

PENNY DREADFUL

By James Dorr

I didn't realize what fear really meant until Penny kissed me. It wasn't the coldness so much as the flavor -- like sausage left out on the edge of too long. And, too, the strange softness of her lips and tongue, as if on the verge of crumbling. Her gown soaking wet.

I pushed back. I spat -- I spat flesh on the ground.

And then I saw the blood.

"Jason," she moaned. She nodded toward the bridge, its broken railing. The river below it, bubbles still rising to the water's surface.

I tried to remember. She in her pink prom dress, in the car beside me. Me turning to kiss her then -- when we skidded!

The splash. The darkness.

I turned to her now. Her dress was a deeper red. Blood splashed across the white of her shoulder.

But how? Why?

"Rescuers gone," she said. "Stiff men. Bit me."

The crash in the river and, yes, strong hands pulling us. But soft, like Penny's lips. Then more men surrounded us, smells like that kiss tasted. Stiff men, like Penny said --

"Bit us both. Head hurt."

As if in the movies. Yes, I'd seen the movies. But I'd also seen the news on TV. The chemical spill the week before last. The warnings. The victims.

"Went away," Penny said.

She pressed against me. The feel of her body, her muscles not quite right, the unnatural softness before they would go stiff. And I felt, also -- hunger.

I looked down at Penny's face, watching her smile. Her teeth gleamed in the darkness. I sensed she, too, was hungry.

"Brains," Penny said.

Of course, I thought. Brains! I looked at the sky. The moon was still rising -- it wasn't that late yet. The prom would be just getting into full swing. There'd be plenty of brains there. I took her by the hand, pointing the way to the road ahead.

Penny kissed me again.

“Penny Dreadful” was first published in FROM SHADOWS AND NIGHTTMARES (Nightfall Publications, 2011)