in her throat.

The creature stood up, and as it rose, it lifted her into a standing position. Dana's body hung slack in the creature's grasp, and there was no longer anything she could do to try to free herself. She couldn't think, let alone move. She was still conscious, still aware, at least on some primitive level, but that was all.

"Don't worry, honey," the creature said in her voice, its tone gentle, almost loving. "It's almost over. But I need one last thing from you."

It... *she* reached out with her free hand, slipped Dana's purse off her shoulder, and slid it over her own.

Dana, or at least the last remnant of what had once been Dana, opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. She experienced a sensation of release, or letting go, and then she felt like she was falling, falling forever.

The darkness rushed upward to take her and she felt no more.

The *Wechselbalg* retracted its finger spines and examined its hands. *Her* hands. It was female again. It – *She* had to remember that. She was old, very old, and she became confused far too easily and often these days.

She, she, she, she, she.

She gazed down at the body on the sidewalk. She didn't regret what she'd done to the original Dana; soon the dead woman would be nothing but a viscous puddle of dissolved flesh and bone. She was *Wechselbalg*, and this was how she survived. She felt no more remorse for what she'd done to the woman than a wolf felt for preying on a doe. Still, something wasn't right, but she couldn't put her finger on it – then it came to her. She had approached the woman in the open, but her kind were supposed to be careful to take their victims where they couldn't be seen, deep in forests and valleys, places where the residue could be easily disposed of. If any humans discovered it, they wouldn't know what to make of it. But if any other Wesen found it . . .

She shrugged. So what if they did? Her kind was rare enough that they might not recognize the residue for what it was. And even if they did understand, they wouldn't be able to track her. Her scent was long-gone along with the original Dana. That was her kind's great strength: to change, to hide, to disappear. And that's precisely what she intended to do now.

She sidestepped prone figure, picked up Dana's groceries, then closed her eyes and began searching the woman's memories. She found an image of Dana's house, and a man polishing a Chevy out front.

Rich, she thought, *my husband's name is Rich.*

She opened her eyes and started walking.