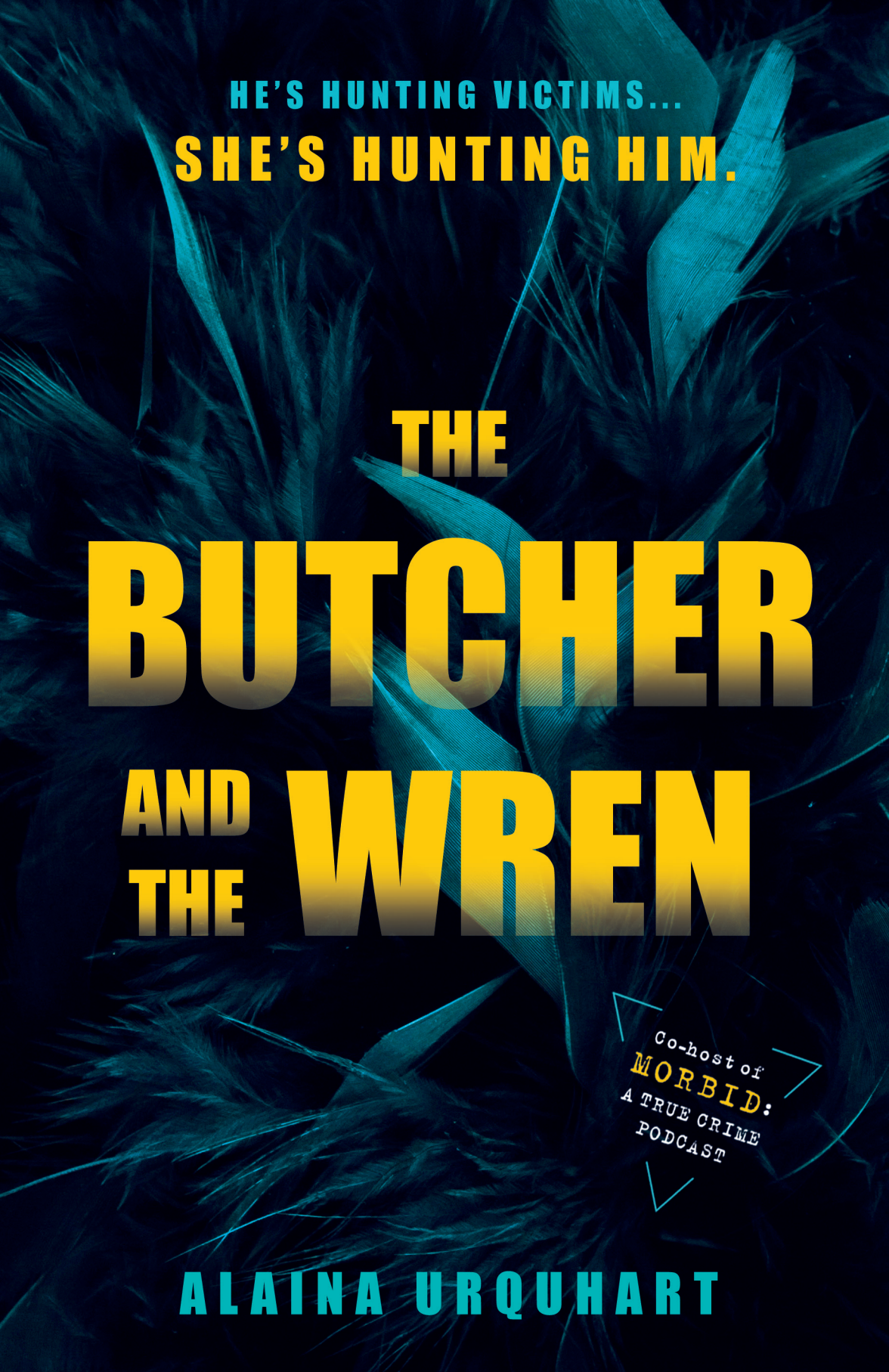

HE'S HUNTING VICTIMS...
SHE'S HUNTING HIM.
THE
BUTCHER
AND THE WREN
Co-host of
MORBID:
A TRUE CRIME
PODCAST
ALAINA URQUHART

THE BUTCHER AND THE WREN

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For Mom and Dad, who are not required to read this book.
You certainly didn't inspire the events (can you imagine?),
but you inspired the act of writing. You got a weird kid, and
you somehow knew what to do. Forever in awe of that.

For John, who gives me the confidence to create.
I adore you more with each passing year.
Never stop singing nineties R&B ballads
at inopportune times.

For my three wonderful babies, who write better books
and have better hair than I ever will.
You can't read this book. Put it down now.

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THE BUTCHER AND THE WREN

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER 1

Jeremy hears the screaming through the vents. Hears it but doesn't react. His nighttime routine is essential. The mundane, everyday tasks that he engages in make him more himself. The simple act of wrenching on the ancient faucet on his tidy bathroom vanity grounds and centers him. His night usually ends standing in front of this mirror. He is freshly showered, and, normally, he follows it with a close, leisurely shave. He likes to crawl into bed with a clean body and mind. He takes the time to ensure these preparations happen nightly, regardless of any outside disruption.

Tonight, a particularly loud screech pulls him from his routine. He stares into the mirror, feeling rage entangle itself into his senses. He can feel it rising like an invasive rot. He can't think with the almost rhythmic screaming now rising from the basement. For as long as he can remember, he has hated loud noises. As a child he would feel his surroundings close in on him like a vise whenever he was amid the sounds of a

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crowded place. Now, the only noises he craves are those of the bayou. Its symphony of creatures soothes him like a warm blanket. Nature always makes the best soundtrack.

He tries to block out the screaming. This routine is sacred. He sighs, pushing a piece of blond hair that has fallen lightly against his forehead back into place and flicking on the radio next to the sink. The only other time he can find solace in sound is when he listens to music. As he prepares for relief, "Hotline Bling" by Drake blares through the speakers, and he flicks it off immediately. Sometimes he feels like he was born in the wrong generation.

He slowly washes away the blood and grime from his hands, trying not to concern himself with the muffled, agonized moans that loudly escape through the heating vents. He looks hard at his face in the mirror. Each year, he feels as though his cheekbones have risen slightly and become more prominent. It is an oddly satisfying consequence that aging has thrust upon him, and he feels blessed for it. A lot of well-adjusted people admire a well-sculpted skull. Most of them don't even understand how primitively ominous that particular fixation is. Most people don't allow themselves to see the savage side of a psyche that was crafted millions of years ago out of their ancestors' often brutal need to survive. These are the traits that evolution deemed to be useful. People are just too dumb to understand that their own predilections are suggestive of a gene pool that is rooted in brutality.

He doesn't necessarily look like someone entangled in depravity. He appears innocuous, and, at times, could look downright wholesome. That's why it all works. There is a

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plant called *Amorphophallus titanum* that is colloquially referred to as the corpse flower. It's large, beautiful, and without any outward mechanism that would suggest it is dangerous. Yet, when it blooms, every ten years or so, it releases an odor that resembles rotting flesh. It survives though. It thrives. He is not so different from the corpse flower. People flock to this curious plant, and it has cultivated a base of admiration despite its quirks.

Tomorrow is Thursday. Thursdays are his Friday, but he truly hates when people say things like that. Regardless, he has enjoyed the luxury of taking Fridays off work since he started his second year at Tulane University School of Medicine. Even though he has some classes to slog through, Fridays are the beginning of his weekend. His weekends are when he gets the most work done. He is particularly excited because he has real plans for his current houseguests this upcoming weekend. Of course, executing those plans to their full potential relies on his ability to add one more to their group.

Emily would indeed be joining them. It had been weeks of analysis after first initiating their partnership in Biology lab, and he is now sure that she would bring the challenge he is craving. Emily jogs a few times a week and doesn't seem to fill her body with trash, so she likely has stamina. She lives with two roommates in Ponchatoula, where they rent a large old home together off campus. Aside from her willingness to reveal too much about herself to her new lab partner, she is competent, self-reliant, and intelligent, all of which would serve her well during his game. Her cohorts would also bring their own value, but he imagines after their extended stay at

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his home, they won't be up for the entire weekend of activities that he has planned for them.

His other two guests endured a bit of poking and prodding since they arrived the previous Saturday night. At Buchanan's, he managed to engage with them without any prior preparation. Usually, he took time to get to know his potential guests as he did with Emily, but these two fell into his hands. It's like the universe was asking him to take out its trash. Of course, he obliged.

Katie and Matt are painfully generic. They lack any sense of unique thought and were all too eager to follow some good bone structure home with merely the promise of drugs. Katie and Matt know now that they made a poor choice. Again, he hears an anguished moan escape the heating vent, and finds himself losing patience.

He abandons his bedtime ritual and hurries down the stairs to the basement where his guests are staying. He can immediately hear Katie's low moans turn to fearful yelps, and her petite frame physically recoils as he approaches her.

"You need to be cognizant of the fact that you are staying in someone else's home," he says, looking her straight in her muddy brown eyes.

She is hopelessly unremarkable. Brown, lifeless hair sticks to her neck with old blood like crude glue. Her aesthetic is entirely trailer park, though she's desperately tried to hide it. The slightly mouselike aspect to her teeth could be considered charming if she wasn't such an unimaginable twit. When he approached her in the bar, she was regaling Matt with an anecdote about her high school cheerleading days—a pathetic

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tale that seemed far-fetched considering the shape she is in now. He adjusts the ligatures that hold her to her chair and checks that the IV bag is properly hydrating her system. No kinks in the line, and the bag is still almost full.

"Matt is being respectful. Be more like Matt, Katie." He smiles wide and gestures to Matt's silent and motionless body slumped in the chair beside her.

They both know he passed out, likely from shock, during Jeremy's previous visit down here. Katie begins to weep loudly, and he rolls his eyes. She is testing his gentility, and he is becoming significantly more disgusted by her desperation. He stands quietly in the dark by her side, pressing play on the portable speaker between the two chairs. "A Girl Like You" by Edwyn Collins fills the space. He grins to himself. Finally, a decent sound.

"Ah, that's more like it." He sways to the music, and he gives Katie the opportunity to collect herself.

By the end of the first chorus, she starts wailing. Without hesitation, he grabs the pliers behind her chair, and with one swift motion rips the putridly pink nail clean off her left thumb. He pulls her screaming face to touch his own.

"Another sound out of you, and I start pulling out teeth. Understood?" he threatens.

All she manages is a nod, and he tosses the pliers in the corner. With a wink, he makes his way upstairs.

He didn't grow up with a lot of mercy. He didn't grow up with a lot of anything at all. His father was a tough man but a fair one, expecting a certain level of submission in his home from both wife and son. If Jeremy caught him at just

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the right time, he learned lasting skills and lessons through his father's careful instruction. As an aircraft machinist in the city, Jeremy's father maintained various pieces of aerospace equipment. Although it didn't require formal education, Jeremy was always proud that his father worked with planes and eager for a glimpse into one of mankind's most significant inventions. But at the wrong time, he was met instead with cruel degradation.

Despite his father's volatility, Jeremy looked forward to his arrival home from work every day. They didn't do much together, but that's what he appreciated. After spending all day with his mother, he would relish the comfortable silence hanging between them as they watched something on television before bed. His days were mostly filled with a heavy dose of neglect sprinkled with some overly attentive moments from his mother, as if she couldn't regulate her affection. She was always far too much or far too little.

A steady respite from the unpredictable whims of his parents, books always held Jeremy's focus. By age seven, he hadn't entered school yet. As neglectful as she could be, every few days, his mother would bring him to a library off St. Charles Avenue. They always went on weekdays, while his father was working. Jeremy didn't understand at the time that his mother was dragging her only child to a library so she could carry on an affair with one of the librarians, but he did absorb the lessons in deception that these trips afforded. He learned early on to never tell his father that his mother left him alone to wander the stacks while she retreated to a back room with Mr. Carraway. More importantly, he taught himself to steal.

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He brought home books in his coat or backpack, never relying on his mother to check them out. Jeremy is fairly certain now that the employees had simply looked the other way out of pity, but at the time he felt like he was pulling off a weekly heist.

Now and then, Miss Knox, one of the librarians, would attempt conversation with him. One day, daring to ask directly if everything was okay at home, her voice trembled with concern. He hadn't responded and instead asked her for a book about lobotomies. He had recently become entranced with this archaic medical procedure and its most ardent practitioner, Dr. Walter Freeman. Over the weekend, his father had been watching a rerun episode of *Frontline* called "Broken Minds." It was a brutal look into the mental health system and highlighted a method of lobotomizing patients diagnosed with any number of ailments, especially schizophrenia, by severing the presumed circuit or network of circuits that they believed to be responsible for the patient's atypical behavior.

Dr. Freeman's prefrontal lobotomy captivated him the most. The nickname "ice pick lobotomy" was an exceptionally provocative moniker. It conjured up images of an immaculate surgeon, twisted with the desire to explore the mentally ill mind. Later in 1992, when he heard the term carelessly tossed around in the news as a method serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer was using to subdue his victims, he was disgusted. Dahmer was so feebleminded that he thought he could make his own zombies by injecting cleaning products and acids into his victim's brains. He was imbecilic. To call what he was doing a "lobotomy" is like calling what Ted Bundy was doing

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"dating." Jeremy could practically hear Dr. Freeman rolling over in his grave.

Jeremy was a kid who craved knowledge. And chronically understimulated, he fed his own hunger by experimentation. His father's early advice echoed in his mind over the years.

"You want to learn about something, son? You have to open it up."

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CHAPTER 2

The Louisiana air feels impenetrable, even at this early hour. Forensic pathologist Dr. Wren Muller is still blinking the sleep from her eyes as she steps out of her car and into the muggy night. She checks her watch and cringes, thinking how great it would be if criminals could take their nefarious dealings out of the two a.m. hour for a couple of months at least.

She steps over some thick, soggy vegetation, steadying herself on the exposed roots of a nearby bald cypress tree. The grooves of the trunk feel as if they could swallow her up, like the crumbling hands of some ancient, folkloric bayou creature. She stops, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the artificial light ahead. The flashlights of three police officers point downward at something on the banks of the water. Their beams of light cut through the darkness, casting everything around them in an even thicker layer of black. The contrast is welcome. It helps the scene come into better focus.

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The dead woman's seminude body is crumpled beneath a substantial amount of tall grass that lines the water's edge. Her head and shoulders are completely submerged in the murky black water. The rest of her body is lying faceup, curled in the grass. The woman is tall and of average weight. As Wren glances over her shoulder, she can see the deputy coroners trailing behind with a stretcher between them. Even between the three of them, it will still be a struggle to get her out of this foreboding bayou.

Only two weeks earlier, investigators recovered the decomposing body of another young woman from behind Twelve Mile Limit bar. She was found facedown in a puddle and drenched with foul-smelling swamp water. The parallels are not lost on Wren as she surveys the area, and although the alarm bells start ringing right away, she tempers them. She always receives a body without bias or expectation. But even while she maintains a single-minded focus on this unique Jane Doe, she makes a mental note to check for hidden items left by the killer. When the previous murder victim was found two weeks ago, they found several crumpled pages from a book shoved halfway down her throat. They were waterlogged and mostly illegible, but one page with the words *Chapter 7* just barely visible was mostly intact.

She carefully creeps closer to the present situation. Jane Doe is missing a shirt, wearing only filthy denim cutoff jeans and a blue bra. There is a large horizontal laceration across her stomach. She has been nearly gutted by something crude. Wren can't help but think of how the cicadas would have been deafening out here. They certainly are right now, as this tired

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team attempts to piece together this woman's last moments. Was Jane's murderer thinking of the last breaths they stole from her as they dragged her lifeless corpse out here to rot? The thoughts of the depraved fascinated Wren. But the last thoughts of the dead fascinated her even more.

She looks back to the scene and notices a braided bracelet around Jane Doe's left wrist. Its original color was likely crisp white, but now it has taken on the color of something well-worn and well lived. She thinks about the woman buying this innocuous accessory. She can see her picking it up in her hands and turning it over before deciding to buy it. An impulse purchase from an endcap now immortalized in death.

She finds herself closer to the body now. Her coworkers help her pull it onto the sloping shore, slowly slipping the head out of the water to get a better look. The lividity has set noticeably in Jane Doe's face. The coagulated blood that ceased to flow when her heart stopped beating has followed the pull of gravity and crawled across her face, forming blotches that harshly stain her cheeks and forehead. It's difficult to see perfectly with just the dim lights, but Wren thinks that the lividity is a deep pink color, suggesting that the victim took her last breaths about ten hours before this moment. Livor mortis usually begins only about a half hour after death, but you won't see it with any certainty until about two or three hours later. After about six hours, livor mortis darkens into the deep pink color that is obvious to the unaided eye. Bring it to twelve hours after death, and lividity is fixed at its highest level.

When her eyes travel down Jane Doe's face, frozen in an expression of permanent dread, she notices the severe bruising

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on her neck. There are very clear indications of strangulation. Wren notes these injuries as a reminder to examine them better once she's back in the morgue, and, after slipping on some purple latex gloves, runs a finger over the deep indentations that mar the flesh of the woman's throat.

She pats the outside of Jane Doe's pockets, being careful to feel for anything bulky or sharp. It's incredible how many times she has been thankful for this extra step, feeling a syringe from the outside and avoiding a trip to the clinic. Feeling nothing potentially hazardous, she reaches into Jane's pockets and comes up empty—no identification on the body.

"Anything found around her? A wallet?" Wren asks, though she knows the answer already.

She looks up at the three police officers shining their flashlights down at her for confirmation. All three shake their heads.

The young fellow on the right flippantly moves his flashlight around the area surrounding the body. "What you are seeing, we are seeing. No wallets, no IDs, and no weapon in sight."

While Wren doesn't appreciate the attitude, she nods and manipulates Jane Doe's limbs, revealing an old, faded tattoo on the back of her bicep. It looks like hands set in prayer with a rosary entangled through them.

"Hand me the camera," Wren says, holding out her hand without looking away from the tattoo.

One of her deputy coroners, a new hire, rushes to take it from his bag and nearly fumbles it before placing it in her open hand. Wren snaps a couple of photos of the tattoo before checking for any others.

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"We'll get better photos in the autopsy suite, but it is always a good idea to cover your butt and get extra. You never know what can happen in transit. With no ID, we will need all the identifiers we can get, or she will sit in the morgue for months," she explains, handing the camera back to the deputy coroner and cracking her knuckles. She knows it is a terrible habit, but it is her habit, nonetheless. "All right, what can we use to determine the time of death?"

Wren looks up at her two young mentees, and immediately their faces drain of color.

The first stumbles to convey what he obviously knows. "Um, well, there is lividity . . ."

He leans forward and gestures to the red face of Jane Doe.

Wren smirks and nods. "Yes, we see that. How about a less obvious method?"

She knows he is smart. He isn't quick on his feet quite yet, but he knows what needs to be done. Speed will come in time. Soon he won't even think before he acts at a crime scene or back at the office.

He runs a hand through his black hair in a slightly anxious way, and offers, "Rectal temperature?"

Wren gives him a finger gun but then shakes her head with a grimace. "You have good instincts. If we were in a temperature-controlled environment, that would be a great answer. Unfortunately, we can't trust or even wish that the temperature has stayed a balmy eighty-two degrees for this woman's entire time out here." She gestures to the stretcher and instructs, "Open up the bag so we can get her out of here."

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As the deputy coroners unfold the white body bag, Wren continues, "You were right with lividity. It is fixed at its highest level, which means we are up at the twelve-hour time frame likely. Grab her arm."

Both attendants move forward, and Wren nods to allow each of them to hold one of Jane Doe's arms.

"Try to manipulate it," she says while she watches them struggle to move it even slightly one way or the other.

"Wow, that's rigid," Wren's mentee points out.

Wren adjusts her gloves farther up her wrist. "Exactly. Rigor is fixed and rigid. It hasn't broken yet. What does this mean?"

The police officers on the scene are clearly annoyed. They make a point to sigh and look dramatically up at the sky as if they have anything else to be doing in the middle of the night. Their display of impatience doesn't shake her. If she has to be awake and in a swamp with a dead woman at three a.m., she will at least train some rookies in the process.

The deputy coroner nearest her stands, smoothing out his pants, "Well, it fits with the twelve-hour time frame. Could be even longer, upwards of thirty hours with this type of rigidity."

There he is.

His growing confidence is promising. With a caseload like hers, Wren can use all the competent help she can find.

"Bingo. And look what we have here," she says and points to the spree of black flies that everyone keeps swatting out of their faces. "I know there are myriad bugs around here, but this little guy is a blowfly. They arrive first to a corpse, and lay eggs that hatch into maggots. We don't have maggots quite yet, but eggs could have been laid at this point. This all still

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